

FROSTBITE

Though I saw that
winter through, I was
too thin for the task
and had brought
the wrong body, packing
it along with the many
misguided supplies a
good-sized grant could buy.

Sitting in our tent,
nesting on caribou
over cut spruce,
the elder of the family
teased me in Athabaskan:
“Are you reading? With all
we did today, you
should be taking notes.”

Who is studying
whom?

In the small space of
a sigh and the popping
of sap in the stove,
my calf muscles uncurled and
the question eased
the pain until the blood
swam slowly back,
pulsing,
pausing,
pulsing,
to scream its silent anger
to the bears and the stars.

When I undressed and,
following the ritual orders,
changed my socks,
I saw that around
the prow of my toes
the tissue had put out
its white flags, a colony
of button-sized swans,
aching with embarrassment,
riding the current in a
mute reproof to hubris.



Illustration by Jim M'Guinness

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