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be than obey?

IS IT BETTER TO BE THAN OBEY?

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You are welcome to my house. Inside, the window looks onto trees. I take off the wall so that you might see inside. I take off the roof so that you might see us inside. The children draw walls coloured red, peach, pale blue or bright green and place themselves inside their homes looking out at us. They invite us in with a generosity of spirit that is lost on many adults, in major cities at least, except for those traditional open houses, churches. Everyone wears a smile, something contagious about it, I smile. I place my head on the sill so that you might see us looking out. Really see. Yes, we are smiling, welcome. This house is a box that we must live inside and you are always welcome into my big. White. Walls that greet the howling wind I am, we are, my mother and brother are smiling, barking and whining – bark and whine – wind-blow and howl – over snow-covered hills and flats, across the bay where there's a store and we – rumble – skidoo to the store. Is my head this round or am I smiling so? I curve in a happy circle. This town is a labyrinth of wandering roads and women walking sliding along them, to find supplies by square, or by triangle one road leads to another and curves as all things are curved in this town, because inside we are smiling my mother. My mother. Is going to the store. Her hair is tall and she tied it up before she left me here in my bed. She said, 'The snow falls in white lines, just as you have drawn it.' Church bells ring from nowhere – church singing from my bedside. Mother walks the roads with a bag to fill me grain by grain, and bannock in my belly. Before he left me at school, Father bade us say a prayer to the road and we did, in the biggest box with a cross on top, with coloured windows singing over the snow. The bay of Mosonee singing what are the words for this feeling? There's no English for this. The only one without a smile is the snowman, who hates standing in the cold. Sing, sing over the bay, it's Christmastime! Don't be fooled by the birdsong – huit huit – we plough our way home, led by a gold star, a gold star, a gold star, a gold star whose light touches an open doorway. We settle amongst the trees. Nine of us. We see three people on their knees in the light and their dog waits behind, quiet and long, white with snow. We wait in the forest, the trees bid us pray. We pray all night to become animals – whine – hoooooowl – who smile, as the muskrat smiles in a long sleep, shot through the neck.

We ate the muskrat. A big fat one. Father shot it in the forest. Shot it and it died. We ate. In the trees there are children who point out the animals. Their bellies rumble so they cannot hide. They don't blink at the sound of gunshots. The crack, the flame of the barrel. They growl at the kill – miaow. They bark and whine and howl over our whooping and laughing, our screams. Our screams travel through the dark between trees, over the bay over the sea-worn sand. Eyes in the trees so no animal can hide. No one can hide, however black their fur it is written in crayon lines stringing from their mouths just where the animals hide. Those animals who kill with an excess of feeling. They bring us beans and indignities. We are not good children who obey, we live in trees, in the water, we talk with the animals, to the fish, about what it's like to be free. 'Did you hear auntie Mina? Yes. She prays all night long.' Prays for what? An end. 'Pull this war out of my country.' Let us be. And by morning black lines have rolled from her mouth, down to the sea.

We fight for the same end, an end to beans. An end to those who get fat on our bread, 'Viva Algeria! Get out, Pig!' We twist our spines and shake our shoulder blades, collar bones and shadow bones, run a hand over the hair of the beaten woman,

feed her cake. Fried chicken we salivate. Her tears bruise us, green and purple as beans. We want to eat eggs. The children want to taste chocolate. The children are pummelled by waves. The children fight with their shadows. The children hurl themselves towards danger. To steal, kill and torture as they tortured us. We are living into death and this is our last swim. Did you hear Auntie praying all night? Her murmurs cover the sound of our bare feet, creeping past the walking spectres, those people living in the graveyard, sitting, stone cold asleep, emptied of belief. We hurl ourselves with faith at the soldier, 'God gave me a mouth to keep filled with food.' And engage him in a ritual of forgiveness for following orders he did not believe in. For hiding in a graveyard amongst the trees. Are the girls too slow? We will be eaten. Are the sexes divided by the quickness of arms and legs? But all warriors have a shadow, black eyes, wrapped faces, youth, soft bones. Our soldier smokes and sings, 'But the war is not over.' It is a labyrinth of branches stretching into darkness. It is the animals that appear to him as children – miaow – hiss – growl. No, it's not yet over. Only he decides when it's over. When lone footprints lead to a dead uniform on the beach. Where the land is wounded, bombed, starved and hungry for blood red watermelon we are not quite children, 'Just the cats,' he says, just animals drumming their skins in a battle cry 'it is better to be than obey' and to desire more than the bells of Egyptian love songs bananas beans and gun planes under the slick waves of the black sea over which bloated bodies float.