Underpaint

ODETTE AUGER

Lush and deep, full of stories, a woman runs through the painted forest on an eight-by-eight foot canvas. She glows, burnt ochre against the dark greens and blacks of the woods. Raw umber underpainting sets a reddish brown foundation. Unusual for me, I add a border around the edges, a geometric pattern edging the painting. Stepping back to look at it from the door, I realize it's the border from an elk tapestry that hung on the trailer wall when I was seven. I frown and decide not to put it into the student art show.

"Who have you been painting for the past two decades? How do you feel knowing that they are not the ones buying your art?"

The interview sessions always hold the same themes. Eventually, I flip the question back. I ask them, "What are the stats for your readership?" They're writing about my Indigeneity for their 'BIPOC centred' audience, but their readership is over seventy-five percent white. How much of the article is performative?

Those responses don't get printed, but it shifts how they introduce me. I was once soft spoken and now they write me as, "walks soft, carries big stick."

Something to laugh over drinks later.

Drinking is something no one asks me about, they're afraid to stereotype, but at some point, I'll share my learning curve. At first, it was a valuable tool for many of my early paintings. There's a point where the canvas becomes alive, and I pause. I see its full potential and am paralyzed. Realizing the amount of time it takes to hit that groove, and then stepping back—I had to rise to that challenge somehow. A mason jar of vodka was my friend, sitting beside mason jars of turpentine. Removing hesitancy and the art-police voice in my head, that mason jar was the solution, but it became my

problem. Not the way people think, I didn't drink my earnings away, I didn't deteriorate—my hands didn't shake. I stopped dreaming. There's a gap on my CV people assume is from having kids.

I tell reporters pregnancy and childbirth were transformative, productive. It's true, but the real reason was that not drinking brought my dreams back, full force. Having paintings come to me in dreams is the source, and frees me from ego. It's not my hands painting, it's my dreams, and the vodka was a false version of that freedom.

Just after my twenty-fourth birthday, I'm sitting in my art school auditorium. An Indigenous fashion designer is answering an audience question about representation—why the models were not Indigenous.

"Great question, and that is one of our keystone goals, we're always expanding and outreaching…" I tune out the rest of the non-response—hungry, belly growling to get to the feast in the gallery. My band's sponsorship money was enough for my rent, with $300 left over. By the end of each month I fast for a week, sometimes longer when I needed to buy something, like winter boots.

"And our representation includes buyers. We have collectors from all over the world," continues the speaker.

"Yeah, because *we* couldn't afford it," says my friend, Sandy.

I nod, and once I start, find it hard to stop.

She seems clear in a way I sense comes from growing up in community, culturally strong.

My lack keeps me quiet.

Next in the show is an Indigenous dance company, and four dancers are alternating movements. Their fingers spread out, trembling right to the fingertips, as their arms wave up and down slowly, rhythmically. The entire audience is caught up in the powerful gestures. I feel my eyes widen when the pace accelerates, as different figures take the stage.

Sandy is loving this, and I glance around at our classmates and the public; they are caught up in this energy whether they understand the story, the symbols, or not. There's some part of them that I'd like to believe understands it.

The next dancer is a man, hoop dancing. He works with the hoops like he's made of water—fluid and ever changing. His three-year-old son joins him on stage and a murmur of joy passes over the auditorium. His chubby little legs are moving fast. He's trying to use small hoops, and he gets close a few times before he succeeds—raising up a globe of perfectly intertwined hoops. We all cheer, and a sob catches in my throat. It's too beautiful. The little boy increasingly matches his father's movements, and when they're in unison, I see flashes of hoops against the black backdrop. It caught my eye a few times, and I looked up to see what lights were suddenly flashing out of the hoops. There weren't any, and there wasn't any pattern. Sometimes, there are golden hoops like a mirage against the black, behind the dancers, but not matching them. A cold washes over me, and my arms become goosebumps. I'm about to nudge Sandy to see if she can see them, too. Something stops me—maybe these are just for me. I watch the stage differently now. I *see* more, feel more—I can sense a power.

The next dancers are young women wearing jingle dresses. They dance, and it is like medicine. I see spirits behind them, their bells flashing like northern lights. The spirits are dancing behind the dancers holding their heads high. I'm weeping, and Sandy doesn't think I'm weird.

"Yeah, this one's for you," she says softly. It's hard to stop crying once I've begun, and I feel like

someone will ask if I've been drinking, so I will myself to stop. I clench my fingers until my nails dent my palms, and my tears stop.

After the show, we walk to the gallery. We've been preparing our pieces for the past month and now they're hanging up for the public to see. It's a little different from our classmate's critiques. Sandy's the only person who asks the questions I'd prepared for. We end up standing in front of my piece. It's the largest in the show, a twelve-foot-high oil painting on opaque drafting film, a long narrow strip. I'd thrown myself into larger formats this semester, and my black and grey oils are bold on the white luminous paper in this bright gallery. I hadn't pictured it hanging in this open space, and a growing queasiness threatens to rise up. I had painted a stack of stereotypes and hurdles of my family, balancing on each other totem style.

Biting the edge of my thumbnail, I avoid looking at my highways-style signage of a tipi as a tourist attraction. The only Indigenous people here are us students, so this sign might seem a little pointed. An empty mickey, curved glass shining, draws the viewer in. Above it, the profile from a coin, and above that, a sexy "princess."

I reach out, tapping the alcohol bottle in my painting as we talk. It's the finest bit of painting in the piece. When I was working on it, I'd thought of my favourite uncle passing away from cirrhosis. I could have painted it thinking of all the arguments, but I remembered something he'd said when I was in grade three.

"They only see a drunk Indian, so…" he'd shrug.

It made me sad, somehow grasping his life in that one sentence. He had stayed gentle, but the world hadn't cared.

I start to tell Sandy, but get sidetracked by my boyfriend Phil arriving. He glances around the space, sees me and comes over. I'm torn between being happy he showed up and awkward that he's interrupting.

Sandy looks at him coolly, they exchange small talk and then she nods at me, pointing with her lips to the student group. She heads over there, and I hear the warm chuckles.

"You didn't hang your portraits?" Phil asks, taking a quick look at my piece towering above us.

"No, I wanted to do something different," I trail off. He's not smiling, and I can't tell if he doesn't like the piece, this gathering, or me.

He nods to my painting, "It's a little angry for someone who's only half, isn't it?"

My cheeks heat up, and I turn away, willing my tears away. A disagreement will turn into something worse at home, so I step outside to the front steps. I rest my forehead on a post. It's cool, and brings me back to the present. I'm supposed to be celebrating. The sound of cars whirring across the bridge in the distance is a rhythm. I fall into it for a moment, and wonder why I don't notice distinct city sounds anymore. I sit on the step, and the edge of my skirt dips into a puddle. I watch the navy fabric darken to black as it soaks up water. I think of my palette, and how without even realizing it I started painting in bruise colours—ochre, dirty purple, camouflage green. I'm actively trying to hide my bruises, but then I go and paint myself a world of bruised women.

He comes outside and interrupts my thoughts, "You left that soup in the crockpot."

I nod, "Let's go then," I say, but in my heart I hear it like my uncle would say it, soft, slurred, smiling.

I make my big soups to stretch groceries, so there's always enough to share with roommates. We sit around the table and talk late into the night. Tonight, I go upstairs after dinner to see if I can find inspiration to paint. I have an idea to paint a dream I'd had about

a midden, the same spot my sister had once found a trade bead.

After a heavy rain, when she was four and I was seven, we'd been combining moose hunting with camping. The old logging roads were colourful with fallen leaves, and our mission was to walk without making them rustle or crunch. It was a matter of deliberate steps—focusing on each one seemed to silence the footfalls. Mom would walk behind us, and Papa was somewhere else with his gun. When we returned to meet him at the tent trailer, we described places by the shape of a stone in the bend in the road, or by water flow in a stream.

Visiting these woods in my dream felt like going home.

I was climbing up a steep bank, my fingers digging into black soft soil with the ruffled edges of softened bone fragments in layers. It's still in my mind's eye—layers that signified the passing of generations. Climbing over the edge, I see a village, along a sapphire blue river. It's where my Mom bathed as a little girl—before she was taken to residential school. That's not what my tears are about, though. It's homesickness. I want to see my mom's shy smile of pride. I want to see Papa's eye crinkling, but it's also a wish. I wish I had guides, cultural connections.

I want to hear about matriarchy.

Tell me it can be mine, and that it'll stretch forward forever in time.

I push these thoughts away, hoping if my mind is quiet that I'll paint this dream. Instead, I keep slipping back into the memory of my sister finding the trade bead. Her plump baby hand held out the large blue glass bead. When I held it up, I saw it was filled with flaws, tiny bubbles and cracks. She was beaming, excited. I remember Mom strung it onto a thread for her to wear, and I had kept an eye on it all night around the campfire.

It was the rich black earth of the midden that came up. A large, four by four-foot canvas entirely black with floury light topsoil, and glowing white glints of bone and shell. It was satisfying, and I jumped into another canvas. The birds were waking up when I paused to take stock. The midden soil had a depth that invited me into it. My back hurt from being hunched over my canvas on the floor. At some point, Phil had come home and aside from hellos, we didn't speak. He was respectful of my painting process, at least.

I'm sitting on the threshold, watching the sunlight creep up my legs as the morning sun transforms this shady spot into a sunny one. I'm waiting impatiently for Phil.

"Good news, good news!" I crow when he finally appears. I'm jumping and grabbing him into a hug. He frowns a little, like he's preparing for bad news.

"My woman in the woods painting SOLD!" It's more than the money, although we need it. It's encouragement at a time when I need it most. "Isn't that such good news?" I'm asking Phil to react, giving him all the cues.

"It sold for $800!" I repeat, hoping that will make him smile, "You can order some books!" He whips around on me, his face close to mine. "What about ME?" He snarls, "What about *my* dreams?"

I step back, dismayed. I didn't mean to trigger this in him, I thought he'd be happy. He rages on, ranting about everything he'd lost, what he'd given up—he'd

had potential. I don't see how I enter this loss, but I sit down on the floor and listen to his hurt.

"Oh, yes, everyone knows you're so good. You're the nice little girl, poor you," he turns on me. He comes way too close.

"I heard the truth on the radio," he says. I draw a blank, not knowing if this was something real he's heard, or a lyric guiding his thinking into this frenzy. Best not to ask, but he lunges closer again, and when I flinch, he pounces on it.

"You want to be hit?" he asks, deadly calm, leaning over me. "You're scared?"

"No," I say, desperately trying to remember what had calmed him down last time.

"Well," he muses, "You should be." Wham.

A hard blow to my ears shocks me. My jaw falls a little slack, and he registers that for a second, the reality flickering in him for a moment. Then it's gone.

"Poor you. I guess your friends were right, you're stuck." Wham.

The other ear struck, and I'm surprised to see flashes of light around the edges of my eyes. A stinging web of pain crisscrosses the back of my head, somehow a layer of pain, just underneath my scalp.

There's always the after. When I'm alone, wondering how this is happening. I look in the mirror and gingerly assess for visible bruises. Almost never in places where it'd be obvious, which is lucky—or so I think.

This time, I see myself in the mirror, with an expression I remember from my grade two photo, biting my lip slightly. I am that girl, still. *Why is this happening to that girl?* I sit on the edge of the tub and let myself cry freely, silent sobs rack my frame.

Eventually I hear him leave, and I go into the living room. The painting will pay to replace the things he's torn up, with a little left for groceries. I turn to the woman, lush and deep, full of stories, running through the painted forest on an eight-by-eight foot canvas. She glows, burnt ochre against the dark greens and blacks of the woods. Raw umber underpainting sets a reddish brown foundation.

I turn calmly to the phone.

I book a ticket to visit Mom.

No words are needed, she already knows.