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Inland North: Stories

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INLAND NORTH: STORIES
DISSERTATION

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
The University of Mississippi

by

ELSA NEKOLA

May 2018

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ABSTRACT

A collection of original short stories.

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CHAPTER 1
INLAND NORTH

When I was seventeen, I gave my sister something to help her pass over. I never regarded the lake the same way after that. All that winter I dreamt of Leila, her forehead cool with sweat, the veins in her arms running like thin creeks under January ice.

In these dreams, our mother dropped flowers at Leila's feet. I picked up the glowing white head of a lily, in my hands it became a crumpled sheet of paper. The paper was cold to the touch, reminding me of the little glaciated islands in Lake Superior. I stared into the creases and folds, hoping to find Leila in them.

"I'm right here, Marit," she said.

I looked up. Leila was there, on the sickbed. Her eyes were purplish, like a bruise, and her pale hair had been cut so it wouldn't tangle. She licked her lips and reached for the bedside table. She was searching for water.

I dropped the paper glacier in the glass and watched it dissolve. My wrist shook as I handed her the water, and she thanked me. I bowed my head as she drank, feeling myself dying with her. It was a cold feeling. My feet were nestled inside our grandmother's reindeer slippers, and heaviness crept up from my ankles like an ice-crusting tide, until I became a body of solid, petrified water.

When I woke from these dreams, I shook violently, and my teeth chattered so hard that I held my jaw firmly with both hands. I tried to warm my weak bones that way. I'd been in bed for days, thinking, dreaming of Leila until I got sick in the wastebasket.

Outside my window, the drooping branches of the Norway spruce shook, provoking me. The wind came, blowing snow from the needles, smacking the glass like a bird confused by its reflection. I looked out into the yard and there was nothing but drifts. I would have been comforted by a dove below my window, nestled in the cold peaks, waiting for its mate before taking flight again.

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"I thought this might remind you of the old country," he said to Aino, removing a tea towel from a plate of cardamom rolls. The tops were glossy with egg wash, sprinkled with cinnamon and coarse sugar. Aino had been born in the Keweenaw Peninsula, but still spoke with the accent of her Finnish Karelian parents.

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“My family won’t forget all that you’ve done,” I told him.

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The house smelled of rye bread and cedar smoke and the sickly waft of the bed pan. I took one step toward him, and Dr. Takkala closed his eyes. I felt his soft breath fall on my neck. We didn’t notice the wooden floor creak. Anders appeared in the hallway in a pale triangle of lamplight.

“Goodnight, Marit,” the doctor said, clearing his throat. “Son,” he said, nodding at Anders. He opened the door. Wind pulled him from the house, and snow swirled around his legs.

“I’m coming to bed,” I told my brother.

“Sure,” he said. “Okay.”

“Why are you up, anyway?”

“I was hungry.” He walked into the kitchen. “Are there any rolls left?”

I handed him the plate. “Do you think she needs anything?” I said, glancing at Leila’s door.

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“He’ll come over,” I said. “He’s practically family now.”

Anders shook his head. “He won’t put his hands on you. You’re not sick.”

“I know that,” I said, walking after him, slapping his shoulder. “I know that.”

Anders went to Leila’s room and shut the door. He spent the rest of the night there, on a cot next to her bed. He told her memories and dreams and made-up stories, and what the future would look like when they rowed out to an island in Lake Superior and never returned.

VITA

Elsa Nekola is a writer from Wisconsin. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Ploughshares* and *Midwestern Gothic*. She graduated from Edgewood College in 2012 with a Bachelor of Arts in English and environmental studies.