

The Treeplanters

by Julia Steinecke

Cet article est extrait du journal d'une femme qui cuisine pour les planteurs d'arbres du nord de l'Ontario.

One hand is dry, the other hand is wet. One hand is in the air, the other is in the soil. One hand holds the baby tree, the other pulls dirt around. One hand is soft. The other is leather, cracked, bleeding.



Excerpts from the account of a woman cooking for a crew of treeplanters in Northern Ontario. Camping in sub-zero weather. Cooking with no electricity or convenience stores. Putting something alive back into the earth.

Five a.m. The whole day is crammed into a pink line across the horizon. Everything else is blue. There's a handful of old trees like skinny paintbrushes, stuck in the ground, bristles in the air.

I cook for treeplanters. I get up early to taste the day. Some mornings snow whitewashes the ground. Some mornings last night's dishwasher is frozen solid in the pan. Some mornings I leap blindly into fog, not knowing if I will ever land.

The tents are catching light, turning orange. Little houses and domes, pretty in a row. Inside each tent lies a treeplanter. Around each treeplanter is a sleeping bag. Underneath each bag is a plastic floor. Underneath each plastic floor is a hard-baked patch of soil where nothing grows. Connect all the patches of soil and you have a road. This is the road that took the trees away.

Breakfast.

The treeplanters line up, empty plates in hand. Uncombed young students, lured by the hope of money, yellow nuggets of sleep falling from their eyes.

Oh hell, the pancake's gone runny again. Add more mix. Now it's lumpy. Pour some onto the frying pan and it all runs to one side. The cake's thick here

and thin in the place it ran away from. The thin part begins to burn. I scrape the flipper underneath and the thick part of the pancake breaks away from the burnt part. I flip the burnt part. I spread out the thick part, still raw, but it runs back together.

The treeplanters bicker over breakfast. Everyone wants more and thicker and faster. They snatch pancakes from each others plates and laugh. They toss their dirty dishes in a heap.

Sylvia.

Rumour is, she's the fastest worker of them all. She wears her hard hat to breakfast. She doesn't talk much. She sits on a rock, eating pancakes smeared with peanut butter. She has supper on the same rock. In the evening she works on her tent, straightens the poles and digs new trenches around it. She waxes her boots. She dries her gloves on hand-shaped sticks over the fire.

the treeplanters are ready for work
steel toes and shanks
hard hats, required by law
(protection against falling
ghosts of trees)

dark mosquito nets
change the colour of their faces

They climb into the old schoolbus and rattle into the distance. Many hours later they return, wearing the landscape under their fingernails and between the hairs of their heads. Wearing the red setting sun on their faces, glowing on the tips of their noses.

This is what they tell me.

Seven cents make a tree. Walk six steps. Kick away the duff. Make a hole, bend down. Drop the seedling. Pull soil around it. Walk six steps. Seven cents a tree.

Sometimes the duff is two feet thick: twigs, grass, anything that once was alive and now is dead, kick it away.

One hand is dry, the other hand is wet. One hand is in the air, the other is in the soil. One hand holds the baby tree, the other pulls dirt around. One hand is soft. The other is leather, cracked, bleeding.

Seven cents a tree.

I bought hamburgers but I forgot the buns. I have hot dog buns but no hot dogs. I used the dogs for breakfast yesterday morning because the cooler ice thawed and the sausages spoiled.

The leftover potatoes have turned black. The rice is overcooked—perhaps I can pass it off as mashed potatoes. The beef stroganoff tastes like cardboard.

The jello won't harden. All it does is melt the ice underneath. The salad is wilted, the strawberries are rotten.

Insects.

Wood ticks hang on to you and suck your blood till they blow up to the size of peas. Pine beetles sink their jaws into you, we're talking *pain*. Stinging wasps sit on the undersides of things you pick up. No-see-ums are so small, no telling what they do. Mosquitos dig down their little pumps... if you pinch up your skin right underneath, it won't be able to

get its thing back out. It'll keep sucking and sucking until it explodes, splattering your blood in every direction.

Dirt.

All around us, on us, in us. Everything I see, I see through dirt. Everything I hear contains the sound of tiny dust particles vibrating in my ears. When I touch someone the first thing I feel is the layer of dirt between us.

Returning from Kenora. My car, full of groceries, tumbles off the gravel road. I fall with it. I see a lake and tents. People come out, their arms reaching for me.

A woman leads me to her tent, gives me coca cola. "We're treeplanters too," she says. "Sorry the

coke is so warm." She wears a ripped shirt, her skin showing, black and smooth. She says they have no cook and half their crew has quit.

They pull my car out with a chain. I give them cookies and granola. I drive away and watch them waving, slowly, smaller.

I return to my camp and make dinner. The treeplanters play cards and sing. Outside I see candlelight flicker, jump, fluorescent orange through their tent wall. Gin rummy. Swing Low Sweet Chariot, four part harmony, bass digs deep into the resonating soil. Choirgirls and boys gambling away their seven cents a tree. Heart of my Heart, I love that melody.

I walk to my tent on the other side of camp. I curl up inside three sleep-

ing bags. There's more night music: a thousand amphibian voices beckon me, cell by cell, into sleep.

Writing.

this page used to be a tree
for every letter
think of a leaf
for every line
a twig
budding

The Treeplanters was published in 1990 by Flying Camel Press, the author's own imprint. The final poem was published as a postcard by The Writing Space, another micro-press, in 1994.

Julia Steinecke was born and raised in Kapuskasing, Ontario.



Photo: Kris Rosar, 1993