

Dreamers

It's gone now, but the recent Somalia exhibit at St. Paul's Minnesota History Center featured a Somali plow, a wooden contraption, the ox-drawn ancestor of, well, what we might see out here in Siouland, some huge 21-bottom plow pulled along a Big Bud behemoth, 900 horsepower.

Imagine coming from a Somalian mud hut to the agri-world we live in. That massive tractor could open up more prairie in an hour than you could hope to see in a decade behind a sweaty team of oxen and that old wooden one-share doohickey.

Welcome to America.

Traditionally, Somalis were nomadic. They carried their shelters on camel back across a divided, hot and desert-like country. Today, tens of thousands Somalis live in Minnesota, an unlikely adopted homeland for so many black African Muslims.

Twenty below isn't rare, so Minnesotans take pride in the deep freeze--"thirty below keeps out the riff-raff," some whisper. But if you're a Somali "nomadic pastoralist," who's only lived in scorching temps, Minnesota must be night-marish. To black Africans, rural Minnesota must seem to overflow with blondes.

If blondes have more fun, Minnesota ought to be an endless party. But they're Lutheran, many anyway. So, like me, they know their sin, right? And yours too, as Garrison Keillor might say, people who've been known occasionally to smile.

Imagine being a devout Muslim Somalian displaced by a never-ending civil war that all too regularly kills people you love. Imagine escaping it finally, leaving that thick grassy roof behind you, getting on an airplane in Mogadishu, flying across the world, and walking into the Mall of America.

It's as easy to underestimate the struggles of immigration as it is overestimate them. Somewhere in all of us, after all, there's this desire to be free and the need to be loved.

Minnesota's Swedish Institute is a castle in downtown Minneapolis. Seriously. Right there, downtown Minneapolis, stands a castle built to a design its wealthy owners determined they wanted to bring to Minnesota. Google it—the Swedish Institute.

A man named Swan Turnblad and his wife, Christina, wanted a bit of Europe in the Twin Cities, and they had the bucks to swing it, so they did. That's the American Dream. The Turnblads, dirt-poor immigrants from Sweden, are your classic Dreamers.

Just inside the castle is a gallery of stunning wood carvings. Four feet tall, they cut a suspiciously randy pose, a Neptune-like bearded man, one arm swung sweetly up over his head like a starlet, the holding back a breech cloth we'd just as soon not see fall. There's intent in this art, some abiding moral, but I didn't really care to ask.

A couple of weighty banister carvings right beside them feel classical, but are meant, the docent told us, as symbols--a pair of lions outfitted with eagle's wings. The Turnblads wanted something to combine the old country (the lions) with the new (the eagles).

Okay, but they make almost scary greeters.

The Turnblads came from nothing, zero, sheer grinding poverty. Christina Turnblad's very first job in America, in Worthington, Minnesota, paid no salary, no wage, not a dime. The best she could do--with no English, no education, and no work experience--was on-the-job training in a hotel where room-and-board was her wage for endless toil that promised her this much: she could learn to become a domestic.

Several decades later, she and her husband built a castle in Minneapolis and ascended open stairways attended by hand-carved lions ascending on eagle's wings. When she began to think the castle a bit roomy, she determined not to live there anyway.

Is it any wonder why needy people have forever arrived on our shores? And is it any wonder why so many of us have resented them, and still do, even those of us descended from own huddled ancestors, "yearning to be free?"

There will always be leaving and coming, as long as people dream.