

Canadian Wild: Poems

by

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## Abstract

It has been my hope that this thesis would serve as a bridge between three things: my past wilderness experiences, my present explorations of great nature poets, and my future as a writer. I desired to write authentic wilderness poems that gave readers new experiences, yet I was afraid that they might not be broad enough in scope and have too much sentimentality to be effective.

To find a path through this dilemma I looked to great nature poets, both American and Canadian, as I sought to see how they were such successful writers. In looking at their work I asked many questions. Where did they get their inspiration? Did they use experiences or did they just write creatively? How did they talk about their past effectively? Did "place" play a large role in what they wrote about?

The act of writing poetry often feels like a solitary task, as if no one has ever written like you have before, but as I searched the lives of poets I found a companionship and association that was inspiring. Looking at Margaret Atwood, for instance, gave me courage to keep alive the memories of when I was a small child in British Columbia, for she herself wrote about her own childhood experiences. John Haines was another poet who contributed to my writing process. He was not someone who simply experienced nature in his childhood. He was a man who sought it out as an adult and excluded civilization from his life.

The end result of my thesis was more than I hoped for. Just by learning from great writers I was able to write boldly about my past, and I found that intertwined in my memories were people that shared those experiences with me, and they too added to the depth of my poems I call "Canadian Wild."

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Other writers in a supportive environment while still getting to the bare bones of what makes a great poem.

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## Caradian Wild

There is a long history of poets that have found inspiration in nature, and more specifically, in the isolated wilderness that still exists across America and Canada. Canadian poets like Margaret Atwood, Don McKay, and American poets like Gary Snyder and John Haines are some of those that have written about this power and majesty. These contemporary poets have found personal expression in using nature as their palette, and have been able to explore ecological and environmental issues, wonders in the natural world, and have done so in a way that was personal and meaningful to a vast audience of readers.

In a search for my own inspirations it has been an eye opening experience to read the biographies of these poets and learn how they got started, and see what influenced them in their writing. In my research it has been very important for me to understand where poets' inspirations came from because although I have had some incredible experiences in nature, and have seen lakes and mountains that cry to be written about, I have wondered which goes into the making of a great poem more, the experience or the craft.

Some of the questions I looked into were: Was inspiration gained from living in remote locations? Was it from emotional trauma? Was it from everyday experiences? Was it from long study of nature? How did they write about personal issues yet not get sentimental? Is it possible to write effectively from the viewpoint of people other than yourself? How did the nature poets each write about common

elements yet make them seem fresh and interesting? These questions are not new, but they are ones that every writer works through to some degree or another, and to answer them I began looking at the childhood of the Canadian poet Margaret Atwood.

In her youth Margaret Atwood would take trips as a child to northern Ontario with her parents to work with her father who was a government entomologist. She was introduced to nature at a very young age, but it wasn't until years later that she wrote down what she found. Later in life the subject of the "age of influence" was important to her as she developed into a poet. Seeing her own father so engrossed in his scientific work, she sought to find out at what age he began and why he was so interested in nature. In her book *The Door* she writes about him in her poem "Butterfly"(Atwood 14).

My father, ninety years ago,  
at the age of - my guess - ten,  
walked three miles through the forest  
on his way to school  
along the sedgy wetfoot shore  
of the brimming eel-filled rush-fringed  
peat-brown river,  
leaving a trail of jittering blackflies,  
his hands already broad and deft  
at the ends of his fraying sleeves.  
Along this path he noticed

everything: mushroom and scat, wildbloom,  
snail and iris, clubmoss, fern and cone.

Atwood talks about how her father ambled through logged-out brush lots and beside meandering rivers, and her lines also contained an element of the scientific, that objective naming of flora and fauna that added an element of solidity to her work, yet the naming did not make her lines seem distant. I too fondly remember walking through meadows where my own father would point out wild strawberry flowers or Indian-paintbrush blossoms. The naming lent a familiarity to me that made the forests and fields a welcoming place.

The more I read Atwood's work the more I found myself thinking of my own experiences. Atwood's verses caused me to be introspective and to draw near to those memories that were sometimes not easy to approach, memories that were filled with emotion. In "Butterfly" Atwood writes about her own emotion-filled past. She describes what her father was like before she even knew him. She took qualities that were important to her in her father, curiosity about the natural world, attention to detail, the awareness of life, and combined them in a poem that was reminiscent and powerful, but not sentimental.

I have always desired to write about my past because I felt that it would be something that would genuinely be of interest to others. Most people I know have never seen a grizzly in the wild, or hunted elk in the Kootenay Mountains, or hunted Chukar partridge with their fathers. Most of my times in the wilderness have been in

the presence of family, so my dilemma in writing about the experiences was to make sure that I did not slide into sentimentality nor head into detached description.

This was an issue when I wrote "Raven Trap." To associate the possibility of death with my own father was not easy to do convincingly without being sentimental, especially since the poem was from the point of view of me as a young boy.

I had visions of a twisted  
coyote, grey and bent  
with pain, teeth in a snarl,  
when my father climbed  
from the cab to walk  
through the pines on the ridge  
to check his traps.  
I only wanted to be with him,  
even in death,  
so I felt much better  
when he said to hitch  
the rifle on my back  
and come along.

As I have written poems like "Raven Trap" I have found how important the setting was in my poems. The American poet Gary Snyder acknowledges the formative role that "place" plays in the shaping of poetry. He traveled around the world early in his life while he was in the navy and ended up living in places like

Japan and the Northwest coast of the United States. All of these places influenced his work and all of the nature he encountered found its way into his poems. Like Snyder I am also fortunate to have traveled to a wide variety of places, and grown up in two worlds: the small city with all its lights and concrete, and the mountains and streams where life is so very different without humanity.

I have also been very fortunate to have had family that enjoyed learning about nature from an academic standpoint as well. It has been very beneficial for me now as I write to know the names of different plants and animals. Snyder also felt this way and wrote in his book *Regarding Wave* the poem "What You Should Know to be a Poet." He writes that readers should look around them and learn, "All you can about animals as persons: the names of trees and flowers and weeds, names of stars, and the movement of the planets and the moon "(1-4).

I have truly taken this to heart, and it seems to be something that all nature poets learn, for even Thoreau went to Walden Pond to "learn only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach "(Thoreau 90). In the past I have done this, hiking up mountains and rivers, and reading Audubon books on birds and plants, and while growing up it made me feel like less of a stranger when I was in the woods. It helped me to become part of something larger than myself and see nature as something familiar the more I visited.

Another aspect of "place" that I saw Gary Snyder using was the idea that a single place will be different for different people. If a poem is written from the view of different people, the "place" of the poem can shift, allowing the poet to reveal more

of his landscape. In *No Nature*, there are six points of view in the poem "The Public Bath." He writes from the perspective of a bath-girl, baby boy, daughters, old woman, young woman, and the men. This was interesting to read because it helped me to see that not only could I create a poem that showed my perspective, but that I could create a poem that showed my perspective through the eyes of other people.

In "Bear Land" I wrote of a bear attack from the point of view of the bear and the man that was mauled. It was not so hard to write from the position of the man, but it was difficult to write from the perspective of the bear. To do so I had to enter his world in my mind and become the bear. This was not something new to me, as I have tried to do this in the past with other animals, but what was new was that it allowed me to explore in writing another aspect of a poem. It gave more depth to what I was writing about and made the story more diverse.

I think that what has also helped me understand nature more has been my knowledge of the First Nations people in British Columbia. Going to school with them, having them as friends, and hearing stories of my father living with them in the Yukon and Northwest Territories provided me with alternative models and ways of reading my natural environment. The native Canadians, the Cree, the Haida, the Inuit, were all were part of nature in ways that modern men may never understand fully. This does not mean that we cannot try to understand however.

When looking at the culture of Canada's indigenous people I wondered about writing poems through the eyes of the Inuit and the Cree. I struggled with this idea because the identification with First Nations culture by white Canadians seemed

problematical to me. Can I ever really understand their culture? Will I ever get to the heart of what nature means to them? What gave me courage to write about them was the work of William Heyen, who wrote moving poetry about the victims of the Holocaust. Heyen himself never experienced what they did, and never claims to speak for them, yet from his research and interviews he has been able to recreate authentic stories about what happened then.

My own memories of being in the Northwest Territories were of going out on Great Bear Lake in fishing boats with the native men and sitting in the trading post with them as they skinned arctic fox. Through my years of coming in contact with many other First Nations people I have been able to see the impact of civilization on their lives. It seems that for many of them the change from living off the land to living with concrete and gasoline was hard. I tried to create this feel of two worlds colliding in "Fool of an Inuit," and even though like Heyen I will not claim to speak for the First Nations people, I will try in my own way to communicate the sadness I have seen at the impact of civilization.

John Haines is a poet who also understood about being away from civilization. He was a man who moved to Alaska to homestead and live off the land. He built a cabin out in the wilderness and lived there for many years, trapping, hunting, and fishing to stay alive. He learned to become part of nature that thrived around him. He understood the First Nations people when they took game and wore their hides and danced as if they were one with the animal spirits. Haines wrote his

poem "And When the Green Man Comes" in the book *The Owl in the Mask of the Dreamer*:

The man is clothed  
 in birchbark,  
 small birds cling to his limbs  
 and one builds a nest in his ear.  
 The clamor of bedlam  
 infests his hair, a wind  
 blowing in his head  
 shakes down  
 a thought that turns  
 to moss and lichen at his feet.(Haines 14)

I also have felt this affinity for my surroundings when I was in the woods. At first though, growing up, it always seemed like a battle. Either I was getting eaten alive by mosquitoes or I was getting my legs torn up with blackberry briars. I would see prints in the mud and nests in the trees but they were meaningless to me until I began to learn about what role they played. Just by looking at tracks in the mud beside a stream now I can tell what went on like I was reading a book. I can tell for instance, if a raccoon was there last night pawing under the rocks. I can tell if it found a frog or a crayfish, and if any others shared its meal. In my poem "I Hear the Woods" I try to express the importance of not just going to nature, but "being" there:

so I hiked up the ridge,

paused  
where two trails  
found each other  
among the trout lilies  
and I waited to hear  
from the woods,  
and when the sun rose,  
the Hemlock land grew warm  
and spoke to me.

It is not easy writing down experiences. Haines had difficulties in changing his experiences into poetry, and it was not until years after emerging from his isolation that he did so. He speaks of this as he writes in *The Owl in the Mask of the Dreamer*: “What I wrote then emerged with difficulty from a kind of spell, one that I was reluctant to break, knowing that once I did, nothing would ever be quite the same” (Haines 1). Writing down memories creates a permanent record of what was once just thoughts. Understanding the struggle Haines went through has helped me to be bold in recording my own history. Haines is a poet that not only wrote about nature; he lived it and breathed it until it became a part of him, and his lines portray a reverence for his many experiences.

Part of writing poems that are dynamic and interesting involves writing about subjects that are either new to the reader or described in ways as to make the subjects seem new. When I came across the poems of Don McKay I found that his writings

were new for me in both ways. In his book *Field Marks*, Meira Cook talks about the feel of his poems: "McKay "is an avid birdwatcher, and his poetry is alive, bright, with the presence of birds-imagined, metaphoric, in flight, grounded, winging it across southern Ontario's skies"(McKay 9). There is a light feel to many of his lines, and what Cook says about the influence of birds is very true.

Reading McKays poems had a big impact on my own writing. They provided a strong contrast to my usual subjects of mammals, rocks and streams. My own poems are more earthbound and I think that the different feel comes in part from the rhythm created by his use of language. Words like swallows, swirling, raptors and wings create the soft sounds of the wind you would associate with birds, and when you think of wind you think of space, a feeling that many of my poems do not have, even the ones that have ravens and crows in them. I have definitely experienced this vastness and space in nature, yet introspectively I see that it should perhaps make its way more into my poems.

McKay's use of sound through consonants and vowels is masterful, and with those sounds he creates images he wants readers to see, and another way he is able to add variety to a poem is through his use of white space. For a poet to say when stepping out of his cabin that he is greeted with a blanket of white snow is one way of describing a scene, but to be able to somehow help your reader feel this momentary pause is another. In many of his poems McKay talks about silence and is even able to convey its presence to the audience by the use of white space in his lines. This is particularly useful in slowing readers because it makes ideas clearer and emphasizes

certain points. In his poem "Domestic Animals" out of *Camber: Selected Poems*, he lets his readers experience the feeling of a dog in snow:

that blue  
blush rising in the snow and the dog

follows his nose into a drift:\_\_\_woof:\_\_\_weightless  
explosion on the moon. Farther off

the dead express themselves  
in little lifts of painless terror...

McKay uses white space well to control his readers, but another method of craft that I explored while looking at poets was the ability to control where the reader pauses and stops through punctuation. With punctuation or the lack thereof, a poet controls the speed and tempo of his lines. He uses punctuation and line breaks as the throttle for how he wants the poem read. While he may use other techniques like white space, syntax and the weight of words, it is primarily the punctuation and line breaks that dictate the flow of the verses.

Every poet learns their own style of punctuation and it is something that may evolve over the poet's life. Take W.S. Merwin for example. In 1963 he abandoned the use of punctuation and decided to let the lineation, syntax, and the line breaks carry the pace of his lines. When I came across his poems I was astounded at the dramatic changes in punctuation. I knew punctuation was important, yet I never knew how important until I saw Merwin both use it and then abandon it. To see the flow of his lines without commas and periods was like watching a man drop his crutches after using them for so many years and stroll out into a sun-filled garden. He was able to

make it work, but it is something that I will continue to explore over the years in my own poems.

After getting back my first draft of poems , I went to work on my punctuation, with Merwin in mind. I was torn because I felt I had to either be on the side of the punctuating poets, or be in Merwin's camp of none whatsoever. I looked at my own lines in the poem of the old homestead:

In the hemlocks by the old homestead  
 a clearing is slowly growing back.  
 The old apple trees in the middle are dead and dry.  
 It will soon be hemlocks once more  
 and to the side of this clearing  
 near the tumbled down cabin  
 is a grove of aspen.

As I looked at these lines I felt that I was not finding that flow that I wanted. I compared them to Merwin's "Deception Island":

You can go no farther. The south itself  
 Goes much farther, hundreds of miles, first  
 By sea, then over the white continent,  
 Mountainous, unmapped, all the way to the pole (Merwin 54)

I know that I was trying to give the impression of the force of nature that goes on and on even when it is interrupted by man, and when I look at Deception Island I think Merwin was doing the same thing. Did he feel that his punctuation got in his

way? I don't know the answer to that, but when I look at his poems after 1963 I see a shift in the way his lines feel. In *Selected Poems* we see "Finding a Teacher" written in 1973, and in these lines I indeed (like the title) found a poet that I wanted to learn from.

In the woods I came on an old friend fishing

and I asked him a question

and he said Wait

but his line was not stirring

but I waited

it was a question about the sun (Merwin 217)

After learning from so many poets I have come to understand that sometimes I may get the answers about writing by merely watching and waiting like Merwin says in his poem. I may want to know how a poet writes such great lines, but I will find my answers only by listening to his work. This whole process of turning place and experience into great poetry is like getting acquainted with nature; it takes immersion, observation, and great patience.

## Fool of an Inuit

Kak was a fool  
a damn Inuit fool  
who froze his toes off  
when his sled fell through the ice  
on a flow near Inuvik. He should have listened to me,  
wore insulated pak-boots,  
those we had at the co-op  
for only two silver fox  
but no, he said his father wore mukluks  
he would too  
damn white man foot-skins  
is what he called them,  
said they made his feet sweat and freeze,  
said he threw his issued gear  
in an ocean swell and the Orcas came  
and ate them. He looked at me with his almond eyes,  
*I saw a frozen trapper up Copper River  
stretched out for the longest nap of his life  
in a cabin with those boots on.*  
I said *Look now, Mukluks didn't help you, did they?*  
He mumbled something that sounded like  
a whale clicking in the bay  
*issumaksorpok (I will do as I please).*  
He turned to me,  
*It was the storm that stopped me from getting back.*  
He shuffled his feet as he thumbed through  
the miniature seal harpoons we sold to visitors.  
He never bought anything, just came in to look around.  
*This one looks like mine,* he said mimicking  
a throw at the leopard-seal skin in the corner.  
He tossed it back in the bin.  
*But mine's a lot sharper,* he said  
and left.  
*A lot sharper.*

## Feet Over Water

I rose as I do every fall  
and slipped my canoe  
into the Tonawanda Creek  
before the sun was above the swamp willows.

I went with the current until  
I reached the mouth of the bay.  
I dropped the iron  
anchor and held the rope  
until I felt it catch  
on the creekbed floor.

I closed my eyes and tried  
to remember how it felt  
when Kak, my Inuit friend,  
held me when I was a child  
over the bow of the lakeboat,  
my feet dangling above the water.

He laughed around his cigarette,  
bragging to my father  
in the stern.

*This is how to teach your son  
to feel the rhythm  
of the salmon song  
when they run up the streams.*

I remember feeling a tingle in my toes  
like static  
and beneath the roar  
of the outboard  
a rushing, racing current.  
Was it the fish?

But now I float with the swells  
on Ontario Lake  
and I hold my heels over the side  
and I see in the deep  
how the salmon run,  
but I can't  
feel them.

## Raven Trap

I had visions of a twisted  
coyote, grey and bent  
with pain, teeth in a snarl,  
when my father climbed  
from the cab to walk  
through the pines on the ridge  
to check his traps.  
I only wanted to be with him,  
even in death,  
so I felt much better  
when he said to hitch  
the rifle on my back  
and come along.

When I fell behind  
he paused  
as I strode from one track  
to the other, and as we rounded a small hill  
I heard the desperate sound of something scrambling.  
When I looked there was a flurry  
of wings, a cloud of black  
as a very tired and angry raven  
tried to fly from the trap  
that held him.

We got close and I saw that it was his toe that was caught.  
He had been there for hours  
trying to get away.  
He almost tore himself  
free and the only thing  
that held him was a tendon.

As we drew near I saw his heaving breast  
as he stopped and cocked its head  
at me.  
My father reached down and pried the metal jaws  
away from the bird.  
It strangely sat there as my father squatted.  
*Sorry dear friend, he said, It was not  
you I intended to catch.*

It spread its wings and took off.  
My father set a new trap.  
We walked back to the truck,  
the trap with the frozen blood dragging  
behind in the snow, falling in the tracks  
my father left behind him.

## Pony Cabin

Why was it we dug in the middle  
of the small pony-pasture near your house.  
Picked and scraped with the vigor  
of boys and their dreams of fighting with rifles,  
dug in the softest place we could,  
to go deep underground and line the walls  
with lodgepole pine from the old stand of trees  
by the homestead.

Like the many projects we started that were much bigger  
than our minds could conceive, we ended our journey  
three feet in the earth, never realizing how hard it was  
to dig with pick and shovel.  
Perhaps we thought to carve a place  
like the frontiersmen before us carved theirs  
with their bare hands in the rock and the loam.  
It would have been a place where we  
could line the walls with traps and pin  
beaver pelts on the outside to dry in the sun.  
We would have bought a pot bellied stove  
to hear the crackling of fresh chopped pine  
and the sizzle of bacon  
before we went to fish for fresh trout.

I wonder sometimes what would have become  
of us had we finished that cabin,  
finished and used it to go on great adventures,  
go great places.  
I wonder,  
where would we have gone?

## Raven Call

I practiced my raven calls till I was so hoarse  
my mother told me I was going to  
wreck my voice.

I could see her looking out the window  
as I sat under the Douglas Fir and imitated the birds  
that came every evening.

I imagine I sounded like nothing  
at first, rather like a squirrel trotting through the fall leaves,  
or a nuthatch scratching  
on the limbs of a poplar,  
nothing to take notice of.

But this one time, and it only  
happened once, I saw a raven flying near the top  
of my tree and I called to him.  
It was a sound I had heard between birds before,  
sort of a clock-clucking sound  
like knocking on a hollow piece of wood.

I had to get my throat just right,  
wet and loose, and when I did  
I saw him veer in flight and swerve down the branches  
to the sound below.  
I called once more and saw him come  
as he dipped and swerved away  
when he saw I was not one of his own.

They say that ravens remember  
and I wonder if he,  
as he floats in the currents  
that flow up the Kootenay mountains,  
remembers the boy in the firs,  
standing with his hands  
cupped to his mouth,  
trying to speak a language  
not his own.

## Okanagan Badger

My father drove Grandad and me up near Mineral Lake  
in his beatup red '79 F-150.  
The dry brush caught underneath and scratched along  
like tiny fingernails on slate.  
We were looking for chukar partridge  
or perhaps a pheasant, and I was the one with the shotgun,  
an old double barreled thing that Dad kept behind the seat.  
Grandad pointed off to the side and we stopped to see,  
the dust rolling around us and coming in the hot cab.  
"It's a badger!" my father said as he opened the door and hopped out.  
Grandad told me to stay in the truck and I saw him run after my father.  
I could see them saying something back and forth  
as they climbed up the side of the hill.  
Dad motioned for me to leave the gun,  
and I climbed out and ran up the hill.  
"Badgers are proteced here " he said.  
As we climbed over the rise he pointed.  
My grandad pushed his styrofoam pith helmet  
back on his head  
and Dad shaded his eyes.  
It was scurring among the rocks about sixty yards away,  
moving higher and higher up a shale slide.  
I could smell mesquite bush  
and hear quail in the distance  
as he turned in a puff of dust  
and vanished down his den.

## Hear Me Calling?

Do you hear me calling  
from the bog  
behind the compost pile  
where spaghnum  
moss hangs along the trellis?

It is I the pied-crow.  
You remember me,  
the black feathered one  
who taps on your window pane  
for pieces of  
battered toast  
in the mornings.  
Last eve I came  
and perched  
in your garden, but then  
my black eye spied  
a berry on a wild bush.  
I lit underneath and stretched my neck  
for a bite,  
but my feet began to sink.  
Now I mire deeply  
in the peat, so I call.  
I have no hands to hold me up,  
only wings which were meant  
to fly, but now I find  
they fly me  
to a muddy-slumber, down  
under the grass and  
plum tree,  
where roots shall  
be those friends  
that come over at expected times  
for tea,  
and they,  
and I,  
shall visit after they slip in,  
slip in under  
my feathered cuffs  
and up into my floggy wings,

cold with wet, and then  
we shall be one, they and I  
no more crow, only thick black  
root.

## Not the First One In

You come to a rise in the logging road  
forty kilometers beyond  
Azure Lake and you stop  
your pickup,  
get out,  
walk down the dirt incline  
to see if you can pass safely  
through the creek.

You are the first to enter  
this spring, and the park wardens  
still haven't flagged this washed out  
culvert for repair.

You step into the running water  
and barely sink, the gravel firm  
under your boots.  
Your truck can make it through,  
you decide.

You turn to go when to the side  
you see prints  
where something heavier  
than you,  
much heavier,  
walked here too.

The tracks look like bear,  
a big bruin,  
and your neck tingles,  
and you reach  
for your rifle  
you left in the truck,  
the tracks so fresh the bottoms  
are still filling with water.

But then you see it is not a bear,  
for these half-meter prints  
were made by something  
with only two feet,

that walks like a man.  
You should know.  
You've hunted  
all your life.

You crouch to look closer.  
Your eyes follow their path  
to the trees, and then with a rush  
you stand at the sound  
of limbs in the forest  
breaking.

You see an alpine treetop  
quiver as something shakes it  
in a rage,  
perhaps at you and your noisy truck,  
and as you backtrack,  
one eye on the trees,  
for once in your life  
you leave  
a path  
alone.

## Feel of the Dead

When you grow up with black bear  
pelts stretched to dry in the sun,  
or sinews from the spines  
of mule deer taken in September  
strung in rows for making  
thread for sewing mukluks,  
it shouldn't bother you when  
you are grown and you have to put down  
your daughter's cat  
infected with the mange.

Although you have cougar skulls  
lining the shelves in your den,  
and antlers with brass plaques,  
and photos of caribou hunts  
hung in rows on your walls,  
you still get the shivers  
from the picture she put on its grave.

Even though the first pictures  
of you as a boy show you skinning  
arctic fox with the Cree,  
something you cannot remember,  
you still can feel  
the cat's limp form  
as you rolled her in a towel  
and placed her  
in the earth.

## Trout-Thief

Papewe dipped his head,  
brought the rifle  
into the tent stock first,  
stashed it by his sleeping bag  
next to his fly rod.

His name meant "lucky man"  
and though he was missing  
three fingers from frostbite  
in the Selkirks  
I felt better with him around.

With all our gear and the two mile  
hike to the edge of the ravine,  
no one else brought a gun.  
They were too heavy,  
too cumbersome  
to carry.

Papewe though, slung it  
over his shoulder with the fish basket  
in our descent down the gorge,  
slipping and sliding  
on silver dollar shale, looking  
like alpine skiers with fishing poles  
and backpacks.

We couldn't hear each other  
when we reached the river,  
the power of the rapids drowned us out  
the only way to talk was to  
signal with our arms.

It was as if we had stepped back  
in time, an ancient tribe  
once more, no written  
language, just fingers pointing down,  
hands mimicking fins,  
and eyes wide with emotion.

It was when the grizzly  
stepped onto the rocks,  
appearing in the roaring silence of the rapids,  
and sniffed the string of trout  
on the shore, that my blood  
ran colder than the Kootenay River  
I was standing in,  
and I didn't want to wave  
to Papewe thirty feet away  
and point to say, "Look behind"  
or the bear might see me.  
Besides, the rifle was out of his reach  
and mine,  
and in my frozen terror  
I watched the bear sneak that string  
of fish back into the stand of creek willow,  
as casually as an old man going home  
after a day of walking  
his trapline.

## Carve Me

I tried to hold it  
in, but my blood ran smooth  
and thick like chokecherry syrup  
on the linoleum floor,  
and I was scared that if I pulled  
that jagged pumpkin  
carving knife, still covered in pumpkin strings  
out of my side, I would have a  
pumpkin looking hole,  
and of all the times to choose  
something Halloweenish to do  
I had to wait until no one was home  
to help me with the gourds,  
and then my wife came in the door  
all "Hey I have some groceries in the car  
can you..." and stopped when she saw  
my blood, and the knife,  
and me carved up all  
Jack-O-Lantern-like, and her mouth  
moved but nothing  
came out because  
I think she saw inside.  
I think she saw  
the candle squatting  
next to my liver,  
the candle inside me  
shining out, and saw the horrible  
things I had done in the past  
as shadows flickering against my ribs,  
and I could not help but shine  
in my Jack-O-Lantern ways  
for all the world to see,  
and I didn't mind  
them seeing but I wished  
that she,  
couldn't see,  
my inner pumpkin.

## Dragonfly

Her love is a dragonfly  
born in a wild watery  
world, a moist paradise  
of cattail towers,  
bullrush turrets.

Her love glistens  
on iridescent wings  
thrumming with power,  
humming through  
her fertile frame  
as she launches from the ramparts.

Skyrocketing in flight,  
she darts and bends,  
her jaws snap,  
and she knows the thrill  
of belly-full.

When shining eyes see  
up above  
another glittering like her  
reaching for her supple form  
she turns to meet him  
in the air.

Arching, aching,  
tail to tail,  
suspended as a circle  
falling,  
she knows a momentary  
pause when all she feels is him  
inside, and in that moment,  
above their reedy bed  
life begins.

## Leopard Tattoo

In inky lines the leopard  
walks the slope  
up her thigh,  
among the blue mountain  
lilies that climb in profusion  
across her supple form.

He glides with the sun  
of morning as she lets  
the blankets slide  
to the floor,  
and when she runs her fingers  
down her leg  
they trail along his neck.

Then he feels her  
move beneath,  
so he spreads  
his paws and touches her,  
extends his claws and pricks  
them in her flesh until  
she shivers and begins to moan.

She bows her head,  
breathes so deep,  
the bamboo strands  
around his face begin to stir.

Her warm air makes him  
raise his head  
to rub a whiskered cheek  
on the tight skin  
of her hip, then  
one last caress of her laquered  
nails bids his feral form  
goodbye as she rises  
in a lope to meet the day.

## Haida Woman

She must have been nine months  
pregnant, with a belly so swollen  
it almost hid her navy  
bikini bottom.

Her matching top was small  
and held her full breasts  
to the sun before  
sometime soon, her dark nipples would be  
covered by suckling lips.

I wandered nearby, watching  
my daughter peer  
into tide pools, her plastic  
bucket filled with shells,  
her tiny feet leaving heel marks  
on the beach where we walked.

I could see the woman,  
her dark Haida eyes  
following my little one  
as she toddled along, and I tried  
not to stare but as we approached  
she looked up and held  
my gaze for a moment,  
raising her hand  
to brush her hair

and I felt nervous,  
me, a white man  
on her ancestral beach,  
as if I had intruded  
on a land where the totems guarded her  
as she lay, mother to her people.

and then she softly said,  
*beautiful child*  
as she gazed at the hand  
holding mine.

*Yours too*, I replied  
and she laughed and rubbed  
the stretch marks on her side,  
then I turned to see  
my daughter run to the waves  
and often  
I have returned to that Vancouver beach  
in the summer,  
hoping to see her and her child  
in the sand, but she  
is never there.

## Inuit Bride

She glides like a leopard seal  
through the icy flows  
and into the passage  
between my heart  
and mind,  
soul and spirit,  
her flesh and heated breath  
rise to reach me.

Her Inuit eyes slope  
along my sleeping form,  
lingering on my  
outstretched arm  
thrown wide in casting  
dream spears.

She draws near and I moan,  
feeling her senses  
drift across me  
when her fingers trail  
from chin to chest  
and down  
my hipbone.

She awakens me  
inside, and I shiver  
to smell the moist  
scent of her longing,  
I breathe her in  
and feel the weight of her bones  
settling into mine

## I Hear the Woods

I went with a hunter into the woods  
 and he showed me where  
 he often sat to wait for deer.  
 He said they usually came along this ridge in the morning,  
 and when I asked where their other trails were,  
 he looked at me and said  
 he didn't know,  
 and when I asked more  
 of bucks and does  
 I could see he was annoyed,  
 bothered that he didn't know which browse they ate,  
 or where they made their beds,  
 bothered that I whom he took for a city boy  
 sounded like I wasn't,  
 and when he said you can sit over there  
 and watch below,  
 I could tell he wasn't interested  
 in anything I had to say,  
 wasn't interested in listening,

so I hiked up the ridge,  
 paused,  
 where two trails  
 found each other  
 among the trout lilies,  
 and I waited to hear  
 from the woods,  
 and when the sun rose,  
 the Hemlock land grew warm  
 and spoke to me:

*Two does passed into the brush last night see? Their prints in the mud?  
 One is older than the other and her rear tracks are wider than the front.  
 See where they leapt across the stream and the soil is still moist?  
 See where an old buck stood after they passed, and urinated in the snow?  
 His big hooves are broad like his shoulders. Look where he stepped in their trail  
 and followed them in.*

*They all rest in the morning sun now near the top  
 where the currents of air warm and rise to tell them who is below. If you are quick*

*you can go around and come up from behind where they can't smell you.  
Oh, and by the way, the man up the vale?  
Don't tell him we spoke.  
He wouldn't understand.*

I am Ocean

I watched them lead you  
past your totems  
down the shore,  
force you  
into the sand.

From my depths I saw them  
kick your groin  
and press your copper face  
with booted feet,

hold you down  
so you could not breathe, and  
as if that  
was not enough,

I saw them snap your fishing spear,  
stand on you and hold  
their guns up high  
in triumph.

You are my child  
and when I watched them leave you  
like a mat,  
and stumble off to drink,

I washed your face,  
cleaned you of their filth,  
and your young limbs  
were new again.

I carried you out  
and placed you  
in the kelp  
with those who died before,  
so you were not alone.  
I rocked you,  
and felt your stiffness  
slide away  
like a salmon after spawning.  
I sang the old song for you  
*Swimmer come again to our shores.*

## Left Behind

Bitterness is a Canadian Thistle  
grown tall in the heart  
of a man with one leg,  
torn off by a bear in the Klondike,  
by a man who wandered so long  
among the Cree he left more than his leg behind.

Bitterness is a glass bottle,  
attached at your hip,  
in place of your leg,  
that became the only support  
you could cling to.

Bitterness is me,  
finding joy in life, yet  
knowing you are gone,  
feeling as if part of me  
like a leg,  
has gone with you.

## What Lies Beneath

What lies beneath is often that which we don't speak of,  
 for in the revealing there is exposure,  
 exposure that needs explanation,  
 explanation that often leaves one  
 vulnerable, defensive.

But the question is:  
 Can that which lies stay beneath?  
 We wish it would go, leave, vanish, but  
 does it ever go or is it a permanent marker,  
 a landmark we wish we never visited?

If like burial traditions of the past  
 we bury it under layers of sediment and loam,  
 will it remain in a resting state, slowly fading from our  
 consciousness, slowly seeping through the cracks in this world  
 down through the igneous rock to be burned away ?

Or is it inevitable that the decayed carcass  
 will be exhumed at some embarrassing point in our lives  
 when we are surrounded by inquisitors  
 asking,  
 asking,  
 asking.,

Or are we our own truthsayers,  
 rooting around in the past  
 like a hog looking for a truffle,  
 rooting around the dead carcasses  
 that groan as we disturb them in their sleep,  
 hoping to find some strand of thought that  
 will make a poem?

I find that lately in my own graveyard,  
 in my reminiscent search,  
 that I stir up ghosts and goblins  
 that make such a racket  
 they keep me awake at night, and  
 it seems the more stones I turn over,  
 the more tiny bones of dead animals I find.

Bones I don't remember were there,  
 Bones I never had the pleasure of meeting before,  
 Bones that are not in my own waking memory,

Bones that I think  
someone else placed there  
for me to find.

## So Many Things Made From the Dead

When someone you love  
leaves suddenly,  
and you can't catch them  
before the door swings  
shut, before they leave with coffee  
in a rush, you replay  
that moment,  
those fleeting sounds,  
those curtains still swaying  
from his passing,  
but then you begin  
your day and listen  
to the news,  
butter your toast,  
and wash the bowls from breakfast.  
The afternoon passes,  
and then when darkness falls  
you put your dirty clothes  
in the hamper and find  
a sock of his fallen  
between the washer and the wall,  
and waves of remembrance  
wash over you  
and you think of all the little things he did  
that were strange  
like carving bones,  
and stuffing birds,  
and how he hobbled around  
in that bowlegged way  
wearing his cowboy hat  
and jeans,  
and how he liked to feed things:  
you,  
the dog,  
his worms in the garden,  
yet he shot the robins for eating  
his strawberries,  
and how you never seemed to find it odd  
that he kept a freezer  
full of coyotes and birds

behind the house.

You remember his shelves of books  
and carved wooden men,  
and skulls with gaping teeth, and so many  
things made from the dead,  
yet around him you always felt so alive.  
You felt the wind when he took you  
to the mountains,  
and you sipped from streams  
high in alpine rocks,  
and it was he that made you love the Stellar's Jay,  
and feel the life in a trout,  
and laugh  
as a marten ran through the woods.  
It was he that showed you  
to be passionate,  
and love those around you  
without limits,  
and so even now  
although you wish things had been different,  
and you wish you'd had more time,  
you still take a moment to remember  
you love him still.

## White Swan

Young fools that we were,  
we drove to White Swan Lake,  
a two hour drive on bent logging roads  
and hairpin switchbacks  
in the middle of January.  
The cargo van with us on the floor  
swayed and slid, the snow  
crunching under the tires  
like styrofoam, our breath  
freezing in crystals on the bare  
metal walls.  
We passed mile twenty five,  
our driver pointing out the window.

*See that shack down below?  
Folks built it around a hot spring,  
and if we dared to slide  
down the bank and go inside  
we might find loggers,  
from around these parts, or tourists  
soaking,  
in the nude.*

So I looked even harder to catch a glimpse  
of a Scandinavian backside.

Then the lake was before us, frozen  
shore to shore,  
and we drove on it like some huge parking lot,  
but here there was no warm shopping mall,  
no burgers and fries.

Here we let a line down  
to get whitefish from a hole  
we drilled in the ice.

Here if we sat too long,  
face tucked in our parkas  
to keep our noses from freezing shut  
when we breathed,  
our lines would ice over in the holes.

The thing about ice fishing  
is that you really can't  
be still  
in the cold,  
so we stood, or sat, or lay  
on our bellies and looked down,  
down through the tunnel that looked like glass  
where the lake trout  
or maybe rainbows,  
lined up around the bait like the hour markings on a clock,  
watching lazily  
as if the 32 degree lake  
was a warm pool in the Bahamas.

But really,  
it was warmer down there,  
warmer by far than where we lay on the ice,  
and when our rods bent  
and the fish dove with the hooks imbedded in their jaws,  
we pulled them up,  
up out of the balmy water  
to flop on the ice, flop  
till the water on their skin froze,  
till their bones hardened and creaked,  
till their eyes glazed  
and they became as the ice below.

## Treetop Bier

I smoothed the black hair from his brow,  
 as he lay on a bier of hemlock bows.  
 I looked to the woods and cried,

"Who will wash him and rinse the dust from him now?"  
 My voice echoed back to me from the rocks and trees.

"I will," said the otter, climbing from the stream." I will wash him with my  
 paws."

and he wiped him clean as a fish.

"And who will comb his hair?"

"I will comb his hair," said the raven black and sleek,

"I will comb it with my beak,"

and he flew to land on my father's chest.

"Who will clothe him and keep him warm?"

"I will keep him warm with my fur," said the grizzly,

and he shed his winter coat

and draped it on my father.

"Who will carry him to his burial tree  
 where he can be lifted and see  
 the land he loved?"

A giant moose stepped from the pines and lifted him in his tines.

"I will carry him with honor, for in life he also honored me."

Then we all walked in a line of animals and family,  
 and we came to an ancient fir  
 whose lower limbs had been removed to protect  
 those in the tree above.

"Who will lift him into the tree?"

A cougar slid out from the forest quiet and strong.

"I will carry him along,"

and he held him gently in his teeth and climbed the tree with his claws  
 and lay him on a branch in the treetop.

"And who will guard him?" I asked in fear of the coming night

"We will," said the owls, and lit on the branches in a flutter of wings.

Then they in all their wilderness voice  
 with growls and barks and hoots and caws said in chorus:

"Who will remember him after his bones pass into dust?"

"We will," said his sons and his daughter

"We must."

## Go Silently

In a bar named Sixty Below  
hung a portrait,  
not a saloon girl in a velvet dress  
poised and beckoning,  
but a charcoal drawing of a dead man  
hastily scratched on a flattened paper bag.

Someone had drawn it:  
a posse member?  
a deputized trapper?  
a seasoned bush pilot?  
a corporal of the Northwest Mounted Police?  
My father had placed it there, tacked it up  
behind the counter  
on a shelf under the Canadian Whiskey.

It was a sideways view of a wretched face,  
hair rumpled from being under a hat,  
skin taut on his cheekbones from hunger,  
upturned nose matching the lip curled  
over the snarling teeth.  
He was dirty, or burned, or both,  
a snapshot of his end of the road.

They had tried to dynamite him out of his cabin  
and the sod roof fell in,  
but he didn't care and wasn't hurt,  
just continued shooting at the authorities.

The tip of his ear was ragged,  
frozen on his hike  
through the storm  
over Richardson Pass to the Yukon.  
They said no one did that in winter,  
yet they found his tracks on the other side,  
homemade snowshoes distinct in their marks.

Yet he still tricked them,  
going backwards, circling around to watch them as they followed, in endless loops  
and dead ends.

He would have won too, in the end, and gotten away with killing those men,  
but this Rat River Trapper misjudged where they would be  
and walked around a river bend  
into their waiting bullets.

The thing was, not once in the whole event did he utter a word.  
When they first came calling routinely to ask who he was  
and why he had moved the Indians' traps,  
he hid inside and never made a sound,  
and when they came back and he shot the one at his door  
he never said why,  
and even as he hid behind his pack in the snow  
and they shot him as he loaded his gun  
he never cried aloud.

Its eerie for me to look at that drawing now,  
that drawing of Albert Johnson, the Rat River Trapper,  
for I have it tucked away, a gift from my father's Yukon Bar,  
and when he gave it to me it was not a joke,  
and it meant something,  
something that I don't think I will ever understand,  
something about living there,  
and dying there,  
and never being able to talk about it.

## What We Shed

Goldenrod bloomed,  
signalling summer's end,  
and I fought my way through thickets  
of sawgrass with mosquitoes.  
I dragged my feet through mud and rushes,  
scouting for new and better hunting grounds.  
I was tired of baking in the heat,  
tired of not finding relief  
in the wilds away from reality,  
tired of my job,  
tired of the layers I hid behind,  
and tired of so many things.  
So in a rush I stopped,  
shed my belt of tools,  
my pack and army boots,  
camouflage coat and pants,  
and then I was standing in nothing at all,  
my clothes in a heap,  
and they looked like the  
abandoned husks the dragonflies shed  
that clung to the bullrushes  
around me.

Then there was a path  
on the ground, and I took it,  
bare feet padding softly in the mud.  
The cattails brushed me as I passed.  
I crossed a stream where the grass was so thick,  
growing from the water, that it invited me.  
I lay back and it held me up,  
and I watched the red-winged blackbirds soaring,  
then I rose and went deeper into the woods.  
The path turned and dropped  
into an alder thicket,  
so I crawled in the moss and finally came  
to the edge of a pond where I sat,  
my skin on the leaves,  
my back against a pin oak tree,  
and when a Mallard swam close and saw me  
he didn't fly, but ducked his head

under the surface, and when he raised it  
the droplets ran down him in beads,  
each one glistening in the forest light.

## Tentside

Shuffling feet  
soft wet brushing sounds  
like fur on rock  
toes slapping the mud  
clatter of flat stones flipping  
scurry of claws in the sand  
splashing water  
stream's edge  
slide of cattails on whiskers  
gurgle of wet throats  
snap of tiny bones  
crunching jaws  
slurping wet mouth  
sniffing nose  
sit and lick  
grass rustling  
slowly weave away.

## Below Ginseng

The bones I found  
deep under the ginseng roots  
were not mine, I mean  
I never saw them before,  
I didn't put them  
there.

I was merely digging for some roots  
looking for a few  
to rinse and sell  
when I hit that skull with my spade  
and found the two forms hidden.  
I bent to look before I put them  
back in their place.

I brushed the earth from their skins  
and saw that twisting  
they had grown around those bones  
molding themselves in life  
to fit around the death and marrow  
like little terra cotta men guarding.

One root looked like a fur coat with brown  
sleeves of soil on a frame  
of radius and ulnas,  
and another had grown between  
the second and third rib  
next to a heart,  
but what I wondered about most  
was the one inside the small jaw  
the one that grew with tiny arms spread wide  
as if even in death a song still sprang from this child  
and from this song ginseng blossomed.

## Aspen Memories

In the hemlocks by the old homestead  
a clearing is slowly growing back.  
The old apple trees in the middle are dead and dry.  
It will soon be hemlocks once more  
and to the side of this clearing  
near the tumbled down cabin  
is a grove of aspen  
that spin and speak  
whenever wind comes  
down the valley,  
and in the middle of this  
secret grove is one tree  
that remembers  
my feet and hands  
and the way I leaned back from the topmost branches  
in fall, and moved with its swaying rhythm,  
and then like a woodpecker  
tapped my name  
into the bark with  
my pen-knife  
in sharp tiny strokes,  
the moist wood  
covering my hands  
in scented sawdust.

## Haida Scent

She likes  
the smell of her man,  
the fragrance of salmon,  
smoke and cedar  
on his forehead, tobacco  
lingering on his lips, outboard oil  
on his fingers, pungent  
seashore by the buttons  
on his woolcoat,  
and the hint of  
evergreen  
in the nape  
of his neck.

## Bear Land

*It is Fall and you are fat  
from the Kokanee in Elk River,  
the saskatoons in the valley, and now  
the raspberries near the treeline,  
and you rumble along  
in your Kodiak way  
tossing stumps and rocks  
looking for marmots as you prepare for the winter  
and then you smell that beautiful smell  
something delicately dead  
and you swing your massive form around  
like the bow of a ship  
and head into the wind.*

You know you shot the elk  
right behind the shoulder,  
so where could it have gone?  
So you tell your buddies to look by the bluffs  
and you will go through high grass  
down the valley, and then halfway in  
you smell something bad,  
see a shape in the brush  
and think to yourself  
this can't be my kill.

*You come at last to the rotten  
deer killed by wolves  
who left just enough  
to make a meal,  
but then you smell steel and cloth  
and a sour unfamiliar taste fills your mouth,  
and you see that a two-legger  
wants your food,  
but you know in the second it takes you  
to barrel him down,  
he will be yours instead.*

Before you can move even closer to look  
the shadow that was behind  
is now in front moving at incredible speed

and you cannot yell  
and you cannot pray  
and all you can do is grunt  
as 800 pounds of muscle and bone  
knocks you into the ground  
and grabs you by the head with its jaws.

*You hear something snap as you bat  
its flailing arms away and you grab the head  
easily, dragging it off to a place  
where it can rot and smell better.*

Your left arm does not work  
and its teeth have carved flesh from your scalp  
that hangs in strips down your face  
and it drags you along like a child pulls a doll  
and you know if you go you will not return.

*You taste something good  
the blood on your tongue  
and you know once you settle the loam  
on its bones the rest won't taste so bad after all.*

So you grab hold of a log  
as it drags you over  
and hang on for all the life  
left in you.

*And something snags your prey  
and though you tug hard  
it won't come along and you smell  
the deer off to the side,  
and the stink in your mouth  
and you decide to take the easier route.*

He drops your head  
and rocks back and forth rumbling  
and trots to the side and grabs the deer instead of you,  
and then is gone  
just like that  
and you are allowed to live.

## Clear Ice

You knew going in your feet would freeze  
but your old boots were all you had  
so you kept your feet moving,  
even standing still  
and your Dad kept giving you the eye,  
telling you that the fish  
could hear you above the ice  
and that you would never catch anything  
that way,  
and then when the men left you and your buddy  
to your own hole and went to cut their own  
in peace you got so bored  
you took off your boots and put on skates.  
Who traded frozen feet for trout anyways?  
Ice fishing when you were frozen got old  
but chasing each other on skates  
was always fun.  
You darted between bullrushes  
found ice that was clear where you could see to the bottom  
pointed out the life in the weeds,  
you were in your own  
gliding world until your father yelled  
F---i---s---h!!!!  
You saw your rod fifty yards away bob and jerk  
then tip over and fall to the ice  
and as the fish dragged it to the hole  
you forgot your fun  
and skated for you life  
and just as the rod was heading down the hole tip first  
you did a slide to homeplate  
that would have made any ballteam proud  
and you grabbed that cork handle,  
hailed it up and forgot the cold and the ice  
as the rainbow trout  
flopped out on the ice.

## Attack in the Okanagan

You don't know why she chained  
her dogs in the cabin.  
You like dogs and told her so,  
but she said  
*Our old lab has a bad heart  
and will follow us up the slope.*  
You took off up the hill  
north of Okanagan Lake  
out of her family's camp.  
She offered you a bite of her sandwich,  
peanut butter and marmelade.  
You said *maybe later, when we get to the fort,*  
then you pushed through the brush  
by the water  
up the twisting path,  
the trout rising,  
and you came to the plateau  
where the others would come  
to play war, the kind children play  
not the kind that chooses to come to you,  
like that which came  
in those next few moments  
as you stood on the big rock  
to see the lake.

You heard the rattle,  
stones falling behind,  
and when you turned,  
death wore a black fur coat,  
no scythe just claws  
and you ran away with her,  
but death was too quick  
and caught her by the neck  
with one paw,  
and cut her scream  
in two and you  
just kept running for help,  
your twelve year old legs  
ripping through the brambles  
and when you collapsed in their arms

they went back and found the bear,  
and found Suzanne,  
but they never found  
that part of you  
you left behind.

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