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Poem

smoke tendrils roll upward
outward onward beyond
this abalone bowl bringing
the ancient ones
to stand at your shoulder
as the eagle feather fan
brushes smudge over the heart
and mind and spirit
making you a circle
containing everything
and nothing
at the same time

I can live like this
this being
blessed and blessing
in the same motion

the sacred medicines smoulder
drums
eagle cries
life
everything I hear

Paul Lake Evening

loon call wobbles over wind
eased through the gap between mountains
the lake set down aglitter
like a bowl of quartz winking
in the last frail light of sun
pushing colours around the sky

to sit here is to see this country
the way a blind man sees
the feeling of it all
pushed up hard against you
insistent as a child's hand
tugging at your sleeve

the Old Ones say
that everything is energy
and we're part of it
whether we know it or not

in the sky are pieces of me

we are the grass
alive with dancing
we are stone
vigilant and strong
we are birds
ancient with singing

the flesh of us
hand in hand, you and I
the whole wide world

He Dreams Himself

walking the line of the Winnipeg River
as it snakes northward out of the
rough and tangle of the Canadian Shield jutted
like a chin that holds Wabaseemoong
in its cleft and empties legends born
in its rapids and eddies of *Memegwaysiwuk*
the Water Fairies out of the belly
of Lake of the Woods

he dreams himself
talking to all the things he passes
singing their names sometimes
in the Old Talk
he won't awaken to understand

still, it's dream he walks through
and when he puts his hand upon
the pictographs set into stone
the iron oxide, bear grease
and pigment mixed to seal them
forever just above the waterline
on a cliff with no name
he feels the pulse of them on his palm
the sure, quick heartbeat of a thing
alive and captured squarely
in time, and wakes to find
his hand upon your hip bone
in the dim moonlight the stars
winking in a kind jest at the window

he dreams himself into being
as the Old Ones said
he would
in the teachings he holds as close
as you to the centre of himself

The Injun in this Poem

I

The Injun in this poem is planting flowers
kneeling like an acolyte at prayer
holding fragile life in his palms and wonders
looking up and around at this land
he's come to occupy at fifty-five how
he might have come to this shining
morning falling over half an acre
of mountainside with a digger in his hand
easing begonias and geraniums into earth
that dirties his fingers browner than they were
before he stepped outdoors into the flush
of light dappled by trees
containing birdsong and
wind song

the Injun in this poem holds the earth
up to his face and breathes the
musk and fungal fragrance that tells
stories of rock beings crumbled down to sand
and plant beings who surrendered themselves
in the Long Ago Time to become this rich
exhilaration of time and history cupped
neatly in his hand before easing it back down
using his fingers as a blade
to crater out a home for a new plant being
to become a hint of the chant that sings beneath
this eternal tale

the Injun in this poem is a hunter gatherer
hunkered down beside a ring of rock
that might have been a fire pit before
a Medicine Wheel or a ceremonial fire
where Grandfather stone
could scorch the ancient teachings
into his heart and mind and soul and take
him back into primordial time when this land
was still tribal land and the teachings sang
in everything and the idea of planting flowers
was unknown, considered nothing that
a native man would do, had no
need to do, when Creation
offered everything
but the Injun in this poem is planting flowers
happily, feeling much like a creator himself
in giving life a chance to express itself
this earth around his fingers becoming sacred
by virtue of his belief in it, his faith
that the teachings and the spirit
reside within it and that teachings come
over time to transcend even time itself
so that planting flowers becomes an Injun thing
by virtue of the Injun doing it
and believing it so

II

They say we cast our stories on the skin of birch trees once,
etching them there with the sharpened edge of a burnt stick
or pigments formed of earth and rock and plant material
that has never faded over time. I saw a birch bark scroll once.
The old man laid it out for me on a table top and traced a
line of history with one arthritic finger, telling it in the Old
Talk that I didn't understand. But I could translate his eyes.
In those ancient symbols was a world beyond worlds, of
legends alive, of a cosmology represented in the spirit of
everything, of teachings built of principles, built themselves of
rock and leaf and tree, bird and moose and sky, and Trickster
spirits nimble as dreams cajoling the Anishinabeg outward
onto the land toward themselves, toward him, toward me.
This is what I understood from the wet glimmer of his eyes.
This is what I carried away to here, to this page, stark in its
blankness, waiting like me to be imagined, to be filled.

III

The Injun in this poem stands washing dishes
looking out across a wide expanse of lake
and mountain while the sound of friends gathered
in the room beyond bubbles over jazz, Dvorak or the blues
and laughter like wavelets breaking over rocks
he wonders how this came to be
these nights when community happens of itself
and belonging is a buoyant bell clanging
in the harbour, the cove, the channel of his being

the way to here was never charted beyond
a vague idea of what might be possible if he were
blessed on one hand and lucky on the other
he did everything he could to break the charm
and he can laugh at that now, the folly of believing
in what he could convince himself as real
the task of being Injun not including

the spell of that charm, the lure of the desire he could never
state because he hadn't learned the language yet
and travelling incognito, silent as a thief
so that home was always the lighted path that led
off the sullen concrete of the streets and in the end
belonged to someone else, their lights
shining through the open windows where sounds
like those he hears behind him now came
to haunt him as he shuffled off into the night

the Injun in this poem nods to himself
wipes a bowl and sets it beside the other
dinner plates, the formal ones reserved for nights
like this that have no haunting overtones
"I'm from a nomadic culture after all," he says and laughs
hooks the towel on the rack and turns
into the current and joins the bubbling voices
in a room that belongs to him now

the nomad in his solitude
carried dreams of home

IV

take
 this
 hand
 e x t e n d e d
curl its fingers in your palm
whisper to me now
tell me that night must pass

V

Medicine burns when touched by fire. The smoke and scent of it climbing higher, curling into the corners of the room where you sit watching it, following it with your eyes and a feeling like desire at your belly and a cry ready at your throat. There's a point where smoke will disappear and the elders say this is where the Old Ones wait to hear you, your petitions and your prayers, the Spirit World where all things return to balance and time is reduced to dream. It vanishes. There's a silence more profound than any words you've ever heard or read and when you close your eyes you feel the weight of ancient hands upon your shoulders and your brow and this sacred smoke comes to inhabit you and in its burn and smoulder, a returning to the energy you were born in — and the room is filled with you.

VI

The Injun in this poem is talking
he's telling stories culled from a lifetime of travel
between worlds, between realities and ways of being
he's telling tales of desperate moons when his living
was like the harshest tribal winters with the howl
of the wind and the deepest freeze just beyond
the thin skin of a wigwam in the snow
he's spinning yarns of plenty when life provided life
and all he ever had to do was breathe as it was when
the Animal People came to offer up their flesh and teachings
so the Anishinabeg might survive and
travel forward to their destiny
he's telling spirit stories born of rock and water, air and sky
legends handed down from generations passed
and held in the hand like keepsakes
worn and rounded at the edges from use
he's offering anecdotes of everyone he's ever met
on the road of years that led him to this point in time:
Cree, Dene, Blackfoot, Metis, Ojib and Sioux

Hungarian, Finnish, Scot, Australian
Brit, Québécois and Swede
they all left him something to trundle down the road
and sort through later in private moments like luggage
he's recounting episodes of the serial drama
life became when choice was predicated on escape
harrowing nights of desperation drinking
and mornings blunt as dull axes
the hard clop of them against his chest
and then suddenly he's laughing like hell, knee-slapping crazy
telling everyone who'll hear it the folly
of it all and how in the end he discovered
that discovering himself meant everything he just said
so that now he's sombre, still as the pool of the sky
reflecting on the stories of a life told in hushed tones
around a fire with friends who see him as a shadow
and a light, become a Trickster too, somehow,
a teacher gambolling at the edges where the flames lick
darkness away and stories are born in the stark
cool caverns of the heart, stalactites mysterious everywhere
yes, the Injun in this poem is talking as he'll talk for years
story upon story creating landscapes out of living
like the Old Ones carving *dodems* out of wood
with something he's come to recognize as love