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Canadian Wild: Poems

Glenn Stryker Ostafew
The College at Brockport

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Canadian Wild: Poems

by

Glenn Stryker Ostafew

A thesis submitted to the Department of English of the State University of New York

College at Brockport, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

October 5, 2008

Canadian Wild: Poems

by

Glenn Stryker Ostafew

APPROVED BY:

Steph Feeh

Oct. 20 2008

Advisor

date

James Johnston Jr.

10/22/08

Reader

One Rj

10/28/08

Reader

AM

10.28.08

Chair, Graduate Committee

James D. ...

11-3-08

Chair, Department of English

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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I would like to thank Dr. Steve Fellner for teaching me about workshopping poems with

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

I would also like to thank Glenn Ostafew, my first father, whose passion for life and nature sparked the same fire within me.

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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
buttered 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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