

Native Canadiana: Songs from the Urban Rez

Copyright Gregory Scofield. Originally published by Polestar Book Publishers under the title, *Poems from Native Canadiana: Songs from the Urban Rez*. Vancouver, 1996. These poems are for research purposes only.

Nikâwî (p. 32)

The world began
through the V of her legs.
a wishbone expanding
that never broke.

My right foot
lodged between her ribcage
was only a hint
of the pain to come.

Thirteen hours it took
before she could breath
Paskowi-pîsim
into my mouth and smile.

Twenty-nine summers
the Moulting Moon eclipsed
his ghost
never once disturbed my dreams
not even
when the phone rang and rang
that's how missed he was.

Paskowi-pîsim: July or the Moulting Moon

Lifetime Stranger (pp. 35-36)

Mostly I was a vacant-eyed kid
thinking of him
especially when she drank.
The three pictures I had
I hid in the top drawer,
his fat brown face
under my socks and t-shirts.

When I was older
I started to think
maybe he wasn't
who she said
he was.
I wanted wedding pictures,
divorce papers, a birth certificate – an answer
how come he never called
or came around.
Probably dead
or in jail, she'd say
shrugging her shoulders.

Finally
when I reached adulthood
I stopped probing,
took her silence to be
a wound never healed.
Sorting through her stuff
after she died
there wasn't one trace.
Even now, I wish
I hadn't ripped those pictures
so hastily
back then.

Stepfather (p. 37)

He stole the sun,
spoke thunder
coming down the mountain
only too proud
to swallow the last rays.

Like raven
he kept any warmth
sealed tight
in a box.
Never ask or beg
she said, her eyes
loose hinges
on a swinging door.

I knew then
not all storms
were good.

She Was Dark (pp. 45-46)

We only knew her
as Grandma.
Her *pahkwêsikan*
was thick and fluffy,
never flat or chewy.
She used milk and eggs
so we called it proper,
tea-biscuits.

The *wiyâs*
was always Grade A.
Her *la-patakwa*
were either baked or mashed,
never fire-roasted.
Dessert was vanilla pudding or cake,
never chocolate.

The sheets
were white and boarding school starched,
always tucked just so.
Her *âcimôwina*
was Cinderella or Red Riding Hood,
never *Wisahkecâhk* or *Wîhtikôw*.
I didn't think to ask.

Years later
in her kitchen
I recited the Three Bears
nîsto-maskwak, in Cree.
"Mm-huh," she said
examining her dark hands
without looking.

Pahkwêsikan: bannock

wiyâs: meat

la-patakwa: potatoes

âcimôwina: stories

Wisahkecâhk: First Man or Cree Trickster

Wîhtikôw: Ice Being or cannibal

nîsto-maskwak: Three Bears

Three Poems (legacy in the blood) (pp.47-49)

Blood Secret

She was someone else's
dirty *Cheechum* story.
The manager probably said,
get that drunk squaw outta here
when they finally found her
stretched out cold
on the floor, by the bed
wearing her fox coat & boots
ready to go.

Years later
it was grandmother who asked how she died.
A broken heart, my *mosôm* said,
dismissing the topic as if
it wasn't his to begin with.

Cheechum: great grandmother
mosôm: grandfather

Blessing The Blood

He was a good man –
he died too early,
my mom would say
when I asked
something about our history.
At school,
ethnic day I dressed
in a tartan kilt.
My face had
brown pigment marks.
I was convinced
God had yet to decide
what colour I'd be
so I stopped asking
and waited
for the significant change.

She listened to Wilf Carter
and Kitty Wells
sipping dainty her Old Style.
One time
I came home from school
crying because this kid said,
fuckin' welfare chug.
Never mind, she said
at bedtime,
you're my special blessing.

Blood and Tears

When the doctors
called a meeting
and needed my signature
it was final.

She just laid there
blinking silent tears,
the respirator pumping
phony life into her body.
I spent an endless month
singing all the old songs.
My voice never wavered,
cracked or choked
once.

January 12, 1993 – 6:38 a.m.
only then did I cry,
scream, rush about the room
like a trapped bird
looking to grasp any piece of my history.

Now
nothing remains
but old warped records,
pictures, bits of memorabilia
and lost relations scattered.
In the other world
a fiddler arches his bow.

Policy of the Dispossessed (pp. 53-55)

And whereas, it is expedient, towards the extinguishment of the Indian Title to lands in the Province, to appropriate a portion of such ungranted lands, to the extent of one million four hundred thousand acres thereof, for the benefit of the families of the halfbreed residents.

Manitoba Act of 1870 – Section 31

The phrase (the extinguishment of Indian Title) was an incorrect one, because the halfbreeds did not allow themselves to be Indians. If they are Indians, they go with the tribe; if they are halfbreeds they are whites, and they stand in exactly the same relation to the Hudson Bay Company and Canada as if they were altogether white.

Sir John A. Macdonald,
Official Report of the Debates of the
House of Commons, July 6, 1885

In that part of the country
our homeland
they ended up squatting
anywhere there was road allowance.
My great-great grandmother's people refused to be pushed out –
even after the first Resistance in 1869.
They lived in a vacant CPR shack,
watched the influx of newcomers
until one day
the prairie was completely taken over.

In that part of the country
our motherland
they gathered seneca root
or did odd jobs for white farmers.
When the jobs grew scarce
or ran out altogether
they perfected their English –
wiped away any trace of a dark language.
This I am told
was the death of *our nation*
and the birth of Confederacy.

In that part of the country
all public lands
were sold or snatched up by speculators
or shifty dealers in Métis scrip.
There are some deceptions left unmentioned.
The children's scrip, for example, in which
land was granted and sweet-talked
for chocolate bars or candies.
My *Cheechum* was born clutching prairie dust.
A taster of shame
clung on her rabbit/ gopher tongue
and carried over fire generations.

In that part of the country
Canada
they hung around small towns, outside the bar.
A bottle was planted in my *mosôm*'s hand
the day of his birth.
At thirteen he left part of the country
and headed west to Saskatchewan and later married my grandmother
who grew up on a farm, safe from any Indians.

In that part of the country
our homeland
I went back and dug in the prairie soil.
There among the buffalo bones and memories
an ancient language sprang from the earth
and wet my parched tongue.
In that part of the country we were always *katipâmsôchik* –
and our displaced history
is as solid as every railroad tie
pounded into place, linking
each stolen province.

Cheechum: great grandmother
mosôm: grandfather
katipâmsôchik: The People Who Own Themselves

