

*Singing Home the Bones*

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**Women Who Forgot the Taste of Limes** (pp. 10-11)

*Letter to ni-châpan Mary*

Ni-châpan, if I take ki-cihcânikan,  
press it to their lips,  
will they remember the taste of limes,  
sea-salt bled into their grandfathers' skin?

*my ancestors, your fingerbone*

If I pull from this bag of rattling bones  
the fiddle, the bow bone,  
if I go down to the lazy Red,  
lay singing in the grass

will the faces of our ancestors  
take shape in clouds  
and will the clouds name themselves,  
each river-lot stolen?

If I take ki-tôkanikan, ni-châpan,  
place on them a pack to bear  
will they know the weight of furs,  
kawâpahtamiwuk chî

*your hipbone*

*will they see?*

the city is made of blood, wîni  
stains their grandmothers' aprons,  
swims deep in the flesh, a grave of history  
a dry bone song.

*bone marrow*

ni-châpan, if I take ki-kiskatikan  
will they offer up the streets,  
lay open their doors and say I'm welcome?  
Or if I take ki-tâpiskanikan,

*your shinbone*

*your jawbone*

place it scolding on Portage and Main  
will all the dead Indians  
rise up from the cracks, spit bullets  
that made silent our talk?

If I take ki-mâwikan, ni-châpan  
I could say to them  
I'm not afraid of gunshots, stones  
or the table I sit at –

*your backbone*

this table where I drink tea with ghosts  
who share my house and the words  
to keep it clean.  
ni-châpan, if I take ki-cihcânikan,

*your fingerbone*

press it to their lips  
will they remember the taste of limes,  
hold silent their sour tongues  
for once?

**Conversation my Châpan Mary Might Have Had with Mrs. Sarah F. Wakefield**  
(pp. 12-16)

*Most of the half-breeds are treacherous. Such is the way with the part breeds, or many of them. I would sooner trust a full blood than any of them. There is too much art and duplicity in them.*

— Sarah F. Wakefield, *Six Weeks in the Sioux Tepees: A Narrative of Indian Captivity* (1864)

mâmaskâc! dare I shay  
you shtupid ole biddy

*it is foolish or surprising*

Mish Shara  
what you got to blab about

wooman  
you got home shafe an

you ole man  
he foun you to be — how you shay

in your Anglaish? —  
not boddered, not molested

so how come dat Mish Decamp  
dat udder gaptive wooman

she dell everyone you far from  
dah lamb-a-God

in gaptivity  
but an ole durkey hen

rufflin up you fedders  
pumped up wooman

like you got no shame

but me Mish Shara  
I got doo mutz art

— what you shay? —  
doo mutz tuplicity in me

do be drust-wordy  
but you

you shtupid ole biddy  
I mate you a fiddle dune

galled dah “Mish Mahkesîs  
in dah Chicken Coop Jig”

*fox*

den we shee  
what you ole man

he shay

anywaysz dat Mish Decamp  
I tink

she makes you dell dat story  
caushz she go blabbin aroun

you kinda big wooman  
not doo goot do look at

an she ton’t know  
how come dem wile Indians

dreat you sho kind  
how come dey give you back

an tont dake nuddin not even  
one coddamn

shiny nickel  
dare I shay Mish Shara

only you an dah goot Cheezus

he knowed what you shuffered

but me I am a half-breed  
an what you shay

I got doo mutz art  
doo mutz tuplicity

do be drust-wordy  
An me I shay

I ton't give a goot coddamn  
wedder you got you virtue

or wedder it's bin tree months  
an dwo days

since you sheen a bar-a-zoap  
an water or

wedder dey trow stones  
or hang you upside town or

march you trew dah streets  
like a whore on Shunday

caushz me I got more art  
more tuplicity

in my liddle doe, damn right  
you shtupid ole biddy,

den you got wooman  
in you whole hungry

atimocîsk bones.

*A dog's rear end*

## THE REPATRIATION OF MRS. IDA M. SCOFIELD (pp. 17-21)

### 1. *The Family Portrait: Portage la Prairie Manitoba c.1904-1905*

It is all here unravelling  
in black and white  
the meaning of salvage, the last  
sepia-toned remnant

of your gleaming white life,  
the stiff likeness of yourself  
appearing more the photographer's prop,  
the settee

holding the seized woman  
whose hair is neatly piled,  
pinned into place you waiting  
to tear off the thick brocade dress

and throat pin, this presentation  
of perfect ordinance  
caught in tatters fraying apart  
all in good black order.

It is all here, Ida:  
you, the portrait in the portrait.  
Knotted and carefully stitched,  
nothing visible, nothing misplaced

except for the soft-shaping bones  
inside, my grandfather's  
small body of exile, the bastard bones  
of freedom freedom

from the tit-tat talk of town,  
the man to your right  
who is raging beneath his collar,  
who is not my blood —

my blood name

that is not my grandfather's name,  
the name  
given to our history.

And it is all here  
in the eyes of the woman beside you,  
grey and death-marching  
her lips pocked with crucifixion

that I can see in black and white  
the meaning of salvage,  
this careful unbolting  
of your life's fabric,

although the drop behind you  
is silk, such lovely silk  
your eyes have cut past  
the photographer's vision

already gone away dear Ida,  
from his composition.

2. *At the Door of Leaving Kinesota, Manitoba, c. 1934*

This evening at the kitchen table  
I sing you home  
beneath this small glow of light  
and I think perhaps  
this will be the only moon, the only light  
you will ever be given. Quiet

the house that holds me  
holding this final image of you,  
a surviving skin vestige  
of used and bleaching bones  
balancing somewhere between disappearance  
and departure, the last days

neither a record of damages  
nor a song of ending hope but simply  
a record, an ending of film  
catching your face tilted, grey  
like the roof above you,  
your eyes

half-pitted, spoiled  
by the uncertain light throwing back  
shadows  
dimming the planks of the door.  
Behind you  
it cannot be seen

the half-breed hands of the house  
Johnny built you or the floors  
scuffed and grooved,  
a house of people, always people  
coming. But you are leaving.  
The dress that holds you together

is barely breathing. But it is your hands,  
the bones surrendered to stumps,  
the fingers curled inward,



mourners of light. And it is your hands  
I am most singing  
home

beneath this small glow of light.

**Ida, But Still** (pp. 22-24)

*On searching for the grave of my great-grandmother at St. Bede's Cemetery in  
Kinesota, Manitoba.*

Ida, but still the old church  
is without records  
and the crocuses along the gate  
have only a seasonal memory and still

the yard is green and greener  
and the midday shadows  
slip past the breaker of spruce  
and down below the lake is still

teeming with whitefish,  
the mud-sunk bones  
of the Icelandic fisherman  
whose foot was caught

in the net of his own casting but still  
Ida, the bones of you  
are without marking  
and who is to know

if the church bell rang  
and who among the living  
can say if old lady Asham,  
old lady Sanderson,

sang with the sparrows  
or if that day  
Johnny tore down the house  
log by talking log,

or set fire  
to the trees  
who carried their proper names,  
if then the bible of you

Ida, was free to burn wordlessly  
And all who were written there  
would become still still  
like the tea leaves settling

at the bottom of my story cup still  
as the June crocuses  
blind  
to where you lay, to where

your hands hold upright  
a century of silence —  
Ida, but still the old church  
is without records

and the lake for some time now  
is slow in her bones,  
and I am here amid so much green  
without a blade of disturbance.

**The Will** (pp. 25-27)

*On reading the will of my great-great-great-grandfather, David Magnus Cusitar.*

He could have said:

my dear wife, I give you back the house  
as now by me occupied.  
Do as you wish with the furniture,  
plates, linen and china,  
chattels and effects  
of every nature and kind  
as now used and enjoyed by me.

He could have said:

my wild rose, my sweet prairie crocus,  
name yourself to be âpihtaw-kosisan  
and our children and their children.  
Lift your sad face from these pages  
and set a feast at the table;

*half-sons or half-breed*

good lass, use me wee mother's linen,  
aye, the silver  
passed down from me gran.

He could have said:

I bequeath unto you, most loyal Margaret,  
Lots 21, 22, 25, 26, 27,  
29, 31, the wood-lots of birch,  
graceful elm and maple.

Rest there the bones of your kohkom  
whose back served the weight  
of Company times.  
Give back to her  
her true and given name.

*grandmother*

He could have said:

to each of my sons and daughters  
I give, devise and bequeath unto you  
equally, the sum of my service  
to Country and Queen.  
I hereby distribute and pay to you  
all monies and lands  
arising from theft.

And I do hereby promise and give to you  
the visions and virtues of Louis Riel  
as hereintofore directed, upon trust  
that you benefit of the foregoing legacy

He could have said:

my dear Margaret, as to the property  
hereby devised and bequeathed to you,  
my will is that upon your marrying again,  
the said property so devised to you  
shall remain yours for life  
and in all respects be treated  
as if it always belonged to you.

He could have said:

my wild rose, my sweet prairie crocus,  
tapwe, mistahi ki-sâkihitin!

*It is true, I love you very much!*

**Prayer For the House** (pp. 72-75)  
(*We are leaving*)

â-haw, kinanâskomitin good house  
we are leaving, anohc  
the bones of us  
have risen for the last  
in our beds. ekwa

*an invocation, I give thanks  
today*

*and*

kinanâskomitin good house  
but now the walls, the rooms  
must give back our lovemaking,  
iskwâhtemak, the doors  
must return to their hinges.

*the doors*

ekwa miyo-wâskahikan  
we are leaving, sweep clean  
the ghosts from the kitchen,  
petâ- petâ  
the poems from the cupboards,

*good house*

*bring me*

petâ the songs, âw nikamowina  
we've simmered in the soup pot.  
ekwa kinanâskomitin good house  
but now the floors  
must give back our dancing.

*the songs*

natohta, the fiddle of us  
has gone weeping down  
the front stairs.

*listen*

natohtawehk, the birds in the yard  
have gathered in chorus,

*listen to them*

*tânte-ê-wi-tohteyin,  
tânte-ê-wi-tohteyin?*

*where are you going,*

ekwa kinanâskomitin good house  
the bones of us  
have risen for the last  
in our beds. êy-hey

*an exclamation of heaviness*

âstam ekwa  
we are leaving, anohc  
we are leaving.

*come now*

â-haw, ekosi.

*now I am done*

**The Return** (pp. 82-83)

All of me is heated marrow.  
Three whole nights  
my breath has come in spurts  
and my eyes, having shut down,  
saw only the moon  
you sang.

The smell of you left  
on my skin was a marker.  
Three whole nights  
all of me went untouched,  
a prisoner lying drunk, jailed  
in our three-day-old sheets

But tonight  
you lay me down and your body  
is the taste of saskatoons,  
having ripened.  
The hands of the clock  
are neglected children  
crying out the hours. But I say,

*let them cry! Let them ring  
in the ears of the dead.*

Three whole nights  
I've felt the marrow of my bones  
congeal like Wihtikîw.  
I've eaten you, peyakwâw,  
nîswâw, nistwâw.

*legendary eater of humans, the cannibal  
once,  
twice, three times over*

But now I'm hungry,  
pîmîciso, boy!  
while the moon looks away,  
dimming the coal of my lips.

*come eat*