

I Invite Honest Criticism: An Introduction

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Long ago, when Kuu-as (humankind) and all other animals knew and understood each other, Kwatyaat (the primeval West Coast superhero) engraved designs representing sea and land creatures, real and imagined, over the full expanse of a large flat rock wall on the lakeshore not far above Emin.¹ These markings on the rock were a message from him to the Huupachesath people, the traditional owners of the territory, to be respectful of all creation.

When I was a boy, in the 1950s, my mother's auntie, Ayaat, visited us annually and regaled our family with stories about these animals that thought and felt the way we do. She would become in turn Ke-in, Tlehmaamit, Ii-ishsuu-ilth, Kwiikwistupsup (Miss Crow, Mr. Red Shafted Flicker, Pitchwoman, Transformer), or any of a great number of other characters. She never portrayed them, acted like them, or copied the way they spoke — she became them! Each year, in the fall, when the commercial berry-picking season in Washington state was finished, and just in time for the annual dog salmon run up the Somass River, Ayaat would come, bringing much joy into our home. She was pure poetry.

All through my life I've been aware of the great efforts of my uncle, George Clutesi, to overcome the racism and ignorance so characteristic of Canadian treatment of us, the First Peoples of this part of the world. On behalf of all the native people in this country, he carried on a long and frustrating harangue, utilizing traditional songs and dances, painting, public speaking, acting, prose writing, and poetry. Like Kwatyaat, he wanted to send a message to future generations. Like Ayaat, he used poetry to send that message.

In 1973, after eight years of travel over much of the world (brought on by a failed career as a grade 8 student), I moved back to Aswinis, where I was born and raised. During one of our first conversations, after my

¹ Emin is the name of a whirlpool on the Sproat River. My brother Kwitchiinim lives there with his son. The large rock face is on the shoreline of Sproat Lake, close to where it spills into Sproat River.

return home, Uncle Georgie said to me, “Don’t write your autobiography yet, Nephew. You’re not ready yet, but your day will come.” His confidence in my abilities and his always present encouragement have had much to do with my poetry.

For years I’ve kept a daily journal, recording important events in my family’s current history and momentous occurrences in my community. I’ve tried to make the information in my journals available to others as much as possible. However, the poetry I’ve been writing since the 1960s is another story. I’ve almost always kept my poetry absolutely private, but recent events in the literary world and in the world of politics have convinced me that the time is right to try them out on the greater public as well as in my own community.

There is an ever-growing number of anthologies of writing by First Nations authors, as well as works by individual native writers, being published these days, and they are receiving considerable attention from literary circles and the wider public — this is encouraging. So are the events of last summer. The Mohawk people’s struggle for recognition of their rights, and the ensuing fiasco that resulted from the Canadian army’s attempt to quash that struggle, have brought renewed attention to native issues. That interest has spilled over into the literary world, and this too is encouraging.

Last summer, I lived with my Auntie Lizzy, my mother’s elder sister. It was on her television that I watched the standoff at Oka develop. Auntie Lizzy told me she’d been trying to write stories and had soon found herself too tired to continue, “You know, Ronny, you should write the stories down for me. You could make a book, couldn’t you?” She was concerned that both a local amateur historian and the renowned anthropologist, Edward Sapir, had failed to get the story straight when writing about events in our family’s history. Her desire to see our stories in written form has inspired me. More immediately, it was Doreen Jensen’s invitation to submit my writing for publication in the present volume that is responsible for it now being before the public.

Now, it is important for me to state clearly that my writing is mostly informed by my experience as a member of my family — a very large though tightly knit extended family. It is also shaped by my communities, in descending order of importance: my tribe, the Nuuchahnulth-speaking community, all Northwest Coast native people, all oppressed people anywhere in the world. I am aware too that I am a citizen of the world community, and I feel a sense of responsibility to this our largest community. I mean to exclude no one from enjoying my poems; I hope they offer in-

sights for all who wish to better understand the cultural and political aspirations of First Nations peoples.

The one concern I have about the publication of my poetry is motivated by our political history. For a very long time now, we have pressed the case for recognition of our aboriginal rights — including sea and land claims. Successive governments have failed to listen to our arguments, partly because — we are repeatedly reminded — we do not know how to state our case according to the rules. Just as Canadian courts have had to adopt some new terms and procedures in order to expedite land claims cases, I believe the Western literary traditions will have to adopt some new forms of writing, not necessarily recognizable as prose or poetry, in order to speed up the approaching understanding so much looked forward to by natives and non-natives alike. I don't want to have to launder my thoughts and bleach my words "white" in order to have them published. The flip side of that coin is that I don't want my writing published merely because I'm a native Indian. I don't want to be a token Indian writer. I don't want to be patronized. I invite honest criticism, and look forward to improving and learning from it.

Chuu,
Ki-ke-in
(Ron Hamilton)
at Musqueam,
Winter 1991



Opetchesath Tribe
Ii-ishsu-ilth A/P II 1ST/4
by: Hupquatchew
H.P.

Opetchesath Tribe Ii-ishsu-ilth design, by Hapkwachuu

Lino block print inspired by an early Henry Speck work.

Return To The River

My sister comes home every year,
When the sockeye return in numbers,
To swell our river with their numbers,
And she goes down to our river.

My sister returns to our river each year,
When it's time to fish for sockeye,
With dip net, gill net, or drag seine,
And she goes out in our waters.

My sister wades out in our cold rushing river,
When the seine is set around the jumpers,
Swimming home to share their wealth,
And she stoops to help pull in the net.

My sister strains with her back bent taut,
When our island is hidden by splashing,
Visitors arrayed in silver ribbons,
And she comes home every year.

Bumble Bee

Alvin you fly from room to room
Humming and giggling, gurgling, laughing
"I'm Bumble Bee, hay Dad?"
Zoom, you're gone again

A Piece Of My Heart

At half a century in age
Kwitchiininim called us together
In this house
To say, "I'm sorry, for all
The hurtful things I've done
And said through all these years."

With white hair glowing proudly
My brother stands before us
With his son
To give thanks to the family
For standing by and helping him
Through times of pain and sorrow

His brothers and sisters are here
Spreading love and strength around
And his nieces and nephews wait
To share the food provided
His aunts are sitting silently
Anchors for truths that fly tonight

This is hard ; this is real hard !

When Worlds Collide

It hasn't been exactly productive
This week
My knees really ache sometimes
I never really did much at all.
When the weather changes
Just cleaned up some gold castings
Might quit playing basketball
I haven't been motivated for awhile
Hang up my runners this year

I hate to admit but I think
Time to change gears
I've finally begun to feel
I want to take up something new
Not old age, but just middle aged
I'd like to learn to sing and dance
It's kind of embarrassing.
It would be easier on
My knees

I want you to teach me to sing
It's the least I can do
I want you to show me how to dance
To help the cause
The dance has to be simple
Kitimat's pretty much dead
I want to start with the frontlet dance
Someone's got to start somewhere

The Eagle

“Do you want an eagle?”
Two young boys asked me today.
I saw wrinkled song-leaders,
Waving magic wands for singers to see,
Tailfeathers.

I remembered men planted firmly atop
A chair, a stool, a platform,
Cheeks painted red,
Mouths gaping open,
Eyes squinted,
Heads tilted back,
Powerfully waving eagle tailfeathers
So others could sing songs.

I saw a thousand headdresses
Lying cold on metal museum shelves,
In a thousand different towns,
Collecting
dust,
Nothing else.
I pictured dignitaries bowing and swaying,
Dipping their heads
In time to songs,
Bobbing, stabbing, gliding,
Eagle down floating from crowns
Worn thousands of times by many
Generations.

When they returned with the eagle,
I took it from the sack
And stared . . .
Its feathers were ruffled and
Dirty looking.
A wing flopped.
Blood dripped.
Eyes stared.
It stunk all over.
Death.

Pulling long tapered feathers,
I saw an eagle soaring.
I pictured his beak ripping flesh.
Beauty?

One of the boys drowned in a puddle.

From A UBC Library Window

Straight down
The green of the lawn is mottled
Patterned too by the branches and
Trunk of a naked tree

Just farther, a solitary crow
Rides atop another tree
That one still clothed in amber
Then a grove of manicured
Decorative oranges and rusty browns

Two concrete towers jump up
With white curtain teeth
So bright
Behind them, deep smokey blue
Mountains, mountains, mount . . .
Patchworked by logging, I presume.

Blanketing dirty grey fog
Soft clouds opening
Here and there, sky blue
Strokes of powder blue interrupt

Farther away still
Marching clouds lean
One onto another

Darker blue above
The off white clouds, shifting

A breeze begins to change all this.

I Miss My Home This Exact Minute

When people gather to sing their songs,
And do their dances,
It is at these times,
That I miss my family the most.

When dark skies come,
And short days return,
And the smell of rain thickens,
I miss the wind blowing up river.

I picture familiar faces at the feast.
I can see brown necks swelling,
Pregnant with songs to sing.
Bodies crowd close, making room for others.

I think about my sister's potlatch.
She's naming her children,
Maybe this exact minute.
And I miss my home.