



I AM WHAT  
becomes  
OF  
broken  
BRANCH

*A Collection of Voices  
by Indigenous Poets in Canada*

*Edited by Rita Bouvier*

**LCP**

Chapbook Series

The title of this chapbook is borrowed from Cooper Skjeie's poem "the dreamcatcher," which is published within.

This chapbook was produced in May 2020 as part of the Chapbook Series, to celebrate Indigenous writers. The series publishes fresh and exceptional Canadian poetry guided by various themes and forms to increase visibility and recognition for folks contributing to and belonging in the vibrant Canadian poetry community. All copyright remains with the poets within.

For this chapbook, the League of Canadian Poets (LCP) partnered with the Saskatchewan Aboriginal Writers Circle Inc. (SAWCI) to showcase the voices, community, and poetic writing of Indigenous writers in Saskatchewan, and of poets across Canada. Publication in this chapbook was open to members of the LCP and SAWCI. The publication of this chapbook has been generously supported by the National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health. The chapbook is designed and hand-sewn by Nic Brewer.

## INTRODUCTION

It is often stated that the *voice* of an individual is as unique and distinct as a fingerprint. In poetry it is described as “that unmistakeable something” – a unique presence and way of saying things on the page or the stage for the spoken word artists. It holds true in this poetry chapbook series dedicated to Indigenous poets. Each poet’s work was unmistakable—subject matter, word choices, images created for the reader, imagination at work and a sense of consciousness of life around them. I was quickly engaged by Carol Casey’s “Change,”—“The caterpillar bows its head,/ surrenders to the shroud./” anticipating the next image suggested in the title of her poem, Michelle Poirier Brown’s “Winnipeg Trip,”—“My childhood friend posts a photo of us to Facebook and seven of the 19 *likes* it gets/ are from women she taught at the aboriginal training centre in Winnipeg./ It’s just a selfie against a flat white sky/ taken on a rooftop patio in the Exchange District,/ a funky place to stay if you’ve come halfway across the country/ to visit the Métis homeland, and take in the Museum of Human Rights;/ and yes, they like her smile and obvious happiness to be with an old friend,/ but she knows,/ and now I know/ it’s my face they’re liking.”, a humor I know that often belies seriousness in subject matter, and by Colleen Charlette’s “A Study on Missingness,” its slow, methodical and innocuous list, interspersed with exactness of societal *pâstâhona*—transgressions on life and the fallout in the magnitude of 10+.

As I read each aloud on a second and third round etc., writer's choice of words had a resonance and weight to hold on to, for example, the alliteration in Cooper Skjeie's "the dreamcatcher,"—"sweat through pores soaking/ viscoelastic foam sprouting babies/...", and the poignancy of the image created by Kirk Bueckert in "bloodletting"—"I count my yesterdays on roadside crosses/ and your promises of tomorrow inside empty bottles/...".

I hope you enjoy the poetry as I did; sit with the poets a while and enter into the places they take you in their imaginations and yours.

*Rita Bouvier*

Guest editor, LCP Saskatchewan Representative

# THE DREAMCATCHER

*Cooper Skjeie*

i am what becomes of broken branch  
one with the physical and metaphysical  
where spider snares spirits  
who haunt eat sieve

sweat through pores soaking  
viscoelastic foam sprouting babies  
from humus affairs  
hiding tithe under loam falling

onto hardwood spinning  
until nervous outcome  
rattles and lays bare the bluenose  
schooner laden with invite and banana-spiked rum:

*i have saved you a seat no not just any  
seat but a seat atop the mast—  
we are heading to the garden  
will you not join us?*

hesitation hinders like hallmark hydrazine  
but propels towards greener grasses  
geometric blues and blacks  
crystalline with sacred smoke

blended into oxygen inhaled  
by ether set aflame by memory  
frozen still in kaleidoscopic stone

*welcome to the garden*  
*had you forgotten what it looks like?*

i am what becomes of broken branch  
the web that safeguards the garden  
the harboured promise  
the ship that sails the memorial

the light that swallows  
the staircase from stars  
the place beyond surveyed sense

the desert's mirage  
the city's lake

the lost light longed for  
the tree's high fruit

i am what becomes of broken branch  
and i am the eternal sentinel  
of all that is you

TREMBLING HANDS TRACING FINGERPRINTS OF  
TREMBLING HANDS

*Cooper Skjeie*

*like this*

you say.

*but our hands*

*they are tremulous*

*and our colours*

*they bleed beyond lines*

*very good*

you say.

QUELL

Cooper Skjeie

a still frame forced fragment  
ice picked child  
now offered to annelids  
by regret and lost time:

*through fence boards  
i've watched kale grow from the same waste  
digested and absorbed by a body i held  
washed and watered just the same*

*the difference:*

*kale will always need me—  
if these earthworms can't help  
at least the leeches will*

# THE CHOOSING

*Carol Casey*

Some special grace of white  
shows only upon black  
as the hungry child  
forms the mother  
and the struggle defines  
the quality of rest.  
How do we know what's best,  
when transformation  
is so commonplace,  
a household event,  
in kitchens constantly,  
a close companion  
of time and microbes  
the way of all life  
and geography?

Whelps of Eve,  
we have the choosing  
not always of the crucible,  
but how we enter it:  
with singing tears  
or sour dispute.  
And also, what we look to  
when the passage turns.

# CHANGE

*Carol Casey*

The caterpillar bows its head,  
surrenders to the shroud.  
Some magic compels,  
says, its time, leave the familiar  
become green and still  
lose sense, equilibrium;  
no compass but the certainty  
of no return.

Nature is always folding in on itself  
in an endless origami dance.  
All form gets absorbed  
continually reconstructed.  
We resist this  
from the bottom of our DNA.

Why this strange ineffectual struggle?  
Fuel for a cosmic joke.  
Or part of the magic that  
makes grow, holds together  
adds terror and drama,  
gives the beauty depth.

WHY JACOB WRESTLED WITH AN ANGEL  
ALL NIGHT LONG AT THE BOTTOM OF THE  
LADDER TO HEAVEN

*Carol Casey*

Awash with light and darkness  
fragile, guilty, stricken human,  
so infinitely precious  
the mask came off.

Truth,  
being misery before freedom  
stopped his pointing finger  
curled it in  
enticed an angel  
with searing light  
casting deep shadows  
into his gaping wounds.

So, Jacob writhed and thrashed  
because the choice,  
after a lifetime of violence, to stop  
left only the angel  
in its awful light  
for as long as it took.

B L O O D L E T T I N G

*Kirk Bueckert*

how nimbly climb the demons  
up the banks of my oblivion  
out of that bittersweet miasma  
to the calamitous light of day

how seductively you beckon them with  
your siren song, your clockwork hymn which  
echoes within every silent drum and throbbing heart  
and they howl into the void  
*death rattle in the tomb of the world*

i count my yesterdays on roadside crosses  
your promises of tomorrows inside empty bottles  
discarded along that same road, a parallel darkness  
lit by last embers of bygone storms  
and sparks of storms which will never come  
the trodden soil yields not as i do

# TENUOUS CONNECTIONS

Kirk Bueckert

turning of the tide | changing of the seasons  
the season of the witch | burning at the stake  
now stake your claim! | *our natural beauty*  
“but beauty is only skin deep”  
the depth of my skin | a puddle i could drown in  
tempest in a teapot? | scorpion grass – forget me not  
*what are you hiding? who do you think you are?*  
a needle in a haystack | *you’re grasping at straws*  
i build my house of sticks & bricks &  
plastic straws – save the turtles!  
“slow and steady wins the race”

## **r a c i a l d i v i d e**

divide + conquer | call it “long division”  
plate tectonics | god complex | S o C i O e C o N o M i X  
“and you know they just spend it all on booze”  
awkward pause | comfortable silence  
recalculating     *recalculating...*  
rat race | human race | race to the finish | *are you finished?*  
*have you got the time?* | “time is money” | trickling down  
down on my knees and pray the rain will come again with the  
changing of the seasons | turning of the tide  
*but i’m not finished!* | *i have so much more to*

# COLOSSUS

*Kirk Bueckert*

as i slumber and so descend  
into that darkest chasm of my reckoning  
i come upon a beast immense and terrible

it crouches in the dark  
with dripping jaws agape  
and eyes cold as distant moons

its coiled bowels and muscles bare  
behind translucent skin  
and within the hollow chamber of its breast

the whaling pandemonium  
of a hundred million souls  
accumulated as one voice

a sound to rival the din of hell  
and the rolling silence of eternity  
and what it says is this

*hark my name is cataclysm  
watch as i drink at the pool of time  
until the bones of all your gods are dust*

the words repeat themselves upon my lips  
and in the madness of my waking  
continue thus and without end

# DECEMBER RUMINATION

*Colleen Charlette*

I drag reluctance behind me low and in chains  
It's in my grip and it's got a grip on me  
Together we glide to the soft clinkering of metal across this  
escarpment  
Any chance for silent passage long gone  
Subtlety can still have a fleeting go

# A STUDY IN MISSINGNESS

*Colleen Charlette*

Missingness is:

an incomplete deck of cards

living an entire lifetime seeing the colour bar with a piece of the  
spectrum missing

beige brown blindness, anyone?

a language based on an alphabet that has almost all of the vowels  
present except “u” and “i”

a television’s remote control with no batteries

official reports of enquiries without the damning facts of the matter

macular degenerative eyesight

cavities, a void of enamel and dentin

nativity dioramas with no baby or only two wise men

a “kibosh” move when it comes to the concept of tolerance

greed and deceit’s “safe word”

a smoking gun

an orchestra without a first violin

Yoda’s proper grammar usage

a piano with 87 keys

boundaries and limits for the disenfranchised and dysfunctional

a musical scale with no key of C

a vitamin deficiency taken to an extreme resulting in malnutrition

family member relationships for Sixties Scoop survivors

a scientific table of elements with no noble gases

a solution to cool with Earth’s oceanic base temperature while  
keeping the planet humanly-inhabitable

my sense of humour in a dearth of compassion

4,000 First Nations women in Canada

# PORCH POEMS

*Michelle Poirier Brown*

Donald Trump is in a hotel room in Singapore.  
We could be hours away from a nuclear war.  
I haven't spoken with my friend in Winnipeg for three days.  
She isn't speaking to me.

Meanwhile, the sun is high above the house across the street.  
The car the neighbour is selling has moved again.  
The late iris, abloom in pure purple, its frill and throat on offer.  
Drink me.

We make progress.  
After five summers of a mud field where we grew peas while we  
waited for inspiration—  
five winters of teetering across a makeshift line of concrete blocks to  
get to the front door—  
my husband has laid a line of stone the width of our property.  
Bones of a wall.

A woman in a coral-coloured sweater stops at the common for a book.  
She wears a straw hat.

My friend has elected not to speak.  
She fears she will say something empty,  
and I will elect  
not to be her friend.

I've known her handwriting since the third grade.

People laugh at me.  
As in, *look at those eyeglasses.*

As in, to my face.

This is not the third grade, my eyeglasses not  
so thick they distort my eyes.  
I am a woman of 58.

Sometimes, they deride me.  
*Ha. That's just citizenship in the BC Métis.*  
As if they know my position on race.  
Or the constitution.

My landscaper laughed at my hat.  
A boss scoffed at my belt.  
A husband laughed at my business plan.

A woman walks down my street in a coral-coloured sweater  
and straw hat and I wonder  
what else does she get away with?

# WINNIPEG TRIP

*Michelle Poirier Brown*

My childhood friend posts a photo of us to Facebook and seven of  
the 19 *likes* it gets  
are from women she taught at the aboriginal training centre in Winnipeg.  
It's just a selfie against a flat white sky  
taken on a rooftop patio in the Exchange District,  
a funky place to stay if you've come halfway across the country  
to visit the Métis homeland, and take in the Museum of Human Rights;  
and yes, they like her smile and obvious happiness to be with an old  
friend,  
but she knows,  
and now I know,  
it's my face they're liking.

Who I am is obvious to them.

Although she married a Métis man  
and takes her grandchild to the Little Métis nursery school on  
Thursdays  
lives in Selkirk, for god's sake,  
my friend looks at me and doesn't see  
*Indian.*

She sees her childhood friend from school  
all grown up and come from far away  
but still the same kid  
who went to Brownies  
skipped double Dutch  
and drew a certain amount of awe  
by living in a house with an attached garage.

In her mental Rolodex, I didn't stand out.  
I'm filed under childhood friends  
associated with knee socks  
and learning to sew on a button.

I was not like the boy who sat in front of me in the second grade,  
whose shoulders I beat with my ruler every day,  
in full sight of my teacher and the kids around me,  
until finally he stopped coming to school at all.  
I wasn't like him, my friend says.  
I didn't smell of woodsmoke.

# CONTRIBUTORS

**Rita Bouvier, editor:** Rita is a Metis writer from Saskatchewan. Her third book of poetry, *nakamowin'sa for the seasons* (Thistledown Press, 2015) was the 2016 Sask Book Awards winner of the Rasmussen, Rasmussen & Charowsky Aboriginal Peoples' Writing Award. Rita's poetry has appeared in literary anthologies, musicals and television productions, and has been translated into Spanish, German and Cree-Michif of her home community of sakitawak - Île-à-la-Crosse situated on the historic trading and meeting grounds of Cree and Dene people.

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**Michelle Poirier Brown** is a Cree Métis poet, performer, and photographer from Manitoba, currently living in Lekwungen territory (Victoria, BC). Her poem "Wake" was published in *PRISM International's* "Dreams" issue, and awarded the Earle Birney Prize. Other poetry has appeared in *CV2*, *Grain*, *Dis(s)ent*, *Sweet Water: Poems for the Watersheds*, *Open Minds Quarterly* (Fall 2019), and is forthcoming in *Vallum's* "Home" issue (Spring 2020), the League of Canadian Poet's chapbook *Tending the Fire* (April 2020), and *Arc Poetry* (Summer 2020). Longlist awards include Grouse Grind V(ery) Short Forms Contest (2017), Literary Writes Poetry Contest (2018 and 2020), and Room Magazine Poetry Contest (2019).

**Kirk Bueckert** is a young writer born on the prairies, currently living abroad. As an aspiring poet within the SAWCI community. Kirk explores the duality of being both a Canadian citizen and member of the Métis Nation. Inclusion in this chapbook represents Kirk's first print publication.

**Carol Casey** is longstanding member of the Huron Poetry Collective. Her work is included in their two collections, *No Corners to Hide In* and *The Language of Dew and Sunsets*. She is an associate member of the League of Canadian Poets and has contributed to *Fresh Voices*, *Stanza* and their chapbook, *Tending the Fire*. Her poetry has also appeared in *Towards the Light*, *The Leaf*, *The Prairie Journal*, *Tickled by Thunder*, and in two anthologies, *Women Who Care* and *Much Madness, Divinest Sense*. Nominated for the Pushcart Prize in 2018 (*Prairie Journal*), she resides in Blyth, Ontario, where she works as a nurse and adult educator.

**Colleen Charlette** is a member of the Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation. She was born and raised in Flin Flon, Manitoba. Colleen has been a board member of the Saskatchewan Aboriginal Writers' Circle Incorporated for eight years. After the career directions of administrative assistant and fashion designer, Colleen's pursuit of creative occupation led her to poetry. Colleen resides in Saskatoon.

**Cooper Skjeie** (/sh-ay/) is a Métis-Germanic educator, curriculum developer, and MFA candidate from Treaty 6 and Métis Territory. An alumnus of the Banff Centre's Emerging Writers Intensive, he was longlisted for the 2019 Pacific Spirit Poetry Prize, and his work appears or is forthcoming in *Grain Magazine*, *PRISM International*, and *The Mamawi Project Zine*. He lives in Saskatoon.

**L C P**

Chapbook Series