



**Canada  
Commons**



*In memory of my brothers,  
William James Vaness, Ambrose Danny John Dumont,  
and my father, Joseph Ambrose Dumont.*

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## OUR GABRIEL

In the late '60s, several members of my family dared to speculate we might be related to Gabriel Dumont, Louis Riel's general in the 1885 Riel Rebellion. I was ten years old and it was the first time I had heard of such an historical figure. My father showed only mild interest in the portrait of Gabriel on the thin paperback that my eldest brother held in front of him: *Gabriel Dumont, Indian Fighter* by Sandra Lynn McKee. It was the type of popular history book sold in gas stations and little gift shops along the Trans-Canada Highway, displayed with other provocative titles like *Murder on the Plains* or *The Lost Lemon Mine*. I remember thinking it highly unlikely that we could have descended from a figure important enough to have a book written about him. There seemed to be nothing remarkable about our family lineage. We were a large, poor Métis family living in small-town Alberta, having migrated from the north-central part of the province so that my father could find work. I assumed that if we were related, it was so distant all we could share was a last name.

My family had just relocated to Golden, British Columbia. Lured there by better wages in the booming BC logging industry, an industry in which he and mother had eked out an existence for twenty years near Sundre, Alberta. My father logged lodge pole pine and my mother was a camp cook. It was a no-frills life, supporting nine children on a faller's and camp cook's wages. Our house in Sundre was an old one-room schoolhouse. My parents worked away from home, in a logging camp during the week, while my older brother and sister cared for another brother and me. My father hunted moose and deer to keep meat on our table. Friday evenings my parents came home via the grocery store, with other essentials like fruit and vegetables. My mother supplemented any store-bought bread with large slabs of baked bannock.

Our home was frequently a halfway house for men from the Kikino Métis Settlement who sought work in the bush with my

father. My parents had moved off the settlement in the early 1940s, not long after the Alberta Métis Population Betterment Act established a land base for the destitute Métis population. Many Métis lived on road allowances and survived on what they could hunt or trap. Even though moving from the settlement meant leaving relatives and a Cree-speaking community, relocation to a small non-Native rural community held more promise with a school, public services, and hope of gainful employment. (Today, most, if not all, Métis settlements boast schools and local businesses.)

In Golden, we rented a tiny two-bedroom trailer with an extra room built onto one side. That space accommodated my parents, my two older brothers, and me, the youngest of nine children. When my married brothers and sisters and their families visited, this tiny trailer burgeoned with bodies.

One of the brothers who visited from Alberta had married a woman who was very interested in Canadian history and the Riel “resistance” period. I’m not sure if we knew at the time where her interest originated, or even if she knew, but years later when her genealogical research revealed that she was descended from Major-General Middleton (who commanded the Canadian troops against Riel), the irony was not lost on us.

Throughout those years, we began to collect books on Gabriel Dumont, Louis Riel, Métis history, and the rebellion. Apparently, the publishing world knew others were interested in this history too, particularly in Dumont. In 1975 Hurtig Publishers released *Gabriel Dumont* by George Woodcock, which ignited the imagination of Canadians about Dumont, whose influence in the Métis rebellions had previously been overshadowed by the controversial Louis Riel.

I recall studying these books and scrutinizing the photographs of Dumont, as if the keys to unlocking our family history lay somewhere in the sepia. Sandra Lynn McKee’s biography of Dumont, the thin newsprint paperback, bore a black-and-white photograph of Dumont on the cover that slightly horrified me.

His balding head, rugged face, ratty beard and buffalo-hair lined vest so dominated his chest, it appeared he had a bald crown, but unusually long and bushy braids flowing down his barrel chest. His eyes were intense and disarming. I saw no resemblance between him and my father. However, in another black-and-white photograph of Gabriel posing in a suit, I did see a resemblance. Their facial features had a striking similarity: a square face; defined broad nose; and wide, flattened bottom lip. As I examined full body shots of the broad-shouldered, stout Dumont, I saw an uncanny likeness between him and my father.

I don't think my father or any of us knew how much family pride would stem from recovering the knowledge of our lineage, but I do remember my father's posture straightening and his face lighting up as more of his children showed interest in our connection to Gabriel Dumont. And the time for recovering this family history was ripe. It was the late 1960s, the era of protests against the Vietnam War, of women's and civil rights marches, the publication of Maria Campbell's memoir *Halfbreed*, the standoff at Wounded Knee, and Canadian Aboriginal leaders Harold Cardinal and Stan Daniels capturing media attention. The opportunity for recovering our Aboriginal ancestry could not have been better.

Perhaps it was a relief to my father to believe that he came from such noble beginnings despite his own father's loss of a homestead situated on land that lacked sufficient water to support a farm. I'm sure he was bemused by his children's sudden interest and even more puzzled by the capricious nature of public opinion about Aboriginal culture and history. With these changing times our history could be reclaimed, and my father's past wasn't merely the story of poor, struggling halfbreeds, but of a proud descendant of Gabriel Dumont, Riel's general.

As my family collected more books on Métis history, one of my older brothers researched the Dumont crest (of French origin) and proudly showed it to the rest of us. We joined provincial Métis



organizations and became aware of Métis events, such as Back to Batoche Days in Saskatchewan. My mother bought a subscription to *New Breed* magazine. My nieces and nephews, when studying Canadian history in their classrooms, were acknowledged because of their link with the Dumont name. One of my nieces was named Gabrielle. Just saying our name in public summoned pride in us.

I don't know if there was a pivotal moment for me as much as it was a lengthy process of historical enquiry and gradual acceptance. We had no genealogical record, and I admit that, without it, I doubted our ancestry for years.

Then the genealogical record came to me. I was an undergraduate at the University of Alberta, when the late Dr. John Foster, a history professor, offered me a copy of six church-ledger-size pages that traced the Dumont genealogy back to Jean Dumont and his three sons: Gabriel (senior), Isadore, and Jean. Isadore fathered the famous Gabriel Dumont. Our family descended from Gabriel Senior who lived in the Edmonton area and was captain of the hunt at Lac Ste. Anne.

Upon discovery that *our Gabriel*, Gabriel Dumont Senior, our great-great-grandfather and uncle of the famous Gabriel, had held the position of leader at Lac Ste. Anne, I finally understood why our family's annual summer visit to the pilgrimage was so important to us. In 1842 Gabriel Senior guided the Oblate missionaries and Abbe Thibault to Lac Ste. Anne when it was established as a mission and Métis settlement. And it was Abbe Thibault who sanctified the *marriage du pays* of the elder Gabriel Dumont.

We referred to the pilgrimage as *the Lake*. My parents and eight siblings and I piled into a half-ton truck and drove 400 kilometres from Sundre to Edmonton and then another eighty kilometres northwest of Edmonton where, yearly, 30,000 or more Aboriginal people attended the Lac Ste. Anne Pilgrimage. It was the longest yearly trip we made. For the journey my father constructed a canvas canopy over the back of the truck bed. It looked a little like a chuck

wagon, and this is where my siblings, ranging in age from seven to sixteen, rode along with our tents, tarps, tools, grub box, sleeping bags, camping gear, and clothes, while I, the youngest, rode in the cab with mom and dad.

My parents had been going to the lake as long as they could remember. If my father ever knew his original family connection to the lake, he never spoke of it, but it is certain that the site was steeped in our family's past. Perhaps my father wasn't even conscious of why Lac Ste. Anne meant so much, and maybe this is what happens to memory when ritual takes its place.

The Lac Ste. Anne Pilgrimage is one of the foundations of my cultural memory. It is where my parents taught me to remember our relatives through prayer after their passing. Invoking their memory through the place, people, and ritual was a way of affirming ourselves. For a large family with few economic resources, not unlike most of the families there, the affirmation of belonging — spiritually and ancestrally — was what sustained my parents through their physically demanding work and uneasy life in a southern Alberta town where Aboriginals were a disdained minority.

My family's acknowledgement of our blood connection to Gabriel Dumont has taken a long time. I frequently found my lack of interest in history puzzling, fraught with a reluctance to approach a subject that seemed merely to recount the lives of famous men; I knew the history of women, like my mother, deserved retelling too. Perhaps this loyalty to my mother was part of the reason for not writing about Gabriel Dumont before now.



## OTIPEMISIWAK

maybe Poundmaker  
or even Big Bear  
would have dreamt  
those waking figures  
Gatlin gun sorrows  
bullets, crosses and misguided soldiers  
if they were Riel  
or Dumont  
while Macdonald  
swilling spirits  
was in some crystal case of glory

and Louis dreamt  
that supposedly  
in broad daylight  
the dawn  
on its unseen bone  
was lifting  
above the fire

I don't believe  
he was merely mistaken  
regardless of  
how little daylight remained

this evening  
I retrieved a piece of birch bark  
and something more  
like a petrified limb  
lay in the palm of a snowdrift

I thought of Louis  
the way he kept envisioning  
what was inside the dimness

how he dreamt of it ascending  
on its unseen limb  
how he wanted it to reflect  
like water

Otipemisiwak: the Free People

## LETTER TO SIR JOHN A. MACDONALD

Dear John: I'm still here  
and halfbreed,  
after all these years  
you're dead, funny thing,  
that railway you wanted so badly,  
there was talk a year ago  
of shutting it down  
and part of it was shut down,  
the dayliner at least,  
"from sea to shining sea,"  
and you know, John,  
after all that shuffling us around to suit the settlers,  
we're still here and . . .

We're still here  
after Meech Lake and  
one no-good-for-nothin-Indian  
holdin-up-the-train,  
stalling the "Cabin syllables / Nouns of settlement,  
/ . . . steel syntax [and] / The long sentence of its exploitation"<sup>1</sup>  
and John, that goddamned railroad never made this a great nation,  
cause the railway shut down  
and this country is still quarreling over unity,  
and Riel is dead  
but he just keeps coming back  
in all the Bill Wilsons yet to speak out of turn or favour  
because you know as well as I  
that we were railroaded  
by some steel tracks that didn't last  
and some settlers who wouldn't settle  
and it's funny we're still here and callin ourselves halfbreed.

## NOTRE FRÈRES

*“They were born beneath the water,  
in the darkest depths of the lake”<sup>2</sup>*

— Russell Freedman

We were born beneath the water  
in the darkest depths of the lake  
We rise, our hooves rumbling  
spewing lake water, muzzles dripping

in the darkest depths of the lake  
Will Gabriel call, us, his brothers  
spewing lake water, muzzles dripping  
pulling the universe in our sway

Will Gabriel call, us, his brothers  
riding his swiftest buffalo runner  
aiming Le Petit  
pulling the universe in their sway  
the Milky Way — dust of buffalo spirits passing

Riding his swiftest buffalo runner  
Will Gabriel, aiming Le Petit  
rise, his horse’s hooves rumbling?  
dust of buffalo spirits passing

We were born beneath the water

## LIBUFLOO

we came from the buffalo wallows  
bowls in the earth hollowed out —  
by the backbones of our greater ones  
those who have returned now,  
through those same curves in the earth

we are ghosts now, but once were  
after the Dog days  
after the Dog days, the horse and the gun

came our children  
speaking our language  
the same language as water  
the same language as grass

we cradle buffalo rocks  
our children, now  
waiting

when will Gabriel call us back?  
when will he put his ear to the ground  
to find us once again?

when will Gabriel call us out?  
our great heads swiping side to side  
pulling the universe in our sway  
the Milky Way twisting in our horns  
shaking bright burning dust  
to earth



## HOW TO MAKE PEMMICAN

Kill one 1800 lb. buffalo

Gut it

Skin it

Butcher it

Slice the meat in long strips for drying

Construct drying tripods and racks for 1000 lbs. of wet meat

Dry it while staving off predators for days

Strip from drying racks and lay on tarps for pounding

Pound 1000 lbs. of dry meat

Mix with several pounds of dried berries, picked previously

Add rendered suet

Cut buffalo hides in quarters

Fill with hot dried meat, berry and suet mixture

Sew quarter-hide portions together with sinew

Bury in a cache for later   mmmh.

I WANTED TO TREAT THEM AS WE  
WOULD HAVE TREATED BUFFALO

*“I wanted to treat them as we would have treated buffalo.”<sup>4</sup>*

— Gabriel Dumont of Middleton’s men

When you said of Middleton’s men, you wanted to treat them as buffalo,

was it because you had the fastest buffalo runner and steadiest shot?

Was it because you knew you could ride a buffalo runner, its neck  
outstretched in full gallop on the heels of a herd holding the muzzle  
loader upright till the last second to drop a wet slug down the barrel,  
thrusting your gun forward to dislodge the shot while pulling the  
trigger all at the same time,

you knew alone on the prairie, you could make a shelter and clothing  
from their hides and food from their flesh and tools from their bones,  
you knew the vibration of their hooves riding in the midst of them, the  
feel of their hides — dry and coarse, you knew their snorting, the stone  
weight of their bodies, their bulging terror-struck eyes, the taste of their  
marrow, their sweet smoked jerky

Did the hunter in you imagine these men predictable as les animaux

Did the buffalo caller imagine predicting the direction of their advance

Did you imagine their heads heavy with thoughts of dividing the land  
for their use alone

Did you believe they like the buffalo would eventually disappear into  
holes in the earth?

## LES ANIMAUX

*"This summer I planted ten acres in potatoes and barley.  
The ferry gave me more work than I wanted. We lived pretty  
good without the hunting. In 1880 or 1881, I led the last  
Saskatchewan hunts, but les animaux were gone and out ancient  
ways went with them."*<sup>4</sup>

—Jordan Zinovich, *Gabriel Dumont in Paris*

gone, uncle they're gone

and something in us goes too following after

les animaux, those who you "called" as if they were your brother

les animaux, those who you called mon frère and herded with their  
great beards

les animaux, the brothers that have left us                      they have moved  
to another plain,

uncle, on the last hunt instead of seeing a moving sea of brown  
backs, a rippling

ground

now, you see only a few stumps      feeding on grasses

now, their great size is swallowed by the bigger prairie

prairie, that once seemed like it couldn't hold all

les animaux, their sound like distant thunder      will never reach  
your ears again

uncle, how sad that day                      when no one spoke of them

as if speaking their name

could slice an arm from one's own body

because they were you

were you less of a man because of them?

les animaux made you captain of the hunt

now, you are the captain of fighting men standing ground

against the settlers rolling in by the thousands

now, *they* are the new herds,

but they're not les animaux

the brothers that fed and clothed us

and gave us reason to dance

gone, and now the prairie is mute

## THESE ARE WINTERING WORDS <sup>5</sup>

Michif problem family among the nuclear language types    one  
parent French    the other Cree/Salteaux    wintering words:  
sliced thin, smoke-dried, pounded fine, folded in fat and berries  
pemmican not pidgin or creole    combining two grammatical  
maps    paddle trade routes along waterways    traverse  
rapids: white and dangerous with Ojibway women à la façon du  
pays    Métis traders, speak la lawng of double genetic origin  
pleasure doubled    twice the language    twice the culture  
                 mixta, not mixed-up, nor muddled    but completely  
FrenchCreeOjibway    different tongues    buffalo, a  
delicacy source language right from the cow's mouth    mother  
of all in-group conversation    wintering camps dispersal  
neither Cree, Salteaux nor French exactly, but something else  
not less    not half    not lacking

## WHAT WE DON'T NEED

An expert, in the audience asks why we didn't invite a linguist  
to our Michif & endangered languages panel

It's because what we don't need is another expert,  
another expert to inform us our direct action on human rights was  
a rebellion

another expert to perpetuate a belief that our Michif language  
is either poor Cree or broken French

another expert to teach us how to be farmers at St. Paul-des-Métis  
or Red River  
when "our failures" were the state's misguided pilot projects in  
*civilization*,

another expert to deny that our Creation stories — momentous  
when the Clovis theory slowly crumbles under our small, small  
stories,

another expert to sell us script as our homeland  
when most of it was speculated and today, we have no homeland  
at all

another expert to tell us our spiritual beliefs are "heathen"  
when what this planet needs is Earth-centred beliefs

no, what we don't need is  
another expert who can be bought by industry and government  
to lead us to our own destruction

## OCTOBER 1869: TO SMOKE THEIR PIPES AND SING THEIR SONGS

Louis planted his beaded moccasin on the survey chain  
cutting across André Nault's river lot  
pitched there by men  
slung with transits, levels, and measuring sticks  
men looking to the horizon  
calculating the *free land* for homesteaders

"You go no further," commanded Louis

blocking their line of sight  
their ledger of lines  
angles, meridians, and parallels  
corrections for curvature  
iron stakes at the corners  
of perfect square miles

although over fifty million acres  
was surveyed  
made ready  
ready-made  
for occupation

there were no quarter sections  
for "the miserable halfbreeds,"<sup>6</sup>  
"the pemmican-eaters"<sup>7</sup>

but any man over eighteen  
with a vacant quarter in the NWT  
homesteaded

did the survey record in its calculations  
witness whose lives were fragmented by these precise  
coordinates?

could their instruments  
determine the number of years  
Nault had lived and cleared brush  
harvested firewood on the same land he was now barred from?

did the surveyor's coordinates record the number of letters, the  
number of signed petitions

did it detect the colourless voices of the Settlers' Rights Association  
joining in Louis' protest

did their instruments detect their words plain as bread "we have not  
been consulted in any way as a people entering into the Dominion"<sup>8</sup>

where did this penchant for measuring and marking derive?

this desire to count and delineate this land  
account for it



rename and grip it  
like shovels, axes, and saws  
lug like trunks,  
steer like plows  
pile like lumber

where did this taste for counting begin  
its long rooted self  
calculating angles and slopes  
long conjuring “empty” land into property  
the long root of capitalism  
boring mineral veins  
drilling wells  
forcing steam down bored holes  
extracting dark thick fluids  
stabbing the land-belly  
sucking every seam  
and filling the gaping holes with  
with the toxic unseen

I am told            when I survey from the top of a hill  
I take into account the entire land  
upon which I stand;

I count this place

what conjuring does the mind do  
measuring a hill,  
the angle of its slope,  
is it easier to climb?

is it in the imagined embrace of mother?  
minds hover  
oversee her

capture, hold

I take into account this entire land

land, upon which I stand

I count this place

I count this space my own

when two lines cross, the saleable land is multiplied by two  
the survey lines that scored this land were  
so it could be ripped along its edges, cliffs, and deeper memories



**Canada  
Commons**



## LINES

these are not the lines of the steeple at Batoche  
or the wheel runnels of Red River carts scoring the prairie  
or the lines of women and children following after  
or the threads of their L'Assomption sash

these are not survey lines severing river lots into acres, quarters, sections  
these are not the bloodlines of mixed marriages  
nor the rail lines of the Iron Horse  
nor the lines of Middleton's men marching in red serge  
these are not the lines of prairie fire confusing the troops  
nor the gun trenches dug deep near St. Antoine de Padua  
nor the reins held tight by Gabriel  
crossing the Medicine Line

these are not the lines of the cross held by Riel in battle  
or his lines of testimony in a Regina courtroom  
these are not the lines of Métis being sentenced for treason  
the lines of a foreign law they transgressed  
or the worry lines of their women praying  
or the lines of hymns they sung in Cree

these are not the lines between English and French  
these are not the lines between oral and written history  
these are not the lines of the rope that hung Louis

## NOT A SINGLE BLADE

*“You are looking for Gabriel? Ah! You are wasting your time.  
There is not a single blade of grass on the prairie that he does not  
know!”*

— Father Alexis Andre, Oblate of Mary Immaculate, who  
accompanied Riel to the scaffold in 1885<sup>9</sup>

Not a single blade

of grass on the prairie

you do not know

not a single blade

will betray and

reveal your whereabouts

After the arrival of Middleton, the North West Field Force, and the  
Gatling gun

after the death of your uncle, Aicawpow, in battle

after the troops set fire to your house and stable

after they confiscate your prized herd of horses and your billiard  
table

after Madeleine and Louis hide in the trees

after you are shot and wounded in the head

you will not surrender

instead you gather eighty rifle and forty revolver cartridges and  
firearms

from the Métis who surrendered or died

from the Canadian forces lying dead in the field

you will not be taken alive

and not a single blade

of grass will renounce you

your life depending on the coulees, leaves, limbs, and blades of  
buffalo grass

So for four days at dawn, you follow Les Anglais' patrols searching  
Batoche

as morning light glints off their gun barrels

and their horses' breath signaling the direction of their advance

you trail them, riding in their tracks to avoid being tracked

hiding in the bluffs

concealed in the coulees

crouched in the willows

the May nights cold along the river

Invisible but hunted

you slipped through their sight

to become the dogwood lining the South Saskatchewan

the ascending light at dawn and descending light at night

the poplars and cottonwoods flourishing along the river

the force of fierce winds pushing the soldiers back

the dust blown in their faces

When they moved, you moved

they stopped, you stopped

and each night you'd return to Batoche for refuge

until the next morning, you'd wait

watch them saddle-up

and set out again in their tracks

To stalk who stalks you

And not a single blade

not a single blade

betrayed you



## ODE TO THE RED RIVER CART

*“an interminable shriek of grinding wood”<sup>10</sup>*

—Joseph Howard, *Strange Empire: Louis Riel and the Métis People*

1.

Just a cart made of wood and shaganappi  
pulled by a draft animal  
triggered a sound that was “hellish, horrifying and nerve-wracking,”<sup>11</sup>

A wooden squealing wheel hub  
twisting in a dry wooden axle  
shattered the prairie stillness  
in its continual drone  
driving anything within fifteen miles out of sight  
Deer and coyotes fled in opposite directions  
Groundhogs dug deeper  
birds lifted and scattered  
to its “tooth-stabbing screech”<sup>12</sup>

its relentless twisting waves of squealing  
bore a hole from ear to brain  
a sound worm twisting, coiling  
altering anyone’s sense of

moving or still  
big or small  
near or far  
straight or crooked

the Métis on their seasonal hunt walked  
dazed in this ethereal wailing netherworld

of “ a thousand fingernails being drawn across a thousand panes of glass.”<sup>13</sup>

2.

This is the gratitude?

This is what’s remembered after busting your knots over every boulder, rut, ditch, gopher hole from Winnipeg to St. Paul? Draggin your heavy ass through mud hole after muskeg, ooze past your spokes and weighed down by nine hundred pounds of raw buffalo-hide stuffed pemmican sausages?

This the thanks for converting to a fortress when drawn in a circle against an enemy, wheels facing outward, carts wedged together protecting everything inside it.

This is gratitude for being an all-terrain vehicle transforming into a raft to ford rivers and creeks

This, a mind-altering earworm?

Well, after all, you are just two six-foot wooden spoke wheels dished, broad-rimmed, and shaganappi bound, fixed to parallel, twelve-foot shafts with a mortised wooden box all drawn by a draft animal.

## FIDDLE BIDS US

the first high call of the fiddle bids us dance  
baits with its first pluck and saw of the bow  
reels us, feet flick — fins to its lure and line  
steady second fiddle stoking the fire below  
our Red River jig and step-dance will witness  
that we long kissed this earth with our feet

that we long kissed this earth with our feet  
before the surveyors executed their dance  
of lines and stakes at the corners to witness  
the Dominion's decree to leave just fiddle and bow  
and no quarter sections to bury our relatives below  
because we resisted the government's line

because we resisted the government's line  
we will now dance and speak with our feet  
our provisional council will guide us from below  
their suffering and sacrifice renewed our dance  
our single-minded celebration of the fiddle and bow  
will continue for generations to be our witness

will continue for generations to be our witness  
when politics and greed try to twist our lines  
we'll commence to jig to fiddle and bow  
when the fiddler arrives we'll vote with our feet  
we, the improvident ones, proclaim our dance  
to the ministers and lords who tried to set us below

to the ministers and lords who tried to set us below  
our well documented petitions will be our witness  
when Imperial powers elect to perform their dance  
the “greasy rebels” and “unhung felons”<sup>14</sup> will not fall in line

because the Métis forevermore will vote with their feet  
now that the Dominion has left us with fiddle and bow

now that the Dominion has left us with fiddle and bow  
who will call the dance, but our ancestors below  
who have directed us to vote with our feet  
drops of brandy and the Reel of Eight will witness  
how we generated our own steps and lines  
without permission from the National dance

dance bow          line below          witness feet

JUST TELL ME WHEN  
THE FIDDLER ARRIVES

1st change

The fiddler rosins up his bow  
we had to fly him here just for tonight

rouses our toes, servant to the teasing bow  
tunes us to the strumming guitar, second fiddle  
lured in the fiddler's trance  
feet stitched to the fiddle strings  
we step-shuffle in time

2nd change

A rising lilt lights the fiddle that fuels our feet  
a little faster, the flipping sash in time with the music  
heating the blood in unison with the shining fiddle  
pinning us there with its reel and bounce

## Breakdown

In the breakdown,  
it's a duel of feet and fiddle  
the fiddler sawing a flaming bow  
friction of flying feet fanning its licking flames  
faster, faster in an exercise that will lead to: FIRE  
but the fiddlers and dancers know to put it out

He was cheap, but boy he could sure jig  
he was a terrible drunk, but a fine step-dancer  
you couldn't trust her, but she'd win every jigging contest

## SHE WORRIES BEADS

through bead she has swelled  
through thread she is held  
through needle she is steadfast  
pressed, grip-polished words more than once  
against her sacred heart  
the beads she worries through, now  
are smooth black river stones  
water-worried  
each bead-berry clasped  
to the next seed in prayer  
Miyo Saint Anne —  
a bead for every morning  
of her thread pulling through  
napew, awasis, maskihkiy  
hides, needles, awls, shawls,  
beads, seeds trail her  
black seeds strung in rosaries  
hung above her bed  
in sleep she worries through them

WITH SECOND SIGHT, SHE PUSHES

sitting close to light  
falling through a window  
glancing down a needle  
along a thread  
to the centre  
of a bright bead  
is her belief  
in petal, stem, and leaf

she directs a long thin needle  
picks one tiny seed  
bead, after seed  
bead, after seed  
from a saucer  
until she has drawn a long white string with  
her fingers  
at the end of a needle

her fingers, nudge their seeds side by side  
looping their weight into a petal  
laid flat against the fabric nap  
each seed pressed  
against the cloth by the thumb and forefinger of her left hand  
while thumb and forefinger of her right  
plumb the unseen side of the fabric with  
another needle and thread, and  
with second sight, she pushes  
the needle and thread up precisely  
where her eye wants to meet it  
on the surface of the fabric



then down  
between each bead  
by seed bead  
seed

over and over  
repeated  
this gesture petal  
takes patient shape

o

the bead's colour makes no sound  
but it is cranberry, moss, and fireweed  
it is also wolf willow, sap, and sawdust  
as well as Chickadee, Magpie, and Jackrabbit

a bead is not simply dark blue  
but Saskatoon blue

it's not merely black,  
but beaver head black

and it's not just a seed bead  
it's a number 11 pearlized bead  
or a number 10 two-cut glass bead  
or a number 8 French white heart

o

the fabric weightless  
supple through her lissome fingers  
the waxed thread yielding  
and the bright beads  
obedient as good children  
lining up in straight rows  
inside the white outline  
of a petal

but as she shifts  
to light  
falling on her beadwork  
her thoughts turn to stem  
how it attaches  
to petal and leaf

slim stem  
bloodline to root  
and back to leaf

and she the link  
like stem  
from rich root  
to sprouting leaf  
her children

she, this link  
holds  
each beadberry

a thought  
each beadberry  
a word in prayer

for her son  
for her daughter  
for her grandchild

o

she considers blue beads as holding a piece of the sky  
reflected in berries  
her same fingers gather saskatoons draping from branches bent  
    blue with fruit  
and release them to the lard pail tied to her waist  
their dropping, the sound of small drumming in the pail  
her same fingers scoop saskatoons, the fruit of feasts  
from a bowl in the sweat  
that place of gathering self  
and others back to womb  
that bulb of life  
in her mother

each bead a birth, she senses  
as light grows faint as thread

each bead a birth, she sees  
her eyesight fine as thread

each bead a birth, she listens  
each bead sewn down, a word                      in prayer

## SKY BERRY AND WATER BERRY

her sisters, the flowers

her brothers, the berries

emerge from her beadwork

chokecherry red, goldenrod yellow, and juniper berry brown

sky berry and water berry

swell from her fingertips

sprout runners and cleave

to stems near the scent

of warm saskatoons

and sour gooseberries

petal, berry, stem, and leaf

sewn down now in seed bead lines

flourish bright from her hands

through her fingers stretch fields of strawberries

their starched white petals

raised heads above layers of green leaf

through tiny seed beads

she is linked

to lineage

through the inheritance of her mother's

awl case, knife sheath, and hide scraper

she is acquainted with moose and deer

their velvet smoke-tanned hide

what they have given up

what they have shared

with her, with her mother and grandmother

how they have sacrificed themselves to

sky berry

water berry

like the life-liquid of berries, her brothers

thirsted for in ceremony

and recalled now in colour

their small fruit

tasting of blossom

## BEADS THE RIGHT SIZE AND COLOUR

If you follow the trail of yellow seeds  
fixed by her nimble fingers  
in the dark velvet earth  
you will surface in  
the sun-swollen prairie  
where buttercups blink open  
coneflowers nod their heads  
and dandelions ignore you completely

If you follow the trail of blue seeds  
pushed into the nap of loam  
by her callused fingertips  
bold crocus will raise their furry heads in the raw air  
bluestem will feather in front of you  
and slough grass will inflict paper cuts if you yank them

And if you bend to examine a buttercup  
your eye will follow the rim of its inner eye  
convex and pollen-swollen  
then, you will finally understand  
why she searched countless beads  
for the right size and colour



## THE LAND SHE CAME FROM

*“If men had wings and bore black feathers, few of them would be  
clever enough to be crows”*

— Reverend Henry Ward Beecher, mid-1800s<sup>15</sup>

cree woman crow

cree woman caw

black shiny bird-woman

crow and caw those who

command you, “Go back to the land you came from”<sup>16</sup>

so shiny black bird-woman plants herself

in front of Frank Oliver’s house<sup>17</sup>

has her photograph snapped in 1885

her image singed into his pupils

into the inky black-and-white pages

of his *Bulletin*

the official but negative space

in Edmonton’s story

not the other story

of Métis river lots

severed into city blocks

a quarter for a Métis river lot

crow knows what was what

*when it all went wrong*<sup>18</sup>

cree woman crow

cree woman caw

call out those names

caw caw caw: Rutherford

call out those names

names that now mysteriously bear title  
to land once granted your husband  
his reward for thirty years HBC service  
as carpenter and blacksmith

a quarter for a halfbreed lot  
crow knows what was what  
*when it all went wrong*

cree woman crow  
cree woman caw  
crow and caw names  
of those known as “better men”<sup>19</sup>  
when Indians couldn’t own land  
call out their names  
caw caw caw: Oliver  
stand iron-fisted before  
his two-storey-red-brick-house  
rising civil in the background

a quarter for a Métis river lot  
crow knows what was what  
*when it all went wrong*

cree woman crow  
cree woman caw  
crow woman dig down  
scrape away the layers  
of sleeping memory  
down to the stake lines of river lots  
in Rosedale and beyond

far down to the Métis family names  
still breathing there: Donald, Bird, Ward  
push away the top soil, sand, and silt  
to names: Daigneault, Charland, Gladue  
uncover their stories of migration  
to build and supply Beaver Hills House  
before *it all went wrong*

uncover the names of profiteers  
Lord Strathcona, for one  
snapping up script and reserve land  
for the price of a sack of groceries  
when Papaschase's people  
were starving and deprived of rations  
recite his name: Papaschase, Papaschase, Papaschase  
so it won't wash away in the flood of "progress"

## THE BLACK MARE

Every night Narcisse tried to “beat the devil.” The soft sweep of three cards in his right hand brushing the table, laid down with a deliberate snap, measured his day as Dehlia measured hers by the rhythmic winding of Big Ben, her thin grey braids swinging in unison. And as Narcisse snapped his cards, she wound her clock; neither of them paused, afraid time would slip away from them as they slept

And they drifted,

Narcisse dream-following his nose to the dry-hay-smell of horses, their fading hooves bidding him further away from his vow at Lent — to give up. While Dehlia pranced, a black mare, forelock lifting in the wind, muscled thighs, ready to spring her beyond, Narcisse, six-and-a-half furlongs, and those two-little-hands marking time, altogether. While Narcisse was hobbled to a fast track, the inside post, his favourite palomino, and the sweet-sweet winning flash of the jockey’s red silks. It wasn’t *his* palomino, he didn’t own anything, but he might have, if he hadn’t flirted so much before.

And they flirted,

The black mare’s withers flinching at the post, Narcisse edgy at the wicket, combing a sweaty palm through his thick wavy hair. His thoughts tumbling in digits: two-, five-, ten-dollar wagers, two-year-old fillies, and six-and-a-half furlongs. He’s still in reverie when at the starting gun the black mare breaks first, her strides steady on the turns, lengthening on the straightaways while his palomino’s legs, appear to be shortening and slowing. The crowd heaves in surprise when the black mare leads on the final turn, and Narcisse, seeing his palomino in last, crushes the ticket in his pocket and turns away from the track, sucking his teeth.



**Canada  
Commons**



The next morning, he wakes remorseful to the sounds of Dehlia humming as she stirs the oatmeal in the scarred kettle-of-their-years-together.

He is weak with guilt, knowing Dehlia will chastise him, chide him that all his money ever does is feed the horses, feeds them their oats and hay. He knows she'll badger him to take confession. So he says nothing.

And they twisted,  
Narcisse having lost his savings during the previous night's dream, wagers with the profits from the sale of his best draft horse the second, but his palomino loses again to the black mare in the ninth race. The third night, he wagers with the money from the sale of his prized buckboard. But the same black-arse-of-a-mare trots into the Winner's Circle.

Awake the fourth night, he hears Dehlia mumble through a gauze of sleep, "I can't help it."

What? He ruminates, suspecting her of cheating.

He's curious what else she might reveal.

But she is silent after that.

So when he is woken the following night by Dehlia mumbling, "I can't help it."

Straight away, he asks, "What? Can't help what?"

And with the precision of a timepiece, she chimes,

"When I leave this house, I change into a black mare."

Narcisse is stunned. Her words reel in his head, leaving him to dangle in his thoughts. He watches her the entire night. And just as the moon is in the night-sky-highest, she leaves. He trails; her body,

a draft flowing out the back door into the honey-eyed moonlight reflecting off her white flannel gown until she vanishes, dissolving into the blackness of the barn door. Narcisse follows slowly, pauses, looks back to the house, but wills himself through the darkness into the barn. Yet all he sees is the outline of his remaining horses, hears them shifting their weight in the stalls, smells the hay, oats, and horseshit. He calls her name in the moist air. There is no answer. In hopes she will reappear, he sits down on an upturned feed bucket. But he falls asleep, and when he wakes, it's morning and he finds her back in their bed, her flannel back turned out. His fingers move to brush her back, but recoil at the scent of boiled kidneys, the blood-metal scent stinging his nostrils, spawning memories of relatives bitten by Rougarous, his Mooshom warning him to smudge all used clothes for fear of being marked. Images of Dehlia moving weightless through the night in her hand-me-down nightgown fuse with his Mooshom's tales of men turning into dogs, flying horses, and crooked spines. Narcisse nervously gathers Dehlia's vials of Holy Water, her father's rosaries, and his worn deck of cards. For the first time in a long time he prays fearful they have been tricked, that they have mistakenly crossed over. He prays in Cree: Notahwenan; he prays in Michif: Li Boon Jeu; he prays English: Amen. When she wakes, she's startled seeing him surrounded by holy water, rosaries, and playing cards; she fears someone has died and he acknowledges the question in her expression.

"You've been tricked by a Rougarou," he says.

"Rougarou?" she scoffs, "Wacistakac, those horses have you charmed."

Shaking his head, "No, they've charmed you — they've hooked me."

"Hooked you?" Her face a sleepy question mark.

“Charmed you,” he repeats, his words an echo.

“Charmed you.”

And they recoiled,

Dehlia, never having known Narcisse to look so terrified, relents and removes the second-hand nightgown he has cautioned her about before. Narcisse bearing it like a dead bat on the end of a broom, takes it to the refuse barrel and sets it ablaze. In the light of the flame, Narcisse broods over what they must do to purge the Rougarou. He knows it will take them all night to haul and heat water, to bathe, to ready their best clothes, smudge, and pray. Not one, not two, not three times, but thirteen times they’ll have to circle the house backwards in their newest clothes, backwards with an Ace of Spades pressed to Dehlia’s forehead, backwards before Mooshom’s time, before Narcisse, before Dehlia, winding them all backwards in time before the Rougarou.



YOU ARE RIDING  
FOR THE BORDER TONIGHT

I fear that Middleton's men will track you like a deer in the woods  
that a single shot will make your life        bleed berries  
on the ground around you        I fear they will find your limbs  
slumped in what they  
think is surrender        I fear they will smile at your mouth  
drooping slack-death  
before them        I fear they will drag you a trophy carcass  
hung from their saddle  
so ride, Gabriel ride        swift-safe in the night, ride without rest  
if you have to    far southward away        where I'll find you  
ride swift, ride silent        rest only beyond the border  
safe from the Canadiens that stalk your breath

I have little but six buckwheat cakes, wrapped warm till they reach you  
as I would send my arms if I could in the chilled morning  
so ride, Gabriel ride        swift-past Les Anglais' vengeance  
ride swift, ride silent        ride safe

## RED RIVER FRAMED HOUSES & DUST

We eat dust for days at Batoche    and think of the men, women,  
and children who lived and loved this country in spite of itself  
where the wind gives in to no one's prayers                    not even  
Manitou's    where the wind-dust blasts skin, settles like soot in our  
eyes, ears, and hair    where Red River framed houses, assembled  
like puzzles            are steadfast against the same devil wind    but  
window- and door-less, now            yet witness to the women and  
children hidden along the river's banks    the young and old  
men hunkered in the deep trenches            dug against the zealous  
Orangemen who hunted them    houses once witness, to the  
sharpest sounds of the escalating Gatlin gun                    its  
rhythmic assault on the ears of six-year-old boy who smashed caste  
iron for shot    houses once witness, to the life that thrived despite  
all attempts by the Lords of the day to deny it            houses once  
witness, to the people who drove their squeaking carts to the river  
and floated across a broad-shouldered South Saskatchewan  
carving through the palm of Batoche                    leaning against  
its knuckled-slopes grown thick with bone willow and bruised  
poplar            extending a hand to the waves of wheat    in the  
minefields where            the memory is deeper than the dust-bones  
of those who deserved to dance forever

## TO A FAIR COUNTRY

*"I want to forget their names, the generals"*

— Rosalind Brackenbury, "Poetry in Time of War"

I want to forget their names,  
the scrip commissioners and their escorts  
land speculators:  
bankers, members of parliament, lawyers, shopkeepers, and clergy  
and how the bank and church held hands

I want to forget their hands  
fast as poker players  
dealing blue-green scrip coupons  
stiff as new money  
to northern Métis waiting for a homeland through survey  
and a Land Titles office  
existing only in the south

I want to forget the official trickery  
the northern Métis  
and their southern impersonators  
redeeming land with their right hand  
and conferring it with their left  
into the smooth palms of speculators

I want to forget their ordinary faces  
their benign smiles and dim hearts  
their mundane treachery  
and accumulating assets

I want to forget their orderly ledgers  
lists, records

and deceptively even-handed calculations

I want to forget a travelling thirty-six-man scrip commission  
with twenty-six speculators

I want to forget their numb greed and narrow vision

I want to forget their dollar-an-acre thefts

I want to forget the fraud and forgery

Crooked schemers, connivers and collaborators

I want to forget the 1921 amended Criminal Code of Canada  
and its three-year time limit on scrip fraud

And finally, I want to forget the number of Métis

less than one percent

who hold property from that scrip today

## WHAT'S LEFT

three pieces — white porcelain doorknob

once hardball in the palm of a hand  
turned to enter a silent kitchen  
steaming kettle wood cookstove stoked  
on the table a drawn hand of poker: deuce of diamonds and jack of  
clubs, face up

cast iron stove shards  
only a memory of la galet akwa la rababoo

a horse's bit  
for Gabe's prized saddle horse or buffalo runner

shards of a rusted knife  
manishamihk (to cut)

a bottle stop  
pour la bwaysoon ou li vaen  
ga minihkwawn (I'd like a drink)

a brass weight  
shiny and mercantile

a hanger  
for Madeleine's capot

shell casings  
from Gabe's Belgian .38 calibre Lefauchaux revolver

plate shards  
wetoushpahminan (eat with us)

## THE SHOWMAN & SHOW INDIANS

In the Congress — Rough Riders of the World, I am gainfully employed as an Indian, where I parade into the big top riding a buffalo runner, holding *Le Petit*, flanking Buffalo Bill raising *Lucretia Borgia* to the cheering crowds in the bleachers, feeding their desire to see “the principles of stereotypes and archetypes of the West”<sup>20</sup> and the “breaking of fractious steeds,”<sup>21</sup> whirlwind races against Mexicans, Bedouins, Gauchos, Vaqueros and Cossacks, we ride into the arena dust carried by the sound of the Star Spangled Banner, the press of horses, jangle of tack, the vibrating crowd in the presence of smoked buckskin, fringes, feathers, headdress, eagle staff, breast plate and braids, we ride under bright lights to the boom, boom, boom of the marching band’s kettle drum. Little Sure Shot shooting a dime from Frank Butler’s fingers, she with her L.C. Smith double-barrelled hammerless shotgun, the cavalry with Winchesters. We ride, Pahaska, the showman marshalling the re-enactment of the Battle of Little Big Horn, a bison hunt, a train robbery, the attack of a burning cabin, we ride whooping pageantry, in mock battles before the Improved Order of the Red Men, we show Indians, those of the horse and buffalo culture given a final chance to be ourselves and many had a good time playing Indian; the only safe kind to be

## RICH IN HORSES

we had snow horses and we had saw horses — both melted  
we had stuffed horses and we had stick horses — they decayed  
we had skid horses and we had mules — both became obsolete  
we rode saddle horses and some of us rode brocs  
there were horses in our eyes but more in our heads  
we had stories and bet on horses, and sometimes they became one  
we had many horses but never owned one  
we had bold horses and we had silent ones  
we had hunters, saddle and pack horses  
we rose small, swift buffalo runners  
and drove lumbering Belgian skid horses  
we had many horses but never owned one  
we rose horses and they raised us

## REQUIEM FOR LOUIS RIEL

*(To the tune of "Cold, Cold Heart" by Hank Williams Sr.)*

I know you tried to make men see what they would not believe

Yet many knew that you were right                      and you left a legacy

And now they write about your thoughts    as if they were a crime

Why can't this nation just admit    'n' see its cold, cold part

No other man before your time    knew just what you knew then

That's why they had to do away    with what you could soon spin

And now we sing about those men                      that took the life from you

Why can't this nation just admit    'n' see its cold, cold part

They'll never know just what they did                      to see us sit and cry

It made us just try harder to                                      protect our ways of life

But now they value our beliefs                                      about this dying earth

Why can't these people just admit    'n' see their cold, cold part

There was a time when I believed that justice would be served



But those who needed change the most    haven't got what they deserve

And as their methods fall apart    who will they turn to then

Why can't this nation just admit    'n' see its unjust heart

## POST BATTLE OF BATOCHE: GATLING GUN

*(Found Poem)*

One Frenchman, Paul Chelet, went to the camp and upon speaking with an English officer, said to him: “Do you know how many you have killed with your Gatling gun?”

“No.”

“Well, I know.”

“How many? Tell me, I’d be happy to know.”

“Well, you killed one.”

“Ah!” cried the officer. “That’s not possible.”

“Yes! And it was my dog.”

The officer was furious, believing that the other wanted to tease him and he was ready to hit him.<sup>22</sup>

## OUR PRINCE

If only your fine mind could have leapt  
in another time  
along this colony's narrow path  
to nationhood

It's not just that the path is narrow  
but it's also borrowed from  
another people  
another place.

Be it trouble, tremble, or terror  
you had to walk before the gallows  
alone or with the priest  
that betrayed you at Batoche  
anointing your last rites

God curse them, Louis. They will regret this!

Regret hanging you

It will be the shadow side of Canada's story  
indelible as the iron stakes of ancestral memory  
on this grid map, witnessing clearly  
how the quarter sections got divvied up at meal time  
who received 200 thousand-acre grazing leases  
or railway "mile belts"  
who accumulated in the greasy politics of real estate  
while there was still no land for the Métis

They will regret taking our prince, our prophet  
And it will manifest in the marking of places

previously touched by you, Louis  
the one who gave us Manitoba  
brokered pluralism  
and language rights

They will regret taking our prince  
our prophet, the one among us gifted,  
our seer  
because when they look across these plains  
they will see the monuments built to him  
the days named after him in recognition  
and when their children ask  
what Louis did  
they will have to answer

## LOUIS' LAST VISION

“Father, I see a gallows on top of that hill,” said Louis,  
“and I am swinging from it.”

in that vision, did you see the limbs of young aspen swaying at  
Batoche,  
the infinity symbol flying there beside the cross  
St. Antoine de Padua church with its bullet holes

from the corner of your eye did the light  
flicker briefly flash of L'Assomption sash whip in the air  
was it Gabriel scouting at dusk? Did you hear him call?

did your sight follow the white line of the sky  
looking into eyes of Marguerite, her profile fading  
your children huddled behind her

did you see the Exovedate on the Feast of St. Joseph





## END NOTES

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3. Woodcock, George. *Gabriel Dumont*. Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1976, p. 425.
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8. Howard. p. 117.
9. *Gabriel Dumont Memoirs*, edited and annotated by Denis Combet, translation by Lise Gaboury-Diallo. Saint Boniface, Manitoba: Les Editions Du Ble, 2006, p. 105.
10. Howard. p. 55.
11. Ibid. p. 56.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid. p. 41.
15. Savage, Candace. *Bird Brains*. Vancouver: Greystone Books/Douglas & McIntyre, 1995.
16. The poem's subject, Elizabeth Brass Donald, Cree/Salteaux, was born 1836, a member of the Key Reserve signed under Treaty 4 located in southwestern Saskatchewan. At age seventeen, she married George Donald, Métis HBC carpenter and blacksmith and raised eleven children. Later she became a member of the Papaschase Band, but extinguished her Indian status by taking Métis Scrip in July 1885 likely under duress of starvation. *Edmonton Pentimento: Re-Reading History in the Case of Papaschase Cree*, Dwayne Trevor Donald.

In two surviving photographs of Elizabeth Brass Donald (Betsy Brass), she is diminutive, with rounded shoulders, and wears a dress of crisp black fabric and a black shawl. In one photograph she stands defiant in front of Frank Oliver's house, the owner of *The*



- Bulletin*, Alberta's first newspaper that advocated the Papaschase Band "be sent back to the country they originally came from." R.S. Maurice, *Statement of Claim: The Papaschase Indian Band No. 136*, *Pimohetwin: A Native Studies E-Journal*, October 2, 2001.
17. Frank Oliver, the founder and editor of Alberta's first newspaper, *The Bulletin*, was opposed to the establishment of the Papaschase Reserve in what is now South Edmonton, and he was amongst a vociferous group of Edmontonians who adopted this attitude. They argued that the Reserve would impede the growth and development of the town and deny the settlers access to valuable resources and fertile land.
  18. The line "when it all went wrong" is a derivation of "Where it went wrong." As Neil McLeod explains, "This is the English translation of the Cree word *e-mayikamikahk* which refers to the tragic events of the so-called Northwest Resistance of 1885." *Edmonton Pentimento: Re-Reading History in the Case of Papaschase Cree*, Dwayne Trevor Donald. See also Neil McLeod, "Nehiyawinwin and Modernity" in P. Douaud and B. Dawson (Eds), *Plain speaking: Essays on aboriginal peoples & the prairie* (pp. 35–53). Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre.
  19. Ibid.
  20. Bird, Elizabeth, S. Buffalo Bill, and Sitting Bull. *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 28 no. 2, 145–7. [www.sscnet.ucla.edu/indian](http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/indian).
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  22. Howard. p. 362.



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With a title derived from John A. Macdonald's moniker for the Métis, *The Pemmican Eaters* explores Marilyn Dumont's sense of history as the dynamic present. Combining free verse and metered poems, her latest collection aims to recreate a palpable sense of the Riel Resistance period and evoke the geographical, linguistic/cultural, and political situation of Batoche during this time through the eyes of those who experienced the battles, as well as

through the eyes of Gabriel and Madeleine Dumont and Louis Riel.

Included in this collection are poems about bison, seed beadwork, and the Red River Cart, and some poems employ elements of the Michif language, which, along with French and Cree, was spoken by Dumont's ancestors. In Dumont's *The Pemmican Eaters*, a multiplicity of identities is a strengthening rather than a weakening or diluting force in culture.

## A PICTURE OF THE RIEL RESISTANCE FROM ONE OF CANADA'S PREEMINENT MÉTIS POETS



MARILYN DUMONT's poetry has won provincial and national awards. She has been the writer-in-residence at five Canadian universities and the Edmonton Public Library as well as an advisor in the Aboriginal Emerging Writers Program at the Banff Centre. She teaches creative writing for Athabasca University and Native studies and English for the University of Alberta. She lives in Edmonton, Alberta.

