

REDEMPTION

After the Great Flood and long before the memory of mortals, Nanaboozhoo and four animals floated on a raft looking for a surface upon which they could live and walk. Amik (Beaver), Ojig (Fisher), and Nigiig (Otter) each exhausted their strengths diving to find where the ground originated, but they were unable to stay underwater long enough to find the bottom. As they despaired, the last and smallest animal, Wazhashk (Muskrat) asked to take a turn. Nanaboozhoo and the other animals told him that it was hopeless and not to try, but the muskrat insisted. It is because of the courage and sacrifice of Wazhashk that the earth was renewed.

Wazhashk, the sky watched this.
Mewinzhaa, long before the memory of mortals
Wazhashk, the sky watched your timid, gallant warrior body
 deliberate and then plunge
 with odd grace and dreadful fragility
 into translucent black water,
 dark mystery unknown and vast as the night sky
and barely - to a single inhalation shared by a weeping four
and a hopeful splash quieter than an oar - break the surface
 into concentric expanding disappearing rings as
 water circled your departure,
 for a moment transparently covering
 rose-gray soles tiny seed pearl toes
 above that determined small warrior body
 that hurtled from sight then
 in an instant was pulled into cold dark depths,
 seeking the finite in the veins of a waterlocked earth.

Wazhashk, the water covering the earth watched this.
Mewinzhaa, long before the memory of mortals
Wazhashk, when you were obscured from the sky
the water watched you
 lost from the sight of the praying four
 alone on a small raft afloat on vast water
nearly faint under crushing cold
 alone then below the waterline
 seeking the finite in the veins of a cumbrous earth
 as waterfingers intruded and invaded
 all unguarded aspects of your small warrior body
 now stiff and graceless, pulled by will
 into icy dark depths.

Wazhashk, in that dark mystery
unknown and vast as the night sky
you continued your solitary plunge
 lost from the sight of all who lived above water,
 who considered your size and your courage
until in cold and exhaustion your silent voice whispered
 ningosh nindakamj
 nidayekoz niwiinibaa
 I am frightened I am cold
 I am tired I must sleep now
and was heard by the Great Spirit.

Wazhashk, you were heard and were answered
 mangide'en, anamiindim mangide'en
 gaawiin gimbezhigo siin
 anamiindim mangide'en
 have courage, have courage in the depths
 you are not alone
 have courage, have courage in the depths
til your spirit roused and spoke
 geget geget
 through my despair I will

and the Great Spirit watched this and guided you.
Mewinzhaa, long before the memory of mortals,
Wazhashk, the Great Spirit guided you and watched
 your small curled brown fingers
 stretch their curving pink-nailed claws
 to grasp the muddy, rocky breast
 of a waiting Mother Earth.

And today, Wazhashk, hear us breathe
our inhalations and exhalations a continuing song
of courage sacrifice grace redemption a continuing song
since long before the memory of mortals.

With each telling of the story with each singing of the song
 we once again rise to break the surface and seek
 the finite beyond the grace of this merciful Earth
 the finite beyond the mercy of this graceful Earth.

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW IN LIFE
YOU'LL LEARN AT BOARDING SCHOOL

Speak English. Forget the language of your grandparents. It is dead. Forget their teachings. They are ignorant and unGodly. Cleanliness is next to Godliness. Indians are not clean. Your mother did not teach you to be clean. Stand in line. You will learn cleanliness. This is a toothbrush. Hang it on the hook next to the others. Do not allow the bristles to touch. This spreads the disease that you bring to school from your families. Make your bed with mitered corners. A bed not properly made will be torn apart. Start over. Remember and be grateful that the boarding school feeds and clothes you. Say grace before meals. In English. Do not cry. Crying never solved anything.

Write home once each month. In English.

Tell your mother that you are doing very well. You'll never amount to anything. Answer when the teacher addresses you. In English. We discourage visits from your family. If you visit your family in the summer, report to the matron's office immediately upon your return. You will be allowed into the dormitory after you have been sanitized and de-loused. Busy hands are happy hands. Keep yourself occupied. You'll never amount to anything. Books are our friends. Reading is your key to the world. In English. Forget the language of your grandparents. It is dead. If you are heard speaking it you will kneel on a navy bean for one hour. Do not cry. Crying never solved anything. We will ask if you have learned your lesson. You will answer. In English. Spare the rod and spoil the child. We will not spare the rod. We will cut your hair. We will shame you. We will lock you in the basement. Learn from that. Improve yourself. Speak English. Forget the language of your grandparents. It is dead. You'll never amount to anything.

SAINT BERNARD

When I got to mission school
my worries about my mother
and how was she doing without me
had to wait when
the priest told me
I had a bigger worry than that.

When I died, he said,
they would never let me into heaven
when they heard my name.

With a name like mine, Barney
not any kind of Bible name at all
I couldn't float in
past the eyes of God.

He'd turn me away for certain
with a name like mine, Barney
and send me back to mission school.

And so they named me after this big dog
who carried whiskey
in a little barrel around his neck
and saved people's lives
by bringing them a drink.

Well, I'd heard about that
and even saw it with my own eyes
in a bar in the West End.
Thanks, niiiji, you saved my life
a man told my uncle,
I was sure dying for a drink.

So I supposed it must be all right
and tried to feel the honor
of my namesake.

But it didn't stick
and I reverted to my pagan ways.
See, when I got home
and my mother said hello Barney
I was so happy
I forgot all about heaven.

THE BEANBAG

When the snow began to thaw, at first we saw
only a trace of flowered calico,
then every day more cotton flowers bloomed,
deep blue blossoms wet with melting snow.
Familiar, it looked. I remembered
forget-me-nots on her favorite house dress
that, when worn out, she crocheted with a hook
into a rug, mostly; the smallest scrap
she sewed into a child's toy, a beanbag.

I remember that dress.
As a child, when she held me close,
my face against her soft, flowered middle
smelling starch and warm geranium
in her soft and cool fleshy embrace
I felt small, an infant, or not yet
born in a cocoon of blue flowered cloth.

Early in spring after she died
one day I recognized that flowered dress:
forget-me-nots on cotton, wet buds of blue flowers
on a beanbag we were kicking around the yard.

Split, it spilled the past

her kitchen floor
bumpy patterned linoleum, shiny and bare
reflecting wavy geraniums in coffee cans,
nurtured from seeds of their own great-grandmothers

checked oilcloth
leaned to white pearl scallops at the edge
by her daughters' slender, bending waists
and ground to silver dollars, several pairs,
by her ravenous sons' elbows

kitchen woodstove a hot dull black
bread baking in the oven;
above, noodles boiling tomatoes roiling
singing huffs of steam above our heads

I remembered when the beanbag spilled the past;
when it split and spilled the past I remembered,
and picked it up, to see it one more time

and what was that? I looked close, and closer.
Through its frayed weave, of returning to the earth
the bag held life beyond the tiny past.
Split and spilt, its damp side finely pierced
by an infant bean seedling yet blind, but greedy
for the light, born in a cocoon of flowered
blue calico, a pattern wet with snow
forget-me-nots an early sign of spring
entwined now with a trace of tender green.

I remember her flowered dress.
That dress.