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Three Poems from "The Elder Project," Vernon School District 22

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Three Poems from "The Elder Project," Vernon School District 22

Authors

Brian Antoine, Yetko Brooke Bearshirt-Robins, John (Wilke) Louis, Lindsay Oppenheimer, Vicky Raphael,
and Lenaya Sampson

Three Poems from *The Elder Project*, School District #22, Vernon

In 2010, poets Wendy Morton and Sandra Lynxleg collaborated on The Elder Project, in which elementary students in the Vernon School District were partnered with an elder, instructed to ask the elder ten questions about their lives, and to write a poem based on the elder's answers. The project was such a success that in 2013, they repeated the exercise with secondary students and their elders. The poems coming out of this project speak powerfully of experiences of kinship, work, and loss, as well as profound respect for and personal relationships with the land.

— Sonnet L'Abbé

Lenaya Sampson and Vicky Raphael

Vicky

I was born in Lytton. The youngest of 12.
Five went to residential school. My brother,
he can't talk about it.
I know a little Nlaka'pamux, the Thompson language.
I wish my mom and dad were alive to teach me.
I've been a waitress, cook, clerk, cashier,
production line worker, student, now a certified teacher.
My favourite memory is salmon fishing
with my dad on the Fraser.
I wish I had learned to make a dip net.

Brian Antoine

Jean

for Jean Tremblay

I hail from Fort St. James.
My mother and father raised me
during the time of no pollution,
when you could drink from the streams and from the rivers,
when you could pick and eat traditional foods,
and live off the land.

When I was young, I heard the sayings: reciprocity,
take care of mother earth, sharing is caring.
My elders taught me “you are the master
of your own destiny.”

We had a garden where we grew vegetables,
rhubarb, and strawberries.
My mother had a smoke house.
We had a log house.

When we were young we played and played.
We had ice hockey in the winter, baseball in the summer.

My brother’s family and mine gathered
on our traditional territory.
We had huckleberries, soapberries, and fish – white fish,
trout, kokanee, sturgeon and salmon, for food.

I enjoyed language classes when I went to day school
out on the reserve. I was an educator at schools.

My happiest memories were
when my five children were born.

My saddest memories are
when I said goodbye to my friends and family.

Lindsay Oppenheimer, Yetko Brooke Bearshirt-Robins, and John (Wilke) Louis

Wilke

I was born in Westbank.
I was raised at the Head of the Lake, nkmaplqs.
I remember the Chinese gardens. We planted
rows of tomatoes, weeded them by hand.
I was ten years old.

The Elders went to shoot deer, some people
went fishing.
We went to town to buy pots, pans, needles, salt.

I went to residential school; I was 8, left at 13.
Wasn't learning anything.

I went horse logging; we skidded logs
out of the bush.

Our language is coming back. I teach Okanagan.
My students can speak now.
I can't read or write Okanagan that good.
I wish I could have learned.