

# One Native Life To Love This Country

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By Richard Wagamese

You walk this old timber road as if you were dreaming. Ahead of you the dog splatters footprints in the fresh snow and the curves and undulations of the land are skewed by the hard slant of its fall. Everything is muffled now and only the soft crunch of footfalls links you to reality.

Everywhere is shadow. This bush is sparse on the side of the mountain and the spaces between trees serve only to accentuate the charcoal line where the light is blocked and you wonder how green so easily turns inward on itself to gray.

Standing here, a mile off the road, alone, you're suddenly aware of the size of it all, this country you pull around you like a shawl. You can feel the roll of it at your feet, this cordillera humped up and moving hard to prairie a thousand miles off or angling off behind you, dropping through valley, gulch and draw to ocean, flat and undulating and eternal.

Sometimes you breathe this country in and it fills you, the air of it all wild, free and open like a ragged song.

I've heard that song in a thousand places.

Once in the winter of 1996, I plowed through prairie snow along the cliffs above the North Saskatchewan River in Saskatoon. I was teaching there and I walked to clear my head. The wind was raw and cutting and through tears I saw the bend of that river through the ice, felt its muscle from three hundred feet away and heard its sibilant call to Hudson Bay, the echoed shouts of Indians and voyageurs riding on the crystal fog of ice.

My friends, Anne Doucette and Michael Finley, lived there and I stayed with them that winter. She owned a bookstore and he taught at the university and with their son and daughter and Ann's mother, they welcomed me into their home. It was a sad time for me then and walking eased the hurt. But I'd plow through that winter chill, knee deep in fresh prairie snow and return to feel the warmth of welcome at their door.

I can't think of Saskatoon now without recalling the ghostly remnants of that song along the river and the light and warmth of friendship that was a song itself.

Another time, in 1987, I was struggling to be a freelance journalist. I tracked down a famous artist who was ensconced in the Jasper Lodge and made arrangements to interview him for a native paper. Driving north from Calgary through Banff and then the glistening glory that is the Columbia Ice Fields I felt the power of the landscape through the windows.

Then, twenty miles or so south of Jasper I stopped to rest. I walked through the woods towards the sound of waterfalls. What I found was magnificent. I stepped out onto a small table of stone that stood above a chasm where the water tumbled. The face of the waterfall was in front of me and in the shaded light of mid-morning I watched it fall mere yards away. It was like being levitated, floating right in the face of all that fluid power.

What I heard in the roar and sigh of that emerald and white and turquoise flume was spirit songs, the voices of my people in celebration of that pure, primal power. Later, in the living room of his suite, I spent an entire afternoon and early evening with Norval Morrisseau talking about art and music and the spiritual and traditional ways of the Ojibway.

I can't enter Jasper now without a feeling of tremendous awe for the stark contrast of roar and whisper and mystery in the song that is Canada.

Then, in 1998, I spent five days in a canoe with an Inuk man named Enoch. We paddled a course of portages that the Algonquin people used to navigate their way through the territory north of Maniwaki, Quebec. There were a dozen of us in six canoes under the guidance of a pair of Algonquin guides and elders.

We paddled across a wide lake in a raging windstorm, the two of us battling mightily with waves higher than the gunwales of the canoe, rain splattering us, soaking us, driving us. In the shelter of a horseshoe bay we drank black tea and felt the wind calm. That afternoon we shot a rapids, both of us energized by the challenge and then emerged into a long, flat cove and fished and rested.

We camped that night on a rock bluff covered with moss and surrounded by huge firs and pines. In the light of the fire that night I heard the sighing of the wind through the trees, the soft slap of water at the foot of the bluff and the call of loons.

We talked and I heard stories of an Inuk life, a life I'd never encountered before, never understood, never imagined.

In all of it, there was the sheer loneliness that is the north and the comfort of a voice in the glow of firelight like grace notes all around us.

Yes, there is a song that is Canada. You can feel the notes of it in the bush and tree and rock, sense the tempo and pitch and rhythm of it in the crash of a Pacific surf and glean its meter in the relentless push of breeze across a prairie sky. There are ancient notes in the chorus of it, voices sprung from Métis roots, Ojibway, Cree, Micmac and then the French, German, Scot and English. It's a grand and magnificent clamor.

I have learned that to love this country means to love its people. All of them. For when we say, all my relations, it's meant in a teaching way, to rekindle community in us, the knowledge that we are all part of the great, grand circle of humanity that shapes this country and that we need each other.

It wouldn't be Canada with one voice less.