

## KATERI MENOMINEE

### *from a salt(less) sea to you: return*

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Here *love*, listen; to the sound of deer unmoved  
by moonlight -their eyes- smoke obsidian,  
smoke lake soused copper -their eyes-  
ebbing cedar tips skull white.

-A herd drifts on birch shadow,  
-move and inch to the left and they scatter.

From the porchlights of a salt-less sea, near limestone,  
forest capes, and cliffside hazing pictographs, raw  
colors are streaked, a birch basket of heart berries  
stamped soft, blushing red copper, dripping from salt  
-less sea crag,  
unbrined and green.

And how *you* sang of red maple, while deer flies  
puckered *your* back. You sang of bright sap dolloped  
on lip bow, snowshoeing on a sand bar, and *your* mother's  
stories. *Your* songs crackling deer tracks from isle to isle  
-bluing lakebed, a deer herd -unmoved-  
their nostrils spilling a smokey inlet fog.

Gatherers, where once spare islands, gardened  
a land swelled in blackberries and crawling moss.  
Where deer bleated chains, wheezing mantles  
off sea caves -from Minong-  
-The Good Isle,  
The Good Isle.

Lone balcony of stone tiers; *you* cried; tears tea-spooned  
on lake shore, tides hissing past petrified footprints. *You*  
stand on Minong and run past shoal, to an island too small  
to be called anything but Castle while deer breath  
-lags sheets of ice, a muscled fog half-  
hearting bleats spackled among the mists.

How bawls and grunts lacerate a beach, *you* whispered stories  
between birch trees, of small bellies greening yarrow, zhing-  
wauk, and red moss sponging stone scraggs. -Salt- less sea  
spires, brindled rock, and claw marks speak of another time.  
-A saltless sea lynx once devoured a woman, she cries  
even now, her body unhatched in golden scales.

How she slinked from eggs shells to ore skin!  
And the great salt/less sea lynx twisted her body  
in an ice bath, maelstroms in her hair. Her whitefish  
skin licked hot with rime and wintered spines.  
-How a salt less sea can cast her jetsam,  
amongst sturgeon bones inlaid in blood, bedrock;

Of mashkiigokamig, a yellow clotted causeway  
splashed on lake rock. Lake glass polished her to a  
pointed spear, an arrow, abalone. A boreal sky swing  
latched her to a breast. *Waarwaate*, where the old spirits  
-dance, where colors burn skies heron blue, fireweed,  
a deafening violet

Uniting, as sky and salt—less water spoons deer hallows over  
calcified tides. *You* sipped mashkiigobagwaaboo, dreamed  
of quays, wharfs, schooners, and steamboats capsizing, white  
water gutting them in twain. No women in bleached whale  
-bone corsets sketching coastline, headless  
bluffs scrawled in drifted woodland coal

To masquerade as another romance. Where Anishinaabeg camped,  
fried moose tongue, deer liver, soured maple sugar mashing them  
sweeter. Babies in cradleboards cooing in deer speech on tree branch.  
An island heavy in fallow welcomes and softened thank yous,  
-thus enough,  
that's enough.

Ah Nature! Her helix, a continuous birth. *You*, my dear,  
run to shaded island, and beware *yourself* in treeline  
from men, to T'ir na nÓg, lost wonderland, you lost *yourself*  
in fairyweather, phantoms, zhaagnoosh, the prison of pale gods.  
-Pale idols of Bawating who darken streams, pine resin,  
animal fur gelling their veins a fiendish red. Who were you

Far from fray? What would *you* say now? Unhinge old bone  
from mud, ret your stories in a birch basket because there was grief  
here. Grief was *she*, whose name is hum of newborn stars, opaline,  
glistening a night sky; *your* hands flecking  
-fawn coat stars against the darkness.  
And will *your* stories then, mean nothing?

For here, Aapiji gwa ombiigwewe bezhigwan gwa bangate.  
*You* are gone. *Your* body was a marsh emptied of wiikenh,  
Of masted ships lost to lake gulf in the quell of winter purr.  
*Your* songs were canoes shooting the rapids, and within them;  
-farers, voyageurs, bishops who wore golden carapace,  
reptilian vestments drank to lakebed, too wicked to treasure.

No moss bags bleeding swapped inside out. No swelled cat's paw  
lesions on currents, peninsulas, the beach tongues sprayed dark.  
Isn't this land a language nested between teeth? It is a viridian glade  
its bramble and bulrush picking syllabics like a bone  
-lost in a mouth. The stories once bitten into bark,  
The birchskin now unpeeled, exposed on a stagnant hill.

No gillnets sewn with nettle stalk twine, braided unripen bass-  
wood catching fish combs, smelt, pike, and sturgeon. No nets  
ladling a salt less broth. Only *your* songs are left my love,  
sculling shore, grand poems etching a soundless drag on sand.  
-This home, always, *yours*, for that is all that is left.  
An island cut from another, a starry ballad feasting.

No, this isn't a lament for a dying land, an island  
pillared against Minong, its birthed child. This is an ode;  
a red beamed glottal break, half-throated, translated  
on a slab of sheetrock. "Or maybe this is a lament?" the -salt  
-less- parts of *you* rumbled, agate and decayed logs anchoring  
the many parts of *you*, returned to a boiled salt/less sea.

# 2024 JAMES WELCH PRIZE WINNERS

*selected by Esther Belin*

## KARA BRIGGS

### *Acknowledgment Two*

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America is my home and my hammer, and it's hammering me, uncle  
says as he plants his feet on scaffold, a round net big enough to catch  
the moon or a salmon leaping up Celilo Falls, quicksilver, shimmering  
blinding uncle's eyes. Muscles in uncle's arm still flex and bulge even if  
only triggered by remembering the river that isn't, the falls that aren't, the  
run that's gone, the fish that leaped into the night sky when the river ran  
backward that day the Dalles Dam concrete walls slammed shut. Rivers  
flow to ocean, not backwards, not settled into this series of reservoirs.  
The people wept as generations of salmon hammered their heads on the  
cement wall of that damn dam. Uncle bought a speed boat, took to casting  
lines and later gill nets on a flat-surfaced reservoir. What had become of  
the Big River, Nch'i-Wana and its ballet of salmon no longer leaping up  
waterfalls while uncle perched above waiting.

Uncle holds a well-thumbed yellow book on Oregon's revised fishing  
codes, the dog-eared page where it said except for Indian fishers. Uncle  
dug out a foot hold in the law where an Indian fisher could build a life.  
Uncle bought land on the riverbank, a pretty hillside where hazelnut trees  
still grow, where the sun baked dry the salmon, where his wife baked  
bread in wood-fired oven, where he and she grew old, their radical days  
recorded in documentaries, in interviews, in legal decisions won, lost.  
They are minor celebrities now, known to urban dwellers longing for old  
style protests, misinterpreting radical for what was just survival, and what  
wasn't all that romantic because the bullets were real, the arrests were  
targeted, the divorces were inevitable. Dying in Toppenish elder housing  
where he lived with his second wife, uncle stretched out his arms like an  
Old Testament prophet giving a blessing, told me to carry this story into  
a future he won't live to see, we might not live to see, salmon might not  
live to see, the Big River might not even live to see.