

Poem (Ekphrastic) for "Kayas' A Long Time Ago"

Fiona Smith

Through members of her family, Fiona has first-hand experience with the fallout of intergenerational trauma affecting those who were sent to Residential Schools. Through the possible and imagined musings of "Kookum" (Grandmother), she explores (and is critical) of this dark mark in Canadian history and the lived-experience(s) of her siblings' and cousins' people.

This poem won third place in the Journal of Integrated Studies 2018 Ekphrastic Poetry Competition.



Painted by Cardinal M. (1986). Medium: Serigraph

Oh, Kookum,
What does the wheat in the wind say?
Does the eagle bring a message from you? Or, to you?
Do the black bison know? Or are they part of you?
Do you lean on their big backs for support,



Or are you in the giant beasts' memory
- with your bright red 'kerchief, as they wander beneath
your great sullen spirit?

You have a long look in your eyes,
Wrinkled by time, the sun or your lamentations - it's hard to tell.

Was it decided for you and
were they plucked gone without your permissions
- Your babes took; whole families gone; yeh, your futures bright?

Did you dig in, praising the Great Spirit of your 'Traditions?

Calling your children home to the fires; waiting hearts and the light,
On the wings of the eagle, over the grasses, Kookum? Maybe you spoke
To the beat, beat, beat of the drum – like it was your heart. Was that you?

Tho' not one teardrop fell, maybe you offered tobacco and sweet grass;

And, defiantly, fists furled, you would not let your suffering show.

You furrowed your brow, perhaps hoping that these hells wouldn't last,
Swallowing the pain, the names and their childhoods, as well as your fears...
...did you say goodbye to everything that you cherished

but daily looked out over the Prairies
and wished your children home
watching, wishing, waiting,
wearing your 'kerchief like a scarlet beacon
in a sea of welcoming warm wheat
hoping, hoping, hoping they might
Just. Find. Their. Way. Home?

Perhaps they never come home.



Or maybe they just forget their way.
Perhaps you keep waiting.
Because, that's what love does.
Yes, that's enough to wrinkle a woman.

You do not look impressed.

No, in fact, your look says it all:
you're right - this can't be undone.
Canada has been wrong
to bring you so much pain and worry.
Trauma! Trauma, for Kookum's children (and their children).
For Kookum knows (we all know) that you can't fix
This many generations
with a "sorry".

Fiona Smith is a Winnipeg-based writer, inclusive development consultant & online instructor who holds a M.Ed. from Athabasca University, a B.A. (Advanced) in Theatre & English from the University of Manitoba and is a proud Black Hole Theatre alumna.
