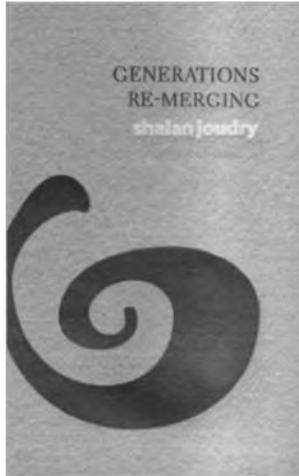


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Poetry as Storytelling

**A review of Shalan Joudry's poetry collection
GENERATIONS RE-MERGING, Gaspereau Press, 2014.**



The Irish novelist John McGahern once took historians to task for their backward look with its obligatory unities: “People do not live in decades or histories. They live in moments, hours, days, and it is easy to fall into the trap of looking back in judgment in the light of our day rather than the more difficult realization of the natural process of living which was the same then as it is now.” Shalan Joudry a Mi'kmaw poet and story teller from Bear River First Nation in Nova Scotia seems to have learned this lesson early on. The very title of her collection *Generations Re-Merging* acknowledges the presence, the attendance, of the past “at the edge/ of the woods where the generations/ before us and after us re-merge.” This is Shalan Joudry's first collection of poems and it shows remarkable maturity, promise and ambition: in “Yellow Pond” for instance she insists that “the children disoriented like fallen geese/ armed with stones and baseball batons” need more and different “notes to play. . .more dreams to run toward/ away from this memorial/ narratives faithfully surfacing/ the way frozen water lilies/ surface with season's melting”. A similar note is struck in “Little Warriors” where the narrator insists on a different way forward “maybe if I asked the children to play/ taught

them other kinds of games/ statistics as an enemy/ instead of holding arms against each other". These poems display ambition because they are willing to confront a colonial past and present, its external and internal legacy. A poem like "Africa/Indigenous" could have been penned by her fellow Nova Scotian, George Elliot Clarke "you faced independence after rape/ and somehow came of age too early too late". Joudry is aware, however, of T.S. Eliot's phrase that humankind cannot bear much reality so she tempers her "stories" with moments of great beauty and stillness. Here nature emerges not as escape or Christmass window dressing but as poetry to encourage and strengthen us for when we return to the streets and kitchens of our lives. "Su'nl which is Mi'kmaq for Cranberries opens with this arresting stanza

it begins with a trace of tobacco
left purposefully supple like a kiss
and a sigh
that stretches out into the lingering blue mist
at the edge of Lake Mulgrave
the dotted islands disappearing into the miasma
of fog and dawn's heavy-peaked light

The poem ends as a kind of love song, not in desire or ecstasy, but in communal and ancestral celebration:

take my breath
take this respite
i plead
kesalul
hold out your fruited limbs
let me unravel
your burnt edges and marred masks
the people left you with

veiled in this ritual of autumn harvest
before the lonely lull of kesik descends

Kesalul means I love you and kesik, winter. Joudry references the Mi'kmaq language here and elsewhere in her poetry the way many Irish poets use Irish when English is their first language.

It is not merely highlighting the exotic, though that is there, but rather it signals a connection with the past, with ancestors and with, for want of a better word, identity. It acknowledges a presence, the notion of the other and the idea of community as well. It is about being apart and separate and belonging all at the same time.

Shalan Joudry's is a unique voice in Canadian poetry, her aboriginal culture and heritage insist on an audience, on stories that must be heard, and this heritage bestows on this promising poet a significance, a gravitas that we should not ignore.