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I recently heard a poet pose the question, what is the justification for a life devoted to poetry? What I appreciate most about poetry is how tools of craft—a carefully placed line break for example—can raise multiple angles of proposition. Or, to expand the term, preposition. That is, the relationships called and made manifest in poems. For example, if I were to put that line into a poem, I might break it so: what is the justification for a life / devoted to poetry?

What is the justification for a life? A question of the utmost relevance to the disenfranchised, the oppressed, the colonized, even as the answer is obviously to insist there isn't and needn't be one. Through *Creeland*, Dallas Hunt weaves a lifeline from the ancestors through the present to a future as beautiful as it is messy. The poems in this collection are a reckoning of what it is to be at once violent and tender, to contain multitudes. In these poems, "trees speak to one another with vocabularies that could burst the grammars that house us roots and tentacles spreading reaching unfolding" (Hunt 9). This language of the land could "topple empires if we would just get out of the way" (9). Small. Unassuming. But burrowing. Not dormant. Not vanished or passive. They seek and manifest a change in perspective and therefore being, so that smallness, too, becomes a position of strength. It's all in what the gaze can and does behold. These poems defy a singular or monolithic existence, celebrating contemporary Indigenous presence in its multiplicity. As Hunt reminds readers of this work, the language we use—and how it is understood—is key.

The language of these poems is the language of the land and body, of lived experience, description as apprehension, as not defining but transformative: "the Cree word for constellation / is a saskatoon berry bush in summertime" (11). There is generosity. There is gratitude. But gratitude does not free one from accountability. And at times Hunt's poems are pointed, as when a poem of thanksgiving ends with the admonishment to "be clear that / trying is / not the/ same as / doing" (15) without breaking the persistent, percussive cadence by which poet and poems continue to beat.

The use of Cree language throughout *Creeland* emphasizes strangeness even as it returns the colonizing language of English back to readers as strange: "the (colonial)

gateway / to the northwest // a benevolent misnomer / Portneuf Gap more of a maw" (24). In "Mahihkan," the slipperiness between language(s) is invoked through proximity: "rarely do you see / wolves by / the highway, / i say, and for a moment / it looks like / he might believe me" (27). Mahihkan. Wolf. Colonized. Colonizer. What is revealed between language? Hunt's use of language is as deliberate as its placement, from the level of vocabulary to the arrangement of the poems within *Creeland*. In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard comments that "to put just anything, just any way, in just any piece of furniture, is the mark of unusual weakness in the function of inhabiting" (100). Such accusations of weakness cannot be made against the arrangement of these poems, where "Mahihkan" (translated as "Wolf" in the glossary at the back of the book) is followed immediately by a poem of kinship, in which the self indeed spills over into language and landscape and kin. We as readers search for ourselves where such networks of being meet. We reflect so often on the self voicing the poems but forget the gift poetry offers the reader who becomes, or at least momentarily inhabits, the speaker. Language becomes charm, becomes an article of protection.

If these poems are concerned with politics and settler tensions, their sights are still ultimately broader than that. In "No Obvious Signs of Distress," though problematic institutions are called out each in turn, one cannot ignore the tenderness of the poem's supplication—what can we do against the fear of dying alone? Indeed, there are moments in these poems that are simply devastatingly tender. From "I Was Born Blue":

> it was worth it,
> being born blue,
> to be outside
> of history
> for a moment
> to relate deeply
> to a mother
> who will not have
> the vocabularies
> to relate
> to you otherwise
> in the future (38)

Poems such as "Tracks" ask what if our continued presence is not in fact the solution? What if the answer is somewhere between here and not here, the said and unsaid,

earth and sky, the heartbeat of language insisted in each poem? Hunt's poems do not shy from their position of the impending moment of reckoning they at once herald and summon. Rather they demand we pause and consider a broader web of relations and consider the network of kin outside of the immediate. Just as they question our understanding of language, they compel us to question our understanding of the self, teasing self out of its own confines. After all, "flooding is love / (to be) made in / overflowing, pipes / bursting" (54).

What is the work of the poem? The poems of *Creeland* simultaneously prod and sow the hurts that nourish, while seeking—perhaps not to bridge the gap between home and wound—but to navigate the space of becoming between them. In "A Prairie Fire that Wanders About," for example, language and form invoke an enigma of becoming, a history of sowing, of harvest and cleaning by fire and flood. Hunt is a poet who knows the many possible gestures of a poem's intent—not least of which is, from time to time, a clear, earnest, plaintive call to act differently. Similar to Ada Limon's ability to tease revelations from observations of the mundane, in "Main Street and Sixth Avenue," Hunt recognizes the obvious lesson in bird cannibalism in regard to the resource extraction industry in Northern Alberta. But if we beg the question of what a poetics of accountability might look like, the answer Hunt suggests is a poetics of relations.

How is a poem, is language, an act of care and love? *Creeland* is arranged as an arc to this question. These poems are not interested in performing to meet preconceived expectations. Writing about "economies of / care and relation" (108) that defy voyeuristic settler desires for more culture entertainment, Hunt writes, "I know that acts of care and love / are supposed to be noisy / declarations, to draw attention to both / the recipient and giver of love" (109). If "an ill-fitting / shell is consignment / to death" (101), Hunt has found in the shapes of these poems forms capable of growth, of surviving and thriving, lamenting and yes, laughing—enough to not merely be consumed. Hunt's poems poke at the irony undergirding the unexamined language of settler colonialism, a language spoken by (unwashed) mouths "full of splinters" (99). If metaphor is a language of abstraction and overlay, perhaps it is through metonymy Hunt's poems reveal that which carries on in the gaps and the between.

Hunt understands and demonstrates the power of language and stories to imagine and manifest alternative realities. In "Narrative Trap(ping)," for example, Hunt revisits tropes of ongoing Indigenous extinction to show what is possible if we simply look longer, if not harder. Following the usual scene of wounded Indigenous bodies left presumably to expire on the beach:

before the cut
to darkness
to black
to the credits,
the settler protagonist,
gazing
intently toward
the horizon,
has a brain
aneurysm,
dying
instantly
the Indigenous guide
sits on the beach
alive
help heard
in the offing
in the distance. (110)

Of course, the outcome cannot be assured. Language is as much a living body as those still to be revived on the beach and always becoming where/as it is spoken. Still, perhaps Hunt is right that a lot of poems these days are different ways of writing pain and longing:

form obscures,
language obfuscates,
but longing clarifies,
longing sharpens,
while stealing focus,
until all you have
is something pure
and painful:
yearning (113)

But if what Hunt says is true, that "desire is / a struggling river" (114), poetry reflects our efforts to keep afloat. The "cure for existential angst" (116) cannot be bought in smudge kits at your local grocer or shopping mall. But perhaps it can be found in

poetry. Cheesy, I know. And my words, not Hunt's. But at the end of it all, the power of language, Dallas Hunt reminds us, cannot be denied where it is spoken.

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Works Cited:

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