

knee deep in high water :

riding the Muskwa-Kechika

expedition poems

bronwyn preece

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for Christy Drever,

physiotherapist extraordinaire ...

all i can say is thank you. thank you. and thank you! none of this would have been possible without you ...

for Janis McLean,

for the utterly rich and endlessly rewarding friendship ... and the occasional surprise gift of a beloved book in the mail!

for Wayne Sawchuk,

for making me appreciate the notion of 'giddy-up!' in so many more ways than one ... beyond grateful!

of note :

these poems reflect one woman's personal experience on an expedition with Muskwa-Kechika Adventures. the collection does not attempt to reflect others' experiences on the same trip in any way. the author holds the guide, fellow riders, wranglers/farriers and company as a whole with the utmost respect and in the highest esteem. i am forever grateful for the experience ...

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i write in lowercase —

out of respect, i capitalize all Indigenous references, the name of the expedition leader and the horses' names. i keep capitals in most citations from books and references.

i have done my utmost to fact check all of my references through various sources; however, i remain a visitor to the area i write about here within and i humbly apologize if i have gotten anything wrong ...

i would like to thank Vici Johnstone and Sarah Corsie of Caitlin Press for your support, thoroughness and thoughtfulness ... it has been nothing short of a pleasure working with you.

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this is a collection of poems. a narrative. a journey, an experience, a story. penned in, and amongst, a mixture of saddles, stirrups, tents and tarps, melting mountains and rising rivers, thwarted plans, awe, overwhelm, and breathtake in the backcountry. it travels through many territories and ethical terrains. it is one woman's account of moving into deeper understandings of self, Peoples and place, as a person of predominantly settler-descent visiting unceded Ancestral Lands in northern british columbia. it is a documentation of these unfurling relationships, overlaps, challenges, hopes and their inextricable reveals *in situ*. the collection captures snippets, soundbites, moments, geology, geography, ornithological-envy, history and gaps.

this is my chronicling of a remote, two-week horse expedition, embarked upon while recovering from a leg-shattering injury, that left me with an acutely crooked knee.

in many ways it is a love story. it houses struggles and celebration. it becomes, and bears, witness ...

it is a book of longing and learning ...

of experiencing

and a return to the trail ...

1.

*Kledo boat launch,
june 28, 2021*

i am
Muskwa
Rivered,
loading
into jetboat,

array of
orange, black, green
dry bags ...

i am
an hour
past mile 300
of the alaskan
highway –
a place which
competes for
the title of '*oldest
white settlement
in bc*',¹

where the land
speaks in
shadows,

song of *Dene,*
Néhiyawêwin,
Kaska Dena ...
rooting itself in
Slavey/Cree
tones, terms,
Territory :

my desire to accord proper Territorial acknowledgment to this area – where i find myself privileged to be a visitor – is met with a painful history of forced removal, division of bands, conquering containment and re-patriation ...

it becomes hard to detangle the destructive colonial legacy from the rightful associations : Traditional Territories overlapped, being seasonally nomadic Peoples. the imposition of reserves defiled lineages of symbiotic subsistence, survival and spiritual sustenance ... and yet, despite governmental-instituted regimes of attempted genocide, many of the surviving Peoples forming part of Treaty 8, including the Fort Nelson First Nation, call these lands 'home' ...

'The Crown recognized the territorial and jurisdictional rights of our people within the boundaries of Treaty No. 8, as demonstrated by the Crown entering into treaty with the Fort Nelson Slavey on August 15, 1910, in the form of an adhesion to Treaty No. 8, signed on the banks of the Fort Nelson River at Old Fort Nelson. [...]

We have rights and privileges under the provisions of said Treaty including, amongst others, access to and benefit of the resources within our traditional territory of said Treaty "for as long as the sun shines, the grass grows and the rivers flow".²

this river, Muskwa, means black bear.³

i have been
early-morning
shuttled here,
from fort nelson
to water's edge,

by the boat operator,
in a 4x4 super-duty.

we talk
pipelines, hunting,

burning, wolves,
caribou. *and*
clouds.

we speak
northern.

i board the boat.

only days before,

i purposely poured
my coffee into my
expedition-embossed
mug. downed it, drowned
the plants, unplugged
the kettle, chucked
the garbage, locked
the door, hid the
key. *and set the*
odometer to 0.

backseat overflowing.
full tank of gas.
fresh oil change.
and four new tires.

first stop,
a friend's. i sound-
track the appropriate
song for the three
kilometre drive :

with lyrics that suggest
i may be able to
lessen the depressive load
of another by just showing up.
a weight-lifter.

i fix us
coffee.
i have been
coming here
every day for
two weeks.
showing up.
now i am
leaving
for three ...

backing out
the door,
i clench my fist
to my chest,
'you got this'

though
directed at him,
i'm speaking to
the both
of us ...

i put on
my shades,
picking them up
off my dashboard
littered with
mementos from
past road trips :
 sand dollar, antler,
 incense ... and
a left-under-the-
windshield-found-
note : *'you are*
beautiful'

i reverse