

Selected Poetry

Rita Joe



Rita Joe. Photo by Clifford Paul.

The Sketchings of Yesterday

The rock drawings we see today
Are messages from the past as they saw then.
The pictures conceived on my native mind
The answers my ancestors have left behind.
At Kejimikujik the sketchings nudged my senses
As I felt their shades close by.

The women were the makers of the petroglyphs
So tried to reason the stories shaded forth.
The major acknowledgement of unseen forces
The life-giving circle we animate.
And Kisulkw* as they knew then
The overall super-spirit in touch with them.

The Grand Council symbol in many ways
In itself an attestation to democracy we knew.
Long before so-called discovery, the laws in effect
No empire on earth can dispute, we still use today.
The realm so free, the women brought forth
Their honesty on record as they saw then.

O yes ! The petroglyphs need to be studied more
Maybe then the simplicity of positive power
Lies in the truth we ignore but must embrace.

* Kisulkw = creator

The Request in Native Tongue

My daughters are going to a university
I long for them to succeed.
When I awaken to the first light of dawn
My imploration is in my native tongue
The request is for a success
My shadow's plea.

Then one daughter comes to my home
Saying words that touch the heart.
"I dreamt about you, Mom !
WE were crossing a river
You dropped a piece of paper in the water
I dived to get it
You stood on dry land
But I struggled for the paper and got it."

The cry continues in my native tongue
The asking for other's insight.
Like all parents wish for children
We care they best their knowledge.
In heart our longings are same
The trail of life for what is right.

Pi'towk-e'-waq (People from up-river)

Who are the people over there?
 Questioned the explorer to Lnu* at Atlantic coast
 "Oh pi'towk-e'-waq na" *
 Meaning the people from up-river or over there.
 Hence the repeated word, 'pi'towk-e'-waq'
 The non-natives then mouthed the word 'Beothuk'
 Naming the natives in Newfoundland.

The people in Ktaqmkuk* were a portion of our own
 And part of other tribes in the North Atlantic area.
 The history says these people are no more,
 I say their blood still flows in us
 The care on our part is nationwide.

I dare you to dispute my claim
 They are still alive.

*Lnu = aboriginal person
 Pi'towk-e'-waq na = they are from up-river; over there
 Ktaqmkuk = Newfoundland

Murdena Marshall

I hear her words in my native tongue
They touch the heart, more for understanding
When she is near I hug and thank her
My friend Murdena, a young elder.

So wise are her ways I like listening
Just woman-talk but all native.
We are never tired of teaching
Each in our own way, all Mi'kmaq.

To educate was her determination
The longing to help her fellowman.
To spread the word to all the nations
Bringing joy to the heart being Canadian.

I hear her words again and again
They touch my heart for inspiration.
When she is near I hug and thank her
My friend Murdena, a young elder.

My First Sweat

It is the third day of the men's sune'wit*
 There are fifteen men on the mountain in Eskasoni
 Tomorrow they come down, the one of them my son.
 "There is a woman-sweat today", my daughter says
 "I am going", I say to help the men in their alasutmaq*

I enter the lodge on my hands and knees
 "Nujinaq* we need your help", I speak to the shadow
 I go to the end, sit in a reclining position.
 There are twelve women, one child.
 Seven large rocks are placed in center pit
 The leader smokes a pipe, offerings said
 In the darkness my heart thumps, wondering what's next.
 The wonder is new, this is my first sweat.
 The air very hot, the glow only at the centre
 SSSSSTTTTTT, I hear the water on the rocks
 We sing.

I hear a beating sound like a flapping of wings
 The sweat is flowing rivers on the body
 My mind sees figures, A bear ? An eagle ?
 I try alasutmaq* not my way, confused ? My way, I'm happy
 With the feather tightly held, I listen
 I hear beautiful expressions of my culture.
 The door opens, the leader says "lisma'si" *
 As I lay, my hand lifts up, then drops hard.
 "Ika'lik kesaqliq'oq*", I speak. I am left alone
 They have shown, I believe.

*Sune'wit = fasting

Alasutmaq = prayer

Nujinaq = grandfathers!

Lisma'si = lay down

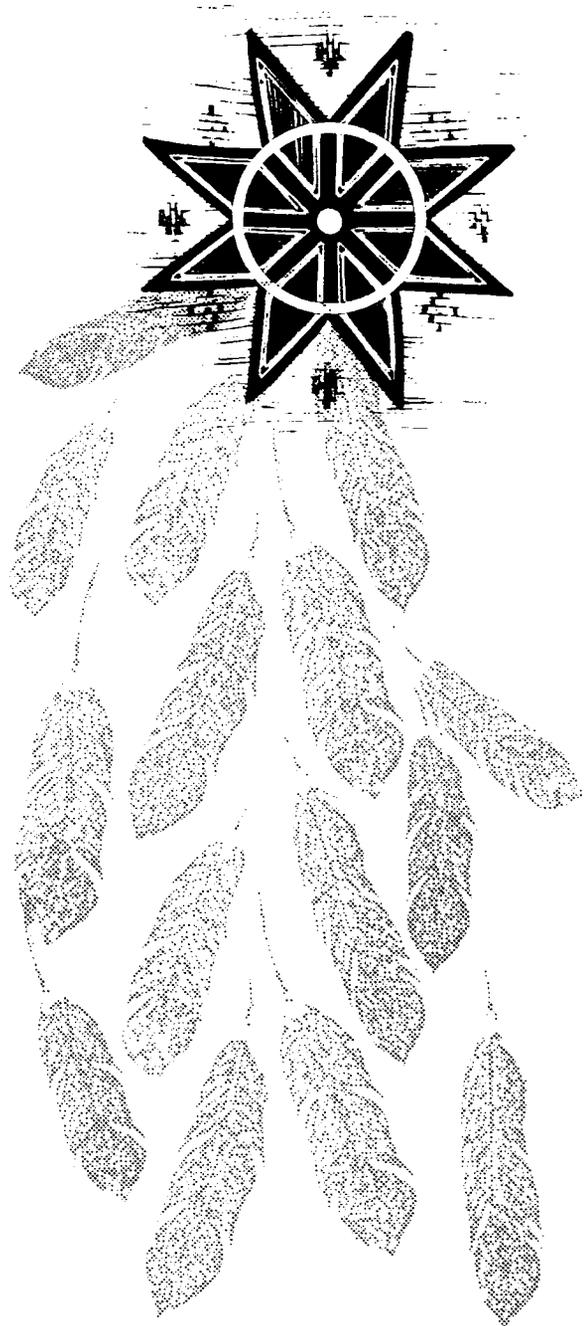
Ika'lik kesaqliq = let me go, you are hurting me

The Circle

A long time ago my bones dried
They returned to the earth
They came.
A long time ago my heart cried
The voice returned as you can see
The awaited destiny, with creative hands
A monument to stand time, we understand.
I show my symbol, the eight-pointed star
The lines pointing east, west, north, south
And the giver of life, the sun.
The triangle of life-giving energy
My sign
Love.

In my custom like all people
There is a reason.
From the centre of the earth, we came
Four groups were created
The red, yellow, black, and white
The colors are also the four directions
With each color to carry out a mission
When completed
There will be harmony.

The harmony is in the process
Continue, continue
Complete the circle.....



Quill work eight-pointed star with tumbling feathers.
Graphic courtesy of Anna Nibby Woods.

