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Exploding Chippewas

Mark Turcotte
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Inhabiting the strange new country of the literary Indian, the poet speaks true without being melodramatic; his poems are pointed without being maudlin. These are important poems, biting and frank. They display one of the deepest and most Indian of tendencies—the meeting of adversity head-on with a grin, finding humour in the most desperate situations. It is typically Indian to look at oneself in a regrettable moment, and belly laugh. This is evident in lines from Turcotte's poem "Signal," about college: "He takes / the flask from my fingers. / The string is still taut. / We haven't been to class in days. / No one has noticed." Other pieces are remarkably tender and insightful, like "Contact," about the birth of his new son, and "Near": "…wife / and son frolic at the edge / of the big water. They bend together, / finger bright stones, shells, tiny / fish bones…Everything is a treasure. / She smiles / deeply, hair wrapped in wind around / the fine curve of her hip."

In "Back When I Used To Be Indian," the author gives readers a glimpse of how he sees his younger/former life: "Back when I used to be Indian / I am leaning into the shadows, / my shoulder against the rough / mud and log wall…Everything is a circle and all / that is not Indian in the World / suddenly disappears." Despite the poet's claim that he "used" to be Indian, these works come indelibly and undeniably from a red heart and tribal roots. It is not an easy thing to live with the inevitable conviction that one is in two worlds simultaneously, living one life superimposed over another. Being in two worlds while being in neither is a dilemma of all minorities, even more complicated for mixed-bloods. This dilemma is further compounded by the disenfranchisement and conflicts built into the reality of being Indian in the 21st century. Turcotte's poems go a long way to investigating these conflicts and struggles, and may even provide some resolution.

GABRIELLE SHAW (September / October 2002)

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