

ANCESTORS KNOW WHO WE ARE
STORME WEBBER POEM

I Cover the Waterfront

This isn't a sad story. It isn't a sad story or a happy story or ... really, it's both, all mixed-blood water under the bridge, light up ahead, people's testimony. It's a sigh and a song, a question and a response but not an answer, because there is no answer, really, just variations on a theme as always. Like everyone, I am always underway.

I told a story until it transformed. I sang a song until the melody lifted, rose from dirge, and I could feel the grace notes. I am headed back into a subspace where we were lost one time. It wasn't a forest. It was darker than that, and the sky was concrete above us. We used to hide in there. I was a child and I felt, but did not know, the layers of narrative covering us too. Oh, I heard the songs playing, saw the big people moving in and out of time, I did.

The Casino was the name, but it was about as far from Monte Carlo as you could ever get. Cuban heel boots and sneakers, stilettos, and cheap thongs, and watch how you walk down, cause those steps are steeply angled. "Make sure you let some light in, so you know how to find your way back out," someone says softly. The music is playing, but I heard the words. Today I walked past, looked down, looked up.

First layer is the deepest, like a cut. The Duwamish there, nearby to the shoreline where canoes depart and return with what gives life. No stories are seen there in the underground, but they are felt—or am I imagining it? Someone is carving, and the stories run from his hands into wood or bone and they create life in balance. They did not think of how to monetize the earth. They did not think of how to sell everything. First layer, oldest striation, the mothers, the carvers, the fishermen, the Indigenous working together for all. As if to lend strength, the spirits of the people who had to hide themselves too.

Many years later, other waves of the dispossessed, only different, only the same. "You are not us," they are told. You are wrong, savage, heathen, unnatural. Come back when you're civilized. Meanwhile, I'll take that, and I'll take that too. You are not using it, and I am sure you haven't a clue how to. Mind your betters. You never settled this land, whatever it is that you people do.

This is a liminal line and I am always trying to walk it. Like all the ones before, half breeds to the ninth degree of pure-blood half breed. It takes a delicate science to blend all these bloods and voyages, mix in the joy and the wailing, and discover how to loft above it all. They took our masks to dead houses to look at with dry, flinty eye or they burned them to ash, tricked us into despising the wise. Ah, but the wisdom whispers sometimes and when I am still, I can hear it. I spend money and time to clear out the debris and I watch then.

Walk the shoreline with me. Don't ask questions. Don't try to collect me for your mansion. Please, just listen and be, for some things in life there are no words. Maybe there is something quick that you see from the edge of your eye, a whisper you cannot quite decipher. This is the footprint my grandmother

made when she flung herself into this deep water in sadness and halfway down changed her mind. This is where she came back to land, walked on.

This pawnshop was my mother's bank. She did much business here, this booth, where we children sat seeing. Be careful with the stairs. Oh, it's a steep drop. Some fell and never lifted again. Lucky we were new and strong. Sometimes, though, I wonder if I return to fetch back some parts of myself still there in shadow and stillness.

[singing] *Away from the city oh that hurts and mocks, oh I'm standing alone by the desolate docks in the still and the chill of the night. Oh, I see the horizon, the great unknown. Oh, my heart has an ache. It's as heavy as stone. Will the dawn coming on make it light?*

The sailors walk like rolling waves into the bar, and the ones who watch with lit eyes sway in response. An Indian tells a joke about Custer. It ends with her saying, "Where'd all those damn Indians come from?" There's something good in the ritual.

The sailor grins real pretty, and Smiley, the Indian butch who rides her Harley every summer up the Alcan to work in the canneries, starts to sing her favorite song, "Don't the Moon Look Lonesome?"

In this bar, it is a traditional song and all present enter into her ceremony.

A couple of Duwamish spirits listen, smiling with eyes closed. At her last note, they sigh with pleasure.