



Autoethnographic Poetry: First Summer in Whitehorse

Description



Wearing shorts and sweating in the North while working to mitigate the impacts of heavy snowfall is potent contrast. An engorged, gorgeous river that gives life to so much but that can also kill is potent contrast.

AUTHOR'S MEMO FOR AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC POETRY: FIRST SUMMER IN WHITEHORSE

I moved to the Yukon, a territory in Canada's north in November 2020. Here, the impacts of climate

change are not subtle, as the 2021 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Report asserted, “warming over land is larger than the global average and it is more than twice as high in the Arctic.” That report also noted “climate change is intensifying the water cycle. This brings more intense rainfall and associated flooding.”

In the north, you would expect a winter of crusty, high snow banks and surging snowstorms, but Yukoners have told me Whitehorse, Yukon is actually known historically to have less snowfall than lake-affected south-western Ontario, where I was born and raised. Climate change is altering this and for two years in a row now there has been record-breaking winter precipitation in Whitehorse. December 2021 was the snowiest since 1980. We are preparing for spring and summer flooding again already.

This poem is rumination on how the personal experience of volunteering in never-before-seen flood relief efforts in the remote north reinforces the research that “many of the changes observed in the climate are unprecedented in thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of years.”

I now work directly with a leader, the Minister I mention in the poem, who was a former reviewer for one IPCC report, and who is passionate about reducing waste and protecting the environment for generations to come. He is on a mission to reach as many as he can and the boaters in the poem allude to a larger conservative culture of climate change denial that is still a challenge in many pockets across the globe. How do we reach them? We get in the water and we must get them in the water, too.

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The physicality of stuffing sandbags followed by losing control in that dangerously high river reveals a tangible but also frightening and urgent sense of time in an intense environment. This intensity is our new everyday. It brought water to the forefront of the climate change discussion for me. And once you waded out of your fruitless battle with the Yukon River, you cannot go back to looking at it as you once did. The water has spoken.





Photo of Yukon by [jdblack](#) for Pixabay

A mummified forest

Poking through on Ellesmere Island

There's only one reason that was found

Black log whiskers in cold grey mud

Dried spikes

*A whispering fortress
You won't get that off your fingertips
Your nails will never come clean
So much dirt and sand
Grains bejewelling the M on your palm
Especially that deep lifeline curve
Ropes of those tiny crushed pebbles
Circling your knuckles
The necklace of the summer
All these sandbags here in the North
A place more consumed by wildfire
So much water here in this strange Yukon summer
From so many pooling pearly skirts
Dancing snowflake girls kneeling
The spring ball cancelled
No where to go but down the mountain
Slow swim into panting pregnant lakes
Unzipping inch by inch
Sleeping bags of surf
A crawling suffocation
Lapping
Teasing treacherous goodnight melody
A tuck-in
Weighted blanket
Smelting.*

* * * * *

I am on Army Beach Road
In Marsh Lake
In this northern territory of Jack London
Of Sam McGee and more importantly Ivan Coyote
In pink hiking boots and shorts
Straddling a burlap bag in desert sun
Sand in my socks
Cascading over burnt wrists
We cannot make them fast enough
The melt is coming
The melt is here
Most snow we'd had since the 80s,
They swear
They'll say that again next December
So many factors
A flood every 100 years
No every seven right?
Unprecedented
Unprecedented
Unholy
Unyielding
The Minister of Energy, Mines and Resources is in the lake
He's an environmental scientist after all
He's measuring the water's journey with his body

Goes in up to his neck eventually
Followed by his wife in a wetsuit and camera
We should all follow suit
We need to be touched by it
Frozen
The hydrologists keep getting the levels wrong
Rainfall is one thing
Downfall cracks open vials and hearts and will
Everyone's noticed except the boaters
Still out on the lakes.

* * * * *

I am in the rushing Yukon River
Just past the blue bridge down from Yukon Energy
Talked into joining the raft flip event
For a white-water rodeo
The river is joyous and unleashed
It is alive and hungry
It fills my mouth and my eyes
Pulls me along with an unforgivable force
Reminds me why I am a lady of the Great Lakes
I come up under the raft
Thundering churning water
Go under like a humble leaf
Like a movie
Animal instinct taking over

I am gasping and crying

Uncontrollable

I am sure I will drown until someone grabs my lifejacket

Hoists me on board in one quick swoop

I choke

Apologize on repeat, trembling and amazed to still have my paddle

We lose the raft race

Hours later

I am still

Flooding.

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