

Pawaatamihk

Paul Sasges

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Elzear, Lost Forever

photographs and paper make virtual memories
but mysteries leave shaken-buried quests

boxes on a tree
shorn from being Métis
Coutu, Vaudry, Venne
Lagimonière.
Dumas, Crebassa, Saulteaux
some tell stories, some are silent
first great-grandfather is the quiet sort
though not fully baffling

I found you in a bankruptcy notice,
discovered you in a drinking tale
once on an official
Dominion Land Grant
settler's section and quarter

to me, never a word about you
spoken by grandmama

here are two photographs
one you are upright behind the family
all dressed in Sunday's best
your moustache arcs across your upper lip,
your hair is thick and black,
combed with pomade
it stands back and stiff

then there is a posed picture
Four Clowns, they called you
feigning a high-stakes poker game
guns and shot glasses raised

you left the smallest imprint on the prairie grass

Louise, Doing Rich People's Laundry

Cane supporting your new hip
taupe coat with faux fur collar,
keeping you warm, you walk the park.
From this green school field,
I see your hard life,
and your new permed blue rinse.

When you and Dad lived in Winnipeg, what was it like
doing rich people's laundry?

Here are some photographs I found
you're dressed in your baptismal dress.
It's a necessary white, I guess.

Your wedding portrait harkens back
when things were also white and black.
your gown runs down to your white patent boots.

Easy to see why you married Grandpa.
He's tall with dark, romantic eyes that hid
future trials and tribulations.

You're in your thirties,
there is a headshot, your eyes deep and unknowable
gaze clear and bold
talking back
your elegant face cajoles the camera
with a starlet pose.

This is what you wrote.
Your father went broke in 1907
in North Dakota.
He returned to Colonial Canada,
land of his birth.
Homesteaded for one year on Dominion land,
returning to get you and the family.
Your cattle car full of furniture and provisions
coming to a new old land.
Your cow froze to death somewhere, crossing the prairie.

Your foodstuffs froze, and a hard winter followed.
I saw a picture of your sod house once.

You're on your knees to pray
tell me again, your silent stories.
I want to know your half-breed father.
Did he claim the scrip, which many died for?
Did your half-breed mother? Did they take money for land?
Only to be cheated by speculators,
church, and state.

Henri: The Tale of a Settler Ally

who belongs to us as our second great-grandfather,
the photographer,
caught you by surprise, seated
spreading your face into five points, shining like a periwinkle

in black and white, his hands are large
hands of a butcher
hands of a farmer
a bushy beard hangs like a bib,
trapping black flies
and bannock crumbs
it's pierced by a mouth that makes a perfect O

a jacket pinned with one button spans back
over a belly
dirt and wrinkles in your clothes,
scuff marks on your shoes,
you old man

once you were young during the Resistance, hiding
your nephew down the cellar
possibly for two nights, Riel remained
Scott had escaped, promising to murder our leader
then tables turned
the would-be assassin shot

sadly, that fatal feat sealed
Louis's sentence to the gallows

Biography

Paul Sasges was born and raised in Vancouver, British Columbia, where he resides as a Métis settler on the unceded territory of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil Waututh Nations. He is a member of the Métis Nation BC, with deep roots in the Red River Métis Nation. He is retired and has returned to the University of BC, majoring in Creative Writing and minoring in Critical Indigenous Studies.

His poems were published in the SFU Lyre and the 2023 spring and summer issues of Smoky Blue Literary and Arts Magazine (SBLAAM). His stories are in the Laurentian University Sulfur, the UK journal Porridge, and the upcoming winter issue of The Humber Literary Review.
