

Progress?

By A. J. Fotheringham



Overture

Before Man's footprints marked the soil
The wind moved silently across the grass,
followed the beds of pristine rivers
and caressed the earth.
Only the call of birds
echoed in the hills
to break the silence.

Then came the people. Heeding the wind's song, they melded their lifestyle into the rhythm of the land and its seasons.

Visitors from across the sea changed it all. They called it progress.



Act One

Lights dancing on water, or so they appeared to us, largest fireflies we had ever seen. Hiding in the forest by the beach we watched, fascinated, as the wooden craft, many times bigger than our canoes, drifted on the tide. Its white wings were folded for the night, but its eyes were bright with unknown light. When daylight came, they left their craft and came to our shore strange pale men wearing too many clothes. We thought they were chiefs come to impress us with their many garments.

We soon saw they hungered, thirsted, like us, that they were men possessed of little but a magic they called Faith, a magic they used to turn our kind welcome into a cruel fate. I saw my brothers die, my sisters cry as their children sickened in their arms I walk the woods alone far from my home I carry the message to the other people of this land: Beware the lights dancing on water.



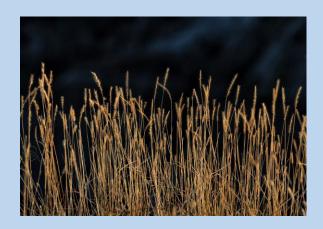
Act Two

When winter came to Huronia and snow filtered through the trees, I, alone, could hear the birds of hate screaming in the hearts of the men around me.

And, as the winds grew stronger, and the cold deeper, their hate buried us like long-lost logs in the snowbanks of our land.

When summer came, we were gone.
A new victor claimed these woods and trod upon our graves.

When winter came again, there was no Huronia, nothing but the silence of the snow that buries the past.



Act Three

Starving, withered babies clutched to dried-out breasts, the women wait for food that does not come. Their men, weakened by hunger, stand with their hands out as the white men pass. Insults and rocks will not fill empty bellies. Our people once rode this Prairie, chased buffalo and laughed to see our children playing in the wind. The red-coated men came bearing the Promise of the white leader in the east, a Promise that broke like spring ice on the ponds and then drowned our nation. We showed them the buffalo and they took it away.
We showed them our land and they took that, too.
Now we show them starving children, but they turn away with hearts of stone.
They do not even hear the wind as it carries away the dust of our bodies, leaving nothing but the low murmur of our song to haunt the Prairie grass.



Act Four

They call me One Who Talks and say the Spirit speaks through my dance, the well-metered movements invoking its presence. I am silent, my whole being focused on each careful, measured step. As the drum beats, so do my feet, hands, arms, legs move, my head held high, my eyes see only the Spirit God. I am the dance; its purity of cadence caught in my soul. Softly at first, then louder, I sing the words I learned as a child before the tourists came. They pay good dollars to watch an old man, wearing feathers, dance in the ancient way.

Their chatter breaks my concentration. Their cameras click and chase away the god. I complete the show, knowing I am but an empty vessel, no conduit for the cloud world now. As the drums die away, I stand quietly and have my picture taken while my grandsons trade my dignity in exchange for coins. Only I know what word the Spirit spoke today. It said "goodbye" and left, taking the light. In the dying sun, I stand waiting. When all are gone, I will dance again; this time without drums or watchers, trying to call the Spirit home, trying to recover my soul.



Act Five

As I walk this beach, remnants of my grandfather's people are dragged out into the ocean and washed from this land. Raven must be laughing to see the mighty warriors are long gone; our houses now showpieces for the gawking tourists; our totems nothing but picture postcards, oddities from another time. The deep coastal forest where once my ancestors trod the path and hunted game have been replaced by cement and power poles, lines of cars and buildings and strangers who turn away from the past. I walk this beach, but not alone.

My grandfather's words spoken long ago travel with me and I feel shame weighing down my heart. When he spoke, I could see the canoes of my people their bright masks, hear drumming and see their dance. Now my grandfather lives a dream in the nursing home. I do my best to keep his words alive, to pass them to my sons, but they hear only the music blasting in their ears. Their eyes are glued to the future they walk away from their heritage. I scream with the ocean birds, asking, "Why?" The only answer is wind song and wave call. Even my footsteps Are gone from the sand. Yes, Raven must be laughing now.



Finale

The land becomes empty. Even the beasts and birds flee the winds of change.

Dying rivers circle diseased cities where the cadence of life pulses day and night.

Some that still care about the land walk the fading trails, but too many souls are lost and cannot find the path to the old ways.

The wind sighs and slips away leaving progress to its own fate.

Meet the Author



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