Sandy Bay Residential School

Inspired by Robert Houle’s series of paintings

Gikinoo’amaadiiwigamig (school)

Each whitewashed board
Looks exactly the same as the next
Together they form a white prison
Above which dreams and nightmares float

A roof of darkened windows
Where children are crying
Afraid of the aggressive dark
That takes them by surprise

Anami’ewin (praying)

A pine forest stretches in the distance
Serene as the Virgin Mary statue
Whose words they can’t understand
Gaawiin ninisidotaziin

In the foreigner’s tongue
Not their mother’s stories
No kisses before they go to bed praying
Nimaamaa, mamaa’ishin, take me home

Nibaawin (sleeping)

A row of beds the terror
Celia felt when she was slapped
On her hands, when they bled,
She said nibaagan instead of bed

When she played Goldilocks,
Someone is sleeping in my nibaagan.
The matron told her to hold her
Hands out, and slapped them hard

With a yardstick until they bled.
She bled in bed that night,
imaan nibaaganing, she bled in bed.
That’s all she remembered of Goldilocks.
Babii’o (waiting)

Waiting
For Grandfather
Who comes in the night to comfort us
When we can’t sleep.

He wears buckskin,
A long black braid. His sleeves are painted
With a row of white dots.
He will come to take us home

If only we can wait.

Anishinaabe (person)

Everything the children learned
Before they were taken away. How to live
An upright life. How to care for your family,
Your people. These are teachings

That can’t be beaten out of them.
The children still remember the ones
Who sang them through the night
The old ones the ancestors the songs

They sang all night in Anishinaabemowin

Zaagai’igan (lake)

The lake where she paddled
With her grandmother gathering
Anaakanakoon imaa niibing
Reeds in summer

It’s slowly coming back to her
Now that she’s giwed come home
A young woman to bathe in its
Clear cold nibi after the purifying
Sweat lodge. Look, there’s the manidoo
Swimming past. She puts down tobacco,
Odaapinaan a’aw asemaa, and all is calm again.
The future is hers, and her grandchildren’s,

For she is still alive. Apane bimaadizii.

*for Waabanangagokweban*

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