

Living Nations, Living Words: A Map of First Peoples Poetry
Poem commentary by Gordon Henry Jr., 2020

Speaker: Gordon Henry Jr.

Date of recording: August 3, 2020

Location: Canadian Lakes, Michigan, poet's home

Length: 13 minutes, 49 seconds

START OF RECORDING

[Gordon Henry Jr. reads "River People—The Lost Watch"]

Gordon Henry Jr.: "River People—The Lost Watch" is clearly a memory piece. I place it as a kind of autobiographical piece as well. It comes from the collection *The Failure of Certain Charms and Other Disparate Signs of Life*, and like many of the poems in that collection, this poem reflects that sort of larger theme of *The Failure of Certain Charms* as well as desperate signs of life and disparate signs of life. The title of the poem, "River People—The Lost Watch," serves to offer indications of place and of course time, both lost and reimagined. The autobiographical part of this refers to a certain time in my life when I was involved in raising kids, moving more deeply into my ceremonial life, the ceremonies I've been associated with for over thirty years now—also, the certain kinds of emotional and physical traumas of the family that I was surrounded with at the time that was experiencing my father's illness and how to deal with that, as he had cancer—renal cell cancer, cancer of the kidneys.

So, I think of this poem as little circular spheres of memory, of oral representations of memory, and also images as representations of memory—these spheres, almost like what some people might consider shadowboxes—let's call them shadow spheres of memory for this piece. And it made me think about creation and how memory helps us to create and continue to build off of what we knew at the time, that we were experiencing something, and what was hidden to us at the time that we were experiencing something. And so poetry, song, story helps us to reimagine and re-experience. And with that, I'd like to refer to a quote from a book by Henry Corbin on Sufi mystic Ibn 'Arabi. And Corbin's quote reads, "Creation is a concatenation of theophanies in which there is no causal nexus between one form and another. Each creation is the beginning of the manifestation of one form and the occultation of another. This occultation of the form of beings, of their perpetuation, is their manifestation in other theophanic forms or in non-terrestrial worlds and planes of existence. Here again we may say this is the other world

or rather this is already the other world, or the other place, already the other place.” And so as I was thinking this poem, I was thinking about its larger extensions to the idea of people migrating and moving from place to place, thinking about Anishinaabe people and their migrations, the dislocations and locations of experience over time, and then, too, time becomes recreated in memory through stories, songs and poetry.

The particular autobiographical elements of this poem reassigned lost time as sort of emblematic, or referred to in the title of the poem, “The Lost Watch,” and also the watch placed on the stone toward the end of the poem. I close with an image of the rising and setting of the sun, as I was reminded in thinking about this poem of what elders used to say in the ceremonies: that the sun’s coming up and it’s gonna go down in the west and during that time it’s gonna give its report about what’s happening. So I was kind of leaning into that as well when I was thinking about time as being reported by these natural beings that surround us through their natural progressions, through the sky, and through their natural progressions of life. I know that’s a bit philosophical, which is why I’m always hesitant to comment on poems and poetry.

One of the reasons I chose this poem—it’s not one of my favorites from the collection—is because a friend once wrote to me that he read it one night and he really loved it; it resonated for him, seemed to provide him with some feeling and knowledge about that time which we shared in our lives, in the time of this poem, in the time of the memory of the poem. And it’s also crucial think about some of the people mentioned as poetic figures in the poem. Zahquod, my father, who is mentioned in a number of other poems in *A Failure of Certain Charms*, as he was experiencing the sickness of cancer, and during that time of my life I was working with him, working with other people, to try to find ways for healing. So though this isn’t my favorite poem—I think in some passages it’s a bit too prosaic, perhaps a bit too oblique for some readers, perhaps too personally, specifically, particularly, autobiographical so that it does present itself in some kind of oblique particularization of memory. Other than that, I would say it is structured around repetitive cycles, “when we were,” and that gives it its structure.

The poem came to me almost wholly as is, though I reworked stanzas, reorganized knowing that even as I did so, many of the stanzas are interchangeable time-wise and offer opportunities for interchangeable structure. I always tend to look at structures and revision of structures in these poems as I look back at them. I do like the way it ends, though, and I think for me that ending is characterized as some sort of this infinite regression. As Corbin says in the same book about Ibn 'Arabi, “We cannot close our eyes to the parallels suggested by reoccurrence of creation from instant to instant.” And so many instances here of reoccurrence, reimagining, and memories, poetry. I don’t have much more to say about the poem. Little bit uncomfortable

talking about and commenting on my own poem in this way, but as I do, I again tend to place it at a certain time in life and look back at it and see what it can bring in terms of the healing possibilities for memory and reliving things in a way that allow us to continue to be creative.

END OF RECORDING