

POETRY AS MEDICINE

Lunar Tides

This series of readings from poet Shannon Webb-Campbell share the story of Mary - a Mi'kmaq midwife.

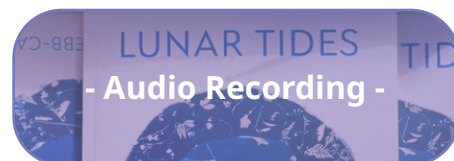
Listen to the audio recording for *Lunar Tides*, read by Shannon Webb-Campbell, then ask yourself the questions provided below to challenge your way of thinking about medicine. The transcript for this recording is also provided on page 2.

Questions: Review these questions before listening to the audio recording or reading the transcript. Answer these questions below, in a journal, or blank page.

1. How does the poem "Time: A Biography," which partially takes place in a palliative care ward, help you reimagine end of life care?
2. Draw a picture of any of the systems of knowledges from the suite of poem from *Lunar Tides* and reflect on your own systems of knowledge and ways of seeing in the world.
3. Imagine a poem could help validate someone's health related experiences. Which poem would you prescribe to a patient?
4. How does the poem "You Were Never A Visitor to This World" help you reimagine a terminal cancer patient's worldview?
5. How does poetry change your thoughts on what is or isn't medicine?



Mary Webb



Click the button to go to the audio recording.



Shannon Webb-Campbell

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National Collaborating Centre
for Indigenous Health



TIME: A BIOGRAPHY

A poet is Atlantic and lion in one. While one drowns us the other gnaws us. If we survive the teeth, we succumb to the waves.

-- Virginia Woolf

I: Beginning

A baby is born in a room to a body. Hears her mother's voice. The baby wants to return to womb waters. What is this room? What is this body? Living is a stretch. Doctors assign sex. Only hours until you hear tides. Nothing prepares you for life. Born three months premature. Are the grandmothers in my body? Doctors don't like to answer these questions. Life becomes a quest of origin. Mother reminds us why light things. Passing into night, you return somewhere like wind.

A room. Body. Baby.

II: Beginning/Middle

In the room, in my body mother tells the story of breath. Falling out of her one afternoon, nearly an entire season too early. The nurses pushed plastic tubes up my nose, put me in a glass box. Was she in the room? Was I once in her body? Birth explodes a new kind of meaning. Nothing prepared my mother to mother. Sex assigned her body. The hospital staff told her to on home. I needed to keep breathing. Nurses took me away, and she was left to imagine holding her baby. Grandmother was island in time – thousands of miles away.

A room. A body. Waves.

III: End

Grief takes up with body. Mother never peed in front of me. Illness yellowed her, and took her socks. Palliative care is tenth-floor view with an aluminum garden overlooking the city. Called in the middle of the night to be with her. Kin piled in cars, drove downtown, followed highway lines. A woman who wanted us there when she stopped breathing. A mother whose body never felt at home. Death exhausts in spectacle. Nothing prepared us for our last morning together. Was I in the room? Was she in her body? I sat in the hospital window while her tiny sixty-year-old body slept. I couldn't take my eyes off her chest. Watching her laboured breath become a final hour. It's okay to go. I imagined a baby cradled in my arms, the way she once held me. Passing my baby to her, I cried oceans over them. This is the closest I get to giving her a grandchild.

The room. The body. Mother.

ECOLOGY OF BEING

in this thinner air
there is no need to ingest crystals
we are surrounded by the boreal forest
at the breakdown of natural order
within the great chain of chaos

we exist as intervention
between land and sky
only to return from a journey
to a place of familiarization

forgo the power of selfhood
pain is singular –
it triggers memorable experiences
if you embody new occult poetics

between the self and this other thing
we make a clearing to find meaning
travel to trembling aspens
and come upon medicines

we remember this leaf
make connections
experience seasons at their breaking point
and reinvent our skin cells

SLEEPING WITH THE NORTHERN LIGHTS

I dream of drinking moon blood
my head next to Sleeping Buffalo
where wild light comes in the dark

I wake to snow-dusted trees
on enormous glacial rock
breathe in dry oxygen

you are wilderness
I know you wished for me
long before I came in your womb

as you birthed us into being
another story surfaced

Mother, I will carry this wilderness forward

RETURNING CLOSER TO EARTH TIME

on a canoe trip between Azure
and Dividing Lakes, only the waters know
I fear cancer, ask should I go?

it takes time to shed ourselves
remove another layer of decay
paddle in further, wave to wave

will I see what's being shown?
can I hear? will I even listen?
how do I hold an offering?

ego wants to play its own drama:
if I make her scared enough
she won't go

YOU WERE NEVER A VISITOR TO THIS WORLD

on your deathbed you wore lipstick
asked me to retrace your mouth
even though you could hardly speak

you wore vintage clip-on earrings
smiled a gap-toothed grin you once hid
a pink cashmere shawl around your shoulders

you didn't care for mint paper gowns
even dying you were all dolled up
you commanded the room

the nurse who shared your middle name
couldn't get over your steady gaze
the sea-grey blue of your eyes

when my father took the subway to hold
your hand for the first time in 35 years,
I saw something I never had before

he told a story of when a boy met a girl,
smashed together like bottles of pilsner
only with a hammer, shards of glass scattered
over grass

until they lit the box of beer on fire
called himself a *bad actor*, *boozehound*
caught up in his character

in our last moments together
you called me over to your hospital bed whispered

tell your father it's time to go home

I NEED TO BE HELD BY SOMETHING OTHER THAN A THEORY

I don't want a theory; I want the poem inside me. I want the poem to unfurl like a thousand monks chanting inside me.

-- Sina Queyras

Grief refrains us. Words fail to contain it.

I am caught off guard by your last photograph. How it divides the present, and keels over.

Where is this place to hold, and be held by?

Try to read other poets, theorists, people. No one knows what to do so, so they apologize.

Learn that loss has its own time, and you are a small animal reeling.

Swim in pools of Freud's theory, only to forget what I've read.

Write several elegies upside down.

Softly tell the body, this is only temporary.

