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*What
Grandmother
Says*

POEMS BY J. D. WHITNEY

J. D. Whitney's previous collections include *Word of Mouth, sd, Tongues, The Nabisco Warehouse, & sd, Tracks, sd & done*, and *What Grandmother Says*. He teaches at the University of Wisconsin Marathon County (Wausau) and has taught at the College of the Menominee Nation (Keshena). Recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Wisconsin Arts Board, he lives in the Nokomis/Opikwuna Bioregion of central Wisconsin.

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What Grandmother Says

*What
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Says*

J. D. WHITNEY

PARALLEL PRESS

2000

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FIRST EDITION

GRANDMOTHER

- sits on her sitting-down spot 8
- likes changing into Changing Woman 9
- pulls herself up onto 10
- grows huge in the dreams 11
- watches wolves watching 12
- tries not to giggle 13
- sits under tree full 14
- has Coyote decide 15
- hears grumpy old snapping turtle 16
- lets some birds wear 17
- hears Raven coming 18
- lets nothing stay lost 19
- lies down beside Old Man 20
- waits for polar bear 21
- is moose calf crumpling 22
- hears arched-back 23
- says sometimes nothing 24
- tells waddling rustle-walker 25
- has birdfeet point 26
- sends her breath 27
- gives mockingbird 28
- sings singing it 29
- yells turn back! 30
- carries the stories 31

for
her from
whom these
come

for
Gary Snyder

for
Lisa

A NOTE FOR THESE POEMS,

poems not made but heard while learning to listen to the voices of the land, air, waters, and all the creatures with whom we share the wonders of Creation in which human beings are welcome but not primary. Voices we can come to hear if we open our ears to the teachings of Native peoples, lessons of place.

Grandmother (who winds her way through the stories of many Native peoples as creator, bricoleur, teacher, shape-shifter, trickster) never uses the first-person pronoun, but the voice (hence the title) is Grandmother's.

This is my voice.

What follows is hers.

—J. D. WHITNEY

GRANDMOTHER

sits
on her sitting-down
spot on the
ground
surrounded by
trees full of
night
full of
ghosts
sitting on branches
speaking—
before anything was—
of things not yet
so
saying
Old Woman Who Never Dies
tell
us
when
the story will be
told.
Says
saying what will
happen makes it
so.
Says
listen.
Says
here we go.

GRANDMOTHER

likes

changing

into

Changing Woman

changing into

what-

ever she

wants

SO FAST!

until

no one can

tell

where

she isn't.

GRANDMOTHER

pulls herself
up onto
end
of
shallow-water
floating-log—
many-turtle
turtle-line
moving up
making
room.
Suns
her
weary
mountain-back.
Sees
muskrat coming
that
look on his
face &
one hand hidden.
Says
no
no more
muskrat tricks
you
let that pawful of mud
just
sink back down where it
belongs.
Says
once was
good
& once
was enough &
you
know it.

GRANDMOTHER

watches
wolves watching
people
not
too close.
Sees wolves' eyes
wondering
if
people
were a mistake.
Wondering
if people
don't
sometimes
wonder too.
Wolves
wonder
plenty.
Grandmother
wonders
some.
But
people
don't.
Oh!
So many riddles!

GRANDMOTHER

tries
 not to giggle &
 give herself away
 hiding in a
 caribou
 now become
 food
 for
 little bear—
 paw
 holding shoulder
 mouth full of
 chewing on a pulling on a
 tendon
 THUMP
 of
 hoof hitting
 bear on the head
 pull again
 thump
 side-to-
 side-
 shaking
 hard-yanking
 mad-
 getting
 bear
 thump thump thump.

GRANDMOTHER

sits under
tree full of quiet
crows.
Hides
listening.
Waits
so
long her bottom gets
sore.
Shouts
&
scares them into
air
with a
CLAP!
to hear the
sound
their
hwa-hwa-hwa
wings
make.

GRANDMOTHER

has
Coyote decide
how long
people
should live.
Longer than
bugs
he
says
but
shorter
than trees.

GRANDMOTHER

hears
grumpy old
snapping turtle
come
up from the bottom
hissing:
I
do like these
strong jaws
but
why
this
silly tongue
I
don't like
talking
even THIS
much—
just
want to
stay in my mud
alone.
Says
be that
way if you want
but
keep your mouth
wide open &
wiggle your
tongue so fish
swim close.
Then
come
tell me how you like
that tongue.
Turtle says nothing.
Turtle
says
ahhh!

GRANDMOTHER

lets
some birds wear
duck suits
because
they
like to
look like
ducks
even
if they are.
Under
those
fake duck feet
hide
duckfeet.
Behind
each duck
mask
is
duck.
Pretending.

GRANDMOTHER

hears

Raven

coming
croaking about
long
hard
no-food-to-find
winter:

I

follow wolves

just

like you taught me but
all

they leave
behind is their
shit

piles &

I

who helped make this
world

will

not

eat
wolf shit—

I

have my pride.
Grandmother

says

pick
one.

GRANDMOTHER

lets
nothing
stay
lost
ever.
Says
life-
light leaving
people's
eyes
never
dies
but
moves
moves
shimmers in
northern
skies
dancing
in the
face
of dark.

GRANDMOTHER

lies
down beside
Old
Man
quiet-foot
crouching-in-the-grass
Mountain
Lion.
Tells
him about
those
2-legged
people.
Says
well
leave them alone
mostly.
Scare
them with a
night-scream
if
you want
now &
then for fun.
But
just eat
4-leggeds
mostly.

GRANDMOTHER

waits

for polar bear
fussing
to stop:

I

sneak up on
seals

like

creeping
snowdrift—
push
ice-chunks
in front of me—
freeze

when they

look

but they

still see my

big

black

nose

you

should've made

white

too.

Lets

bear think.

Says

now

what

color are those

paws

&

how could they hide

that nose.

Bear

says

oh—

those.

GRANDMOTHER

 is
moose calf
crumpling
 dragged
down by the face
by wolf.
Is knowing
 her
throat ripped
open
 while
still
she can.
Is
 crow
watching.
Is
 warm-belly
full-belly
bloody-muzzle
wolf.

GRANDMOTHER

 hears
arched-back quiet-foot
ring-tail
trouble-makers home
from their moonlit
raid
 on
sleeping-people places.
All
 telling at
once:
 we
scratched with our
fingers & woke them up
& they ran out
yelling all
naked & furless &
how can they tell each
other apart they
all look alike!
Laughs at her masked
friends
says must be why they
all wear
clothes in the
light.

GRANDMOTHER

says
sometimes
nothing.
But
what
others say
she
says back to them
again
if
she likes it.
Why
owl
hears Echo Woman's
song
more
than people do.
Why wolf
does too.

GRANDMOTHER

tells

waddling
rustle-walker
belly-dragging
porcupine

little

one

who

rises in anger
no

you

weren't made
backwards

all

your good stuff
on the wrong
end.

Says

somebody
bothers you

you

show them

ALL

you've got:

grunt

clack your teeth
stink

then

swat with that
fancy tail.

Says

go ask

skunk

to teach you:

we go where
we want.

GRANDMOTHER

has
birdfeet point
the way—
3 toes
front &
1 back
but
roadrunner wants
2 & 2
to
fool
that
following
pain-in-the-ass
coyote.
Says
ok.
But can't
bring herself to
tell:
how
old
coyote
he can
go
both
ways at once.

GRANDMOTHER

sends

her

breath

into everything.

For

its

time.

In

&

out &

in.

Taking

turns.

Out

& in

& out.

All

life

all

death:

Grandmother's

moving breath.

GRANDMOTHER

sings
singing it
the
same song:
high
deep
whale song
bird
song
wolf song
baby girl
playing
with her
voice
song
water wind & tree
song
bee song
some people
snoring
song
spring song
of
peeper song
singing all to-
gether
song to
keep the song alive
song.

GRANDMOTHER

yells
turn back!
to
bears
swimming in the
little lake
toward
her
smaller island.
Sits
eating berries.
Says
there
are no berries
here!
Bears
keep swimming.
Says
bears
berries are
spoiled!
Bears keep
coming.
Says
bears
go back
now
or you'll
all be turned
into rocks!
Sits back
down
to
berries.

GRANDMOTHER

carries

the stories—
when
 they're
not being told—
huddled in her
story-bag
whispering
 softly
among themselves:
how
 they
like changing shape
to fit
mouths
 she
sends them to
ears
 she lets
hold them
how
 they'll
always fly home—
Grandmother's
promised—
shapes
 that can
change
 but
never be lost.

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