

Hi there,

Please accept the following submission for consideration. This work concentrates on issues of landscape, place and space and is a part of a longer poem titled, black river.

My bio, should you require it:

**Katherena Vermette** is a Metis writer of poetry and fiction. Her work has appeared in several literary magazines and compilations, including *Manitoapow – Aboriginal Writing from the Land of Water (Highwater 2012)*. Vermette is an active member and coordinator of the Aboriginal Writers Collective of Manitoba, and currently completing her Master of Fine Arts (UBC). Her first full length collection of poetry, *North End Love Songs*, was released in September 2012 (The Muses' Company).

Thanks so much,

kate

**katherena vermette** [katherenavermette@gmail.com](mailto:katherenavermette@gmail.com)

excerpts from *black river*, a long poem

road runs straight  
'til the new school  
then bends right  
to lake

all roads break off  
this main one -  
only thin tributaries  
for the houses to sit along

concrete breaks up  
right after the first house  
where bush opens  
and the highway ends  
where paved road becomes  
rez road

you can feel it when you drive over  
even when you aren't paying attention  
even after the first snow fall  
when snow packs down  
on uneven road  
and won't be cleared  
'til spring

you always call the new school  
the most beautiful you've ever seen  
arched up in the middle  
with long, blond logs  
posts to resemble tipi poles  
decorations polished  
varnished and smooth

the building stretches  
long on either side  
windows wide and high  
bricks an earthy colour

at night, the new school is lit up  
with pot lights hidden in the snow  
shining on the middle arch  
like a star in a spotlight

you say, it's so beautiful  
now

the ghosts linger  
on the brief finger of land between  
school and teacher barracks  
they edge around bare brown  
trees and red willow  
making only the smallest  
markings on snow

they dance  
I see their flossy shapes  
in wisps of snow lifted  
by the wind

they inch  
across road  
when I am sleeping  
I dream I can  
hear their whispers -  
that hinging accent  
that language I used to know

that night, driving to black river  
fog tumbled  
all the way to city, that  
very mild winter, february still wet  
from spring floods, thick  
grey air like moist smoke  
heat vents  
set low, the drive slow

“look at this,” you kept saying  
as night descended  
and we drove up  
through it, listening  
to all our favourite songs, singing  
and holding hands ‘cause  
you didn’t have to shift gears  
on the highway, “look!”

watching the lightly smudged  
sky, a wooly blanket  
on either side of us, trees  
weighed heavy with hoar frost  
like the fog left remnants of its colour  
behind

“we’re going to remember this,”  
you said, turning down the music  
to say the words, “one day,  
you’re going to tell our kids –  
*this one time, I was driving up to black river with your dad..”*

you laughed, and I saw it –  
our life laid out  
as sure as flat manitoba  
earth, only hidden  
as if by fog

river dances out to lake  
lake rushes excitedly into river  
waters sway around each other  
like singles making couples  
mixing together  
like batter whipped  
until smooth  
ingredients that together  
make something different

in november when  
frothing currents arch  
and freeze into crooked  
fingers beckoning us out  
onto the tundra the lake has become  
flat, white  
jagged mounds like giant fingers  
like graves on a field

island arches  
on the edge of lake  
where river meets  
great water

this was a gathering place  
where all nearby anishnaabe came  
for ceremony  
island of black ash  
resting there like memory  
between the layers of sand and muskeg  
where it waits  
to be churned from the earth  
and honoured again  
now covered in snow

I don't feel the ghosts  
at the beach  
I only know them when  
they waif in-land  
like snow clouds  
they move slowly  
toward the bedside

they too wait  
to be honoured  
again

you can't see  
black island  
from the beach  
bush gets in the way  
the long thin bush arches  
around the water  
making a smooth, quiet bay

somewhere in the bush  
there is a long pathway  
older than all of us  
and at its end  
there is a rock  
with a tiny footprint on it  
something little people left long ago  
no one knows exactly  
where it is  
or knows anyone  
who has seen it  
'cause if you wander down  
that long pathway  
into that thin line of bush  
between beach  
and river  
you won't find it  
unless they want you to

there are other ghosts here too  
remnants of lovers lingering  
on our clothes  
they haunt  
the folds of the blankets  
take flight  
when I shake it out before  
we go to bed  
they fly around the room  
hide in corners  
snuggle into shadows  
they watch us  
they wait

they come out when we fight  
they come between us  
and take the small words  
out of our mouths  
fluff them like pillows  
until they seem so big  
and buoyant  
they block our view  
and dance  
fingers over our shoulders  
like spiders  
they have residue  
that comes out of their hands  
making cobwebs

they laugh echoes  
conjure insults  
show us our old wounds  
rip them open  
they float around us  
until we can't see  
anything but them  
and we forget  
who we are talking to  
who we get to love now

they are the ones I want to exorcise  
they are the ones I would banish from this house  
they don't belong here

they belong in the city  
they belong left to the grey dregs

and cold, sour places  
the places we left them  
when we knew didn't need them  
anymore

or they belong  
in ceremony  
their earth grip released  
their fingers lifted  
off our skins

I want to watch them rise  
with the smoke of a spirit fire

I want to sing them  
into their next world

ghosts thick on our skins  
stuck like sweat  
dirt that needs washing

we should wrap each other  
in cloaks of water  
we should soak  
our skins  
submerge  
ourselves  
as wet earth in spring

we need to fill up  
until we spill out

until pools surround  
us like aura  
and we drift  
our weighted hands  
toward each other  
drip tears off fingers  
lap together  
make ripples  
that only soften  
when we are still

we move in  
inches  
not leaps  
or bounds  
time is different  
when you only  
have weekends

we gesture  
together  
then apart  
again  
we are left  
only somewhere  
quite small  
only a little  
beyond where  
we were

but we feel it  
in our bones  
we feel it  
in the sinew of our intertwined  
fingers

we move  
forward  
then back  
two by two  
we walk  
under the elms  
hands held  
leaves breathed  
twisting into that brief  
autumn yellow  
they gasp  
then turn  
and fall

we sigh  
into the marrow  
our quiet Saturday  
we stay  
in  
we blend  
closer

before we go so very  
far away

you drive back  
Sunday evening  
I coil back  
just a bit

until it is  
Friday again

we move in  
inches