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**From the Selected Works of Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.**

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Summer 2017

# Métis Poet Gregory Scofield

Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.



Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/matthewryansmith/145/>

METIS POET

## GREGORY A. SCOFIELD

By Matthew Ryan Smith, PhD

**G**REGORY A. SCOFIELD is a Red River Metis of Cree, Scottish, English, French, and Jewish descent whose ancestry can be traced back to the fur trade and to the Metis community of Kinostota, Manitoba. He taught First Nations and Metis literature and creative writing at Brandon University, Emily Carr University of Art + Design, and the Alberta College of Art + Design. He currently holds the position of assistant professor in English at Laurentian University where he teaches creative writing, and previously served as writer-in-residence at the University of Manitoba, University of Winnipeg, and Memorial University.

Scofield won the Dorothy Livesay Poetry Prize in 1994 for his debut collection, *The Gathering: Stones for the Medicine Wheel* (1993). In addition to several volumes of poetry, Scofield is the author of the memoir *Thunder Through My Veins* (1999) and his latest collection of poetry is *Witness, I Am* (2016). In 2016, The Writers' Trust of Canada awarded Scofield with the Latner Writers' Trust Poetry Prize. I had the opportunity of communicating with Scofield through email exchanges in February and March of 2017.

**MRS: Thank you for granting this interview, Gregory. First, I'd like to ask you a general question, however it is an important one: What is the philosophy that drives your writing practice?**

GS: The philosophy that drives my writing practice is the desire to explore the unknown, the desire to make sense of the unknown, and to give the unknown a sense of ceremony, a sense of justice.

**What is your advice to future poets and writers? More specifically, what is your advice to future Indigenous poets and writers?**

My advice is to find and read poets that you love. Have an affair with their work, their minds and, of course, to keep writing. To write your way out of the darkness, to find a certain light that brings you joy and pride.

**On a related note, I'm curious to know how your position within the institution has changed your approach to writing, if any?**

My current position hasn't really changed my approach to writing. If anything, I'm a lot more conscious of time or lack thereof.

**Indigenous storytelling dates to time immemorial. How do you position contemporary storytelling through media such as poetry, fiction writing, song lyrics, and so forth within this rich history? Is there a difference, or does storytelling follow a linear trajectory?**

I believe the foundation—the roots—of Indigenous writing is grounded in our oral stories and the way in which we approach these stories; the telling of them and the protocols around them. If you look at the body of past and contemporary Indigenous writing, you will see our stories are rooted in our languages, our histories, our lands, and traditions. Furthermore, you will see we are writing our way out of colonization by returning to these very things, these very teachings.

**Must a great writer also be a great listener? It would seem, at least to me, that the two are so closely related that they appear one and the same.**

I agree wholeheartedly. A great writer is a great reader.

**Your 1993 debut collection of poems, *The Gathering: Stones for the Medicine Wheel*, finds you negotiating your Metis and European heritage while living on the fringe. It's a profoundly autobiographical examination into the vortex of family, community, and history, seemingly quite cathartic yet deeply challenging to put down on the page. Last year, you published the collection *Witness, I Am*. From your first collection to your most recent is a 23-year period. How have you grown as a writer during this time? Have your interests shifted significantly or is there a thread that runs through all your work?**

I can only hope that I've grown as a writer. My experiences—like my interests like my abilities like my challenges like my worldview—have changed and continue to change and shift. Thank God for movement and for the ability to grow wings.

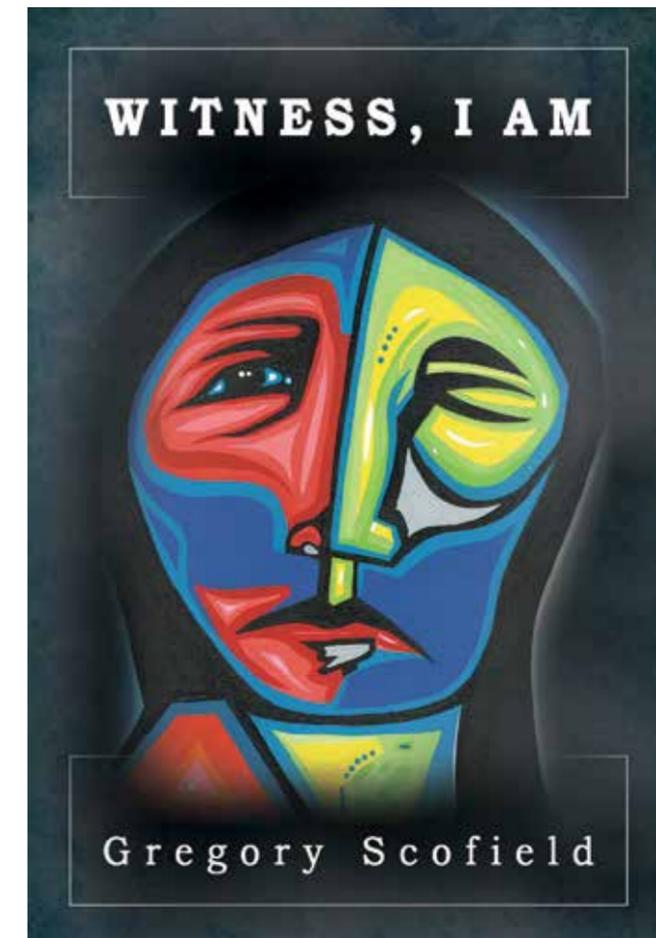
**How does your Indigenous identity influence your approach to writing and creativity?**

My identity influences everything I write about. I was once told by a writing mentor that everything we do, from brushing our teeth to walking down the street, is a political act. I've been actively engaged with this political act ever since I began writing.

**How does your process differ when writing poetry as opposed to writing texts of another genre, say, your poignant memoir, *Thunder Through My Veins*? Do poetry and prose require different states of mind? Does memory force another form, another manner of writing?**

There is a definite shift in writing. More so, there is a definite shift in the way in which I approach the story. One thing is certain, however. I always begin and maintain a sense of ceremony while I'm writing. Once I've begun writing, I've entered a sacred space, a lodge, and I'm forever mindful of the spirits and songs.

“Everything we do, from brushing our teeth to walking down the street, is a political act.”



**In speaking of your approach to writing, I'd like to ask you what comes naturally to you as a poet and writer; and alternatively, what, if anything, do you struggle with during the writing process?**

I am a poet through and through. I've often wished I were an incurable novelist. But I've also wished I was born with thick black hair, the color of a crow's wings. Either way, I'm a trickster. After all, it's not how we tell the story; it's simply about the story.

**The question of audience is crucial. Who do you write for specifically, and has this shifted throughout your life?**

I write for anyone who'll listen. I'll write for Cree speakers. I'll write for people struggling with issues of identity. I'll write

for the little boy down the street, who feels no one is listening to his story.

**Finally, do you have any future projects planned?**

Yes, I'm in the courting stage of a new memoir. Whether we fall in love will be another story.

Twitter: @GREGORYSCOFIELD



Jack Sabon (Ahtna Athabascan), *Root Thoughts*, 2071, oil on panel, 16 x 20 inches. Photo: Ward Rice, Stowe Photography.

## Despite

I persist. Anyway.  
Still. Despite.  
There is a sound left in my chest  
And my ribs, not broken from all of this,  
Take the shape of crows  
Made from clay, made from water.  
Here, I listen for songs.  
pa-pum, pa-pum, pa-pum.  
They persist. Anyway.  
Still. Despite.

When I turn home, one day  
My eyes hollow like the canyon  
I will ride first to the east  
Then to the west, to the south  
And then onto home.  
The crows, empty of songs, will be gone.  
Again I will be clay.  
Again I will be water drumming,  
sha-shaa, sha-shaa, sha-shaa.  
I will persist. Anyway.  
Still. Despite.

—Gregory Scofield

## Untitled

I was born into this fair skin  
A long way from a fair land  
A long way from home

I was born with my right foot crooked  
A long way from the mountaintop  
A long way from home

Into this fair skin I came  
môniyâw, môniyâw                      white person  
A long way from home

My right foot crooked  
I was born at the bottom of the mountain  
A long way from home

Fair in my skin, fair in this housing  
I was born to be unseen  
môniyâw, môniyâw

A long way from home  
In this fair land  
I was born

I was born at the bottom of the mountain  
I was born into this fair skin  
A long way from home

In this fair skin I was born to be unseen  
nanâskom, nanâskom the red ochre  
I come from on the mountain      I am gratefu

—Gregory Scofield

**Jack Sabon** is an Ahtna Athabascan painter living in Vermont. The Ahtna culture and homelands along the Copper River in south-central Alaska inspire many of Sabon's paintings, as does his former home in Santa Fe and his current home between the Worcester Range and the Green Mountains. Sabon earned his BFA degree from Maine College of Art in Portland, after earning his AFA degree with honors from the Institute of American Indian Arts. His works range from highly naturalistic land and seascapes to stylized works with cultural symbolism, including that of the Native American Church of which Sabon is a member, to nonobjective abstraction—but they all share a vivid, glowing palette. He constructs and paints 12-sided hand drums and occasionally sculpts in stone.

Sabon has exhibited nationally, is represented by the Bryan Memorial Gallery in Jeffersonville, Vermont, and taught classes at the T. W. Wood Gallery in Montpelier, Vermont. More of his work can be seen at [sabonart.com](http://sabonart.com).

## Panic

Mostly it comes on the thin breath of night,  
The ending song of the day  
Silk in its slinking, quickly  
It moves. Quickly it pitches.

It could be joyous depending on the day.  
It could be all splinters the next.  
Either way, it loves me.  
I am its score. It conducts me.

I am its chest with twelve beating drums.  
I am its nostrils with two wobbly notes.  
I am its trumpet sounding my bones.  
I am the empty chair of the flutist.

Once it pinned me to the bed and  
Kept me there for three days.  
I was all nerves and too many eyes.  
My feet thought they were going away.  
In the terrible symphony  
I saw my lungs turn into powder.

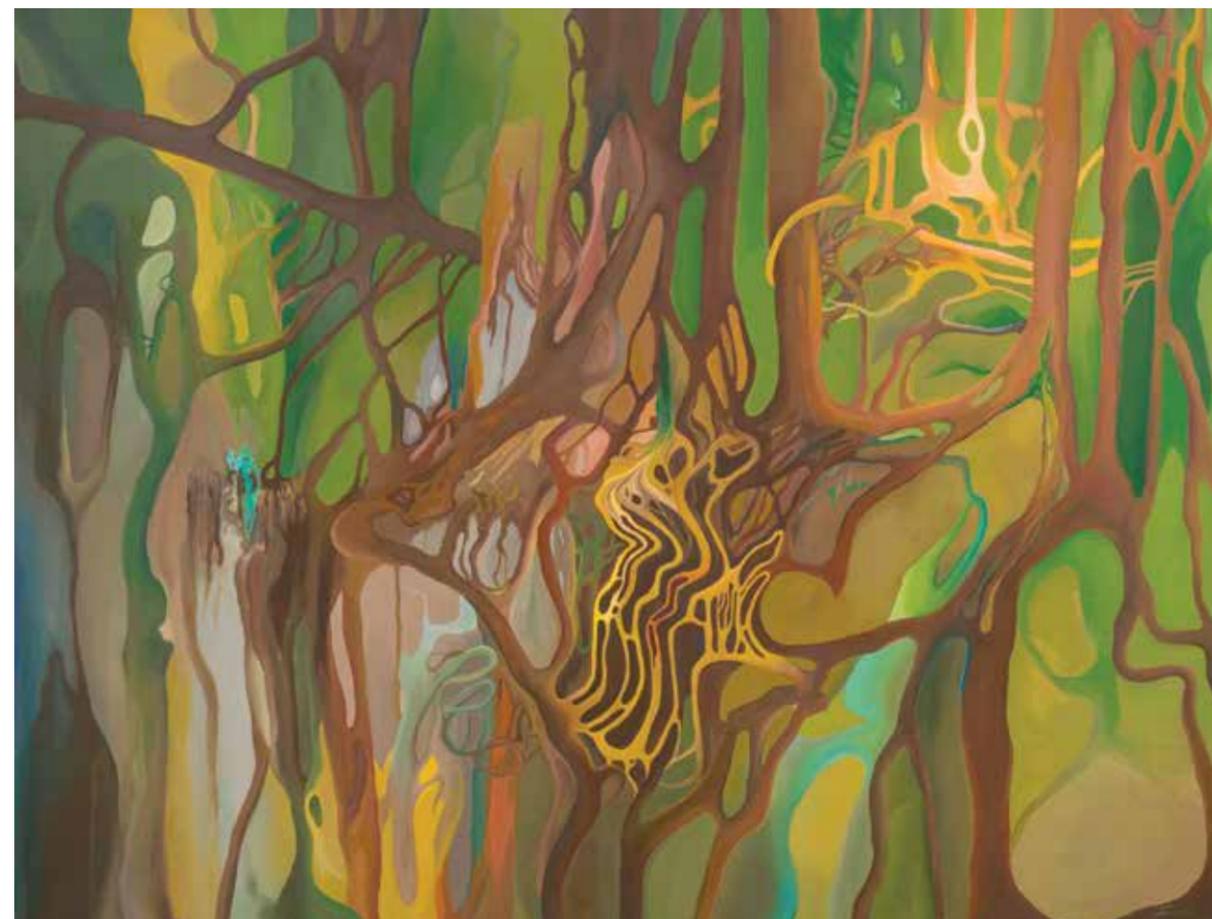
I saw my tongue roll over on itself.  
Then the orchestra nearly packed up.

It had two horns and a pointed chin.  
The very image of my mother's making  
In her time away, her fractured head  
Reorganized into some newly zapped package.

It kissed my lips and from my strappings,  
I rose like Icarus. I said, Enough  
Before I bit its poisonous tongue.  
Then the true conductor came and I began to  
play.

Still it comes on the thin breath of night,  
All its golden gadgets set to sounding.  
It is true. It loves me.  
I am its brimming ovation.

—Gregory Scofield



Jack Sabon (Ahtna Athabascan), *Root Thoughts I*, oil on panel, 30 x 40 in. Photo: Ward Rice, Stowe Photography, Stowe