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# Three Poems from "The Elder Project," Vernon School District 22

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## Three Poems from "The Elder Project," Vernon School District 22

### **Authors**

Brian Antoine, Yetko Brooke Bearshirt-Robins, John (Wilke) Louis, Lindsay Oppenheimer, Vicky Raphael, and Lenaya Sampson

## Three Poems from *The Elder Project*, School District #22, Vernon

*In 2010, poets Wendy Morton and Sandra Lynxleg collaborated on The Elder Project, in which elementary students in the Vernon School District were partnered with an elder, instructed to ask the elder ten questions about their lives, and to write a poem based on the elder's answers. The project was such a success that in 2013, they repeated the exercise with secondary students and their elders. The poems coming out of this project speak powerfully of experiences of kinship, work, and loss, as well as profound respect for and personal relationships with the land.*

— Sonnet L'Abbé

Lenaya Sampson and Vicky Raphael

### Vicky

I was born in Lytton. The youngest of 12.  
Five went to residential school. My brother,  
he can't talk about it.  
I know a little Nlaka'pamux, the Thompson language.  
I wish my mom and dad were alive to teach me.  
I've been a waitress, cook, clerk, cashier,  
production line worker, student, now a certified teacher.  
My favourite memory is salmon fishing  
with my dad on the Fraser.  
I wish I had learned to make a dip net.

Brian Antoine

**Jean**

*for Jean Tremblay*

I hail from Fort St. James.  
My mother and father raised me  
during the time of no pollution,  
when you could drink from the streams and from the rivers,  
when you could pick and eat traditional foods,  
and live off the land.

When I was young, I heard the sayings: reciprocity,  
take care of mother earth, sharing is caring.  
My elders taught me “you are the master  
of your own destiny.”

We had a garden where we grew vegetables,  
rhubarb, and strawberries.  
My mother had a smoke house.  
We had a log house.

When we were young we played and played.  
We had ice hockey in the winter, baseball in the summer.

My brother’s family and mine gathered  
on our traditional territory.  
We had huckleberries, soapberries, and fish – white fish,  
trout, kokanee, sturgeon and salmon, for food.

I enjoyed language classes when I went to day school  
out on the reserve. I was an educator at schools.

My happiest memories were  
when my five children were born.

My saddest memories are  
when I said goodbye to my friends and family.

Lindsay Oppenheimer, Yetko Brooke Bearshirt-Robins, and John (Wilke) Louis

## **Wilke**

I was born in Westbank.  
I was raised at the Head of the Lake, nkmaplqs.  
I remember the Chinese gardens. We planted  
rows of tomatoes, weeded them by hand.  
I was ten years old.

The Elders went to shoot deer, some people  
went fishing.  
We went to town to buy pots, pans, needles, salt.

I went to residential school; I was 8, left at 13.  
Wasn't learning anything.

I went horse logging; we skidded logs  
out of the bush.

Our language is coming back. I teach Okanagan.  
My students can speak now.  
I can't read or write Okanagan that good.  
I wish I could have learned.