

# WOLASTOQEY

Shayne Michael

**M**y name is Shayne Michael. I'm Wolastoqiyik, from the Madawaska Maliseet First Nation in New Brunswick. Before I went away to school, I had lived in my community for eighteen years. I wasn't sure about what path to take; I travelled from Ottawa to Moncton to Quebec City. Theatre and dance are my two favourite art forms. I chose to explore both, so I studied drama at the University of Moncton, and theatre and directing at Laval University. I finished my bachelor's degree in 2015. My dance training was more self-taught, self-directed. I used those years to explore the arts, to see performances, to watch and practice. Then I took a break, and after that I started writing for the first time, and enjoying reading for the first time. In November 2020, I published my first book of poetry, *Fif et sauvage*, with Éditions Perce-Neige. I never thought I would publish a book before getting up on stage!

*Uncertain spring  
The sun warms my thoughts  
The wind makes me smile  
Aromas everywhere  
The smell of flowers calms my lungs*

*The rain falls  
And the sun recharges  
The flowers are thirsty  
Caressed by the wind  
Ready for tomorrow*

*Uncertain spring  
My body is photosynthesis*

I used to be lost with my identity as Indigenous and LGBTQIA2+. I was always in a hole, in the middle. My Indigenous culture was pushed aside, it wasn't a priority. The arts allowed me to express myself, but I still couldn't really be who I was. With everything that is happening today with Indigenous cultures, those identities are still relevant, they're in play, though there aren't enough people to make that play. As an emerging author, am I too late? I always thought it was too late to learn my Indigenous language, my history, my values, my traditions, but it's not. I still have a voice. I can use it. To be a leader, you just have to have a voice. The arts exist to convey a message, easily. A leader's voice supports

the message and that's when Indigenous artists become Indigenous leaders.

*You slide into the moments of life  
Lost in shortcuts  
To forget your worries  
You let your heart sing  
To feel enlightened*

*You thrive on what's difficult  
But so quickly  
You thrive on what's difficult  
But a valuable lesson*

*Time doesn't stand still  
It's not fast enough  
To enjoy every moment of life to the fullest  
You want to remember it all  
To be able to adapt  
But above all  
To learn from it*

The title of my first book of poetry was very daring and provocative. Do I regret it? No. My collection allows for discussions around Indigenous and LGBTQIA2+ issues. The world is changing really fast, so it's important to start a dialogue and make space for it. When I was a young Indigenous person, we only talked about marriage between a woman and a man in my community. As I grew and travelled to different provinces, I learned different perspectives on culture and identity. It's possible

to be Indigenous and gay. It's possible to be Indigenous and two-spirit. Why now? Each person has to find out for themselves. Sometimes you have to explain it over and over. You have to repeat yourself. You have to bring up the same arguments every time. The world is so heavy that it drags us backwards. It's normal not to have the answer to everything. The answers come with time. It's up to me and other Indigenous leaders to tackle issues that can be delicate or sensitive. That's why I appreciate the arts. A leader can take the weight of dialogue and turn it into something beautiful. I'm a leader who wants to open up people's eyes to new perspectives, and do so respectfully.

*Broken branch  
Dying leaf left behind  
Dehydrated fish  
On the water's edge  
Naked eagle  
Looking for its feathers  
Naked wolf  
Looking for its fur  
Flowing stream of oil  
And floating plastic*

*My culture  
Stolen goods*

*You want a better future  
You must build with what's left of it*

When I was young and searching for my identity, I had no touchstones. Resources were almost non-existent. Today, you can learn anything, and be better prepared. I've met many Indigenous leaders and artists over the years. Their combined knowledge inspired me to dig deep into my Indigenous culture. The wisdom of those many Indigenous Elders inspired me to better understand Indigenous realities and issues. And I had this need to combine the two and get out of my comfort zone. I want to face challenges. I need challenges to keep improving as a leader. I wasn't born a leader, but the leader in me was awakened. The arts must continue to exist. My identity is tied to my creative will. When everything rests on my shoulders, I can be who I am.

*Walk on sensitive ground. Carry the spirit of your ancestors with you. Every step is sacred. Walk with eyes closed to where the Elders guide you. Uncertain, curious youth. You have a long way to go. Others will cross your path, their gazes leave scars. People will point at you, will make you dig a hole. Don't fret, the sensitive ground goes deep. It absorbs, it is strong. It lifts you up. With all your breath, you raise your head. Brave, determined youth. Keep moving. Every step is sacred. It's your turn to leave a mark for who comes next.*

A leader develops continually. Like every one of us, I have my faults. A leader must be ready for anything. A leader must be focused. A leader must always better themselves. A leader must be generous. A leader must be open-minded. A leader must be able to anchor themselves

in the everyday. Despite the pressure, a leader does not always have to speak. A leader can express themselves through the arts. Remember: a picture is worth a thousand words and a leader can play with words. It's like stepping out of your comfort zone for a moment, and at the end of the day being able to put your slippers back on.