Janisse Browning / TWO POEMS

RACE TO CULTURE

I see

see this child swingin' in the playground jumpin' rope, singin'

"who stole the cookie from the cookie jar"

light as a feather

yeah

but she always tensed up when they picked who'd go first to jump rope 'cause they'd all put their fists in a circle and someone'd go

"eenie, meanie, miney, mo..."

would they say "tiger" or..."tigger"...or...

Even, even when she was in grade four

Teacher walked in and said

"we're going to learn about multiculturalism today" and he printed three words at the top of the blackboard

Caucasoid...Mongoloid...Negroid

(and this was the '70s when Black was Beautiful)

and he asked everyone, starting at the front of the class

(Teacher had curly, red hair)

working his way to the back of each row, he asked

which word they belonged to

which category they fit into

and she got real scared

then remembered her mom said she was "a quarter Indian"

(they didn't know about *First Nations* people back then ...still don't)

and Teacher finally pointed at her but she turned the table and didn't know she was egged on by trickster

(she didn't even know what a *trickster* was, but learned ...about court jesters in history class)

So she said she was Indian and everyone turned around to look at the new Indian in their class but Teacher didn't believe her and her name was the only one printed under *Negroid*

"we don't have a list for *Indians* here," he apologized They didn't believe her

(even though she was..."a quarter"...)

She didn't like Teacher's categories
'cause it reminded her
of what she wasn't and
of what she was when some of the kids put their fists in a circle
and started singing
to pick who was going to jump rope first

SUNDAY MORNING JINGOISM

three sunday mornings
in
a
row
going to the baptist church
all us kids marching in step,
in time
in a circle 'round the chairs
where we sat for sunday school
preparing for easter's pageantry
numbly chanting,
singing from the hymnal:

"onward christian soldiers
marching off to war
with the cross of
(blonde-haired, blue-eyed, his-picture's-on-the-wall-for-proof)
Jesus
going on before
christ the royal master..."

master...mmmmmm...massa? sunday school Teacher telling us

"put some spirit into it!"

so she had us march around instead of sitting straight, hands neatly folded in our (the Church's) chairs

all these little soldiers marching in step, in time, naive, little war machines

ready to fight for whatever cause... and didn't I wonder "who are we going to war with," or

"why?"

but was too shy to ask out loud, so marched around the wooden chairs with my battalion anyway

upholding the tradition

yes, all we like sheep have gone astray