

Love Letters to the Collection
Guest curator selection #10



Molly Murphy Adams (Oglala, Lakota), *Forced North*, beadwork and ribbon on hand dyed wool, 2008, 54 x 40 inches. MAM Contemporary American Indian Art Collection, purchased in part with a gift from John Fletcher, copyright the artist, 2008.09.

Selected by Heather Cahoon

Cahoon, PhD, received her MFA in Poetry from the University of Montana where she was the Richard Hugo Memorial Scholar and was awarded the Merriam Frontier Prize, resulting in the publication of *Elk Thirst* (2005) She has also been awarded a Potlatch Fund Native Arts grant and a Montana Arts Council Artist Innovation Award for her writing, which has appeared in *Hanging Loose*, *Lit Hub*, *Yellow Medicine Review*, *basalt*, *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, *Carve*, and *Cutthroat* among others. Her first full-length collection of poems entitled, *Horsefly Dress*, is forthcoming from the University of Arizona Press this September. Heather is also a federal Indian policy scholar and Assistant Professor of Native American Studies at the University of Montana where she directs the American Indian Governance and Policy Institute. She grew up on the Flathead Reservation in western Montana and is a member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes.

May 4, 2020

Dear Forced North,

Topographically drawn deep red mountains, a modern-day winter count depicting a journey / a story / the same / for almost every tribe. Their route charted in golden sun yellow, straight, strikingly direct, with so much at stake, and with so much familiarity with landscape / landmarks / this land. Take, for comparison, the circuitous route selected by the river, playful, periwinkle, moving wherever whenever, no one in pursuit, no reason to rush, no one's life on the line. But make no mistake; lives were indeed on the line. Each pause for breath, unrestful / each camping spot / the lightest sleep / your mind's eye on the subtle rise-fall of your child's chest / their face / their hair / soft in slumber. Their tomorrow, unknowable.

While gazing at a Paul Cézanne painting in France, Rainer Maria Rilke arrived at the conclusion that "surely, all art is the result of one's having been in danger." I believe this is true for so much of what we, removed from the first-personness of particular experience, call art. I was not on this particular journey; this was not my tribe that was forced north / pursued by the U.S. military / day and night and day / one after the next. Nor was it my European ancestors, soldiered, pursuing, not the British-born Quaker or highlander Scot, not the French couple or the Austrian girl brought here by her parents, nor the Dutchman recently returned from South Africa. Though it was not them who pursued, it was they / I who would benefit. Though it was not you who pursued, it was you who would benefit / from these forced removals, this clearing / of space.

*This textile and the story it tells repeatedly calls me back, beckoning without words. My eyes meet this scene and I feel the narrative as blackbirds tangled in my body / throat. Tension. Anticipation. And dread, the stopping dead-in-your tracks that happens when you know the next 150 years of the story, past the edges of textile / this / story told on blood-red flannel. In *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings*, Joy Harjo writes, "For any spark to make a song it must be transformed by pressure. There must be unspeakable need, muscle of belief, and wild, unknowable elements. I am singing a song that can only be sung after losing a country."*

Thank you, Forced North, for reminding us of this story, of our story / of / American settler colonialism / the mixed up and messed up / the overlooked or forgotten / the snapshot of past-present / the edges of what's known, what's knowable – and the still unwritten future.

xoxo,

Heather