



## From the Poplars

*Cecily Nicholson*

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## **From the Poplars** Cecily Nicholson

In the North Arm of British Columbia's Fraser River lies an uninhabited island. In the midst of major industry and shipping, it is central to the waterfront of British Columbia's original capital of New Westminster passed by daily by thousands of SkyTrain commuters. Poplar Island is lush and unspoken, but storied. It is the traditional territory of the Qayqayt First Nation. Made into property, a parcel of land belonging to the "New Westminster and Brownsville Indians," this is the location of one of British Columbia's first "Indian Reserves."

This is also a place where Indigenous smallpox victims from the south coast were forced into quarantine, substandard care and buried. As people were decimated the land was taken and exchanged between levels of government. The trees were clear-cut for industry, beginning with shipbuilding during the First World War. The island still serves as booming anchorage for local sawmills.

*From the Poplars* is the poetic outcome of archival research, and of listening to the land and the stories of a place. It is a meditation on an unmarked, twenty-seven and a half acres of land held as government property: a monument to colonial plunder on the waterfront of a city, like many cities, built upon erasures. From an emplaced poet and resident of New Westminster, this text contributes to present narratives on decolonization. It is an honouring of river and riparian density, and a witness to resilience, tempering a silence that inevitably will be heard.

*demonstration parcels bought and sold repeatedly  
as the record shows, stolen  
quarantine and bury there the government*

*not taking graves into account  
warships were built view down a launch ramp*

**Cecily Nicholson** is a writer, curator, and community worker in the impoverished and inspiring Downtown Eastside of Vancouver.

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