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Notes from a Native Son and Other Stories

**An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of**

**Bachelor of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing: Nonfiction
and
University Honors**

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Abstract

My goal as a writer is to contribute to the growing number of Native voices in contemporary memoir, as well as to continue a longstanding tradition of Indigenous creative nonfiction. I also hope to assist in the important work of ushering the voices of First Nations people out of the linguistic prisons of the past and into present-day discourse. In doing so, I will underscore the importance behind the demand for Native spaces in academia and politics. Using memoir, I'll show some of the ways in which abusive social structures replicate themselves on smaller levels like one's family, and demonstrate how the reiteration of one's personal narratives constitutes an act of self-determination. My desire to keep these pieces in their original two-inch margins is primarily due to the channelizing, centrally striking effect it lends the narrative—a buoy to pace and flow. This decision is also an homage to Elissa Washuta's memoir "My Body Is a Book Of Rules," and the form and style in which she presents the most personally impactful of her sections. As a means to integrate and incorporate traumatic memories into my past and possess them instead of the other way around, nearly all of these pieces are written in first person perspective. Formally as well as spiritually, Washuta and I are part of the same conversation, though my work is made distinct by its queer dimensions. Nativeness and queerness mesh well as non-normative states of being despite the continental, colonial context of queer theory, but as Native narratives written and presented in the colonizer's language, these stories can at best only allude to the role of indigeneity in my life. Conversely, this form could also represent a Native voice attempting to speak in spite of being hemmed in by an all-encompassing whiteness. Either way, much like Indigeneity, these stories are inextricably linked to body and place. Both concepts meet here on the page.

The Only Good Indian

A race to every corner, a corner for every race. Latinos in this section, Black people in that, white folks up front, Asians to the side. Where in the room am I? Just off the entrance, one lone, jumbo-sized, blank poster hangs, the words NATIVE AMERICAN written up top.

Often the only NATIVE AMERICAN in the room, I stand alone beneath this poster, appointed yet again to speak for my ancestors. Use “ancestors” for an extra hint of reverence—white folks eat that shit up.

Everyone passes. I feel like whatever I’m selling, nobody wants.

In truth, I don’t know how to speak for my ancestors because I have no idea who they are. What would I say? How should I know? My siblings don’t know. My father doesn’t know. Despite being what they call “full blood,” he too was raised on a diet of salt and whiteness.

I watch, wishing others would join me. Nobody comes.

The Latinos are twelve strong. Camp counselors enter, walking the center aisle, double doors swinging shut behind them. It is clear we are about to begin, that they all expect something great from me, and that I will be assisted by no one.

“We’re passing some markers around! In your groups, discuss the various slurs you’ve heard applied to you, and write them down.”

My face beads with sweat. I don’t think I can do this. I shrink back from my poster, but there is nowhere to hide.

Looking down at my hands, at my vaguely ethnic skin, I think, *have I endured any slurs besides ‘faggot’? Would anyone know I was Native if I didn’t say anything?* “Your father’s a drunk,” my mom says, “but he’s an Indian—are you surprised?”

Everyone else works in teams on their papers. I have no pen, which is fine, because I have nothing to say.

Across from me, a chair opens up among the Latinos. I watch myself abandon my post, cross the aisle, and sit down in it. Some odd looks are thrown my way, but they don’t say anything. Not yet, anyway. They are busy with their lengthy list.

When the time comes to present “our” list of slurs, I volunteer to hold it. The paper hides half my body. Some of the counselors glance at me, then to the empty NATIVE AMERICAN page still on the wall, then back. I look away, but I still feel their eyes, their disappointment.

What they wanted was a real-life Indian, but I could not deliver.

Thoughts on the Microaggression

I take umbrage with the term “microaggression” because it is somewhat misleading; it implies the transgression is slight, temporary—easily overlooked. When assault on the body is felt but not seen, do we recognize it the same? Why is the answer no?

Microaggressions act on the body like wind on sandstone, scoring little pits and grooves in its surface until weathering it to dust. An offhand comment here, a searching stare there. It adds up. In class, at work, I see you thinking—*what are you?*

When I was younger, I kept to my room. After a nine-hour work day, without much help, my mother made supper from nothing. When it was time, she knocked on the drywall: “Come out and sit with us white folk,” she hollered, as if every night were Thanksgiving.

My Indigenous Studies professor once told me that mixed-race children of Natives signal the erasure of Indigeneity. Confused, I raised my hand and said, “I’m mixed race and I identify as Native. Can’t my body be an extension of Nativeness and not its demise?” Class halts. Everyone looks to our visibly Native professor to see if they will validate my words, my right to exist. The teacher responds by smearing blood quantum over my body—you are *not Native enough*.

I used to wish I were Latino because I believed in the stereotype of family togetherness—home in a racist mirage. It is much more than skin color. White folk mistake us for Latinos because colonizers ravaged us both, tried to oblivate us in similar ways, and by conflating one with the other, they reveal what is going on in the back of our American minds: that in truth, we’re all keenly aware of the tyranny that defines our nation, yet most of us remain unmoved.

Piece by piece, each casually racist shakedown chips away at our bodies until we are only raw nerve, crackling with electricity. “Really?” a friend once said, “You’re the whitest Indian I’ve ever seen!” I seized his gaze until his smile faded. “I’m sorry,” he said, “I didn’t know it meant that much to you.”

Blow on a rock and it is unfazed. Place the same rock atop a mountain in a desert and subject it to the sweeping windstorms typical of the region. They whittle the stone until it is too is indistinguishable from a tumbling grain of sand.

No Reservations

I wish I possessed a genealogical report tracing my lineage back to a Potawatomi priestess. What I have instead is a legacy six times removed. The stories I hear tell me of white settlers driving us far from our brothers, off the Great Lakes and into southern Illinois, where a few of us stay because they cannot bear to keep going. In 1820 we are marched through Missouri, with children and elders dying as we walk, until resting briefly just north of Kansas City. A decade later the government uproots us again, to Council Bluffs, Iowa, displacing more tribes along the way. Bands of Potawatomi form and separate out of differences in opinion: do we assimilate, or do we fight to preserve our culture?

This “choice” feels forced because it is—if the conditions of my my Nateness are not my own, then neither is the decision. From the land to our bodies, the cruelty of ownership divides Indigenous people everywhere. Like how treaties dissolve and trauma is cyclical, the federal government moves us southward once again, this time in 1846 to the featureless windswept prairie of northeastern Kansas, a region once called the “Great American Desert.” We are a fishing people, ordered to take over 500,000 barren acres and farm them. Rocky and hard to cultivate, it holds no large bodies of water.

Years pass. Settlers and bankers make piecemeal of the rez, carving it up one acre at a time, boiling us down to around 77,000. Some wanted to adapt. Others wanted to preserve. We wanted our numbers to stop shrinking. Nobody got what they wished for—except for those that did.

While Congress was voting to terminate federal recognition of tribes across the country including the Potawatomi, a woman on the Prairie Band reservation gives birth to twins Rick and Randy. She already has more children than she can care for, and with no one to help her raise them, she surrenders the boys to an orphanage, never intending to see either twin again. We know almost nothing about her, except for her last name: *Kishko*, the second-born. Who was first? Are there more?

Their first white saviours, my grandparents, adopt them when they are four years old. Identical twin Indians. The little white town they were moved to had never seen anything like them—where did you get them, the townspeople asked, and why?

I recently learned that Randy was grandmother's favorite. "He was the golden child," my father told me. "He could do no wrong." When my dad married my white mom, Randy called him a race traitor. This was the same man that, when they were younger, forced Rick to watch him mow over a row of newborn kittens.

My mother doesn't like to talk about Randy. "He was," she'd say before pausing, "scary."

My mother files for divorce while my dad is still in prison—a move that might have been smarter had she not started dating her caseworker. A family friend picks me up from daycare one day, and when we get to the house, I find it almost empty. Adults I have never met lug boxes out the front door. My mom comes in, tells me we are moving, and disappears into the other room. We all sleep that night at a strange new trailer in a town of only six hundred people.

It isn't long before my father is released from prison. His house, however cramped and badly furnished, is the first house that has ever been *his*. I never feel right there. Echoing my dad's adoptive mom, my mother threatens when she is angry: "Do you want to go live with your dad?" With her words, she turns his house into a punishment, its own reservation in Kansas.

We move further away in distance, in time. Visits dwindle until stopping completely. I have to remind myself what he looks like, as if he had passed away. To my mom, he may as well have. "I will always love him," she'd say if you asked. "He's the father of my children." Her tone speaks of a man who has seen her through many deaths, and now himself has died. But he didn't—he hasn't. As of writing this sentence, he is alive and breathing, living just east of the river from which Randy's body was pulled in the summer of 1998.

Real Injun

I live in a shell of whiteness. This is to say that my pale body was born of a white woman, raised by this white woman, and for a time, her new white husband. Unlike my father, my skin is not obviously copper and I do not have black hair cascading down my shoulders that demands to live in braids. In short, I'm nobody's goddamn Pocahontas, and for that, I am punished.

What's more contentious than an undergraduate philosophy class? Count on there being at least one insufferable white boy who insists on being "right." I'm taking notes during lecture when we come to the subject of colonialism. I sigh, rest my pen on my page, and wait for the inevitable.

"Personally," pipes up some greasy-haired slob at the back of the room, "I think the Natives *should* have been colonized."

My heritage isn't something people notice right away. One look at my pale skin and any argument about my ethnicity is over before it can begin. My white-passing skin is a cloak of invisibility. When I cast it off, my body offends public expectations of what a Native person should look like. With that in mind, I inhale slowly and turn.

"So," I say, "you believe that Natives deserved to be slaughtered because why, we wouldn't just *surrender*?"

"I'm saying that if Indians couldn't resist colonization, it makes sense that their resources be allocated to the colony's growth."

My teeth scrape against each other, and I worry one will crack. He is too ready to reduce genocide to a game of capture the flag.

"I think we're gonna end here today," our professor says. Other students start shuffling, relieved at no longer being forced to play jury. I pack my books slowly and deliberately.

My stomach burns, and for a moment, I ready myself to fight. On my way out, my white professor stops me. He apologizes before asking me to let him field the "controversial" questions from now on.

I say it's his classroom, that he is free to do what he likes.

Following the stragglers, I swing my bag over my shoulder and leave. Passing the slob in the hall, I hear him say to another student: "Next time, I'm talking to a *real* Indian."

Wal★Mart Necklace

At four years old, I learn that God is selective.

Shortly before my father begins serving time, a woman drives to the local Wal★Mart and approaches the customer service counter where my mother works.

“You’re Cindy?” she asks.

“Yes,” my mother says.

The woman grins. “I thought you’d like to know that for the last few months, I’ve been fucking your husband.”

With her negligible employee discount, my mother purchases a fragile gold chain from the jewelry department and wears it home. Years later she will tell me, “I bought it because I earned it.”

This type of news spreads like a field burning. Soon, our pentecostal church on the northern edge of town diligently shuns my mother, a failed woman, unable to sustain her husband’s appetites despite how often he beats her; is it any wonder he would seek the fruits of marriage from a dozen different trees? He paid the bills. She should be so lucky.

It gets worse after dad’s sentence begins. People don’t look at us when we shop at the grocery store. Nobody talks but everyone knows—there she goes, the white woman saddled with three brown kids—how does she afford to feed them? Is she wearing gold? Where does she get the money? Is she seeing another man? Welfare queen.

Life in our little prairie town becomes unbearable. Sneers from our neighbors catch my mother’s sunken eye. Her brow, caved in by my father’s balled-up fist, twinges in public. Leaving the market, we hurry across hot parking lots, our secondhand shoes sticking to the soft, black asphalt. Mom smokes the entire way home. We should be so lucky.

Freeloaders

“Goddamn Indians don’t pay taxes,” the woman says. “They just live off the government!”

On the train to campus, my partner and I sit two rows down from a very drunk woman. It is nine o’clock in the morning. We each hold a slice of salmon quiche from our favorite sidewalk cafe, our forks out and ready, when she airs her opinion unprovoked.

I hear her before my partner Finn does. He talks about school, stopping mid-sentence to listen in.

“What they get, they don’t even work for! Fuckin’ freeloaders,” she concludes.

Who are the freeloaders? I think of the squatter-settlers, armed white men raiding Indigenous villages, murdering masses of Natives in the name of American progress. They flush these villages with fire and ammunition, shooting children as they flee in search of their parents.

Picture your home in flames with yourself trapped inside it, crying in black acrid smoke, praying it kills you before the fire does. Heat peels the skin from your arms. You smell your hair burning. Gunshots pop in the distance as the roof caves in.

My partner squeezes my knee with a free hand. “You alright?” His eyes are soft and cautious, his skin white and unbranded.

I have two bites of quiche left, eggs clinging to crust. I stuff them in my mouth in quick succession, the crust parching my tongue.

A Beating on the Patio

It happens before I can register it. I have never been hurled down a set of stairs before. For the briefest of moments I am airborne, and if there were a God, I'd have sprouted wings and flown away. Since there is not, I hit the ground back-first, expelling the air from my lungs.

In the split-second before he descends, I open my eyes. The shape of his body plummeting from the night sky is barely recognizable until I see his face illuminated by the porch light. Sitting in the sockets of his skull are not the eyes of my brother, but rather a late relative: our father's twin. He has the eyes of a madman.

He lands on my crotch. Pressing his knee into my pelvis, he narrowly misses crushing my testicles. I gasp. My lungs ache at the sudden reintroduction of air. I see his right arm rise into the night like an oil derrick. Then my brother begins to beat me.

If you have ever been savagely beaten, you know that after the first few excruciating strikes, the pain begins to feel less immediate. As you retreat inside yourself, your body becomes the flesh, thick and reflexively stiffened, locked in a state of contraction until the threat is attacking no longer.

But he is not happy with beating just the body. The mind too must suffer. I feel his weight shift to the other leg. Uncurling his fists, he grabs my head like a melon and rams it face-first into his knee again and again, and I believe that tonight, I may die. Lightning sprays across the sky of my tightly shut eyes.

"Fucking . . . faggot!" he screams, and then, as quickly as it began, it stops. I open my eyes as much as they will allow; the porch light is off, the front door is closed. Standing, I clutch my sides—they are screaming. The whole world is screaming.

The Weekend

If I do not know my father, could I make him into anyone I want him to be? Is it wrong to love the ghost more than the person? Memory is a long, hushed drive down the Kansas Turnpike—a lonely stretch of I-35 dotted with fluorescent-lit toll booths, truck stops, and peeling billboards demanding all passers-by to REPENT. Obeying the court, our mother drives us deep into the plains at the end of each month to leave us in the charge of a wolf.

This like all things is temporary. I know the arrangement will fall apart. All it needs is time. For three days, we pretend that this open secret, known and unspoken by all of us, does not exist. It is the weekend, an unusual stretch of time that erases one parent and supplants them with the other. Some rules: we don't make comparisons, we never complain, and we do not expect in one world what we get in the other.

FRIDAY

It begins like this: Mom parks the car at the edge of a roadside cafe and smokes with the windows up. Her anxiety palpable, we await the ominous rumble of her ex-husband's F-150. Her dread hereditary, it furnishes a tight tether between my body and the world around it, keeping me keen to vibrations in the ground like a mole. Now, I feel as one does before a tornado, when the wind stalls and the sky turns green with nausea.

He is late—a habit admonished by our nail-biting mother, as if her opinion of his character had not yet solidified. She crushes the last of her cigarette in the ashtray before lighting another.

Our heads turn when his truck roars into the lot. My siblings get out of the car, followed by our mom, then myself. Our parents divorced before I could read, so I am timid, afraid of this man I do not know. Standing on the windswept gravel in the orange light of sunset, our father trades minimal eye contact, forced smiles, and three reluctant children with our mother—a country-fried drug deal, only we're never the intoxicant of choice.

My brother and sister languish in his truck, their eyes watching us resist one another. Outside, I teeter on my feet next to our mother

while they talk. She pats my hair with a free hand, pulling the last dregs of her menthol with the other.

Looming across from us with a fresh Marlboro stuck to his lips, my father strikes a match and brings it to his face. Smoke blooms from behind his knuckles. “Let’s go, Jakey.”

“It’s only for the weekend,” she tells me. “You can do it. Do it for your bubba and sis—for mama.”

We climb in and he starts the engine. The odor of gas fills my nostrils. I catch sight of my mother backing out. Her headlights swing wide as she drives away, a plume of dust rising in her wake. I watch her grow smaller and smaller until she disappears completely.

Steering south, we merge onto the interstate. Being the favorite, my sister takes the front seat. I share the backseat—a long bench draped with an Indian blanket—with my brother. A cooler full of ice and Bud Light sloshes between us. Dad asks my brother to hand him one.

Fishing poles rattle around in the truck bed. The cabin reeks of cigarettes; I breathe through my mouth. Two twelve-gauge shotguns grace the window behind me, ready and loaded, eager to show the world just who’s boss.

The sun goes down and the rocky transition to otherness sets in. A red-skinned man must contend with his lighter-skinned progeny, but he says nothing. Who are we? How do we spell the name of our tribe? Why won’t mom let you take us to pow-wows? I would ask these questions if I knew what to say, but I don’t, so I remain watchful.

A Doobie Brothers song begins, “Blackwater.” Dad turns up the stereo. My sister hums along before singing the words, and our Dad joins her. Despite having smoked for years, his voice is smooth and on-key, a tenor. Like his passion for playing guitar, it seems to come naturally to him, an effortless talent that makes me proud to call him dad. So why doesn’t *dad* make sense?

The moon smiles over an empty road. We pass signs pointing to unusual towns: Towanda, Udall, Rock. Here in the absence of cities, the night sky swells, pierced only by flames shooting from the top of a nearby oil refinery. My sister sets her eyes to the glowing fields flanking the roadsides. Like the ones surrounding our own faceless town, they stretch for miles before yielding to wild, unmanicured prairie.

We are far from our mom though not altogether with our dad. I envy the history my brother and sister share with him; we had been interrupted by his incarceration. I look up at the stranger with his eyes on the road, his hands on the wheel, and wonder, *do you know anything about me?* Here on the highway under the stars, it is unclear just whose children we are. Maybe none of us wants to know. I fall asleep facing the soft digital glow of the radio.

SATURDAY

We stay at his new house, sleep on strange mattresses, eat breakfast with him and his new wife in the morning. Dad works all day, leaving us alone with New Wife and her daughter. I don't know what to make of them. For lunch, they cut up hot dogs into macaroni and cheese.

It's different this time. Dad packs the pickup with camping gear, and drives us through our hometown instead. Memory is a drug bust: two guns aimed at the backs of our parents' heads, felony charges, a plea deal leaving us in our mother's shaky hands. Even during the day we drive through it creeping, out of respect for the resting place of our family's wholeness.

Passing Maynard's Bait and Tackle where dad likes to buy raw chicken livers, we head east to Fall River, where the tent will be pitched, the fire pit dug, and the world outside will disappear. The river sacred and the road there a secret, we vanish behind the underbrush.

Dad is as much a part of Fall River as it is a part of him. Safe from the whip-like tongue of his adoptive white mother, he made a shelter of it over the years, one that never castigated or quartered him off. Having camped here since he was my age, he speaks of the river with reverence, his own private corner of paradise. Is this what Natives do? In summer, the cottonwoods lining the riverbank bloom, releasing hundreds of fuzzy white seedlings into the air. They fall back to the earth, coating everything like snow.

Today we have company, a man and his daughter, a girl around my age. When others join us, my siblings will retreat into the woods and won't return until dinnertime, but lately my teenage brother has been sticking close to our father, a beer in his hand before sundown.

We stack rocks while our dads drink and toss wood onto the fire. The girl and I have become architects, and we can see that the best

stones for a foundation—long, flat pieces of flint—lie just on the opposite shore. We only have to cross a stretch of rapids to get them.

Holding hands, we secure one foot, then the other, just like dad taught us. The river foams around our ankles, our knees. I grip slippery stones with my toes.

Then the water bowls us over.

I hit my head on some underwater rocks. My ears flood. Was anybody watching? *He didn't even notice.* You see stories like this on the news all the time: child drowns, father too drunk to save him. The girl's hand brushes mine as we tumble downstream.

The river spits us into a deep pool of water. I thrash, grabbing nothing. When I open my eyes, I can see it. Downstream, the current curls into a visible, sucking whirlpool. It scours a depression at the bottom, collecting what gets dragged down into it. I try screaming, but instead of air, I get river. The water's getting colder.

I hear a crash, some struggling, then it stops. I feel like crying. Then, someone's arms wrap around my ribcage and pull me upward.

Dad's friend drops me on the bank and returns to his daughter. My ears drain. I hear her sobbing. Her father holds her, soothes her. He tells her she's alright, as many times as she needs to hear it. I turn over and vomit onto the sand.

Heavy feet come running, kicking rocks. "What happened?" my dad shouts.

Nothing, her father says. Just kids being stupid.

I spend the evening in and around our tent, far from the water. I don't eat much for dinner, a hot dog, some corn chips. I try my Walkman, but the batteries are dead. Slumping in a fold-out chair, I catch the first stars peeking out from behind the day.

Everyone else has gathered by the campfire. Cans crunch like gravel under feet in the distance. I imagine my brother drinking while my sister watches, a cigarette burning between her fingers.

Drunken male laughter pierces the evening. It almost sounds conspiratory. The river gushes and swirls behind it all. My sinuses ache.

Weeds break behind me. "Jake," dad says, "come sit by the fire."

I shake my head. I don't want to be close to the river.

He sighs. “Look—you’re okay. I’m sure it was scary, but you’re fine.” He tugs at my arm. “Come on.”

I resist. Dad lowers his voice. “Come *on*.”

My shoulders lock. “No.”

“Fine. Stay here, see if I give a shit,” he says, walking away.

I imagine mom watching reruns of M*A*S*H alone in her trailer, and wonder if she misses us.

The wind picks up. Glancing at the sky, I search for stars, but they are no longer visible.

I look down at my arm. Two mosquitos land and start feeding.

SUNDAY

We used to go to church—used to, not still do, so when New Wife takes us to hers, it’s like going back in time, to a cinderblock tabernacle on the edge of town that turned us out as if we were a family of witches.

A white wooden chapel, hers sits back from a street paved with brick. Magnolia trees line the sidewalk out front, their flowers in full bloom, sweetening the air with their fragrance.

She and her daughter Tawny chat with other parishioners on the lawn. We wait for them by the steps.

“Anita, it’s so good to see you,” an elderly woman says to her. “And you’ve brought some new faces!”

A few years older than me, Tawny turns to us and glares.

I glance up at my brother and sister, who are already scowling back. I join them, smiling.

The sermon is lovely, the hymns angelic, the power truly divine. Crisp with mousse, New Wife’s curls bounce as she praises. I watch her, her eyes closed and palms upturned to the ceiling, channeling the Lord. Dad sings half-heartedly, his stare set straight ahead.

I stand to her right, fascinated. The congregation calls upon the strength of Jesus, but instead of *strength*, I hear *string*. I picture white cords unspooling from the worshippers’ hands, taut with spiritual tension, running straight through the ceiling towards God.

After church, I sit in the shade of a magnolia tree. Swollen with summer humidity, the afternoon is hot and breezeless. Bees float lazily from one blossom to another, and I am getting impatient.

Clean white shoes walk into my line of sight. Anita. She plucks a flower from the tree and brings it to her nose. *Stepmother*, I think. *Should I trust you?* Crouching down, she offers it to me and smiles.

In the late afternoon, a stillness grips the house. Smart enough to stay gone, my siblings leave Tawny and me with dad, who has been drinking in front of the television since we got home from church.

Anita went out. I hope she'll be back soon.

We play in Tawny's room. Her door closed, we station ourselves at her pink plastic tea table, working hard to redress her Barbies. I ask if she likes the clothes I've picked, but she doesn't answer, concentrating on which doll gets what sweater.

Sunlight wanes as evening approaches. Anita still hasn't come home. I lie on Tawny's bed, stomach to mattress. While she plays at her table, I am starting to get hungry.

Maybe we're talking too much. Maybe the radio's up too loud. Before it happens, I notice: I can no longer hear dad's television.

Tawny's door kicks open; the crack of splintering wood. Dad begins shouting, but I can't make out what he says. I throw my body between the wall and the bed and wriggle my way underneath it.

Last time we were here, we watched *Twister*. Covering my head like in a storm drill, I think of a scene where the team takes cover in the mechanic's garage across from a drive-in theater. A twister tears the theater apart, hurling cars, broken glass, and crackling neon signs into the flimsy metal structure. An actress screams like she means it.

As sudden as it started, it stops. No more screaming. The door closes and Tawny and I emerge from the rubble, shaken but still alive. Is this what Natives do?

* * *

For the Fourth of July, Anita encourages dad to make plans with us and his buddies, so he does.

Dad takes us to the home of a family friend, leaving Anita and Tawny behind. Drunk men take turns firing mortars into the air. Red, yellow, green, blue, one after the other, they explode over a swimming pool full of kids, fizzling out just before reaching the ground. After the fireworks, adults keep drinking, and I fall asleep on a couch inside with their dog.

“Jakey. Wake up.”

It’s early. The dog is gone. Judging by the lack of guests and the Solo cups strewn about, it is time for us to leave.

Dad picks me up from the sofa. Budweiser and cigarettes seep from his mouth, so I turn my head away. He carries me outside and puts me in the truck, where my brother and sister are nodding off. The smell of gunpowder hugs the ground like fog.

We get to the house. Anita’s car isn’t there. Dad throws the truck into park and bails. He runs to the front door, flips on the light, and freezes.

The house is empty. Everything is gone. The table, the couches, the television—all of it, completely evacuated. An immovable wooden bed frame lay bare in his room. No pictures grace the walls.

My father and siblings are stunned. I just want my teddy bear.

Dad walks the house without words. My brother and sister see our clothes neatly folded in Tawny’s old room, my teddy waiting on top of them. We find dad standing alone in his room, the only spot of color against the stark, white walls.

“Son of a bitch. Just like your mother. Son of a bitch.”

Blue light builds outside. Throwing together a makeshift nest with spare blankets, we sleep in the white noise of vacancy, and for once it feels like what it has been all along: a sleepover at a stranger’s house.

* * *

Two ribbons of roadway bracket an isolated rest stop where our mother waits in her car. As dad’s pickup rumbles up the highway, our sense of togetherness dissolves in its infancy.

He pulls into the lot, parks the truck, and turns off the engine. I hold my breath until dad opens his door to the roar of the interstate. A pale brunette mother exits her Hyundai, her hair whipping around her neck like a noose. She’ll get an earache in this wind, so we don’t dawdle, we hurry. Hugging quickly, we never take long to say goodbye.

Heading north in mom’s car, we pass El Dorado Lake, an artificial body of water with a peculiar feature. Rather than remove the

trees dotting the floodplain, dam engineers left them behind, believing the lake would claim them.

The trees are still standing, their gnarled hands reaching out of the water, sinking boats and snarling fishing line. Accustomed to the harshness of the plains, their roots run deep. Rarely do they relinquish their hold on the land, like underwater ghosts, unrelenting.

Twisted Sister

Born of storms and lightning, my sister grew up a tornado. Men chase her, drawn by her power and intensity. If you get close, her roar can be deafening. She can be found carving deep notches in the Central Plains, shearing power lines and detonating transformers as she charges through town after town, hitting all trailer parks in between.

I wish I could say this is new, that this is a recent development, but long has she raged like Jupiter's Great Red Spot. It seems no one has ever asked her *why*. I admire her spirit, however intense, the way she creates new beauty from the debris of former lives. We live in tornado alley. Her life proves that sometimes to create, you must first destroy.

If you ask my mother, she would deny giving birth to a storm. Rachel is the first of three children, and the only one to gift her with postpartum depression. I used to see my mom as a human barometer, as having an innate ability to forecast severe weather. Now I know she is no such thing—she will stand in a flood and swear it's not raining.

The first time I saw it, I got too close. Rachel came home one night spinning out of her mind. She really wanted those cigarettes. I threw them away because at eight years old, I thought I knew what healthy meant. It took two full-grown adults to drag her kicking from my room. She sent one soaring through the air like a toy.

I had never seen anything like it. My stepfather, easily a whole person heavier than she, flying then crashing to the ground as if thrown by a professional wrestler. She rips our mother's leg open. Struggling, my stepfather bellows, "Go to your room!" as if a false wooden door could protect me.

Rachel rips the clothes from her body until she stands in her bra and underwear. Furious, my stepfather rises and runs at her. She screams and they collide, reeling towards the front door. It bursts open; he hoists her by her brastrap and panties and hurls her into the night like Pecos Bill. Our mother clutches her wounds and sobs.

Neither him nor my mother treated my sister's addictions for what they were—a symptom rather than a cause. One reason (but not *the* reason) he is no longer my stepfather is that he made his wife choose between him and her children: "If one of your kids pulls this shit again, it's me or them." He never quite understood how the weather works.

A Letter to my Mother

I do not know how to ask this, because whenever the desire to punish you for your crimes arises, I crush it reflexively out of pity, because you've "been through enough." It is not my place; it has never been my place to self-advocate before you, until now.

What makes a mother? The tribal culture you denied me required a woman's consent before a relationship could even be considered. Two years after your birth in 1963, Gwendolyn Brooks wrote a poem to her abortions. Her children are as real to her as I am to you. "Believe," she writes, "that even in my deliberateness I was not deliberate." Do you see it as a choice?

You used to call me your miracle baby. "That 0.01% chance on the birth control box? That's you. You're my miracle."

Are all of your children happy accidents? At least once a day, I think to myself, *you should not be here*. At fifteen, I ask you point-blank; "did you consider abortion?" No, you tell me—never. Despite funding one for my brother and his fling, you're a good Christian woman who would perish the thought.

On Valentine's Day in third grade, my teacher disperses manila envelopes to the class. Inside, a handwritten note from our parents enclosed in a paper heart, counting the ways we make them happy. I hold my letter, grinning at the warmth of your love when it's a wonder I exist at all. "Now," you tell me, "go out and make miracles happen."

As a way to evade my animal stepfather, extracurricular theater harbors me from sixth grade until I drop out of high school. You attend each musical, every play, all three showings. Stepfather goes once in a while; that's his decision. It's you I need to see in the audience. You know how I read your expressions—part coach, part teacher, all mom—it helps me remember my lines. You clap your little hands off when we take our sweeping bows. After the show, I know that you'll be waiting outside, a proud grin on your face, a bouquet of yellow flowers cradled in your arms.

Driving home from Walmart*, the sun sets low behind us. We've been quiet for most of the time, too long to begin an ordinary conversation. I am fourteen and you are turning up the radio.

The light is green. Obnoxious plastic bags shift in the trunk as you accelerate. I imagine grabbing the wheel and yanking it to the right, sending the car careening off the bridge and onto the interstate below. The thought jars me and I blurt out some words, beginning to unravel. John the stepdad has been jobless for three years and has nothing to do but take his anger out on me, because I am home and no one else is.

I talk about how taking me to and from school, he says, "I did not sign on to raise your mother's fucking baggage," and "God in His infinite wisdom has seen fit to saddle me with you kids and your mom, who hasn't put out in two years." He growls when he speaks, when he calls me Worthless Piece of Shit like it's my Indian name.

As usual, you stare straight ahead, absorbing my words the way you absorbed dad's fists and John's lazy sex. The cycle of abuse is one you know well—it is all you know, so when I tell you the things I've been enduring, you follow a well-beaten path of logical self-protection: "Prove him wrong," you tell me, as if I have a choice.

It shocks you when I ask if abortion was an option while on a cruise in the Gulf of Mexico. We are touring other colonized countries, and it is breakfast time. The question doesn't scare me at all. At fifteen, the idea of nonexistence doesn't sound half-bad.

I ask because my sister likes to call me the demon seed, because during your pregnancy, my fetal body made you ill. Toxins seeped into your bloodstream, your body attacking itself. She tells me how, at two weeks overdue, they induced labor in the middle of a heat wave, much like the one we'll return to next week.

Grandma booked us in a cabin together because, after eighth grade and your second divorce, we "need to get to know each other". It doesn't occur to me until thirteen years after the fact that this is eerily reminiscent of the way she introduced you to dad, in the eighties when he was incarcerated and in dire need of proselytization. Grandma won't tell me why she brought her daughter to meet a man in prison. "Let me run that by your mom first," she said when pressed to explain. "Painful memories."

We are smoking outside on the Lido Deck. Though we know you don't approve, you pass me your menthol for a puff or two. *I'm not asking because I want reassurance, I think. I ask because I'm thinking of killing myself.* No, you swear, it never crossed your mind.

Grandma would like us to come to church with her more often. "Why is she pretending it's not an hour and fifteen minute drive to Topeka?"

"Don't argue with her," you warn. "She will always win. You know what she'd say? 'Well, you can just come over Saturday evening and stay the night!' and we'll have to work our way out of *that* mess."

Scheming with you is almost as fun as taking you downtown in the summer, where I am twenty years old and living on the sixth-floor of a rent-controlled building. "It's so New York," you say when I buzz you in. I've never been, but the compliment flatters me regardless. I will live in downtown for two years, and this is one of three times you come over. We walk up the street to a cafe and enjoy a cheap happy hour. The food is delicious and the atmosphere is nice—historic, your taste, a century-old hotel with ornate art deco trim—and you run through the standard list: how is work, how are your friends, how are you doing.

"Boring, good, fine." My job laid me off because I said *no* to full time retail, so I'm running out of money. I smoked a joint an hour ago to replace the feeling of having company, and I have a bar of Xanax at home, just for forgetting about how all of this makes me feel.

You do not ask if I am dating anyone. You never do. We don't have Family Moments© like where the well-meaning mom makes a mess with her try-hard lingo. In the three years since my brother outed me to you, you've pretended it was news every time I steer us in that direction; when I do, the weather changes, so I learn what to say and what to keep hidden, how to stay in character. I am your sanitized son, white with a tan, gay and quiet about it, and I definitely didn't fuck a man on the couch you were sitting on earlier.

"One day you'll realize you need to marry a woman," you say.

The conversation implodes. You think this is a choice.

After years of patchy communication defined by my new life on the West Coast and her intermittent stays in federal prison, my sister and I are speaking again. She lives in an in-patient rehabilitation clinic just

south of our hometown. You hate it when we talk; “twisted sister,” you call her. Is her illness inconvenient to you? Or is it the inconvenience of inheritance, how depression both uni- and bipolar seem to be passed from parent to child? Perhaps it’s the shame of *being ill*, something less than fully functional and therefore undeserving of praise, like when my brother hurled your antidepressants at you and screamed about how weak you were. Your behavior encouraged distance between my siblings and I, as if you feared being outnumbered by otherness.

“I’m working on a story about mom—well, sorta,” I tell my sister over the phone. “It’s half story, half letter.”

“Both,” she tells me, “it can be both. What’s in it?”

I smile. “Remember how mom would call me her miracle baby in reference to her being on birth control when I was conceived?”

She scoffs, disgusted. “Yes, and it pissed me off so much. I was like, ‘quit telling him that shit, it’s not even true!’”

“Wait—what?”

“Yeah—trust me, it’s bullshit. I was old enough to know what birth control was and I can tell you, she wasn’t on it. Ask dad next time you talk, he’ll tell you. What happened was, dad was home pre-sentencing and they fucked like rabbits before he went back into lockup. Mom was pissed off that she got knocked up and then left to raise two kids and a baby on her own, so she concocted this bullshit to make herself feel better about it.”

So I take her advice and ask dad—sure enough, “twisted sister” is right. I know—you invested years into making sure we were at odds, divulging honest stories of your survival while totally neglecting the rest of our past to which we rightly have access. You’ll never admit why it is you hold our history hostage.

My partner of five years who you refuse to meet plays the guitar just as good as dad can. I’m serious. He looks like an angel when he walks into a room, and transfixed as I am by him, the thought occurs, *you will never see me in love*.

I pace the living room of my Portland apartment, my face heating up as your tone moves into the defensive, or maybe it’s just my phone.

“Admit it,” I snap, “you’ll never visit because you don’t want to meet Finn, and that’s why grandma and grandpa won’t stop by on way their way home from Seattle.”

“Jacob Kevin, you know how I was raised, and that’s how *they* were—”

“I know your Christian shit is tired. I know you’ve had ten years to get used to it, and I know I am done waiting. I love this man! Doesn’t that mean something to you?”

Nothing on the other end of the line. You must have hung up before I finished my thought.

I walk home at the end of a long day, my consciousness descending from the sky via parachute. When spirit and body finally reconnect, I imagine this is what it must be like to really hit the ground running. Maybe it *is* a miracle I exist, that I keep persisting, even if out of spite. What if all this time, you were right, but for all the wrong reasons?

My brother looks the most like you. He shares your round features and likes talking about Warren traits as if they’re more than just a pattern of violence. When I picture your face, you are always smiling. “When I smile,” you always say, “my eyes disappear.” We have similar faces—chipmunk cheeks, you call them—so when I’m laughing, mine do too. You used to pull my hair back and tell me how much I look like my sister. She is a well of creativity, so I take it as a compliment.

My given name is blend of yours and dad’s, themselves the inventions of surrogate parents. “Warren” may be written on my birth certificate, but it isn’t *mine*. I have no idea what my true name is. In my daydreams, I know my paternal grandmother. We spend afternoons at her house on the reservation making medicine, she tells me stories of relatives I should have known but never met. We attend a ceremony where I watch her drape a young girl in beautiful, colorful cloth. I learn *midá* from her because she sees my queerness as a mark of spirituality. She offers me a name.

Of all the ones you’ve had since you were adopted, which feels the most like yours?

Rhinestone Cowgirl

My partner and I live in low-income housing. Our old brick building is the last bastion of our gentrified district's eclectivity, stocked with Vietnam veterans, aging goths, studded-denim skaters, retired queer DJs, and piss-poor college students like ourselves. It is a privilege to live here, thriving in our economic fishbowl.

Our building manager is a sweaty white lady sporting a scoop neck shirt, a purple rhinestone butterfly bedazzling the front. Christian rock bleeds from a radio on her desk. We are two queer men in her office renewing our lease, so I'd like to keep it casual. "You're from Portland?" I ask, making small talk as we tick boxes.

"I grew up outside of Rapid City, but I'm a Montana girl."

"I hear it's beautiful there. When did you move to Oregon?"

"Oh, way back," she says laughing. "1970, I think." Behind her, a former nineties grunge band member sings about the glory.

"You're so lucky to have grown up here," I say, speeding from one form to the next. My partner Finn sits next to me doing the same.

"Yeah," she says, giggling. "I didn't even think Black people were real until I moved to the city!"

Finn looks up at me—did she really just say that?

"I tell you what though," she says, leaning in, "Black people never scared me like the Indians did, I mean, Christ—they're all dogs."

I inhale sharply. Her words strike my white partner; he squeezes my knee under the table. A familiar voice says, *keep it together*.

"Really?" I say with oblivious Southern air.

"And then you had Geronimo acting up—he rallied a bunch of tribes together and terrorized the hell out of us, just because he could!"

Where do you get off using the word "terrorism" to describe the actions of Natives when Geronimo led a lifelong resistance against Spanish and American colonization? In his absence, his wife and three children were slaughtered—do his demands for justice appall you? He died a prisoner of war in 1909, buried far from his home beneath a mound in Oklahoma—nowhere near Rapid City, South Dakota.

"Well," my partner begins, indignant, "that *was* during a time of Native activism—"

God love him, I think, but this is not the time. My hand clamps down on his knee like an iron animal trap.

Bewildered, he closes his mouth. “So you like Portland better,” I ask her.

“I love it here.”

This city is almost seventy-three percent white, I think. Of course you love it here.

Rifling through the remaining forms, we sign page after page. The last in the stack is a form that asks us to PLEASE CHECK THE RACE THAT APPLIES. The choices are WHITE, ASIAN/PACIFIC ISLANDER, HISPANIC/LATINO, BLACK, NATIVE AMERICAN, and UNDISCLOSED.

We’re three people gathered in an office with the door closed, but what is really happening is my having to side openly with one culture over another in front of a racist landlord from Montana.

I hover over the page. She sees me hesitate. Both of them are watching, I can feel it. Neither is sure which box I will choose, and for an instant, neither am I. Empty squares stare up at me like little prison cells. I consider anonymity; what would checking “undisclosed” mean? After all, it is my skin that tricks racists into believing they’re among friends, not me. Then again, it is precisely the color of my skin that repels other Natives from seeing me as one of their own. How utterly alone my body makes me feel.

I glance up from the form. Finn smiles at me earnestly, and I know what I must do (if he is ever unsure of his role among Natives, he need only remember this moment). Our landlady sighs. She will never understand the reason behind her impatience. With a dramatic scratch of a pen, I end all speculation, marking the box by NATIVE AMERICAN.

I hand her the form. She looks it over, and her plastic smile melts. “Well! That’s—that’s all I need. Looks like we’re done here.”

“Yes,” I tell her, standing. “Looks like it.”

Seven Bits of Advice for my Sixteen-Year-Old Niece (Since She Asked)

- 1) If you are having the time of your life in high school and you never want it to change, stop. Something has gone terribly wrong. Soon—*very* soon—high school will end, the watering hole will dry up, and your four years of hard time in the American public system will be over. Your classmates will scatter and try to bury their high school memories as quickly as possible, hoping you are doing the same. Once the caps hit the gymnasium floor, it's over, and the only ones who will miss it will be those who enjoyed it, often at the expense of everyone else. Move to a different state in a different region and watch how your friends that stay behind crystalize.
- 2) Never let a man convince you to compromise your wellness for his benefit. If you're attracted to men, know that it's true—all men are assholes. Believe me, I know. Why are fathers overprotective of their daughters? Because apparently it takes having one to recognize humanity in a woman, because men teach boys that girls aren't people but things, alienating you from the body you inhabit and preventing you from reconciling the two, because men view women with a mind as a threat. This isn't to say "good" men don't exist—they do, but this conversation is not about them. This is about you staying ahead of the game.
- 3) You do not have to decide when, where, or even if you want to go college right this second. You do not have to choose one next term, next year, or even by the time you graduate (or drop out like I did). What makes college worth it is deciding to go and knowing why you're going. Yes, college can be pretty rad—you'll meet people that will stick with you for the rest of your life, in lovely and sometimes haunting ways—but if you try it and it's not your thing, don't sweat it. There are other ways to get educated besides through an institution, and if you want knowledge, you'll find it.
- 4) On your Indigenous roots: claim them, they are yours. You belong to our tribe just as much as any Potawatomi descendant, no matter what blood quantum—how white people determine who "is" and "isn't" Native—tells you. With terrible consequences, it has been adopted by many Indigenous people as a means to preserve community, despite being invented to destroy it. Tribes can choose how one "proves" their Nativeness. Some follow an ever-dwindling lineage, others decide to honor documented ancestry. Regardless, it's divisive and counterintuitive, reducing the people it allegedly protects to mere numbers. You are Potawatomi. No one can rightly tell you otherwise.
- 5) If you want to maintain that youthful glow of yours, drink water. Keep a bottle of it within reach at all times. Have an ice-cold glass of it in the morning and with your meals—and especially if you've been drinking. Speaking of, please stay away from alcohol for as long as you possibly can. You come from a long line of debilitated alcoholics, and your genetic makeup is not much different from mine. I'm telling you this because I sincerely wish someone had done the same for me, for your mother, your grandfather. Don't get me wrong, drinking can be fun. What isn't fun is waking up after noon on a stranger's floor having pissed yourself in your sleep.
- 6) It's gross when a relative talks about sex, so be warned: I'm going to talk about sex. Remember when I said men are assholes? When they're boys, they hear things like "you can't knock her up if

you pull out right before,” and they *actually believe it*. I hope parents nowadays are telling their sons not to rape people instead of scolding their daughters for wearing shorts and a tank top when it’s hot out, but until we get confirmation of that cultural shift, look out for boys that don’t use condoms, who won’t respect your boundaries, and especially those who ignore the meaning of the word “no”—a word that is yours to invoke anytime, anywhere. Ignore any shame for using it.

- 7) Here are some tips that I didn’t want to write full paragraphs about: Smoking looks cool, I’ll cop to that, but if you are, quit while you’re ahead—again, your skin and other organs will thank you. Tell the people you love that you love them and often, not just because death can happen at any moment, but because that person might really need to hear it. Please, my dear niece, never be afraid to ask for help; on homework, with groceries, with anxiety, anything. There will days where you feel like the worst thing that has ever happened is happening, and that it just might kill you. It won’t. Fall apart, collect yourself, keep moving. Be kind to yourself. Never open a credit card.

Dreams of the Thunderbird

Before taking a class in the building, I passed by the Native American Student Resource Center at least four times a week. Each time, I felt a tiny thread tugging me closer to the doors, but I clipped it, never going in. I worried some sort of whiteness detector would begin blaring as soon as I entered: WARNING, WARNING: IMPOSTER INTRUDING.

One night in bed, I told my partner about how estranged I felt, how at war I was with myself. I recalled to him how, at a reading hosted by Indigenous writers, I said to one of the featured authors that I'm half-Potawatomi. "Which half?" he asked me. "Are you split at the hip or right down the middle?"

"That question still fucks with me."

He leaned a sympathetic head on my shoulder. "Do you know what he meant?"

"No," I told him, frustrated. "Do you?"

He shrugged. "I could guess as much."

"I'm open to interpretations."

He inhaled slowly, gathering his thoughts. A soft-spoken, wildly intelligent white boy, he allows time for thought-out responses to form. It's from him that I'm learning to have patience with myself. He works on what his privilege affords him, and he always listens when I ask him to.

"I think he was trying to get you to see the constraints that that kind of label places on you," he said.

I cocked my head to the side. "Go on."

"I mean, think about it—which half of you is the Native half?"

"What does that even mean," I groaned. Part of me was pissed off at that author for playing the Indian riddler, but he was right. Later, in the class taught at the Native Center, I learn that blood quantum is a deeply flawed white invention, and by believing in it, I am colonizing myself. This boundary, if there is one, is simply where two identities meet. There *is* no "Indigenous half." Only Indigeneity.

"God," I told him, "existence is fucking weird."

"I prefer it to the alternative," my partner said, and I kissed his forehead. In my dreams that night, I am driving my dad's old pickup somewhere in rural Kansas. In the distance, a thunderstorm builds. My dad appears to my right, though it feels like he's always been there. "Turn your lights on," he says. "It's about to get dark."