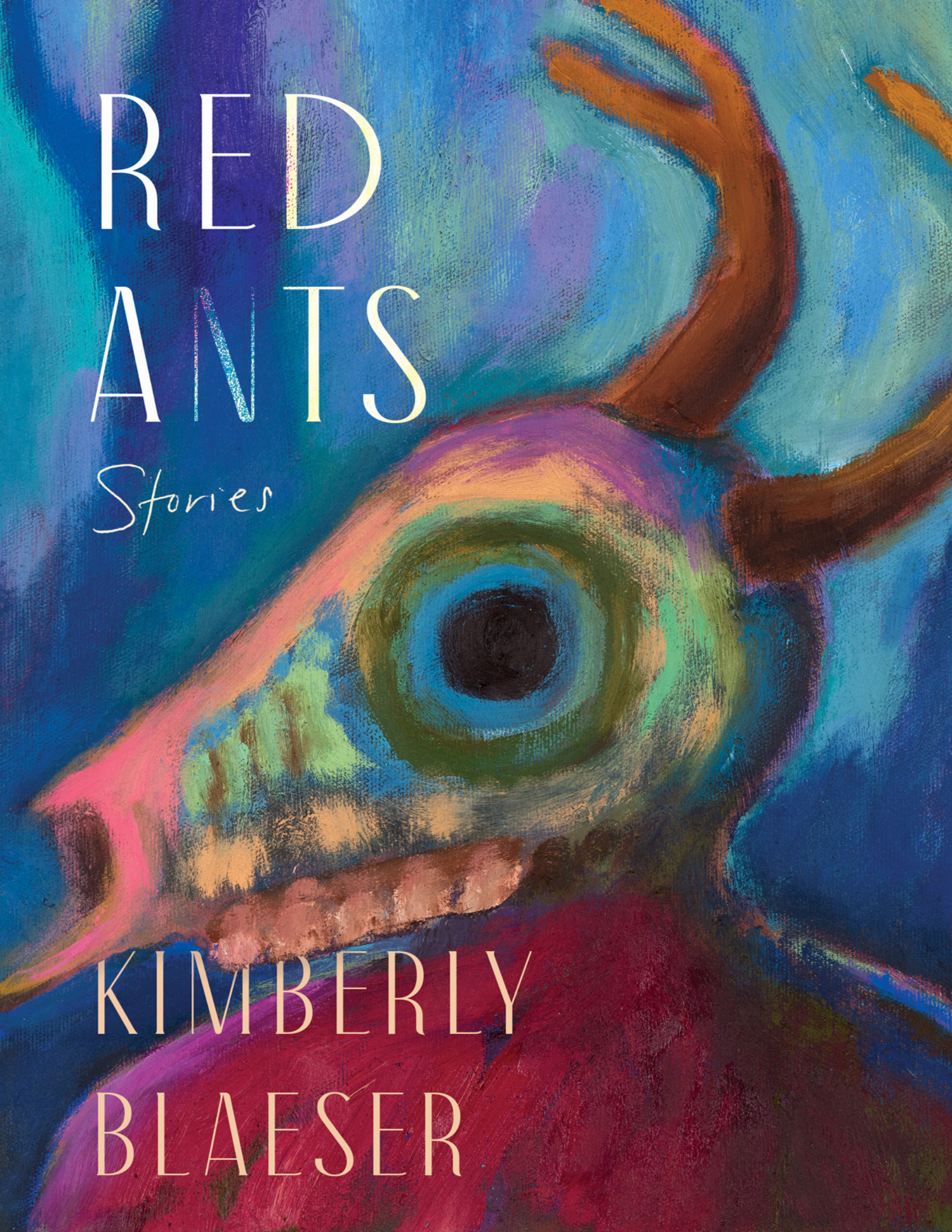
RED
ANTS
Stories
KIMBERLY
BLAESER

Praise for **Red Ants**

"Kimberly Blaeser's stunning debut story collection is filled with receding shorelines, revolutionaries, tricksters, whip-smart women, found family, and monsters that stalk the land. *Red Ants* feels like sitting at the feet of your favorite aunties and cousins deep into the night. The stories send pulses of fear and unease through you, break your heart, and leave you rolling with laughter. I love when my favorite poets write prose. Though *Red Ants* may be her first work of fiction, I'll be counting the days until Kimberly Blaeser's next one."

—Kelli Jo Ford, author of *Crooked Hallelujah*

"Blaeser's Anishnaabe characters in *Red Ants* are deeply human, full of compassion and resilience, in stories told through her gift for craft and precision of detail on the line level. Here, Blaeser proves she is one of our most thoughtful writers working today. I absolutely devoured this collection of stories."

—Brandon Hobson, National Book Award finalist and author of *The Removed*

"*Red Ants* is a stunning collection of short fiction, with gorgeous prose and images bearing the fingerprints of a poet at the height of her gifts. Each story lands with impactful moments of wisdom, insight, even shock regarding the uncanny turns a life can take. A remarkable, imperative read that lingers in the imagination—these powerful stories will haunt me forever."

—Mona Susan Power, author of *A Council of Dolls*

"Kimberly Blaeser's prose stands alone. Each one of the stories in this kick-ass debut harnesses a kinetic voice, the energetic bodies behind them as real as if they were sitting next to you. This collection has it all: realism, horror, speculative futurisms, myths of the past made present. I laughed. I

remembered. I wanted to fight. Long have I admired Blaeser's lyrical and incisive poetic voice, and now, her prose."

—Bojan Louis, author of *Currents: Poems* and *Sinking Bell: Stories*

"*Red Ants* is a gorgeous collection of contemporary Anishinaabe stories in the very best of our storytelling traditions. Generous, funny, and intimate, with Blaeser's signature stunning poetics, these stories feel like old friends exploring belonging, the places that make us, and the people and spirits who are our kin."

—Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, author of *Theory of Water*

Red Ants

Also by Kimberly Blaeser

Poetry

Ancient Light
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When the Light of the World Was Subdued, Our Songs Came Through: A Norton Anthology of Native Nations Poetry (CONTRIBUTING EDITOR)
Traces in Blood, Bone, & Stone: Contemporary Ojibwe Poetry
Stories Migrating Home: A Collection of Anishinaabe Prose

Red Ants

Stories

Kimberly Blaeser



COUNTERPOINT

CALIFORNIA

For the old stories tucked inside
the pockets of the new.

For Robert, Gerald, and all the White Earth
storytellers whose voices animate my words.

. . . let the wicks of candles
burning inside you
shine a light in dark corners.
Hurry up now,
hurry.

LINDA HOGAN,
“MORNING WITH BROKEN WINDOW”

Contents

River Dreams

The Making of Monsters

Launch Pad

Red Ants

Waiting: A Quintet

Fancy Dog Contest

Copper Traces

Growing Things

A Tally in Birch

Sky Stories

Translation for Dummies

Leaving Paradise

Learning the Directions

The Elements

The Broken Year

Like Some Old Story

Vision Confidence Score

Acknowledgments

Red Ants

River Dreams

I.

Microfiche holds its secrets tight. I know because I have danced around the safehouse. Small stories ours. Tucked beneath a shoe ad on page thirteen. Squeezed in just before the classifieds.

My uncle lived and died on Windigo Island. An herbalist, a hermit, a holy man to some. A man who laughed big and teased big. He named the island himself. Carefully, because he thought the name might save him from tourists. One year a local resort owner made maps that identified the island in English. But someone accidentally transposed the order of the words, and it became “Island Cannibal.” Uncle threatened to put that name on a T-shirt with an arrow pointing up.

He didn’t name the ziibi. It became Bluebird River—a resort name good for postcard buyers.

In reality, the water—the alive being we called nibi—flowed grey. Cloudy and curving through the northern forest. Birch, white pine, red maple, and tamarack loved nibi as much as we did. The Anishinaabeg called the cold trout-filled water Inaabate Ziibi—Smoke River. Because he lived there, my uncle, my nizhishenh, earned the nickname Smoke Man.

Everyone in nearby Green Lake adopted that “Indian” name for him, too. The only personal detail in his generic obituary mischaracterized him as a man who sold kinnickinnic, a ceremonial pipe tobacco, to tourist stores. Uncle actually sold wild rice to local merchants when he needed money, never the tobacco.

I located his death notice in the *Green Lake Times* next to a coupon for two dollars off Folgers; and, two issues later, the succinct obituary. “Found by a passing boater … death has been ruled a drowning.” No mention of the controversy over damming the river, or later Uncle challenging water quality reports. No mention of foul play.

Hence my haunting the microfiche reader at the local library. I needed backstory.

II.

I came home two years too late. If I told you I was incarcerated, you might assume you would find my name, Bineshi LaFronde, among the “juvenile offender” statistics. No. But my crime—wanting an education—had kept me captive and broke and cut off from my family as surely as if I had been living behind bars in Red Wing. The essentials covered by scholarships didn’t include holiday trips home.

My first shiny college goal—to be an accountant and remove the corrupt white influence from our casino—morphed into hanging on through four years of business and prelaw, surviving on too much coffee and as many calls home as my phone plan would allow. The more I learned about government encroachment into tribal finances, the more I doubled down on my elective survey courses: “Legal Order and Disorder” and the true bitch course, “Statistics for Legal Scholars.”

With a diploma encased in imitation leather, the mandatory University of Minnesota sweatshirt, and tempered ideas of what either meant, I returned home to regather myself. Back now for all of two weeks, I had been sucked into the old routines—late-night poker and pull tabs, early-morning berry picking and long afternoons visiting relatives one after another. During the welcome-home meals of venison, wild rice, and a rotating array of berry pies, I also feasted on the good-natured teasing, the rivalries during croquet, and the familiar—cadences, faces, inherited loyalties of a water nation. Only my closest cousins voiced outright their theories about Smoke’s death, but I sensed a general uneasiness among my whole family. I can’t say the elders were keeping something from me, but I felt a carefulness, a shield slide in place when his name came up.

“Everyone knows something bad went down,” my cousin C-Span told me when he stopped by to pick me up during my first week back. “It ain’t that they don’t want retribution for Uncle Smoke’s death. But history’s cover-ups go way back to the three little piggy ships. Calling anyone out will only put a target on another back.” He whipped the leather of his work gloves against an open palm. “Don’t need to go to college, Cuz, to study corruption. It’s homegrown.” He stood up. Shrugged. “Careful, is all I’m saying.”

I could add nothing, so I just nodded and followed him to his truck. *Careful* as a warning wasn’t meant just for me, it also meant *don’t put anyone else in danger*.

So I determined not to ask too many questions of my relatives. Instead, I added searching county records and any available police files to my agenda. I made library archive visits when the auntie of my high school track friend, Toad, was volunteering. She didn’t pry, didn’t create broken-machine, lost-file roadblocks, and seemed to know intuitively where I might want to dig.

Police files were harder. By default, police reports are public records and citizens have access because of the FOIA. But officials in small towns tend to lean into the “sensitive cases” exception—redact like they are playing tic-tac-toe. Or they seal records as if they were pickle jars—letting the contents cure long past the active case stage.

My toes wiggled nervously in my sneakers while I smile-lied and played my college research card. Poking around in whatever old files I could get my hands on, I soon realized I should have studied deferred prosecution agreements at the U and maybe taken self-defense. I tingled in the research rooms. Not cold—afraid.

Before the kerfuffle about potential contamination of Inaabate, Twin Ports Manufacturing had acknowledged spewing chemicals into Lake Superior, paid a $15,000 fine, and pinky-swore not to misbehave for five years or until someone’s back was turned, whichever came first. Any underhandedness at Smoke River could throw that old grievance and this new one back into court. This time it would likely be classified as a “knowing violation,” which carried up to $50,000 per day in fines. In the legal arena, that is high stakes.

They could ill afford a vigilant troublemaker like Matthew LaFronde, aka Smoke Man.

III.

Now, they could ill afford anyone (an unemployed college grad, for example) looking too closely at the records. At Uncle's involvement in the 2018 challenge to their water clarity reports. At his death.

"You know they're tailing you." C-Span chalked his cue and then blew the excess my way. We'd just finished winning nothing at Wednesday night bingo and were in the midst of a lopsided game of eight ball at the Side Pocket pool hall on Main Street. Offering this tidbit was C-Span at his chattiest. So I knew he was concerned when he elaborated. "Heels or not, you are the chief's new game, Cuz." It reveals something about my insecurities that my first reaction was a note to self to tone down my "hip college grad" appearance. Heels, yeah; but boots not pumps, so that seemed okay. Maybe less glam—put my brown hair up in a ponytail or back in a barrette instead of blow-dried and flowing. That I immediately took the comment on as an assignment made me laugh out loud. C-Span, himself strictly jeans, sneakers, and band T-shirts, read my inadvertent laugh as bravado. I let him.

But honestly, how could I pull off nonchalance when my spit had all dried up from fear? I said nothing as he aimed, bent, and sent the eight ball home in the corner pocket.

"Come to papa." He fake-kissed the five-dollar bill before pocketing it.

Someone had put money down indicating they would play the winner, so I took my perspiring beer bottle and headed to the booth. Sherri looked up, half smiled, and shrugged. The universal *who cares*. Then she slid over and patted the booth seat. I wasn't bothered by the loss, but her sympathy touched me. I sat and took a swig of my Corona.

My sister-cousin, former partner in crime. If anyone was all heels and *Vogue* she was, but her attitude was totally rez. "We're planning our garden." She raised her eyebrows and pointed to a cocktail napkin. When I looked closer, I saw a list of men's names with varying numbers of flowers beside them.

"I see. And how *does* your garden grow?"

She laughed then, the ice-tinkle that charmed. I forgot for the moment the police chief memorizing my vitals and joined in.

IV.

I missed my rez sisters. I missed the endless fixer-upper trailers, fixer-upper cars—fixer-upper men. Those long-ago days, we sipped sweet wine while we filled big roasters with wild-rice hot dish. Suppers, potlucks, wedding dances. Lust just a whim. Deep forever choices were still far off.

Then suddenly everything caught up to us. A snag became a pregnancy. Maxine's William died in a car wreck. Grandparents forgot the shortcut home, needed caregivers. We went to more jail hearings than powwows, more funerals than weddings.

When I left for college, I was afraid to walk away, afraid nothing and nobody would wait for me. I couldn't tell yet if the newly expanded casino building and community college meant I was wrong, or if they represented everything hateful about change.

Sherri hadn't changed. Her laughter lightened my worries. Trout still swam in the Inaabate. *Maybe I did come back in time*.

"In time for what? Raiding my garden?" Sherri narrowed her eyes and scrunched up her nose like a mad Pekingese. Then her laugh jangled again.

I realized I had spoken out loud. Figures. I had been living in my head and talking to myself all through my last semester. Time to ditch that habit. I pulled myself back—the booth, the bar, the warming beer in my hands, and old friends. "In time to help you … weed, Niijikwe. Heck you can't have all the good plants."

V.

"Shores Near Windigo Island Chosen Site for Fish Sample." I found that fall 2017 article front and center—as if advertising the stakeholder's angelic compliance with EPA testing. Of course, the sampling meant Fish and Wildlife "accidentally" messed up Nizhishenh's leech traps. Four months later a page-five court report gave the case two paragraphs. Can you guess? "No evidence of harassment found … Traps not properly marked. No compensation ordered for damage."

My research file thickened, but not my skin. It still tingled when the chief of police greeted me with his usual sarcasm outside the post office. "Hey, College Queen. You visiting or moving back?" Without waiting for a

reply, he added, “Wrong era for back-to-the-blanket, isn’t it?” He smiled at his own joke, then aimed and fired a gob of snuff into the gutter.

Maybe C-Span had been right.

Nathan Johnson hadn’t been the chief of police when I left. He had been Nate, varsity linebacker who thought that meant the girls should fall in line. He had graduated to a loudmouth badge—the police force was just another way to continue being a bully.

I couldn’t be certain he was keeping tabs on my activities, but I saw him way more than was good for my blood pressure. And I worried Chief Johnson wasn’t the only one wondering about my plans. Winnie’s morning greeting, the refrigerator door, the air mattress pump all seemed to ask about my work prospects.

Frost supposedly wrote, “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.” I knew my Native relations had my back; I just forgot how steady an eye they also kept on my pocketbook.

Currency and value work differently on the rez. If we had a chart listing most “lucrative” careers, it wouldn’t match *Forbes*’s. Our priorities align differently. In America, teachers fall low on pay scales and, lately, lower in the respect category, too. On the rez, we value our teachers—whether or not they have titles before or letters after their names. Their salary may be set by the school district; their worth is not. In our gift economy, people shift the scales. A hindquarter may not increase your take-home pay, but it does increase your quality of life. We saved our esteem for Head Start workers and healers. Government employees had higher salaries, but community leaders had their driveways plowed first in winter.

Smoke’s plant knowledge filled a need. I was an egghead. My worth had not been tested. Until I could prove my value, I had to pay my way, and somehow, add to the general pot. I wasn’t certain chasing environmental bandits would count. As I fretted about this, I walked the cracked sidewalks to the two-story library that had once been the municipal liquor store. The stone walls didn’t seem haunted by Jim Beam or Saturday-night brawls. They were covered with posters proclaiming OJIBWEMOTAADIDAA!—LET’S SPEAK OJIBWE.

I guess inheritance, too, follows a funny pattern here. My home, the ranch where I now slept on the porch and where I had grown up, housed my youngest aunt, her kids and grandkids. I “owned” it, but Winnie paid the

taxes, kept the pipes from freezing in winter, kept it from becoming a party house.

"Bineshi, can you get Sig dressed and run him to T-ball?" Winnie was changing her kitchen apron for her bowling shirt and was halfway out the door before I got my answer out. She at least didn't seem to wonder about my "role" in the household. Winnie and my hoard of cousins had fussed over me for a bit, like I was a guest. Then everyone settled into the normal rhythm of fun and feuding. Still, I was struggling to find my place—whether in the old normal or in a new one.

The chief's question—visiting or moving back—nagged because it felt like scrutiny and because I woke each morning my feet freezing under the weight of a patchwork quilt, the circumstances reminding me I was temporary.

VI.

I did what I had always done when in a rez fugue. Grabbed paddling gloves, fishing pole, tackle, and bait. My kayak looked like a mossy stone, barely visible in the tall grasses near the landing. Did no one come here anymore? I turned the vessel upright and pulled it the short distance to the water, climbed in, pushed myself off, and aimed upstream. I was ten yards from shore before I let out a breath I didn't know I had been holding.

Ahead water winked in the sun, trees on the banks bent low toward the river like they were women about to wash their hair. I let my fingers swim in the tear-grey memory.

Boozhoo, uncle. I'm back. Come on, old man, I know you haven't left this place.

No spirits answered, but the wet cedar scent soothed me. I fell into the forever of the river world. When breeze lifted the petals of lily pads, I heard him say, *Wave back, my girl. Otherwise, you'll hurt their feelings. If that happens, the water lilies might close their flowers*.

I told myself no one was around to see me nod politely at the plants.

Besides, what did we really know of cause and effect? Maybe the water lily's joy—like everything else—flowered better in relationships. Did mayflies just die, or did they offer themselves to ogaawag in some ancient compact? Was I really a water witch like my cousins claimed, or did the

walleye offer themselves to me for the same reason? Did it have to be one way or the other?

The river was full of questions that morning. I sipped coffee, letting it ask.

A beaver crossed from one shore to the other, a small branch in its mouth. The splat of its tail-warning brought me back. As I resumed paddling, timid mergansers dodged among the rocks, keeping an escape distance, too.

His island seemed unchanged at first. The wooden dock askew, fish-cleaning shack painted with flies, spires of pines shading the log cabin, and a checkered tablecloth still visible on the picnic table. Could I really walk back in, find him with his blue enamel coffee cup and cribbage board, radio on the table, blueberries in a pine basket? Maybe I was a witch, a time traveler—lucky.

I wasn't.

First came signs of absence and decay, then evidence of intruders. I could accept the branch through the screen, the rusted water pump, even the mouse droppings on the kitchen counter. But the Budweiser cans by the fire pit, waterlogged chip bag, and abandoned Zippo lighter-fluid tin meant fishermen—or worse, teenagers—had used the covey of rocks. Maybe they had simply stopped for a shore lunch or refuge from a storm. The cabin itself had not been broken into. But if the island was no longer off-limits, that might follow.

I cried then. The kind of crying you do alone when you have fed an irrational hope. When the last tiny childish flicker goes out.

Quarreling chipmunks ran by my feet. Not wanting my heart to bleed out, I made a tourniquet out of work. This going on I learned young. *We have to live for the living*, Dad had said while his age-spotted hands held mine and we turned from the mound of earth that had been my mother.

I swept the floors, patched the screen, and washed the dust from all the surfaces. While I heated up an expired can of soup to go with my emergency granola bar, I argued with myself. I ticked off all the reasons I shouldn't move here and keep the island company. It wasn't safe for a young woman alone. I couldn't chop wood worth shit. I tired of eating fish more quickly than almost all of my aunties—who swore they could eat it

every day. Being here, removed from the small city of Green Lake, would hamper my access to the information I needed to gather.

But then I lay under the white pines and napped on their bed of copper needles. This was the scent I had craved all the time I was away. None of the bottles of essential oils in the city boutiques smelled anything like their labels promised—none smelled like this.

I woke as someone braver or more foolish. I smudged the cabin, in case any evil lurked there. Then I answered my own worries in the decisive way I had learned in my mock trials at the U. I could have a friend or a cousin stay with me. Hell, I could borrow a dog. I knew how to shoot, how to use bear spray. Uncle had a season's wood stacked neatly behind the cabin. Who says I had to eat fish. I could stock up when I went to town.

And what about the research? The investigation was a reason to stay, not go. Maybe the clues were right here.

VII.

I had brought nothing for an overnight stay. My family would be worried if I didn't return. So before the sun got too low, I fixed the padlock, and on a whim, kissed the doorknob like I used to when I was a kid. Then I walked back to my kayak.

Just before the landing, I tucked the kayak into a bay. After I'd attached a plug, I added a dangling nightcrawler for extra enticement, and cast—aimed for the faster water near the outside of the bend. On my first cast, I had a follow. A skinny pike that darted away without biting. I repeated the maneuver. No luck. I checked my rig. Perfect. So I turned toward the weed bed, aimed at the sweet spot where the coontail and muskie weed came together. My imprecise cast landed too close—I might get a snag instead of a fish. But Nizhishenh's motto was *Weeds equal fish*. He loved the finesse of casting adjacent to weeds. "Your way, Uncle," I said as I tried again. Of course, Smoke Man's method came through.

Almost immediately, I had a strike. I jerked to set the hook and felt the heaviness as I continued to reel. A walleye. He came along smoothly, then dived. Pulled me back into the old game.

Forty minutes later, I had a happy stringer—three small walleyes and a respectable northern. But no trout. Trout are elusive, take more patience—

but they're prized for their flavor. *They taste like dream fish*, Nizhishenh used to say, *better than we can imagine while awake. Each one with the subtleness of hazelnut tea, the flavor of the sweet waters they swam in*.

Me, I liked fish, but I loved just being out on Inaabate, to float alongside the clouds, to watch the colors of sky and water both transform to pink at evening. I wanted it all—the eerie steam over morning waters, the rocking rhythm of a boat, the eagles perched like guardians, their fierce eyes penetrating all the way to your soul. Everything I could name—mineral scent of nibi, otters, conversing with the water lilies, frog song—filled me, and the everything I couldn't name kept me coming back.

The river had been kind today and given up some fish. Like I had been taught, I put down asemaa. I tried to feel grateful, but making the tobacco gift, I felt like a fraud. Hadn't the river also taken Nizhishenh from me?

I arrived home beat from the day. College had made me soft—ill prepared, not only for the physicality of fishing, but for all the real jobs. Still, I came bearing gifts. No loaves, but four fishes. I added to the pot in one way at least.

"Can I help you clean them, Auntie?" asked Jade. "I got a fillet knife for Christmas. Check it out." He displayed a small number whose blade looked like a fish body. Duly impressed, I voiced big wows that got him grinning.

Not to be overlooked, Sig chimed in, "Can I hold the heart? Can you get it out quick, Jade, so maybe it will still be beating?"

"Okay. But I get to cut open the stomach and look for minnows."

Winnie wisely called out, "Take it to the yard—and don't leave a mess!" Fish scales and fish stories filled the next hour. I was gleaming as proudly as the boys when we brought in tomorrow's supper, happy to have made this small contribution.

Later, from my porch bed I implored whatever gods were listening that I might also contribute a sliver of justice. I convinced myself at least one star winked its reassurance.

VIII.

I managed to avoid offering too many specifics about my trip to Winnie and the rest of the family. Yes, I visited the island. Mm-hmm. The cabin was in

good shape. No sign of bears. No big trees down. My answers satisfied—them, if not myself.

I would tell them about the beer-drinking visitors, but not before I worked out my plan and devised a plausible move-to-the-island strategy they would accept.

As often happens, the spirits gave me a push. Sherri discovered my "crazy-headed never-gonna-work-in-ten-donkey's-years peg-legged maneuvers" as she called my investigation plan. I had accidentally left my Smoke files at her trailer, and when I stopped by to retrieve them, I found her with a full ashtray and an owl scowl.

"And you were going to tell me this when, little cousin?"

I opened my mouth to lie but looked at her grasping a stack of the papers while one tear and then another tracked down her face. Instead, I shrugged and gave in.

"Uh, how about now?"

"Damn straight you will. Who the fuck you think you are, Bineshi? The Lone Ranger?"

And so, with Sherri's colorful comments steady as a humming radiator, I filled her in.

"I know everyone's … well uh, reluctant about digging into Uncle Smoke's death."

"Reluctant? Is that your polite college way of saying *chicken shit*, Cuz? It don't take a genius to see how the landmines all over this here situation might make anyone who valued their red skin *reluctant*."

I didn't know if she was testing me to see how much I would grovel or if my careful phrasing had actually crossed into the pompous range on her bullshit meter. Law classes may teach you how to finesse a jury, but nothing prepares you for the tightrope walk skins have to do with family when they come home with a diploma. "I get it, Sherri. Come on. I grew up here, too. Hasn't Johnson been tracking my every move since I got back?"

She ran her eyes slowly up and down my body, squinting as if I were a message too scribbled to make out. "Trackin' your moves, did you say?" Then she smiled her I-just-rolled-double-sixes smile and I knew we were okay. "Maybe you're givin' off some pheromones. I heard he's partial to musk."

"Seriously, you want to hear this, or no?"

“No. But I guess I better. Someone’s got to keep you and your beaver musk out of trouble.” She sat down then, crossed her legs, and took out her nail file.

“Yup. Okay. But don’t jump all over me and let me say right up front I have more questions than answers.” Going before a magistrate had nothing on letting Sherri in on my meandering investigation. When I told her of my digging into records—at the library, DNR, courthouse, and tribal offices, I think she mumbled “grubby little paper whore” under her breath, but I kept on. I outlined my theory about Twin Ports’ past, and likely current, water contamination and the potential legal (and monetary) consequences. I pretended not to hear her huff and the rhetorical questions she threw out like confetti: “White greed is a surprise, cousin? You think Twin Ports doesn’t have its fishhooks deep in the whole region? Where you been sleeping?” I just continued to spew all my facts and my worries, explained how those consequences made Uncle Smoke’s complaint, which drew attention to them, unwelcome. Sherri also continued with her asides. “Unwelcome? Fuck yes. He slept with a gun under his pillow for a year.” I wanted to ask about that, but couldn’t let myself get sidetracked. I made my case for needing to know how deep his investigation went and whether the information he uncovered endangered Twin Ports’ business. I wanted to know who exactly worked behind the scenes to bend environmental rules or smooth over infractions. “Slimy tribal backstabbers, that’s who. The same hang-around-the-fort betrayers that sold off lake land to resorts, our girl babies to top hats.” Her savvy assessment rang true. I knew she knew the same sad facts I did, lived torn between fight and safety. But, because of Nizhishenh’s death, I now knew how flimsy was that safety, how illusory. I looked at her straight on then, all apology gone from my voice when I told her I would not stop my investigation—could not, until I knew if the treachery he may have uncovered endangered him, may have caused his so-called accidental death. When I had finally finished speaking, sweat was running down my back and between my breasts.

Sherri was pacing. She called me some inventive names. *Wood tick of a turd* was my favorite.

I waited.

“Well shit,” she said. “Shit shit shit shit shit shit. SHIT.”

Then she sat down on the couch next to me and asked the one question I hadn't expected, "Well, is Uncle Smoke around to help us?" And just like that we were in it together, whatever it was.

I didn't answer her question and she didn't repeat it. But it stayed close like a ghost.

Finally, we talked about Uncle Smoke. Remembered our summer "camp" visits, his big ol' dog Frida, and the skills he taught us, never worrying that as girls we wouldn't be interested or would be unable to do the same things our boy cousins did.

We tramped around the woods, Nizhishenh storying the tracks, animal markings, medicines, and edible plants. The way I pictured the complex world he shared was as a honeycomb of invisible—twin of the physical—ready to feed us when we learned how to unlock that knowledge.

Sherri always had a more pragmatic approach. "Uh, maybe you should show us the nonedible plants, Uncle Smoke," she laughed. "I seem to attract trouble."

"True enough." His eyes crinkled as he laughed, too. We all three knew Sherri's lively nature wasn't welcome in every space and tended to land her in hot water at school. "Don't worry, my girl," he added. "Trouble can be a good teacher."

He did teach us the simple differences in foraging—false morels from the real, for example. I don't remember his encyclopedic details about color, scent, shape, and texture of the mushrooms, but both Sherri and I still recite *If it isn't hollow, don't swallow* when we are hunting. Through Uncle, we learned many ways to distinguish safety and value—of people, places, and the plants.

I had settled deep into my reliving of the long-ago summers, so when my cousin shouted "Fish fritters!" I jumped, banged my elbow, then groaned both from the stinging elbow and at the memory. Now Sherri made big googly eyes, did fish lips, and pointed both fingers at me.

"Not my fault," I protested, remembering my infamous cooking failure. Thick smoke and all of us coughing, even Frida. Then settling for popcorn for supper. "Seriously, it was that rancid lard. And don't even think we will be getting out the rolling pin. This is a low-maintenance expedition, remember?"

Sherri just waggled her eyebrows at me. I knew I would be eating (if not making) fish fritters within the week.

IX.

We had to fight our way out of a bunch of fleshy hugs the morning we set out for our "camping trip" to the island. That euphemism seemed the closest I could get to what we had in mind. And Winnie only agreed because Sherri was coming, too. Sherri surprised everyone but me with her willingness to forgo manicures and lattes.

As we drew close to Windigo's shoreline, we paused when we spotted a great blue heron fishing in the rocks and shallow pools. Sherri and I waited. The stalking drama never got old. We watched the slow ballet as the heron lifted reed-thin legs and crept forward. Then, though we expected it, we still jumped at the swift head dive. Sherri was duly impressed when the bird swallowed its prey whole. "Crazy! Look at that—the whole fucking body sliding down their skinny neck. They eat like C-Span after he's had a potent toke."

Lots of folks called the birds shitepokes, but Uncle said they had it wrong. He called them zhashagi in Anishinaabemowin and shypokes in English. "They hide and blend, but keep a keen eye out for danger—a sentinel bird. They lift off if wary and become a thin line in the sky—their legs straight out behind them." I figured we could use a sentinel about now. We let the heron finish its dinner before we docked.

For three days nothing happened. We swam, ate cabin food, watched the sunsets, dodged mosquitos, shivered when wolves howled, and sighed when loons did. We took out memory after memory and dusted it off. Sherri caught me up on the family gossip and I transformed my unfulfilling college jobs and screwy boyfriends into funny anecdotes.

"No way did you date a mortician!"

"Worse, a mortician in training."

"Stop. Don't make me picture you holding a hand that polished dead bodies." Sherri shook herself off as if dispelling the image.

"You don't polish them. Clyde said you have to massage them to ease the rigor mortis."

"Clyde? Clyde the Mortician? You are fucking with me, Bineshi."

I tried to continue, but Sherri held up her hand in a stop gesture. “No. No way. New subject,” she demanded as she sputter-laughed. “So that is college? I guess I didn’t miss much staying here.”

I know her, so I heard the wistfulness. “Sher, you’re queen here. The senior center couldn’t run without you AND all the old men would die of boredom if you and your perky breasts left. But you could …” I hesitated before stepping quietly into the serious zone. “You could still go. There are lots of students older than us.”

She hooked her eyes to that dream for maybe ten seconds. She said nothing at first, just jutted out her dimpled chin and nodded. We sat in that marsh silence, then she gave me a wink and added, “I’ll keep that in my change purse, little cousin, along with my spare condom and my emergency ten-dollar bill.”

During the cabin nights, we fell into the longtime cousinhood that had sustained us when her parents split up, when mine died two years apart, when the school cast us into the role of underprivileged so they could flex their charity muscles. We would start each night in separate rooms and end up in the same big bed, not wanting to leave an opening for regret.

Grief was a different thing. We didn’t pretend not to miss Uncle Smoke, whose presence seemed everywhere—in the vinyl records we played, in the rock garden, the canning jars of maple syrup, the sweet barrel sauna he built.

I had lived with him for months after my dad died and I was officially an orphan. Winnie became my legal guardian; Nizhishenh became my backbone. I drifted hazily through the first weeks. My life had become a dammed river—the ecosystem completely altered. Uncle Smoke handed me job after job. Nothing trivial. He put me completely in charge of the supply agreements with the local businesses. I set prices and delivery schedules. I learned about expected harvests, competitors, and overhead costs. Who but Uncle Smoke would turn key parts of their livelihood over to a green and grieving girl? But gradually it brought me back. I took pride in my wins. Uncle brushed off any errors. Together we debated. Plotted new products.

Nizhishenh was a simple woodsman, but he had understood my fragility. As I told Sherri about the work splint he had fashioned to help heal my sorrow, I grew more and more angry at whoever was responsible for his death. Still each carved decoy, every recipe in his handwriting brought him

back to us. We looked through his ledgers, laughing at the way he recorded everything down to flashlight batteries and tick collars.

We read aloud to one another. *Lamp wicks, $8.50 for a dozen, Bactine & gauze, $4.79; QuickJohn*, *$14.95*. That last one sent Sherri off on a rant about the merits of Johns—quick or otherwise. Suddenly, something jumped out at me: *Legal Consultation, St. Paul, gas, food, half-hour LC fee, total $140*. Legal consultation! But why St. Paul? Didn't he trust the Duluth lawyers? I looked at the date, October 2017, I kept looking and found another *LC* two weeks later. Then nothing until the following February. I tried to work out the timing. He contacted Minnesota Pollution Control in spring 2018 to challenge Twin Ports' water quality reports. This had to have been the preamble—him getting his ducks in a row.

I hadn't known the details when it happened—nothing about the specifics of the complaint, just broad strokes the *State Journal* supplied. *Local Landowner Challenges Water Study*. The article didn't say who wrote the complaint or if an attorney was involved. I also didn't know who threatened him, only that he had written contingency letters. One to each of his siblings, none to me or the other kids. He sent me a picture—Polaroid of him and Frida by the campfire, two ten-dollar bills, and a note saying he knew I was studying hard and didn't have to answer, promising he would keep the fire going until I got back.

It was a promise he couldn't keep.

Soon after the complaint became public, Uncle's identity was leaked. Life became complicated—and dangerous. Family pulled him to land. He was in the big house frying salt pork the morning I returned for my summer break. A loud card game was in progress, but he winked at me when I came in, gestured with his spatula to a chair at the table. I ignored the invitation to sit and bear-hugged him from behind.

"Hey, hey. No harassing the cook." Then he turned, wrapped an arm around me. Everyone had noticed my arrival by then and I was pulled into the hullabaloo that is a LaFronde family meal, so we didn't get to talk until later.

It wasn't the talk I wanted though. He promised to play it cool for a while. Assured me he was *safer with all the eyes on him—cuz who would chance a public revenge?* No secret confidences, no *if something happens* declarations.

“I made my play, Bineshi; now it’s their turn. Let them stew awhile and let’s just enjoy the summer. Poor Frida doesn’t like the bed here. Can she bunk with you?” Everything light and ordinary. None of the details. Nothing about his plans.

The summer moved on, and it seemed he was right. All contrition from Twin Ports Manufacturing. The incident seemed over. A week after I went back to school, he moved back to this island. What happened next remains mostly unclear.

X.

Small sabotages are the way Winnie explained it—some fouled gas. A boat “come loose” from its mooring. A grass fire at the landing. Winnie didn’t know or didn’t tell me if Smoke had tried to enlist tribal officials or—less likely—the police.

But now I wondered if there might be something in the paper I missed, some story hidden next to engagement announcements and school menus. Monday I would run into the library and to the tribal offices. Sherri could continue reading through Smoke’s records, and I would scour the microfiche. I had been reading targeted dates before; now I vowed to search each issue from fall 2018 until the “drowning” early the following spring. Then I would copy the RBC meeting minutes. Anyway, Reservation Business Committee minutes might make for great comedy when Sherri and I needed cheering. Nothing subtle about the tribal reps’ internal feuds over HUD housing, casino nepotism, and parking spots.

“BRING ME AN iced latte with mocha.” Sherri’s only direction when I readied to leave early Monday. “Scratch that, the ice would melt. Make it hot—I’ll ice it up here.” She looked skeptically at the fridge.

I promised I’d bring food, too, so she could just chill and look for more of Uncle’s papers. To save time, I took Uncle’s small motorboat. Guilty and a little worried, I left Sherri soaking her feet at the end of the dock. Her purple painted toenails looked like flashes of colorful aquarium fish in the grey water.

An uneasiness overtook me when I looked back at her jaunty wave. I was leaving my Indian Barbie cousin on an island—alone. I told myself I was being foolish to worry, but my knee-jiggling and nail-biting body refused to listen. So I hurried through the newspaper back issues. Pages and pages of local color, photos of prize heifers at the county fair and fast-pitch tournaments. Then one photo under a bicycle rally ad grabbed my attention. It showed some kind of Twin Ports ribbon cutting. In the background, in civilian clothes and holding a beer, stood Chief Nate Johnson half turned away, head ducked—like he didn't want to be photographed. Nothing else in the week before or after. But I left the library with my instincts about him validated.

He was in this. Had Uncle got in his way?

I honeyed my face before I dropped in at the tribal offices. They were used to my studious interests in rez government. I endured the usual teasing, but soon had access and hastily copied RBC meeting minutes to read later. My vague Sherri worries made my hands clumsy, too slow.

With a latte, chicken dinners from the diner, half an apple pie, and my accordion folder of documents, I made it back to the dock by four, only to find the boat gone. Was I so distracted by leaving Sherri alone? I thought back—boat rope through the metal hoop on the dock, pulled back, clipped with a carabiner. No, I remembered doing it just that way.

Someone did this deliberately—again. My thighs shook like they do on a long portage. Now though, the weight testing my strength was the confirmation that evil lurked, somewhere nearby. Damn the greedy hearts behind this. Sherri was across the water, maybe in danger. I gulped the air then, forced myself to blow it out slow—calm.

I walked to the river's edge and looked both directions along the shore. There sat the boat in river muck a few hundred yards away. I could swim to it, but wouldn't be strong enough to pull it loose of the muddy glop it was mired in. Calling Winnie or C-Span would for sure lead to them forbidding us from staying on the island. I fumed and stomped one more minute, then I called Sherri. She picked up immediately, but all I heard was dead air.

"Hey, Cuz, you there? Sherri? Can you hear me?"

Nothing. I walked back to my truck thinking the reception was bad. When I dialed again, no one picked up. If it hadn't been for the boat, I

would have written it off as crappy Northwoods service. But the creep up my back said no.

XI.

My mind went through a frantic list—who had a fast boat, who would come without asking questions? Suddenly, my phone buzzed. I looked at the screen—Sherri's number. Half afraid, half in relief, I answered.

"Someone was here," she whispered.

"What?"

"Here. At the dock, and at the door." She was crying a little, but softly.

"Are they gone?"

"I hid behind the wardrobe."

I needed her to get a grip, so I baited her. "With the spiders?"

"That's your question? Do you have scales for ears? Someone was on the island!"

I was glad to hear her voice had steadied. "I know, honey. I need to know if they're gone now."

"I'm not sure. I think so. That's why I called. I couldn't talk before. I didn't want them to hear me—to find me. I hid."

"Behind the wardrobe. I know. Can you come out now?"

"I think I'll wait until you get here."

I sighed. Whoever did this had a lot of payback coming. "Sherri, listen. The boat is kinda stuck."

"The boat. Is stuck? What did you do?"

"I'll explain later, but I need you to come to the landing with a heavy rope. I mean sturdy—a sturdy rope."

"But *you* have the boat. I can't come."

"You can take my kayak. The paddle is in it."

"You know I can't."

I did know. Sherri got claustrophobic in the kayak and she didn't like the motion of a small watercraft. "Okay, the Scanoe then."

"No."

"Sherri, I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important. I can't call anyone on this side or I'll mess up the investigation."

“Someone was on the island. Duh—I think the investigation is already messed up.”

We didn’t have time to go into all that. I sighed, then took a breath about to concede and say I’d call C-Span when I heard her again. “Bineshi, I’m afraid.”

“Me too.”

“Can’t we just turn it over to someone, well—professional?”

“Not yet, Sherri. We don’t know who we can trust. You can take my pickup once you get here and go back to town, I just need you to help with the boat—promise.”

“Me think you big fucking liar, Ke-mo-sah-be.”

Before I could decide if I was okay to laugh, I heard her deadpan. “I’ll take the *canoe*. The Scanoe moves like you do after a feast—heavy and slow.”

We worked out the details. Then I waited. Turned on my truck and charged my phone, just in case. I also texted C-Span—just in case.

C you at home?

He answered right away. *Yah. Need something?*

I typed *No*, then erased it and typed, *Maybe, but not this minute*.

K. I’m just skinning your Little Uncle in cards. I’ll be here. Making zooniya!

I texted a thumbs-up and a laughing emoji; felt a little steadier. Then I remembered Sherri’s food. Damn. I went back to where I had left it. The pie was a little squished; otherwise everything was fine. I took it back to the truck, where it would be safe from critters and flies.

XII.

Twenty-five minutes later, I was at the dock watching Sherri approach. The canoe wavered—first left, then right. Its bow was pointing up. I had forgotten to remind her she needed counterweight. I broke down—half laughing, half crying with relief. My beautiful prissy cousin was paddling toward me. Safe. And—if I was reading her face correctly—fuming.

When she crashed the canoe into the dock, I reached down to help her up. She swatted my hand away.

“What?!” I asked. Then I was laughing for real. Her eyes were rimmed with melted mascara, her capris splattered with mud. I looked closer. “Is that, is that bird poop?”

“Fuck you. Go ahead, laugh.” And then came her unique curses, a string of them. She ended with, “I hope your smile wrinkles get so deep you fall in. I hope the next time you eat ice cream you get brain freeze so bad it starts the next ice age.” While she cursed me, I splashed off the bird poop. Finally, she petered out. The last thing she said before climbing up on the dock and falling into my arms was “Where is my fucking coffee?”

I removed some weeds from her hair as I held her. I hated to push, but we also had to get a move on. I tentatively stood up. “Can you …”

She sighed. Looked down at the wreck her clothes were in. “Why not. Can’t get much worse.”

“Sher, you’re the bomb. I’ll make it up to you. Promise.”

She shook her head like a long-suffering cousin had a right to do.

IT TOOK US forty-five grueling minutes. I was covered in mud and slime because I had trudged through the muck with a rope in my teeth to reach the stuck boat and yoke it to the canoe. Both of us had mosquito bites on top of mosquito bites because we hadn’t dared stop paddling once we were towing the boat out far enough to free the prop.

“Towing a boat with a canoe—can you be more rez?” Sherri had regained her sense of humor, partly because I looked like the beast from the black lagoon and partly because she had had her coffee—neither hot nor iced, but coffee nevertheless.

After each crawling carefully into the boat, we were on our way back to the island. I was still mulling over my decision to return, but we couldn’t leave the place now that we had flushed someone out—somebodies, if Sherri heard what she thought she did. Voices. More than one and not trying to be quiet. Almost like they wanted to be heard, I thought. My poking around had clearly ruffled some feathers. But how concerned were they? Was today just a little mischief to scare us off, or did they have something else planned? Uncle had gone back to the island after being warned away by “mischief.” And Uncle had gotten killed.

XIII.

Sherri was still high on the adventure of the day. “Let’s dive in real quick to clean up. Then you fire up the sauna while I warm up the chicken and the, ah, apple mush. I’m starving. Paddling is for morons. Who would do that for a sport? Then after dinner we can sit in the sauna with some wine and soothe our pitiful muscles. Sound good?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Bineshi? You okay? Did you pull something back there?”

“No. Just starving like you said. And tired.”

WE HAD TAKEN a swim, put on dry clothes, eaten a big dinner, and were in the sauna with the promised wine when Sherri said, “Oh shit. I almost forgot. I found something. It was in my capri pocket. Don’t worry, I put it in a ziplock just in case.”

“What? What did you find?”

“I think it was meant to be a bribe or maybe it was a threat—but anyway a letter to Uncle Smoke wanting to *reach a deal* and then some gobbledygook I didn’t really understand. Next to that was an official-looking report with a seal and everything. But anyway, get this, Uncle had written on the outside envelope of the letter—*Chief of Pirates*. I think it was supposed to be a joke, but it made me wonder. Could *Chief of Pirates* be like a slam, you know, making fun of Chief Johnson?”

“You mean Nate the Snake? Show me? Let’s go inside, cuz I found a few things, too. If you’re right about the chief, then they make more sense.”

Folded inside the plastic Sherri had thankfully zipped it into, away from the muck and water we had encountered that afternoon, was a tidy packet of words that had set off a panic at Twin Ports, a panic that had led finally to Uncle Smoke’s death. My fingers tingled where I held the pages. I skimmed, and the room swam a little. “This is it, Sher,” I whispered, my relieved tension leaking out as tears.

“This is it, what? Don’t you crap out now. You got us into this hugger-mugger tale, little cousin.”

I started to smile as her verbal momentum built.

“No time for fucking secrets. Put on your big-girl pants and spill.”

As it always had, her colorful nagging bucked me up. "*This* is it," I said, holding up the document. "You found what we have been looking for, Sher. This is the nail in their corporate coffin."

Only five pages long, but definitive. The evidence Uncle must have paid for himself. A water clarity report made *separately* from the one done by Twin Ports Manufacturing. A water quality report the thugs and Nate the Snake needed to keep quiet. And, according to the letter Sherri had found that afternoon, a report they had tried to bribe him to suppress.

An hour later, we had fitted together most of the puzzle pieces. If Nizhishenh's privately contracted water quality report contradicted theirs and proved Twin Ports had tampered with the monitoring, that could mean prison time or big money for multiple CWA violations. While Sherri braided and unbraided her hair, I got on the phone to C-Span. No longer confident that the afternoon's events were just pranks and no longer sure we could do this on our own, I filled him in, asked him for some overnight backup, and asked him to get in touch with Nizhishenh's contact in St. Paul and the tribal police—not Johnson or his cronies.

The complete unraveling would take a few days—"Even too fuckin' seedy for Judge Judy" is the way Sherri summed it up. But, because we had irrefutable evidence safely in the hands of the tribal police, for once we had state officials who believed us.

The newspaper story that ultimately came out in the *Green Lake Times* and the *State Journal* said little about the part Sherri and C-Span and I played in exposing the Twin Ports' skulduggery. But it did end up on the front page. Not once, but three times. Once when the arrests were made. Once when Twin Ports got slammed with more fines and warnings. Once when Nate the Snake and Walter Byerly, the Twin Ports' honcho, were sentenced.

The whole scenario should become a TV movie, but essentially, the two hooked their greed to the same sail when Chief Johnson went to investigate Smoke's complaint about the leech traps. Cloak and dagger from there, but the chief needed to be "convinced" that he didn't see what he really saw and once the money started flowing, they just kept figuring out ways to keep the tap on.

I'd feel sorry for Nate because Byerly ended up kind of leading him around by his nose, if I didn't hate the bastard for the part he played in

Nizhishenh's death. That story haunts me. The ice was not even fully out yet when it happened. Uncle would never have been messing around in a kayak in the current knowing the ice could shift at any moment. He and Frida always stayed put during freeze-up and break-up. Smoke did his books, caught up on his reading, wrote letters. But the chief called him out to help with "an emergency" and that was the night he died. We may never know the exact details and maybe I don't want to, but Byerly gave up that part of the story in a plea bargain.

I sort of crumpled on the tail end of the whole black disclosure and Sherri was the one shoring me up. I guess the Frost claim about home is true after all. I'd been taken in by Winnie and C-Span and Sherri. Well fed, well teased, and well loved.

XIV.

We never told anyone this next part and may never. Unless Sherri's with me to share the memory, I don't chase it.

That night, when C-Span was sleeping in his canoe keeping watch, and Little Uncle was standing by on land, the bad guys didn't show up, but something shattering did happen. Sherri and I tried to stay awake in shifts, but somehow dozed off and then were awakened by the river calling. I mean it.

With all the exercise, we had been completely zonked. We had both fallen asleep. And then at dawn we heard someone calling us—not our regular names, but the names we had been given by Uncle. I don't mean nicknames, but our spirit names. We hardly ever talk about those names or the night he gave them—even to one another. The way things are now, someone could use them or steal them or twist them. I don't mean to sound like a total misanthrope, but we were both a little soured on the selling and parading of our culture, so we just kept the names to ourselves. Ourselves and Nizhishenh. Then he was gone and it seemed sometimes like the spirits had gone, too. Then they called us. Or at least the spirit of Nibi. I mean in words.

"Bineshi." Sherri reached over to nudge me, but I was already sitting up.

"I hear it, Sher."

I slipped a sweatshirt over my head. Sherri pulled a blanket around her shoulders like a dance shawl. We sat in bed listening, our bodies tuning to the presence. We looked at one another, simultaneously shook our heads in an *I don't know* gesture. Then a low chant filtered into the room. I tried to believe the night coming alive like that was a dream—except we were both inside it.

The soft steady sound reminded me of distant powwow drums. Their aching call when you are walking toward the arena after having been away too long. I hungered that lonely way until Sherri covered my hand with hers, covered it with a corner of the blanket shawl. It reminded me I wasn't alone—we weren't alone and we would never be left entirely.

The way I remember, we didn't talk again or decide what to do. We just both got up, took tobacco, and followed the grassy path down to the water like sleepwalkers. The cool dew startled our bare feet, awakened our senses to the glittering dawn canvas. Pine scents, the skitter of small bodies, then the vision.

The fog lay heavy that morning over the water, but it wasn't the fog dancing. I've seen that before. The river rose up like a body. I don't mean waves splashed. I mean a grey-blue body beckoned to us, then danced and sang. Beside me, Sherri gasped. Then we fell out of time. For three, maybe four, minutes we stood together and simply received that song before we remembered to put down the asemaa.

When we stood again, Sherri looked at me, her eyes big as the dome of sky, her cheeks damp. We wove our fingers together like the buried roots of mitigoog and held one another upright. No other sign came, but we stayed, watched while the sun burned off the fog. Our awe did not disperse, but settled like a stone into our watery bodies. We savored the river's voice. Even Sherri had nothing to add.

Finally, she blew out a long "Whoa." Then she bent to the river again, filled her hands, and brought the water toward her mouth. I thought she was going to drink, but instead she splashed her face and spread the icy morning nibi over her skin like a smudge or a lotion.

I, too, had few words yet. I whispered the only one that seemed appropriate, "Aho."

I GO BACK and forth on what I think it all meant. Maybe Inaabate Ziibi sang an apology for taking our Uncle Smoke. Maybe the river was Smoke—you know, transformed. Maybe he wanted us to know he would remain with Ziibi.

Nothing much changed after that night—Sherri is still the queen of cursing and I remain a nerd—a nerd trying to get a job with the tribal court system. We both still love Windigo Island and the smoky river we sometimes call Uncle. Though we keep pretty quiet about it, we believe we have some evidence the river loves us back.

The Making of Monsters

I.

Before the deserts marched north, we scared one another with water monster stories. Around fires on the shore of Gichigami we unspooled tribal tales as old as the ledgerock. I began replicating their fearful images in the sand, slowly building the stories. Other tellers elaborated on the gruesome details, trying to top one another. Though we pretended to scoff, no one went into the night lake alone.

"Like a snapping turtle closing on your leg," my cousin June Bug said of the monster's storied bite.

"Hell, you could just piss on him. The smell of your zhigiwin would make him gag." Ziib downed most of his beer and then, pretending to pee, poured the last drips on June Bug's feet.

They scuffled on the sand like crayfish—June Bug brown and round as his namesake, Ziib thin and swift as the river, ziibi. Their rowdiness seemed almost ritualized—acted out regularly, it balanced the homegrown tensions with which we all lived. Afterward, we settled back into silence, watching the water lift and crash against the shore, then slowly recede. I accepted both as natural rhythms.

My family life, too, alternated between fury and peace. It explained my chewed nails, my scavenging for spirit stones along the shore.

"Hey, Namid, you got more?"

"More?"

"Stories," said June Bug.

“Beer,” said Ziib.

We all laughed then, and threw sand snowballs as we dodged among the rocks. Sand doesn’t hold together for long, but we weren’t much after damage. Not in those days.

In our high school years, amid the usual rez traumas—alcohol deaths, drunken uncles, and dancing around the race line—the cavernous whirlpools of Mishibizhii had seemed more legend than threat. Had our teenage laughter mocked the spiky-backed creature? Was it payback time?

Weather became the new scandal. Stories spread about fifteen-hour rains, mudslides pushing tourist houses off the cliffs. Just as it had swallowed ships like the *Edmund Fitzgerald* and kept their secrets, Lake Superior now became a graveyard to gilt-edged furniture, collections of “Indian” art, the framed faces of immigrant trespassers. Fires followed floods on our tongues—lightning strike, dead fuel, crown fire, indefensible space—like we were learning a new language.

Mr. Nolan talked climate change in fifth-hour Life Science. Our wild rice partners worried about disruptions to the germination of manoomin in the warming temperatures. Yet I don’t think anyone believed something more terrifying than shrinking waters awaited us. No science or religion could have predicted the Lilliputian lives we now live.

In the survival years that followed, the lake sound of waves crashing, crescendo followed by calm, played like theme music in my head as we faced off with one unimaginable danger after another. While local priests and pastors opened their Bibles and preached Armageddon, scientists shrieked about weather patterns and tsunamis. Old-timers opened their tobacco pouches. They stood between us and the spit of the great underwater panther—with songs, with offerings, they made themselves pitiful.

WHEN THE WATERS beneath Mishibizhii receded to uninhabitable levels, when the rhythm of the tides ceased, everyone along the great lake watched warily for what might happen next. The lullaby of waves on ledgerock, waves on ledgerock had soothed our sleep. Now we lay awake to the

squawk of seagulls who fought day and night for the decaying bodies of fish.

"I don't know what's worse," my dad said, "the fucking bird noise or the stench." He lifted his ball cap and seemed to peer inside for answers before smoothing his greying hair and putting the cap firmly back in place. He fell into the story then. "My grandpa remembered fish floating to the surface after a torpedo sank an enemy boat in the war. He seemed more haunted by their pale wasted bodies then by all the men who went down with the destroyed boat. I never understood. Jeezus, Namid, I thought he was a bastard mourning the fish over the men. But lookit this massacre." His arm arced over what had been Gichigami, our Great Lake—the graveyard of rotting fish, of carcasses and bones.

He cried softly then. The pockets of his flannel held smokes. I knew I could harvest asemaa and make an offering to some god or other. But all the old songs had fled with the waters, and I knew no way to soothe him.

That night, like many nights in the early days of the transformed world, insomnia or fear had brought us both to the shore. Like him, I often traveled the rivers of story when something in the present troubled me. So we came the way you return to an accident site, trying to piece together a tale that will help you move on. Turns out, the world did not yet have a plotline that featured shrinking waters and the chain reaction of dying and fear, dying and fear that follows.

As the waters disappeared, while my father's tears remained close, my mother turned all her fear into work. With a warrior's vision, she understood the loss of the lake as a threat to our livelihoods—pushed families to build up their food supply. So each household gathered and dried, gathered and dried giigoonyag, building stores for the unknown future. Now each hour of unknown chipped away at our nerves. We breathed in and exhaled an air dense with anticipated danger.

THE TOWERING HORNS emerged first. Mishibizhii walked slowly from the mythic caverns where he had once made his home. Eons streamed by in the time it took for Nimaamaa to gasp with recognition. The panther's spikes glistened in the relentless new sun. One was foreshortened, perhaps broken

in battle. The lopsided toss of his spotted feline head should have been seen behind the protective bars of a twenty-first-century wildlife enclosure or safely in a digital image in a movie theater. But like the long-ago dinosaurs, he tromped from Gichigami and crossed the drying mud. The bewildered roar with which he shook our world echoed our own displacement.

We might have found a way to live in peace with the underwater panther turned land animal, but with each step his squat legs grew and grew. Soon he stood taller than the bobcat, taller than the northern cougar, taller even than bizhiw, the lynx who some say gave him his name. You must imagine for yourself the squat panther legs becoming elephantine, his rakish cat grin growing broader and broader as his teeth lengthened.

Perhaps we could have killed the monster in his first moments of emergence, before he grew to King Kong proportions. History books always name external forces as the cause for destruction—scorched-earth campaigns or the atomic bomb—but if we live to tell it, our history will say mystification and wonder took us down. No one made a move against him—how could we, when he was the manifestation of treasured stories?

By the time his dark temperament became apparent, we had waited too long. Our weapons would have been like toys against his brute strength.

Two women of the tribe, Cold Shell and Lu, floated out of our still-mesmerized flock. Older than me, more daring than most of the grown men, in ribbon skirts they spun like leaves before the beast. Lu played a small hand drum to which they danced. “Weya hey heeay. Weya hooa,” she sang. She wore a feather in her hair, an affectation that I secretly loved and longed to imitate. My feet tapped softly in the sand as she sang and smiled up at Mishibizhii. We all held our breath when he bent to sniff her hair, but her song and smile never wavered. “Giiwenamaw,” she sang. Then suddenly the animal flicked his head and a single sharp horn pierced the soft flesh of Lu’s belly. When he lifted his head, her lithe body remained on the horn like a wiener on a stick. The fabric of her skirt floated around her—a flag of surrender raised too late.

I ran then. The memory of it shames me, but I ran and most of my friends followed me. We left the most beautiful girl in our community hung and dying on a make-believe creature’s spiky flagpole. Most of the tribe retreated to their homes, only to realize the walls were too flimsy, the scents of their drying fish too tempting, their few weapons inadequate.

II.

Like moles, we hollowed a refuge. Brittle-boned elders crept into the underground chambers of an old icehouse. To make room for more relatives, they spooned. I imagined them as young lovers—melted together. My tears stayed close now and this fantasy, too, caused the missing lake water to spill from my eyes. Would any of us ever have time for love again? Or leisure to fondle and couple, bodies spent under the lustful moon?

"Howah, you still have bazookas," my uncle Ting teased my aunt as they squeezed in among old friends. "Can't you tuck 'em in a little bit, Niimi?" Uncle still called her by the nickname he had given her when she was itty and would dance from foot to foot whenever she was anxious. Now they all had to find another way to quiet their nerves. Soft teasing words like Uncle's kept their spirits up.

I turned from the pitiful hope we had built. Counted the days until the hungry panther's claws began to dig for our sacred cache. I tried not to picture our tribal teachers trapped, their fingers, leathered feet, or chanting lips in Mishibizhii's insatiable jaws.

For I swear he had learned to read our most hidden thoughts. In my mind I pictured trees. Hazelnut bushes. The dried swamp. I worked to focus on these decoy images. Pines. Squirrels. Not nimishoomis. Not a dark hideaway in the damp clay earth.

A few miles away, more of our desperation showed. Former war veterans had fixed on jungle tactics. So we lined a small basin with embedded spikes, then camouflaged the top to look like regular ground—covered it with leaves, sprinkled dandelion fluff and anything else light and earthy. We would use scent to lure the giant. Despite having become an accomplished mammal hunter, Mishibizhii still favored fish, so we took donations from our clans' private stores. The most potent of the smoked fillets were suspended by fishing line. The filament no more noticeable than the strands of a spider's web.

While the trappers sat in wait for the monster, I kept watch near Waazh Bezhig, the name we'd given to our first underground lair. I wondered if we would survive to build more. I wondered if our lives would really move underground as the tribe planned.

As I fingered the pistol I had borrowed from June Bug, I longed for my familiar and more powerful deer rifle, whose trigger spring had recently broken. I added *spare parts* to the list of tools and weapons we lacked, a list that also featured diminishing food staples. Mental inventories kept me awake while on guard. Tonight, I also listed things I would rather be doing: *Touching the hair of Mauve (my current crush), eating hot bakwezhigan spread with sweet butter, eating fresh raspberries (hell, eating anything other than the gruel that kept us going now), swimming on a warm fall day and listening to the migrating birds fly by …*

I SMELLED HIM before I heard him—something rancid had been trapped among Mishibizhii's scales and because no water large enough for him to swim in existed anymore, he had little chance of eradicating the smell. His own foul scent seemed to irritate the monster and he would beat his tail against his body, rake his claw over his own face, and roar, or roll on his back and try to rub the smell away.

As the thud, thud of his heavy feet came nearer, I also smelled my own sweat. The stink of fear had lived on me for weeks, but now the sour scent of despair clung like dollar-store perfume. He would find me and my weak excuse for a mind would give away the hiding place of my family. My pistol would be a popgun against a giant like him, a misaabe whose scales would repel the tickle of a bullet.

As a guard, I was positioned on a rock outcropping above the hill into which the icehouse and now Waazh Bezhig had been built. I looked left. An old oak stood ready to aid my escape. But the gnarled lower branch from which I could gain purchase was at least six inches out of my reach. Beyond that, nothing big enough to hide or shield me. To my left, a stand of tamaracks. Some stood golden in their fall beauty, some already half bare of needles. No help.

I looked again at the small gun in my hand—useless really except for signal, for bringing someone else to my aid. I pointed the gun skyward, ready to summon backup. But to what end? To bring others to die alongside me? Slowly, I lowered the pistol.

I had retained few of the ancient prayers, but I remembered the Grandfather teachings of our Ojibwe nation and their manifestation in animal spirits. Should I call on Makwa, the bear spirit for bravery—aakwa'ode'ewin? As I turned the gun over in my hand and the thudding step and stench of the beast came nearer, I could not be certain if it was my hand or another that raised the pistol to my head. But how else could I keep the safe house safe? I would count to four and if Mishibizhii kept coming toward me, then somehow I would find the courage Lu had shown in her dance and pull the trigger.

Bezhig ... niizh ... niswi ... He had paused. I could see his feline ears perk and listen. I heard nothing. Fuck, fuck, please don't let it be noise in the underground tunnels. No, something or someone was crashing through the brush, not attempting to hide their approach. The misaabe lumbered off in the direction of the noise, back the way he had come.

The next few minutes are gone from my memory. Did I faint? Did I stifle sobs? Next thing I knew, I was shivering in my clothes, which had soaked through with sweat. I was on the ground leaning against the oak and in the hand that had held the pistol was a medicine bag. It had the mark of a makwa manidoo on the leather. I knew the bear was one of our warrior clans, as were martin, lynx, and wolf. Was this a new kind of war? We had not called on Waabizheshi, Bizhiw, Ma'iingan, or Makwa, maybe afraid even the old clan warriors might succumb to this new enormous Mishibizhii.

Now I wondered if we were wrong to try to fight the beast only on the physical level. Had we lost faith in the spirits, the older knowledge? I had plenty of time to ponder as I kept my watch. Nothing else disturbed the night except a couple of hungry raccoons and a potent-smelling skunk. The small leather bag burned in my hand. Afraid to open it, I felt the outline of small hard objects inside. Finally, I tied it around my neck—satisfied for the moment to believe in this amulet.

Ziib limped as he came to fetch me the next day. Cloth strips that bound his leg at knee level bore the mark of dried blood. Still, he approached like the clown he had once been—a grin on his face, pounding his chest, "Me Tarzan. You see, Jane?"

"I see a one-legged idiot. What the fuck happened?"

“Tarzan brave,” he answered, keeping up the play. “Tarzan fall in pit to test spikes. Spikes work.”

“You fell? In the pit we built for the misaabe? How? And the pit … ?”

He had reached me now and lowered himself to sit beside me, his injured leg stretched long and straight out in front of us. *Like a blood-stained arrow*, I thought. *But pointing where?*

“Pit’s fine. They think the smell of my blood might help attract Mishibizhii.” He flashed me a crooked smile. I could see the effort it took.

“Messed up, man.”

“Tell me about it. It’s like falling into my PS5. Like *The Last of Us* is the only game in the store.”

I thought about last night. About the comfort of the medicine bag hanging near my heart.

“Thing is,” Ziib said, his voice breaking a little, “Namid, in this game, we only get one fucking life.”

III.

In that little heart-to-heart with Ziib, I never told him about my own night terror, about what I now understood as a rescue by Makwa. I realized then that this new world had layers and layers of nightmare—and barely enough room for a little hope.

If I could do nothing else, I promised myself to feed only the hope. I didn’t know if the pouch I wore held precious gems like hope, joy, and courage, or if it was meant to capture my fear and keep it from paralyzing me. Either way, I understood now the way warriors in the old stories had kept their own counsel, hadn’t burdened the community with their pain or despair. I thought again of Lu’s dance—not the way it ended on the horns of Mishibizhii, but the defiant beauty of it.

Let us all go down dancing.

I figured I would need a mantra in the days ahead. That one seemed as good as any.

Turns out, we didn’t have long to wait, nor long to prepare for the full-on explosion of our before-world. As Mishibizhii depleted ready food like our small mammal relatives, hunger and fear escalated, and hiding became the tribe’s new long-term strategy. The daily dark and powerless waiting

drained us. Depression and suicide became our other most dangerous adversaries. If Ziib and I went into the chaos with a little youthful bravado still clinging, we lost that video-game fantasy soon enough. The blood and dirt were real. The deaths, too. And, as Ziib had lamented—no one got up and had a do-over.

Mishibizhii did not discriminate. He made meat of children who had sneaked away from their parents' careful watch. He ate the game we snared for ourselves and feasted on those who insisted on using the old outhouses instead of humbling themselves to crap in the close quarters belowground.

And while the misaabe grew more monstrous from devouring our families, our new underground tribe grew thin with hunger. Food was scarce, as were our trips to the sunlit world to hunt and gather.

One forty-degree day, Ziib and I went with June Bug and his parents to their old house to scavenge for any remaining canned food and tools that might be turned into usable weapons. Auntie Waabizii and Uncle Jon were going to check the shed, and the three of us descended into the musty cellar. We unearthed not only a few dented cans, but a waterlogged *Playboy* we had stashed there when we were ten and used the small room as a clubhouse. In their sopping and crumbled state, the images of naked bodies looked more grotesque than seductive—too much like the decomposing remains we regularly buried now. Still, we turned the pages, mesmerized by this relic of our innocence.

Then Waabizii screamed. To our credit, we didn't hesitate to turn away from the tiny safety of the cellar, the refuge of our memories. Armed with tomato soup cans and our pitifully ineffective guns, we rushed upstairs, through the house, and toward the work shed at the back of what had once been June Bug's family garden. Waabizii sat dazed on the cement slab in front of the door while Uncle Jon bounced away on the ground behind a retreating Mishibizhii. The scene seemed almost comical at first, June Bug's dad riding an invisible sled over the rocks and hillocks of the wooded path. Then we realized the giant had a handful of his braid and was dragging Uncle Jon as if he were a pull-along toy. As his body repeatedly hit the hard ground and his flesh tore, Uncle Jon's screams of pain rose like dust in his wake. Then they stopped. He began singing his death song, a haunting lament and farewell. His prayer to walk straight and his baamaapii stuttered in and out with his remaining breath.

We didn't talk about it after—not among ourselves and not to the gossips who still thrived among us. But somehow the story came out, was whispered from person to person. How it took Ziib and me and June Bug's mom to hold him back when he wanted to try to rescue his dad. How the four of us made a fire right there despite the misaabe, offered prayers and directions so Uncle Jon's soul wouldn't wander. June Bug and Waabizii both cut their hair, so when we came back to the underground lair, they wore the truth louder than words—death had found their family.

Now our niiji June Bug shuffled around like an old man himself—like someone waiting for their grave. We took turns keeping watch over him but spent no words on pretense. We'd learned to look squarely at the truth, at the terrifying.

I still wore the medicine bag. In my darkest moments, I wondered what separated the brave from the foolhardy. Would this talisman teach me the difference?

GRADUALLY, THE CAVERNS had been enlarged, the entrance and emergency exits given every protection we could devise. Just as in the old world, where families would huddle in a middle room away from windows when a tornado was approaching, we deemed this the best we could do against the new threat. We went about our days quietly and cowered in our own dark dreams at night.

The pit scheme seemed less and less viable each time something else fell in and the surface had to be repaired. Subdued by the failure and desperate for some alternate plan that didn't require resources we no longer possessed, our war councils continued underground now. All the adults, men and women, gathered. Ziib, June, and I, as new young warriors, sat at the outside edge of the circle. We listened and didn't speak. Opinions varied, and talk sometimes turned volatile. As weeks wore on, the plans grew more and more desperate.

Sometimes, my mind drifted. I remembered sunrise mornings with my parents when we went on fishing trips to Strawberry Island. Coffee perked while steam on the lake lifted. We cooked yesterday's fish, each sharpened branch holding a fillet. Skillet biscuits raised and browned. The scents of all

this mingled with pine as the water glistened and woodpeckers drummed nearby.

I ate more memories than food now. Drank the past like it was mint tea.

IV.

One evening, I heard my mother and father's voices during the council meeting.

"Let me try," she urged Ndede. He only scoffed and tried to hush her.

The ojimaag paused their talk. "What is this?" asked the oldest chief.

"Forgive us," my dad answered. "This is just a small family dispute."

"A dispute you raise during our time together?" The question sounded like reprimand, as had been intended.

"Gaawiin," said my mother. "It is for all of us. I have an idea."

"Mikwam, you have foolishness," my father retorted, trying to silence her with his eyes.

"Let us hear this idea." The chief spoke slowly, as if we had years to find a way, as if our clan members were not being murdered and eaten each day, as if we did not sit beneath a time bomb. Suddenly, he glanced my way. "We live in challenging times," he said as if in answer to my thoughts. Several of those in the inner circle nodded or murmured a quiet *aho*. Now the eyes of the old man sought my father's. "In this topsy-turvy, maybe foolish ideas will become the most wise." He smiled understandingly at my dad before he nodded to my mother—his invitation to speak.

She stood—Mikwam, my mother. You could have easily believed just then in the root meaning of her name—ice. Cool and calm, she faced the council. Despite the scarcity of water and grooming tools in our underground world, my mother still managed tidy hair and a passably clean ankle-length skirt, blue floral appliquéd with black thunderbirds. It escaped no one that this woman's Animikiig clan had been created by Nanabozho to fight the underwater panther. Traditionally, Mishibizhii and Animikii, the underwater panther and the sky thunderer, offset one another, created a balance.

Now she stood and showed no fear as she carefully laid out her plan. "Mishibizhii has become monstrous," she began. "The tribe knows one other monstrous figure. That one—the Evil Gambler or Windigo—

welcomes visitors. Indeed, Windigo pleasures himself with those who come for games of chance." She smiled as if she were proposing a simple card game.

"And when they lose?" my father demanded.

Her smile stayed put and she made steady eye contact with him when she answered. "He eats them, of course."

Those gathered emitted a collective gasp, but my mom continued as if she hadn't heard it. "He has been bested before. I feel certain I can beat him at his own game—with wit and flattery."

My father wasn't yet done. "Tell them, Mikwam, what you hope to win."

My mother turned to the front row in the circle and looked intently at each elder seated there. "It is true," she said. "I don't go to the gambler for riches as have many before me. I want one prize—his child." A roar went up in the room when she stated this flatly. "Think of it," she commanded. "I could bear a child who might grow big enough to banish the misaabe who now terrorizes our people. We might even be able to breed a race of holy giants."

Silence descended on the room when she sat back down. Then my father spoke. "Mikwam, my wife, begs me to let her go belly-to-belly with the evil cannibal. She says her binesiwag ancestor spirits will guard her. I, too, honor the great raptor ancestors from which my wife descends, but I fear the serpent-sized wiinag of Windigo will poison her and any offspring. And how can this tiny ikwe bear a monster's child? Surely it will destroy her."

Before that moment in council, I could not have imagined the world might turn yet farther on its axis, farther away from the sunny sane days of my childhood. Yet here was my mother asking the tribal leaders to let her become an adulteress, asking for permission to mate with what had previously been the most evil being any of us could imagine.

No amulet, no brave stoicism could hold back the retching that overtook me now. I bent over, my body racked by the dry heaves. My mother, who knew all the sounds my body makes, broke from the meeting then to hurry toward me. "Namid," she pleaded in her most soothing voice. I stood ready to leave. Then, for only the second time in my life, I collapsed.

V.

I woke unbelieving. The bizarre world where a woman might willingly go to the den of a cannibal must be the stuff of nightmare. Yet when I opened my eyes, it was not my mother but my father who was wiping my brow with a cool cloth. Unable to speak, I filled my eyes with the question and flung it at him.

My dad shook his head and shrugged resignedly. “The council asked me to make a man’s sacrifice.”

Though I closed my eyes, the many paths to madness loomed before me. Was there a single narrow trail that might lead through?

In the old stories, our ancestors made offerings to Mishibizhii for safe passage. Yet I don’t remember any of them offering omaamaayan—the woman who gave them life.

On the other side of this tunnel through dystopia, my mother might give birth to our future, my dad might hold my half-sibling, a child as big as the dream of survival. I pictured a child with slate eyes and a copper heart—a heart no cannibal could devour. But will the heart that beats in the half-beast recognize us as relations?

VI.

You who hear this story know a truth about the making of monsters that we could not discern in those past days. Yes, a misaabe can spit and harass, Mishibizhii can spear and eat and digest our pitiful bodies. But the most terrible monster any of us met in those years or these came in the form of the big unanswerable questions. Who should sacrifice for whom? Who matters more? What will we learn of spirit, and what is there to hold on to when the tornadoes ravish memory?

Some of us made it through. We sit again around a fire—Nibi again our neighbor. Yes, the waves crash and recede, crash and recede.

Do not ask for the blood-and-gore war story. You could not bear to hear it, nor I to tell it.

I wear a tattered leather pouch around my neck. If you can name the medicine it holds, perhaps you will be the storyteller who finds words when the water again falls away and new monsters spill onto dry land.

Meanwhile, we ride the tide. We remember to laugh and tease on the beaches. We love our dead.

We do not forget.

Monsters roam the earth; sometimes they live inside us.

Launch Pad

“Calm down,” he says. My friend’s slick cousin. “Calm down. They’ll hear us.”

This is what you are worried about, I want to shout, but I am counting. Counting backward, like you do when something is about to leave the earth.

10

9

8

Or has blastoff already happened?

An explosion removed my best friend’s shoe, maybe her toes, maybe her Achilles tendon. I am trying to remember the parts of the foot.

Each foot has twenty-six bones. A surprising fact I memorized in science class.

But I can’t see bones. Only blood. Splattered blood. A map on her tawny moccasin.

7

6

Six. Six-pack. Six-shooter. Sixteen candles. I am playing the game in my head. I am calming down. He is taking off his shirt, tearing it. He is wrapping her foot like a present. Wrapping it awkwardly like a child who fumbles with the ribbon.

5

Five times around with a belt. Hers? His? “Help me,” he says. “We have to stop the bleeding.”

4

3

I am not helping. I have stopped counting. I am crying again because she is not. Why is she silent instead of screaming?

"Get a hold of yourself," he says. "You're going to make it worse."

Make it worse? There was a gun. Confetti of leather and blood and maybe bone. What is he afraid of that hasn't happened yet?

"We need to be quiet. We need to carry her. We need to leave." He hoists the body—his cousin with the mummy foot. He wobbles, but he doesn't grunt. "Now," he hisses. "Get the fuck up." His feet start dancing, his non-mummy feet shuffle back and forth where she fell.

He is unmaking this story with his feet. Both of his feet are whole. Not mummies. His non-mummy feet unmaking the bloodstain.

"Follow me." This time his voice seeps out slowly, like the pressure when you open a soda can. Like a sigh because she is heavy. Because he is not young and has been on his non-mummy feet too long.

I want to count again, but I don't want to get past one, I don't want to get to "BLASTOFF!" So I start with one hundred bottles instead.

We can do these things like crouch low, move slow and quiet because I am counting, because it is just numbers. Even he can crouch, though sweat is running down his face.

When I am at forty-eight bottles, what they will call the accident scene is already a city block behind us.

WE ARE NOT in the city, not in a place with blocks, but that is what he will tell them. *We carried her a city block from the house. Across an open field. After that we were hidden by trees*.

He will feed them his invented story and, because they know the fathers or the names of the fathers of those who have made the explosion, they will use terms like *unfortunate circumstances*, *unstable individual*, and *accident*.

His feet are not shuffling now. They are still.

"You're safe now," he tells me. "Both of you." I go down to 2, 1, and *pass it around* before I start over because if I let myself get to *no more bottles* that would be the end.

I started counting up this time. Up can never take you to *no more*. I am at eighty-five and he is still unmaking the story—with his words this time. He is shuffling the parts and telling me what I remember.

"Remember nobody forced you to come along."

"Remember she wanted to party."

His story doesn't have little packets of powder. He doesn't pull a gun in the shuffle.

It seems a lot like telling me what I should forget, though he never says that straight out. "I saved youse," he said. "You were out of it. You didn't know what was happening."

I am not feeling saved. Not safe.

She is quiet. Her foot is a question they have yet to answer. She has not asked it.

I think I am counting down to the truth.

Only I shy away. Again.

One, I say, wanting numbers to lead to a future.

2

3 I breathe. I make a calm counting rhythm.

4 Four is the sacred number, sacred as truth. But it is also formula like the "confession" he will want me to make. Four. Forsaken.

5

6 *Sixth sense*. What told me not to go. What tells me to speak carefully now—until she and I and her mummy foot leave their control. Their eyes.

7 Seven seconds—this is how long it takes me to bend, squeeze her hand, and whisper, "Almost there. You've got this."

8

9

10 *Ten little, nine little, eight little*—like the classroom rhyme they taught us. A countdown—a song unmaking ind'ins.

Red Ants

Outside I can hear the squeal of tires and little kids at jump rope chanting. *Some like it hot. Some like it cold. Some like it in the pot nine days old*. Inside the converted Quonset hut, the voice from the state education department instructs us—the junior class from Red Earth High School—on how to prepare for standardized tests. I don't mean on Zoom or a video. They sent a real person—a woman, tall with a pasted-on smile and a name tag. Like one of those nutrition missionaries that come every year, she measures her words and her eyes squint in cartoon rays when she says, "Motivation."

Despite her fake eye contact, she doesn't notice the demolition derby flier moving from hand to hand, or the Sweeney twins playing epic tic-tac-toe in front of me. *You spin it any way you want, we still come out invisible*. I want to climb on my chair and chant out those words. But nobody's made a rhyme for this roomful of slumped brown shoulders. Someone from our wrong year, wrong bloodline, stupid wrong school, original one percent of the pitiful population needs to climb to the top of something and wave a different flag. But the staccato of feet trying to keep ahead of the spinning jump rope is the only sound when she asks for questions. We pick up our sad ACT practice tests and file out—like so many ants.

Yeah, I know a little science. Learned not to mess with a red ant mound. Here, we've all met some fire ants over the years. Been bitten by our own reservation tribal leaders. That's why lots of people, like my dad, just keep their heads down and do their casino jobs. It's a small community. Pain teaches. Caution, I guess.

My best friend, Chimook, and I are sixteen and have been fed on caution since we were ten, when elections got scary here again. When the council changes, waitlists for HUD housing and payroll lists change, too. My mom says the HR at the Landbridge Casino should be called HF instead, for "hirings and firings." Ants make slaves, too—maybe it's just natural behavior.

Down at the city park Chimook and I climb up to the trestle. She snake-dances her way to keep from slipping, loose bits of earth crumbling beneath her boots. I follow the avalanche of her passing, but propel myself straight up, grabbing small trees on either side of the path so I don't wipe out. When I stop to catch my breath, I look to where her long silhouette rises like another dark leafless spring tree, the small curve of her hips barely noticeable. She turns then, sees me, and extends her branch arms. "Ambe, come on, I'll pull you."

On the flat of the pillar, we settle ourselves without talk. Though spring won't come for another month, today the temperatures have risen to sixty. We shed our sweatshirts, shoes, even our socks. Just sit and drink our Pepsi. Cold cement on our legs. Below we watch water move over the rocks where the ice has melted—sometimes a lean black line of mink mixed in. The sun hits the ripples at different angles—not angles like math, but star angles. Sometimes we scare ourselves and pretend the flashes of light are Memegwesiwug, the little riverbank-dwelling water spirits from Anishinaabeg stories. Fear in the afternoon, leaning with your back against your best friend's, feels almost like love.

Some fungus-farming ant species are asexual. They clone themselves and don't require a mate. Sounds lonely to me. Pretending to see the Memegwesiwug from a distance is a little like thinking of the guys we are crushing on at the moment. They're mostly fable, too—just stories they have made up to get girls interested. Sometimes I don't care; I just want to see that flash of light and believe. Other times I figure I'll leave anyway, so why bother. I read that all queen ants are female. Same with soldier ants. While we lean here together, barefoot—with our toes painted bruise purple—Chimook and I don't seem so fierce.

"Dang, Lornie, everybody's talking applications already," she says.

"My brother says I either work this summer or do the precollege program for skins. I told him you don't qualify for Colorado."

“Let me guess, he doesn’t give a rat’s ass.”

See, the latest ant colony war is over the tribal constitution and membership. Chimook is a descendant. I’m enrolled. You know the fatal drop of mixed-race blood in the early twentieth century? This is the reverse. Then people didn’t want it to show on records; we do. Lots of people consider bloodlines the biggest myth in Indian Country, but the CDIB—Certificate of Degree of Indian Blood—counts as the legal measure. I might be light-skinned for a Shinnob, but I’m brown-eyed and card-carrying. Her family’s been here since the 1867 treaty, too, but in a government way, Chimook doesn’t count as Anishinaabeg. Her blood math doesn’t add up. So no Colorado program for her.

“Let’s get jobs at the Pine Lake Resort.” I raise my eyebrows at her when I add, “Joeboy’s family has a cabin there. You’ve always liked his … boat.”

“Yeah. Nice boat. Nice hair, too.”

We tap out a rhythm with our bare soles. I start the 49 song under my breath. “*If you were only here. But you’re so far away. Hey yah, hey yo*.”

“Yo?” She sings then. “Yeah, yo yo Yo-Yo Ma.”

We’re laughing and mess up the beat now, but finish together, “*If you were only here. You know I’d feel okay*.”

As we sit, we imagine things better and worse than Memegwesiwug. Maybe the whole ACT thing has me worried, but I picture a college here instead of six hours away. Then I imagine away. Four years of away and no sugar bush, no watching eagles fish on Bass Lake, no mornings of Grandma’s baking soda biscuits. “You go,” Chimook says as if reading my mind.

“Huh?” I’m startled by the edge in her voice, by her seeming nonchalance about my leaving home for college. Then I realize she means the summer program. Three weeks, not four years.

I look at her then just to see the way she pulls her black hair up like rabbit ears. She’s done this since she was little whenever she’s really angry. “Nothing changes, Lorn.” She stares me down. “Nothing.”

I want to ask if she means under the microscope that’s fixed on Indians, the blood rules, the broken promise, but then she nudges me lightly with her knee. “Nothing.” We lean harder into one another. The sun heats our skin and sweat forms where we’re touching. I think then about how ants have

two stomachs, one to hold food for themselves, one for other ants. It probably won't help me on the ACT, but it's one of those facts that come in handy, almost like a story.

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Turns out Chimook isn't ready to just chuck it and let someone else have all the power over her. Until now, she had been embarrassed by her status and didn't really want to draw attention to it. But in applications, we check the boxes over and over. *Descendant. Enrolled*. Her box, mine. We realize the check puts us on different sides of the dividing line. "Lornie, what the fuck? The school counts me to boost their Title VI funding numbers, but when I'm old enough to vote, what then? The tribe's gonna turn me away? My tribe?"

Growing up we'd seen lots of hot issues play out on the rez. We watched protests, even painted signs a few times. But after the camera flash and the headline in the *Crane Lake Herald*, not much changed. At least not for long. Most ants can survive underwater for twenty-four hours, and most tribal politicians can play reform games for about that long. When the press goes away, the deadly venom is back in action—sometimes worse than before.

But we've each had relatives who've been in office and you learn a lot watching their dance with the tribal council. *My constituents have given me a job to do. I know I speak for the people. I was elected to protect, enforce, build, expand ….* (Add your own verb here.) Everyone claims to work for tradition, for the seventh generation, for Mother Earth. Nobody needs a speechwriter on a reservation to get elected, they just need more absentee ballots with their name checked. Sometimes the election's legit, sometimes election judges do their job like blind worker ants.

Chimook and I figure over the years we've become savvy enough to build a campaign of our own. In March, while she dreams about getting out in Joeboy's boat and I sew clothes for my summer trip, together we also finally climb up and have our say. First, Chimook and I make the sugar bush rounds. Then in June, the strawberry picking patches. We eat and talk. Sing and watch. Sit around fires.

Too bad your granddaughter can't get one of those summer jobs, Auntie Jo. No, they're just for card-carrying In'dins.

Hey yah, hey yo.

I saw this YouTube video about how Indonesian ants farm mealy bugs, moving them around on plants so the bugs can gather sweeter sap. All to the ants' belly in the end. Sometimes people need redirecting, too.

Hey, I saw Lyndal's picture with the quiz team. Howah! Bet he'd do good on the college bowl, too. Bummer how the tribe's whole blood quantum thing might mess that up.

Disapproval starts building and we keep feeding it. Everywhere people gather for harvests, feasts, or games, we saunter in, sing our song of diminishing fractions. *Hey yah, hey yo*.

Yeah, met some kids from the Chickasaw Nation and the Shawnee Tribe at the powwow in St. Paul. Your twins were there, too. Cool shawls. You make those? Anyway, eating tacos after an intertribal, they were teasing us about our "road to extinction." Guess they have different requirements for their membership. Lineal descent. Made me wonder who here wants Red Earth Nation to disappear.

Hey yo, yo, yo.

Pretty soon the council has "constituents" up to their ears, people stopping them outside the Red Owl, coming by the RBC offices, saying in words more or less appropriate for print that the time has come for some changes. You know ants move about fifty tons of soil per year just in one square mile. Lots of earth began moving around us, too.

We hold our caucuses in our favorite spot above the river. One day, when fish are spawning below, Chimook suddenly spins around and rubs her hands together like Joker in Batman.

"Don't tell me," I say, laughing. "You're going to be a stowaway on his boat?"

"No. I mean, great idea, but later for that," she says. "All these dizzy fish just made me realize we can use social media!"

"Um, let's clarify," I say. "*You* can use social media. All those hearts and fire bursts and impossible-to-translate pictograms creep me out."

"Emojis."

"Huh?"

Chimook pats my hand. “Okay, Lornie. I stand corrected: *I* can use social media. You stick to the in-person charm and alarm.”

In the weeks that follow, Chimook surprises me with her gutsy posts. She does her best Obama imitation, friending everyone on Facebook and Instagram, and posting all these mini videos. You probably saw the one that went viral of the tiny tots T-ball team doing that weird running man dance while wearing shirts that said *Unclaimed by My Nation*. Watching her maneuver and slide different pieces into place, I think about the wingless ants and the beauty of their controlled glide.

Me. I’m the roadblock when someone wants to wave their cards. I wave mine right back. But sweet like. My cousins are all boxers—trained for the Golden Gloves, so I know about timing and the whole weave-and-jab routine. Only I do it with my hair blown out to perfection and complimentary buffet passes in my hand. I volunteer to check IDs at a street festival, giving out one free pass per person. *Hey, Les. Awesome photo. They let you wear those colored contacts? Your eyes are sooo blue in this picture. Man, you should see mine. Look here—jest muddy brown like always*.

I check in dancers at the powwow, give out raffle tickets for a free canoe—always getting a feel for who’s a real boxer and who just dances around the ring to be in the spotlight. I get into a rhythm—weave, weave, jab. But sometimes I’d get a little hot and want to jab, jab, jab. *Maybe they’ll deal these cards out again and I can get one that says—oh, I didn’t know you were a quarter, I thought you must be at least half*. Then I’d have to remind myself about the ants using their glide to return home, to the safety of their own tree. If they get lost on the forest floor, they aren’t likely to find their way back. Chimook is on my tree; I don’t want to throw myself to the floor in a fight.

••

“Nobody’s coming.” I sigh and think of the farewell picnic we’ve packed.

“Chill. They will be here. It’s early.” Chimook’s wearing this smocked top, dipping down on one shoulder, and the shape of the small hollow by her collarbone reminds me of Triangle Lake. I used to hike into that lake

with my Grandpa Warren when I was eight or ten. It has a soft rim that suddenly curves down, so that when you first see it, the blue surprises you every time.

I must have zoned out staring at the crater of her shoulder, because now Chimook is looking at me funny. “Says you.” I answer a little more harshly than I mean to, so I use my whiny I-need-him-now voice to distract her. “It feels late. Look at the light.”

“Says my cell. And you have your ‘Jackie O. I’m incognito’ shades on.”

I push the sunglasses up on my head. Chimook’s right, the water below is still lit with the sky’s reflection. The clouds floating on the river look like they’ve been colored by kindergartners—all rosy and peach against the deepening blue. It hurts to see them. Little puffy rafts. And I can’t climb on, because I’m leaving. Without Chimook.

“Come on, Lorn. You don’t love him that much and it’s three lousy weeks.”

“Love him? Who said anything about love? I just … admire the cut of his baseball uniform.”

“Yeah. You admire the crap out of it. Anyone can see that.”

She has me laughing again and puts her arm around my shoulders. “Buck up. You are what the student teacher calls ‘winsome.’ No worries. Men in the program will fall at your feet.” We both know it’s not about men, but guys are easier to focus on than the whole messed-up world. Even worker ants take these mini naps all damn day. They have like 250 “sleep episodes.” Sort of like power naps, I guess. Yeah, guys with good hair are like a reset button.

But, for now, it’s me and Chimook and the Memegwesiwug. We press pause and just take it all in—this place we come from, the evening woods, the river, chickadees calling, their voices seeming to repeat to repeat to repeat to repeat. Like family names on the reservation that go back beyond counting. Like stories, too. Some I believe, others seem improbable. Memegwesi. Mishibizhii. Or Thunderbird. Like ants who can lift five thousand times their body weight. Improbable. But maybe believing isn’t the point. We hear thunder and it warns us. Maybe it does come from huge bird wings. Who am I to doubt?

Here, where we all live on stories, making a new one takes a lot of tellings and retellings. Like the war story Chimook and I have been

trumpeting all year—tribal belonging pitted against identity rules coined by the colonizers themselves.

“Count it out,” Chimook’s posts command. “How many generations to extinction?”

That math story question won’t be found on the ACT test, but we winked at one another when we heard it repeated in the big showdown at the council meeting. “Whose relatives don’t get membership?” was another way some of the grandmas told it there. “Our rez, our membership rules.” Together with feet shuffling and loud mumblings, that chant disrupted any attempt to return to regular agenda items. Like a territorial red ant who will attack to protect habitat and food, it promised a future. Of course, no tribal rep wanted to seem weak and just concede to demands, so they rapidly took up the citizenship story as their own.

Let them take credit. After all, next year when new tribal enrollment rules kick in, Chimook and I will both do the skin thing—together.

Sometimes odds just don’t play out the way you expect. Take the ACT results. Who knew this Podunk rez was a breeding ground for smarts or potential scholarship students—me and Chimook among them? Who knows what new rez story we might write together? Sometimes life surprises you. Like learning some ants can swim.

Waiting: A Quintet

I. PUD

The moment before things started to unravel, Norman Rockwell might have painted our rez playground—little brown kids in tennies with jump ropes and marbles. Sure, no frilly anklets on the little girls' feet, the boys' T-shirts a bit ratty and mosquito bites marring their bare backs as they bent to their cat's-eyes or shooters, but even Rockwell's nostalgia understood poverty and the beauty of doing-the-best-you-can.

We are America's "Indians." At least on the surface. Peddling crafts and paddling canoes—sometimes even the tribal council wants to relax into that image. Maybe that's why we find little help for the dark trouble some of us live in.

Still, I guess that night, our small covey of "Indian youth" had let our guard down, too. We had fallen into the still-life—an evening of no math homework, just stretching our dreams like they were lanky adolescent legs too long for the swings. We expected nothing more of the hours than sneaking a smoke behind the pool hall, pitching horseshoes, and jawing.

I remember the soft opening to the drama: on the merry-go-round, teenagers scream like they're five again. Then Melmo's head drops down. He leaves a trail of puke—pink from the strawberry Boone's Farm. A circle of blue-jeaned legs instinctively push to keep spinning. No one wants to get near the skinny guy with vomit covering the leather wraps of his braids, covering his hoodie. The girls' screech now high and piercing like a hawk's.

From the sling-bottom swings, Wally and I watch like the drama is the last down of a football game. Everything riding on the run. Just like our Hornets' games, this will end badly. Somehow a fight will erupt. Parents will shake their heads. Someone will get suspended.

Wally spits sunflower seed shells onto the brown sand. "Another *Godot* moment."

I arch my eyebrows.

"What are we waiting for?" After a beat, he commands, "Ambe, Pud." He pulls me up and we walk toward the spinning mess, the toes of his boots arrowpoints headed to target.

Ten minutes later we're washing slime off our shoes under the hose at Trish's house. Retelling it. Laughing. Trish has stripped off her John Prine T-shirt. She splashes us, pushes back her curtain of bangs, then settles on the porch steps to study her painted toenails.

Lanie breaks into the merriment. "What about Melmo?" Always timid, she wears her ball cap pulled down in the front, shading her face. I long to see the dark ovals of her eyes, want to trace her full lips. I think we all do—especially Trish. But the porch light, with only one working bulb, refuses to show us the perfect curves of her aloneness.

"Nothing about Melmo, Lanie." Wally's answer comes out like a command. His grey eyes extend his dare. Lanie, surprised, looks up at him. The two of them hold the stare no more than three seconds, but to Trish and me it seems longer. Long enough for someone—the stage manager or Trickster to change the set. This is no longer an idyll, Norman Rockwell's Native America—it's Vine Deloria's.

"He's a fuckup," says Wally. "He throws up. Tomorrow, he wakes up, sun on his face, smelling his own puke. Classic Melmo."

No one counters. Except the moon that suddenly slides out from behind a cloud. A sky that hurts.

"VERSO, YOU IDIOT." Wally waits for me to comply.

We're in his uncle's shed. The maker and the gofer. Wally's working on a hide today. We're both sweating. Not talking about Melmo last night, Melmo's not showing up for school today, or anything sharp enough to rip

open the day, including Lanie's fragility. Not talking is like being on hold. You can't relax into it, because you know something more is coming.

Wally tries again. "Pud! Verso!" His voice a whip. Its sound echoes off the metal tools lining the walls.

"Can't you just speak English?" Tired of his arrogance, but not ready to pick a fight, I add, "Or dog or Michif or Anishinaabemowin or Pig Latin."

"Urn-tay over-way, Ud-pay."

I flip the leather. Wonder, but don't ask, what will go on the reverse side. The afternoons—always the same. Watch. Hope. Figure it out. Never any explanation. No promises, no compliments. Here in the nonschool of Wally's world, I am still the dogsbody, still just do what I am told. Clumsily. Sometimes sun shines on the dirt floor. Shadows appear and disappear as branches blow across the high, rectangular windows. Their dance comforts me.

My days, too, have become shadows. Darkened by the *X*s on my calendar counting toward release day. The day our trailer becomes full again. My dad takes up space like Wally—like he doesn't need permission. While I hunch my five-foot-two "pudge," he sashays his. Work camp won't change much for him, though it has emptied my mom, emptied me.

I bring my hollow here, and sometimes Wally surprises me. Puts his hands on mine and guides the awl, the needle, the paintbrush. His touch swift and light—like a breeze has found its way through the window cracks.

I don't know how he learned. These crafts. His attitude. His uncle seems too far gone in booze to take on an oshkaabewis. Wally, too cynical to apprentice.

Whatever. It's their story.

I'm just trying to fit in somewhere. I bike here most afternoons. Fifteen minutes of furious, fifteen minutes to forget. White schools are white schools even on the rez. I'm not an it-is-what-it-is kinda person, but at sixteen, what power do I have against the "tell-us-about-your-culture" Band-Aid teachers slap on history books?

At Wally's, I hang on as long as I can. Watch the pattern emerge. His color choices unexpected. Chokecherry red with aspen green, with mud brown. Lightning-white accents. He caresses the quills, guides them like it matters. In the long making sessions, his face changes. It's like seeing the

surface of the lake come alive in sunlight. Eyes a kaleidoscope of water fractals. In the hot terror of every day, refraction is a dream to fall into.

"Shit storm, can you help out here?"

"Ass-yay!"

II. LANIE

In art class, Wally and I become partners by default. Our classmates have us pegged. I'm awkward; he's angry. The others don't make eye contact on "project" days. Don't get me wrong, we prefer it this way. Neither of us wants to navigate the cliques and social politics of this messy consolidated school. Wally and I went to the same rural grade school and ride the same bus now. Actually, we mostly figure out our own transportation. If you've ever ridden on a bus full of jocks, majorettes, and rich farmers, you can understand why.

"You and me, Lanie." Wally points his lips to the chair opposite him.

Today for life drawing, we alternate between sketching and "modeling." "*Fully clothed*," Wally reads from the syllabus. "As if. In this school?" But Mrs. Warren is nothing if not precise. Petite, grey-haired (no dye, thank you), British-born, and agnostic, she's unique enough to be Wally-approved.

I hold the charcoal. My eyes pan slowly from boots to bandanna, sweat forms on my lip as I try to find the angles inside shapes. Stroke by stroke, I shadow his set jaw. Noses are my nemesis. Once again, I flub even the clear hill of his hawk nose. Not horribly, but it will be part of the "critique" comments. Wally knows I am struggling.

"Lanie, Lanie, wiikaa, Lanie!" I try to tune out the teasing of his eyes while I pencil them in. Askew. Like the maker's hand slipped. Eyebrow scar? Or is it shaved just there?

Without warning, my lungs constrict. The swim of razors, song of *cut cut cut*, of pink bathtub water stops my hand.

"Switch!" The loud command coming from Mrs. Warren rescues me. I piano my fingers, easing an imaginary cramp.

"FREAK SHOW TIME." Wally points at me. Playful in our classroom corner.

Art unlocks the kept parts of him. Sweeps away scales and dried bones from the sites of old subsistence. He stretches. Languid. Nothing at stake here. Despite chipped nails, the fingers on the hand he extends for the pencil remind me of sleek dark minnows. Smooth and swimming effortlessly in the freedom of these hours.

His arm, too, lengthens. The pencil, a wand over the page. A glide, a curving path. Then something shifts, becomes heavy with intent. The movements no longer those of a minnow but rather of a garter snake in grass, with that edge of hiddenness and surprise. A twist, an unexpected line.

Mesmerized, I forget to worry. Forget the ordinariness of my face, the tip of the scar that peeks out of my sleeve.

"AND TIME!" WE both start, each having left the room for our refuge world.

Wally shakes off his daze more quickly than I. Puts down the charcoal pencil, dusts his hands on his black jeans, returns to banter. "Don't get bigheaded when you see it." He tears the page off his sketch pad and passes it to me. "Comic-book you—*Guardians of the Galaxy* and all that."

I prepare to see myself in skintight leotard, cape, and tiara. But the sketch is the same goofy girl as in my mirror—V-neck T-shirt, wide forehead, low ponytail showing my ear piercings. Except for the steel of my shoulders, the knife glare of my eyes. Except for the scar fully visible on my wrist—a triumphant scar that looks like fire, like a lit sword.

I have no answering words. He cocks his wicked eyebrows.

"Don't hide so much, Niij."

LATER, I CUT out quilt squares with my mom. Blue, purple, and lilac flower prints—some realistic, some with surreal smiling pansies. Mom pretends not to, but she watches me. Home is a careful place now. My posture, the timbre of my voice, whether I eat or just push my food around—everything under scrutiny, read for signs.

I take careful breaths to remain calm. Make careful conversation about school and babysitting. Compose my face carefully when Mel's absence is

brought up.

"Mr. Walsh called today," my mom is saying in her gentle you-don't-have-to-hide-things voice. "Something about Melmo and an episode on the playground?"

"I was with Trish," I blurt, forgetting to be careful. Then I channel the Lanie who had smooth scar-free wrists, the Lanie who knew how to make meringue by eight, who won blue ribbons in 4-H for homemaking and animal husbandry.

"We, we were practicing a skit for French class." I don't know where that lie came from, but suddenly I believe it too. "Bonjour, mademoiselle. Je m'appelle Lanie. Je suis très fatiguée!" In true melodrama fashion, I pretend to fall asleep. My mom's eyebrows arch like crawling caterpillars and then straighten out. Somehow the distraction works—for both of us. We laugh a real laugh together.

I steer carefully for the rest of the quilting session. We stay in the what-if territory of before. What if I hadn't fallen for Mel? What if I hadn't used an X-Acto knife to slit my drug-loving veins? I am that Lanie, and we both love being with her.

That night with the cicada rasp outside my window, I remember Wally's drawing. Pushing up my pajama sleeve, I trace the raised edges of my lightning sword. I let the night breeze find it. I hope—carefully.

III. MELMO

The stiffness of my jeans wakes me—almost icy in the predawn. I remember having felt warm and wet before I passed out. Was someone here with me? There, where the fire had been, a body is curled with the Grandfather Stones. When I look closer, I see it is my twin.

We are alone in the mists of morning. Behind the fire circle is an outhouse or a shed. A rusty horseshoe has been nailed above the half-open door. No house in sight, no barn. I look at the wood in the back of my pickup. Half a cord? What was I doing with it? Never mind, we need wood now.

I check my back pockets for gloves. Not there. I shake my hands to warm them. Then I shake Twin, but he refuses to wake. His body solid as the rocks.

None of this makes any sense. Have I lost him?

Again.

Loneliness grows into a cannibal giant that could swallow me. I curl next to the body, but feel no less abandoned. Whoever was here—Twin or me or a shapeshifting spirit—has left only this hull.

Is this death? Mine, at last? I wonder, but have no way to test this thing. I begin to laugh and find I cannot stop. The sound fills the air, striking my bones and setting them ashiver as if they were a xylophone. Do the dead become music?

When I was alive had my life been so indistinguishable from nothingness or from damnation that I can't tell the difference? If I'm dead, I should feel something—pain or anger. Instead, I am numb as I have been numb before each needle and after, before the words flung at me, the starving days and the stealing days. Numb and longing for anything, anyone to make me feel. I remember the stray cat that stayed black-eyed and purring through the nights last fall.

I had broken out my old fishing pole, baited a jig with canned corn. Just as I did at six, eight, even ten, fishing from the public dock at Little Moon Lake or from the banks near the dam. Then and now I brought home perch, sunfish, sometimes a crappie or a snake of a northern pike. "The small ones are the best eating," my mom used to say as she scaled or filleted my catch almost before they stopped flopping.

The tiger cat, Winslow, showed just as much delight with my stringer, though she tended to play catch and release before actually eating the fish. Her paws would flash, pinning the gold belly of a sunfish to the grass. Then she'd let them loose again. Her tail would flick—back and forth like a metronome. She'd pause again, hunker down, and sneak up on her prey. I'd smile, watching her, and make my own meal, feeling almost happy. But, too far gone one morning after a night dealing and sampling, I backed over Winslow with my truck, right where she had been napping. After that came weeks I don't remember. Then one Wednesday, having received another "straighten up" lecture, I left school to find Lanie sitting on the curb. She looked up—at me, not through me—and offered to share her only slightly burned home-ec cookies. The bell of her laugh called me back. It was that simple.

Nothing can call me back now. So, though I know instinctively I am to travel west, I turn instead toward town—to find Lanie. She will understand what has happened, tell me how to find Twin. Lanie will make my death fires. If I am pitiful, perhaps she will come with me across the last river.

BUT BEFORE I can reach the main road, headlights come down the two-track. I sink into the ditch. Watch as men tromp about with flashlights, set up torches. They touch Twin, take pictures, measurements. They cover his body with an army blanket. "Soon," I think. "Soon he will be warm. Soon I will feel the heat, too." We were like that as twins. Connected. That's why I know he never traveled what the old ones call the "path of souls." I know he is waiting.

Another car snakes down the road. Stops abruptly. Starts to back up. The blue-clad men holler, "Stop! Stop, or we shoot!" All their lights go out again. I hear crashing and gunfire. Close by, then farther away. Each sound a story I should try to decipher.

Instead, I lie back in the damp ditch grass. Tired. For years chaos has made me its slave. I could never sort what came my way, now feel beyond trying. I can smell wild mint nearby. I imagine I feel a snake slither past me. I neither hope nor flinch. The noises, more and more distant, no longer matter.

ONLY LANIE BOTHERED to help me sort through what my mother had left behind, sort my days. We swept the rooms. Filled the trash with expired food. "Evicting the mold monster," she said. I pawned baskets and tools we found, plugged coins from the haul into machines at the laundromat. We washed my mom's clothes. Her death blankets. Gave all that away because spirits can be tricky. We washed rugs, curtains, couch throws. After a while, I could watch the spinning drums without getting dizzy, without crying like the leaky machine I had become.

I wasn't bad for Lanie at first. But I needed her to need me, too. I knew only one sure way to keep her. With each high, each crash, I helped her. She'd call my name: "Mel? Mel!" I took chokers to pawn, feather fans. I

eased her journeys. I took appliances. I didn't cook anyway. She came more often, now. I took the antlers from the wall. The spaces where they had been accusingly bright in their emptiness. I took the rocking chair from the front porch. She asked about that, but I said the runner was being repaired. Soon we were locked together in our need. But then the pawn ran out.

I had to get my own fix first so I could think about how to get hers. But she couldn't wait. Didn't wait. Fuck, fuck, fuck all the hypocrite saviours who took her away. They won't let me talk to her alone. She still needs me. I am building us a stronghold. Soon it will be ready. Then I will take care of her again.

I AM TRYING to find a spot on my mom's flowered couch where I can't feel the springs pushing through. Then I realize I am still in the ditch. I must have fallen asleep waiting to make sure the cops weren't going to return. My back hurts where it has been positioned on a stick, but I wake warm again.

I realize Twin's warmth has found its way to me. He is whispering. "Go on, Mel. Go ahead. I'll meet you."

He has said this before, and I am leery. "Promise?"

"Trust me."

We both know trust is a scab that never heals. Yet he pushes me away from him, onto the path.

I step from the ditch and immediately the frigid air clutches at my exposed skin. My muscles spasm. I start to walk east, but something is off. I look down and discover my boots are gone. My feet don't feel like feet now. They have grown hairy and large.

IV. TRISH

In the quiet of the guidance counselor's office, we sit—four candles burned to nubs. Like melted wax, we are unsightly, mute and spent—dark.

"You must know something about this situation," Mr. Walsh says, the feigned patience of his voice suspect like all treaty language. He sits with a pen poised, the overhead light gleaming on his close-cropped blond hair, his eyes turned to full power.

How many times had Mel been here? How many times had Lanie and I waited to give him a ride back to his crap empty life? Pud called Mel Lanie's "project," but I knew their relationship was something more. That's why I made certain to stay with her. Mel was Mel. Lanie couldn't see it. Couldn't see me right in her path, waiting.

In the schoolyard, we would beg chalk from the grade-schoolers, promising them jawbreakers and candy cigs. With the dregs of their twelve-color packs, we made sidewalk kingdoms. Lopsided blue doors, tree swings, and always, the Yellow Brick Road. Lanie has a thing for Dorothy like I have a thing for her. She would draw the winding road. I'd make Dorothy with a baseball cap and Lanie's doll lips.

But in the movie, Dorothy has only Tin Man, Scarecrow, and Cowardly Lion. To put all of us in the drawing, someone had to be the dog or the witch. I pretended innocent when I gave Mel a witch hat and a jack-o'-lantern mouth. I was here, making my time hers, what could she say?

We didn't place much stock in Oz, and never drew the Wizard. We didn't expect to get to the Emerald City anyway. Where we come from, it's all journey and making the most of what you have. You know—tribe. In the long afternoon detentions, we also wove our Anishinaabe migration story with the bombast of Hollywood and the simple of Kansas. Some days the Brick Road became a waterway for our birchbark canoe, and Mel became the water monster Mishibizhii. You can bet Lanie frowned at his horns in that picture.

Chalk dust stayed on our hands long after we had used up our stock. As we waited, we compared our rainbow fingers and palms. Lifelines are not a subject to dwell on if you're Indian on the rez, but those sidewalk afternoons with Lanie felt like a promise.

WALSH'S PRETEND PATIENCE has run out and he claps his hands. "Now then …"

"We know nothing about it," Wally speaks for all of us. "We don't hang with Melmo." In the awkward pause that follows, he corrects himself. "Uh, didn't."

"I see." Walsh seems to concede the point, then asks, "Since?"

No one speaks, but we try to work out the answer through quick glances. Finally, Lanie opens her mouth, but I cut her off.

"Mr. Walsh, just because we're all Native doesn't mean we're a gang." I'm good with teachers' games. I look down. I know I've won the point, but unlike Wally or even Pud, I'm not above pandering. I start again, my words rote like a memorized catechism. "Mel, ah Melmo had a drug problem, an alcohol problem." My lips quiver and I pause. Fuck, even I can't tell what part of the emotion is put on and what is real. I bite down on the flesh of my thumb then, just enough to wake the pain, to stop the tears.

Mel was only Mel, wasn't he? Mostly enemy to me. We both felt that, didn't we? "He …" I stumble a little. "He had family issues and we—Wally, Lanie, and Pud, uh Patrick, and I didn't have, um, resources to help. We had to back away because … because …"

Before I can formulate a half-truth to placate Walsh, Wally stands up. "Because he was a prick and tried to pull Lanie into his shithole. We pulled her out. He drowns in the crap. End of story."

The warning bell for the next class rings, but no one moves. School rules now insignificant—even to Walsh, who stands, hands in his pockets jingling his keys. Like us, the room, the file cabinets, all the college brochures seem to hold their breath.

Sometimes waiting is a strategy. Sometimes the world is spinning too fast to dismount.

V. WALLY

The red swirl of police lights passed the farmhouse window. No siren. That night, they didn't pause at our driveway, no heavy boots kicked the chickens aside, no badge flashed on the other side of a screen door.

Had I been awake expecting this? Expecting them? Filling the ashtray, I bide my time between visits. So yeah, maybe I had been waiting.

I wanted Lanie safe. We all did. But did we want it like a tire iron wants peace, like a gun does?

I'm no psychic, but the evening of the playground incident the air had smelled of scorched skin mixed with fear. I didn't want near any bad medicine. Didn't want Lanie near it. Or halo-Trish or sad Pud. Not everyone believes anymore, but my Uncle Amik's life had proved

Bearwalkers exist. He doesn't talk much when he's sober, but I've seen him watching hard for fireballs when he's shkwebii.

Yeah, I saw the patrol car and knew Melmo was in trouble. I didn't know for certain whether it was the kind of trouble he made for himself like my dad made his, or the kind that comes from a spell, like the trouble that caught my brother. Maybe you think I'm a coward or selfish not to have tried to warn him. But maybe you would feel different if your hands had helped wash blood from your mother's face, aimed a gun at your own brother. Maybe you would turn toward the little bit of sunshine you could find and let it keep you warm until you were eighteen and what they call "free." Maybe you would put a nighttime of whispered prayers between you and the rez hungers that haunted Melmo.

I waited like I had learned to since I was six and my parents were out somewhere. I didn't expect comfort when they returned, or explanations. I always hid myself at the sound of tires on gravel—listened, and watched. Some things I saw I wished I hadn't. "Sneaky little turd!" my dad would bellow if he caught me. "Get an eyeful, did you?"

Sometimes it hurt to collect crumbs of knowledge. But as I learned who siphoned gas or where to get bootleg cigs, liquor, and hides, I instinctively understood that knowing might keep me safe—keep us safe. I failed my mom; I won't fail again.

On the night of Mel's murder, all the farmhouse lights were off when I watched the return procession—the cop car, Melmo's pickup, and a blue Chevy I didn't recognize. I couldn't see the plate, but I memorized the rust pattern on the rear door. It was 3:00 a.m. Another Sunday when churches would pray for our "lost souls." The headlines in the weekly paper would read: "Another Tragic Teen Suicide."

Was I the only one awake enough to question that? Was I the only one who knew there would be more?

Fancy Dog Contest

The dog stories started again last October in the Corner Store. I was working after school just like I had been doing since I was ten. My auntie owns the place and she sells most everything the folks in Polecat Lake want that they don't go to town for. The post office sits on one end and Auntie has a gas pump outside. So we stay busy. Weekends and most evenings, she has coffee made for those who want to sit and visit, which is just about everybody who comes in. You know how it is. The talk is free and that makes up for the prices on everything else.

Well, that evening a table full of leechers, who should have been out checking their traps, ordered one more round. When Ronny Two Mink's dog wandered in and started the stories, wasn't nobody there going to leave. That's what I like about working for Auntie Todd—you can hear all kinds of village news and old-time tales, too, without anybody paying you a bit of notice. I was unpacking canned goods, wiping off their lids, and putting them away, practicing my whistle while I did it. Maybe that's what brought that fat Martha Beth into the store, or maybe she just followed someone in because she liked the smell of them.

Anyway, in she came and right away started making the rounds at the leech table, offering to shake hands. She went from one guy to the next, waiting by their chairs, pawing up and down. All the guys shook just polite as you please. And then Martha Beth started her tricks. She puts on quite an act. You ought to come see. Sits up to beg, prances across the floor, and rolls over and over. She's really pretty good at it, but nowadays sometimes old age and her belly get in the way. Still, she keeps it up until someone

feeds her. So that bearded guy, Truck, yelled to me to bring them some beef jerky and that's what Martha Beth carried off.

Then they started explaining to the new boy from the city—everyone likes to show off like that with city folks. I heard this guy called him "Ringworm" and "Raymond." Didn't know which name would stick, but he was a good listener. "Martha's one of the new educated reservation dogs," one of the leechers told him and they all laughed, because they knew good stories were coming. I knew it, too, and I was anxious. I wanted to hear about the Bush brothers. But of course, it starts with the dogs.

Outsiders have a hard time understanding the way Indians behave with their dogs, just like they puzzle about Indians and their kids. Maybe in some ways the two patterns are alike. In Indian communities around here, dogs are lavished one minute and kicked under the table the next. And children, well, they're prized beyond almost any material thing, but then they have the air knocked out of them when they least expect it. I don't mean physically, necessarily, although that's true, too, sometimes. I mean the way you feel when something happens that suddenly makes you go limp with loss. My Uncle William once told me about a drunk hunter who shot his own dog when it got beat out in retrieving. "I can still see the betrayal in the eyes of that animal as it looked at the barrel," he said. "It turned away and went dead before that fool even pulled the trigger." Well, I've seen plenty of children wearing that look, and with reason enough.

But it's not the alcohol cruelty that makes the reservation different from any other place, it's the strange loyalties. And the way they flow back and forth between children and parents, animals and humans. I don't know if you can understand, but it's like what happened between my grandma and her old dog, Larky. Grandma and that dog had been together through two moves and ten kids. Larky didn't have a fancy life. She lived under the house, protected in winter by bales of hay piled around the skirting. And she survived mostly on scraps and table slop. I don't even remember Grandma spending very much time with Larky, just a quick scratch on her way to the woodpile or a pat while shucking corn. But they were friends. I knew that because Grandma could set Larky's tail to wagging more than anyone and Larky always started Grandma on a mumbling conversation. Well, that dog was old and beginning to suffer, her hind legs almost too weak to hold her up. My grandma finally told one of the boys to build a box

and ready his gun. But the next morning they found Larky had just died. You see, that's what those two would do for one another.

And because Indians are loyal to their dogs in that way and their dogs are loyal to them—even if it means sharing their poverty—the dog population is always high around the village. And just like almost every house in the village had extra relatives living there, extra dogs seemed to attach themselves to every family, too. Used to be you couldn't walk to the outhouse around here without three or four dogs starting to bark. Wasn't anybody getting a full night's sleep and they were always scaring someone. My mom lost more than one pail of hazelnuts when someone's dog had a bark too close to her. Could be somebody complained. But more than likely the federal health people just showed up by themselves. My Uncle Timberwolf used to say the federal agents were like poison ivy, popping up every year, always right in your path, and good at starting an itch that would keep spreading until everyone felt uncomfortable, whether they were scratching or watching.

Anyway, some officials started saying the mongrels were a nuisance and a hazard, carried diseases, and were dangerous. So they did what the government does best and started a program. They wanted all the dogs to get shots and licenses. But nobody wanted to claim two or three animals when it might cost fifteen dollars a head. Far as I know there isn't a single licensed dog in the village yet. But they did get their shots. A big paddy wagon came in every weekend for a month and lots of young vet students chased around catching as many animals as they could, giving them shots, and tagging them. Sinner Jacob used to charge people five cents apiece to set up their lawn chairs in his yard and watch. He says he's got lots of good tales stored up from those days, but so far I haven't heard him telling them. Maybe he's gonna charge for stories, too. Anyway, those student veterinarians stopped coming after the ticks ballooned and turned grey, ready to pop.

Everything was quiet for a while, except the dogs kept barking. Then after a year or two some agency started Phase Two. They put up posters: *Dog Training Classes. Learn to be in command*. And sponsored a contest with big prize money: *Five hundred dollars for first place, two hundred for second, and one hundred for third*. They also started offering snacks at training meetings, and, their smartest move, somehow got the two Bush

brothers to enter their dogs. Those guys hadn't talked to one another for eighteen years and people started coming to the community center just to see what would happen with them both there at the same time. But the teacher didn't let you just hang around unless you brought a dog. So pretty soon almost all the dogs had "owners." Sometimes if someone didn't have anything better to do and wanted to eat and gossip they would borrow a relative's dog for the night. And so the fancy dog contest replaced cribbage and friendship cakes the year I turned eight.

The first sign of craziness came after the contest people announced that all dogs had to have collars and leashes. It felt almost like powwow time around here, with grandmas, aunties, and uncles all costuming the kids. A dog might have a few ribs showing, but you can bet it wore one fine collar. No one settled for a plain old Ben Franklin variety. You ain't never seen such fancy hunks of leather. Missus Manypoint made up the prettiest little deerskin collar edged with large blue trade beads for her Samantha Wolfe. Old Sid Cottonwood had his mum lazy-stitch an eighteen-inch collar and the whole length of the leash for his Labrador.

Next came the government paperwork. To participate you had to register, and to register you had to "designate a breed." So all the folks started naming the breeds of their dogs or the breeds they imagined them to be. Joe "Dandy" Trautner, who likes to call himself "The Fisherman," linked together a bunch of red spinners to make a collar for his "malamute" (which he used to just call a sled dog). English setter, blue Dane, fox terrier, springer/poodle mixed-blood. It turned into another whole kind of contest I guess you could say, but one Indian people had lots of practice at anyway—bloodlines, stories, and invented identities.

Course it didn't stop there. One week after the dogs received competition numbers, they started showing up in fancy outfits. Frank Rabbit's second wife, Linda from Pine Ridge, brought her husky in wearing sled boots decorated Plains-style. They looked better than most moccasins. The story goes she had to carry that dog in because he couldn't get used to anything on his feet and kept trying to find a way to walk without stepping down on the leather. He kept at least one foot off the floor all the time, shaking his paws, walking on his two hind legs and then on the front ones like a circus poodle. Finally the poor critter just rolled over on his back and froze. Linda was sure put out at that dog, which people started calling

Possum after it stiffened itself out just like it was dead. And they say that dog ain't never walked the same since. I see him sometimes kind of slinking around, his tail drooping, stopping every step or two to hold up a paw like he has a thorn in it. Some things stay with you, I guess, for good or bad.

Well maybe Possum's getup didn't work out too well, but some of them dogs took to the fancying up like princes and princesses. Fat Martha Beth here had a little Pendleton coat with a mink collar and Jimmy Sledge's terrier-cross Sun Dog had something like a grass dance outfit in rainbow colors. Both of them went round those training circles with their little black noses and stubby tails held real high. Beads, feathers, tobacco cans, bones, skins—there's nothing you've seen stitched into a dance outfit that didn't end up on somebody's dog.

Of course, everyone watched the Bush brothers. At first it seemed they had no plans to costume their dogs. Folks called the brothers "Rusty" and "Dollar," the names they got about the same time their argument started. It happened because of what the one brother did to the other one's pickup when they had just come home from the service—drove it into Pickerel Lake one night. He did go through the trouble of towing it out, but then he just left it in the woods to rust. And he convinced his big brother that he had lost the truck himself in a bet with a Roy Laker. It took half a year before the truth got out. Meanwhile, the second Bush brother bought a swanky blue pickup that he kept 'specially clean and started using it to take his brother's girl to town. He got his name because he bragged everywhere about his truck, calling it "shiny as a silver dollar."

Until the truck thing, the brothers had always hung together. Story goes Rusty washed and dressed Dollar from the time their mum passed on. Later they ended up being the only two Indians in their army platoon, so they had to keep each other remembering and believing they'd come home. I've seen pictures of them back then. In their uniforms you could hardly tell them apart, one standing like a reflection of the other. *Like two peas in a pod*, my mom used to say. She says they still see the other brother in themselves and that's what keeps them angry. Course Rusty began to look his age—six years older than Dollar—once he started to carry his mad with him and now no one would mistake him for his slick-tongued brother.

Well anyway, when they came to the second meeting their dogs had the most plain training collars of the whole bunch and Rusty had just an

ordinary piece of clothesline rope instead of a real leash. Folks whispered about that—disappointed, like they expected more.

Though the Bush dogs had come from the same litter, Dollar called his Spike a wolfhound and Rusty called Spitfire a borzoi. Neither dog resembled those Irish or Russian ones in the *World Book Encyclopedia* except for looking long-legged and shaggy. At least at the beginning of the contest that's how they looked. Third meeting, Dollar brought in Spike all cut, brushed, and Brylcreemed. Rusty sat real stony-eyed. Next week, Spitfire came in with his hair highlighted, honest-to-god, to look like flames on his flanks. From then on everyone began betting on the "Two Dog Match."

One day someone heard that someone else overheard Rusty making a deal in Lengby for some bear claws. Didn't take long until that got back to Dollar. Pretty soon someone spotted Dollar setting traps and carving deer antler buttons. No one knew for sure what those brothers were making, but the words *dog outfit* were whispered back and forth. One night I heard my ma say Snowflake was out getting wood when she saw that Old Shawl Woman crossing the road sneaky-like, taking the path toward Dollar's. *Probably helping him sew*. The rumors flew for weeks as the suspense grew. Every Tuesday more people popped in to the center, but after the haircut and the highlighting, neither brother showed his hand.

Not that anyone had much time for gawking anymore on dog school days. The routines had become intense. So had the owners or trainers. Each week, the dogs seemed more and more comfortable, happier to come together for butt sniffing and tail wagging. But at the other end of the leash frown lines grew. Everyone practiced their commands. Not just *sit* or *come* like the teacher said, of course, but *seddown, you* and *come 'ere* and lots more colorful variations, too. Polecat Lakers called *yadog* and *animosh* over and over no matter how many times the dog extension class lady pleaded with them, "Please, ladies and gentlemen, use your animal's proper name so he or she doesn't become confused."

As the contest wore on, some of us kids would pile straw bales below the windows so we could watch the doings. A circus, but pitiful, too. All those mutts with new haircuts, new collars, and the craziest, most colorful regalia you could imagine led around the arena by a group of people dressed in hand-me-downs and Goodwill bargains. The teachers (there were

two by this time) had clipboards and pens, which they mostly used for heading off the wayward dogs or pounding themselves on the head.

Only the Bush boys and three or four other owners seemed able to walk their dogs through the routine. Folks had kind of expected Rusty and Dollar would be two of the contenders. I heard how their daddy used to have fine coon hounds and how their Uncle Benson trained and sold hunting dogs. Lots of stuff gets passed around here like that—in the family blood.

There's different parts of those contest days that get remembered and told, but the wildest and best part came when the skunk showed up on competition day. Most everybody from the village had turned out, despite the teachers trying to object. Even us kids talked our way in. I sat on my cousin Detroit's shoulders and had a real good view. The scene looked like some Disney nightmare or maybe a Dog-America pageant. Up and down the rows, they stood, sat, or slouched, pooches of every variety. Long-hairs, short-hairs, tailed and tailless, they wiggled with excitement, jingling or swishing, flashing the colors of their costumes. The dogs' routines involved heeling in circles and in figure eights. The commands included *sit*, *lie down*, *stay*, *come*, *shake hands*, *roll over*, *fetch*, *sit up*, and *beg*.

Well it happened in the finals, during the figure eights. Rusty, Dollar, Sid Cottonwood, Toni Mae Singer, and the little LaTreque girl were in it for the money. Those already eliminated joined the rest of the community folks on the sidelines. Sid had just stepped out to perform with his dog Otis. Suddenly a gunnysack flew in through a window and a skunk fought its way out. Dogs went crazy, the skunk's tail went up, and everyone raced for the door. That would have been a pretty good trick, one a person could claim after a month or so had passed. But someone must have dumped a smudge or dropped a lit cigarette in the mad dash to escape, because somehow a fire got started. Soon a couple of the dogs' costumes caught fire. The poor creatures yelped and ran in panic.

Out of the screaming and whirling colors the brothers stepped, seeming calm and walking into the very center of that tornado-force chaos. Maybe their army training, an instinct, or the old bond they shared woke some power and stirred in them the same response. Like twin spirits, they each grabbed an animal, tucked their body around them, and rolled. When they stood, marked by the smothered flames, the people in the room went silent. Just that one moment. That's how I remember it.

Then we all gathered outside smelling like skunk and singed hair. People offered the Bush brothers drinks and handshakes. Everyone started telling what they saw. The teachers came over and gave all that prize money to the two men, four hundred dollars apiece.

That seems like a real nice end to the story, but the story I'm trying to get straight keeps going from there. See, something happened to the Bush boys that night that made them brothers again. Some people tell how they shook hands or exchanged glances. Some say they brushed one another off or even spoke. I didn't see any of those things.

What I saw then, and now in my dreams, and sometimes in the stories goes like this: Rusty turned to leave and Dollar followed. They walked, each with the same stride, out to Dollar's truck. Dollar handed over his set of keys to Rusty just like it hadn't been eighteen years.

So when folks start telling about tomato-juice baths and burying all those fancy dog costumes at the dump, when I see Martha Beth performing or Possum limping down the road, I think about brooding memory and blood. I try to figure out what transforms boys into brothers or feuding brothers into heroes. I wonder what that fire purified in those two men, what burned off and what remained.

Copper Traces

I.

Ten months.

Ten months and no sighting of Ishko. For comfort, I play his words back. *I'll be in disguise—but right in plain sight*. He tented his eyebrows to underscore the comment. He tossed it over his shoulder along with his pet name for me—Boodoonh, Little Tadpole. *Never forget, Boodoonh*. He sent it like a kiss on his way out the last time I saw him. Could it truly be the last time?

I play hidden pictures with the news. Search for the backstory, who's silencing who, and why. None of us actually expect the truth in print anymore. And certainly not from networks like Fox News. Only infrequently from the White House press secretary. So I listen for clues the censors have missed. What kernel of reality can we find secreted amid the propaganda? What deeper truth does the dark web offer?

My brother's life may depend on me finding some safe exit for him, a route out of the surveillance state. My own safety, or at least my sanity, may dissolve unless I uncover a pathway *to* him. The bundle of nerves I now call my body will short-circuit under the scrutiny of those who consider me a security risk.

I go over each detail like a bookie trying to figure the odds. Eighty percent chance of escape. Fifty percent chance of survival. No. Ishko created intricate protest playbooks with exit routes and safehouses. But my fugitive brother still remains missing. I imagine him in a *Where's Waldo?*

book on a page I cannot solve. Camouflaged or inconspicuous. Like one check on a loon's back. I keep asking: Black or white? I keep wondering: Alive or dead?

Ishko's eco organization, Great Lakes Environmental Ethics (GLEE), has remained noncommittal about his fate and their future. *On hiatus. Restructuring*. So says their social media. Newspapers say GLEE *can't confirm* rumors of Ishko's death. The surveillants play pretend nice with words like *tragedy*, but I know their action plan is *trace*. I need to find Ishko first. Meanwhile, GLEE has offered discreet visits and hope-to-make-contact-soon casseroles, but no real information. I know he did not step off into the underground alone. *He has support. Someone should surface soon with a message*. So says my daily affirmation. On bad days, I repeat it like a mantra to drown out the subliminal worry.

II.

On better days, I furnish the pause with small defiances. Attend to my job, my garden, my dog, and my memories. I refuse to put on mourning.

Today, July sun, still strong in a world diminished, woke me at five and we walked out to the pink sky rumors. Rain soon. Wingnut, my spaniel, runs back and forth, back and forth at the verge, sniffing wildly, like a runner doing wind sprints. I find the four-toed track that has excited her. Deep like that of a full-grown male, it crisscrosses the back garden. As both of us check the markings, I try to decipher the pattern. Not after plants, not digging, but some Morse code I don't understand. Like Ishko's. Wingnut's quick crouch covers the scent. Isn't this what we all do now—mark our territory?

I scan the white-etched birch, the dark pine shadows, pan like a camera over the length of the small woods and back again, my eyes lonesome, hungry. *Ma'iingan*. I whisper it. I cannot claim this wolf relative in the same way I cannot claim my human brother, Ishkode. Both they considered predators. In their reports, Ishko crossed the line from free speech to terrorism. He *went dark*. They want me to believe this. They name his *propaganda*, evil; try to teach others to fear it. In this new world, truth has become enemy number one. Because, of course, truth is contagious like freedom.

Reluctantly I call the dog from her pleasure. Turn my stubborn feet, stubborn eyes—go to ground. I key in reports and don't dwell. I don't think wolf, don't dream Ishko. The week unfolds with humid politics. Who owns mineral rights when environmental protections trespass on prosperity. *Great again*. Each day, I open my computer at eight, close it at five. Fuck the internet. I pick up my paddle, enter another world.

In the kayak I ease the tension from my shoulders. Drive, push, and slice, over and over. I twist my torso and throw my core muscles in, needing the burn. *Rotation is power*. Ishko's advice when he offered pointers on my forward stroke. *Rotation like love—makes the world go round, kid*. We used to race, him always letting me keep apace, until the last hundred yards. Then he would alternately turn it on and fly past me to the finish, or pretend he had run out of steam and let me cruise in to win. I would raise my paddle with both hands, over my head like a barbell, and whoop. Either way, we ended up splashing in the water to cool off, then spread-eagled on the beach, spent and happy.

NOW, I GUARD my memories and my shadow existence—my everyday life beyond the control of the punk patrol. My digital signature gleams clean for all those government sweepers. Forensic graphologists. Five thousand different personality traits spilling out the ink of our pens. Which way the letters slant. How we connect the lowercase *o*'s and *s*'s. *The quick brown fox jumps over the lary dog*. Every year, regular as taxes, they evaluate our citizen penmanship. Every painful cursive letter gifted us in boarding schools.

Print, you moron. That was Ishko's advice. Damn I miss the dance in his eyes when he teased. The flap of his dark hair falling in an obtuse angle over the bridge of his nose.

I bring the paddle down just that way into the breaking waves. Put everything into one sweet angle after another.

ONE MONTH, ISHKO. In thirty-one days I have to sit across from them again and write the same obedient sentence. *The quick brown fox …*

The missing brother. The slow search.

The wolf leading me?

I know they watch my movements, watch my pen hand like it is confession.

III.

There. Only a shadow. The big male lopes along the shore. I feel him before I look up.

I am not telling you we formed a friendship and I learned the wolf way. That story you can get on Kindle.

I just watch that long stride—easily six feet between touchdowns. Ten seconds, fifteen—until my kayak hits a submerged log that stops my glide.

His kept on; he was gone.

WHERE THE WOLF body had stretched—lean, a twin parallel to river, an apparition lingers.

In his wake, the trace of movement. The now empty somehow still full of grey flashes—withers, a narrow taper of flesh and fur, the wind beneath it.

TWO BODIES GONE, nothing but air.

IV.

Back home, still seeing the specter of the wolf, I brush Wingnut's brandy coat. It lies taut over her now slightly concave spine. I push a dab of coconut oil along the ridges. Her face slacks in relaxation. Believing in animal intelligence or eco-anything may earn me another mark in someone's recordkeeping, but Wingnut and I don't need the evidence of fake science. We understand each other. And we know what we know: her long run will come before fall. The signs have been building.

Our sweet oldest shared luxury has been food. Not always the usual fare for carnivores, but green, orange, and red crisp vegetables. Now though,

even the early cucumbers don't interest her. She used to fall to her belly before them, her cropped tail wagging excitement, like she was watching them grow. Finally, unable to restrain herself, she would nibble the end of one barely pickle-sized cucumber, then another. Sometimes she snatched and ran, a stolen green curve of joy tight in her jaws.

Now her shrinking body seeks sun and sleep for comfort. She builds nest after nest—my clothes pulled to the floor, a dug hollow under yard chairs. As she shuffles from one bed to another, the blades of her shoulders, the silhouette of her haunches remind me of a monk on hunger strike—the skeletal shape equal parts beauty and horror. Building distance.

V.

I dream the sinew and bone of language. My tongue tuning while I sleep.

My grandma's voice, steady as steam from the sugar bush kettle, rises in a litany of gratitude. *Miigwech manidoog iyaajig giiwedinong, waabanong, zhaawanong miinwa epangishimok*.

I speak myself awake and lose the cadence of those years.

VI.

Routine has different music. Each day I review schematics, sit through the monotony of Zoom meetings—faces successively pastier and more unreal each morning.

Mine, an uneasy compromise: I tame my hair until dark waves skim sharp cheekbones, soften the raptor intensity of my oak-brown eyes. How we cloak ourselves in a cosmetic normal. Estée Lauder, my corporate auntie, smooths my furrows—my where-is-my-lost-brother lines. In my closet and online, I move through a sequence of soft jackets, wearing them above my comfortable jeans. I button myself in with the colors of soil, leaf, cloud, and stone—become a neutral package.

My job, too, camouflaged in irony: a "global" product manager in a country devoted to exclusivity? This nation epitomized by colonial faces on banknotes—Washington, Jefferson, Jackson. Now posing in media moments, our new democratic figurehead furrows his pop TV eyebrows, his rhetoric exploding like bombs beyond our borders.

Each day, the politic demonizes. Cages. Tweets derogatory nicknames.

Meanwhile, I live onscreen in the virtual world of schematics. I build intricate patterns for circuit board designs—find elegance in the geography of electronics. The winding copper traces of semiconductors look like a map of our oldest river systems—our links for sustenance. If I still prayed for something other than Ishko's survival, I would offer praise to the solder that grounds us to places, to the melt of silver and tin that holds us together. Somewhere I still have a tissue-wrapped belief in this one part of the techno world—how careful crafting builds an electronic pathway—the pathway for each signal we send and receive.

Ishko called it a daydream—my allegory of delicate pathways, of building cooperation. *No fucking way*. *Cigar-smoking bastards want profit, not summer camp buddies*. But all day I think, *Map, map*. I watch deteriorating business relationships in this America-first era. But don't we wish for an antidote to the climate of isolation? Those of us who still remember the concept of community long for its return. Wasn't mutual good once one of our core values, our history? Couldn't it incubate our future?

Who am I kidding? I sit in a room alone, my careful image boxed on a screen, stacked among corporate faces. No brushstrokes of copper traces to join our lonely, muted avatars. We engage politely, but not warmly. Every square head exists in their own room of fear. Because none of us know who is government, we carve every word with caution—give nothing away.

In my particular room of fear, I imagine power closing in. If waterways could again become our pathways, is that my exit? Was it Ishko's?

Eight hours each weekday, my hardened fingertips on the keyboard follow that tense public duty. My off-hours I stay away from screens. Instead, my hands propel me through the darkening blue lakes, until sky and water merge. Some nights I go too far, stay too late. My paddle back is fueled solely by adrenaline.

Always, I am one stroke away from lost, one stroke away from home. I have lived this way for months without Ishko.

VII.

Then one morning he's back. I am watching Sigurd Olson's fog horses dissipate as day drinks mist. But something else emerges, rising water-grey

at the edge of my vision. *Ishko? Nisayenh?* I spill all my saved-up joy and half of my loneliness into a smile.

Ishko. I feel the cold of dawn shiver across my parted lips. Somewhere between knowing and not, I become a familiar story. A woman imagines. She watches her own longing take shape.

I see you bend in the water.

You are there, then gone, like the glitter of July sun.

This life I wake to. Not hollow, but fractured. I let them say their sorrows, Ishko. Spill ashes, make memorials of absence.

But still we travel the fissures.

Hope is old. Like the dreamsongs leaving rock. An ancient vision of canoes.

I see you fill the copper pail. This way you return, dripping of morning. You bring iron scent of Northern Waters to flavor our tea.

Carefully I walk from shore, watch sun silver the ripples. You shimmer —your body elongated, translucent like mayfly wings on water.

Like this we learn new patterns. And continue.

My alarm starts soft and builds to crescendo. John Lennon sings. *Imagine there's no heaven*. Again today, my damp hair curls—my pillow is cold, is wet. So I expect the water that meets my feet. Spilled from where? Again. *Nothing to kill or die for*.

Lennon and I have no time to quibble with mystery. But still I curse as I turn off the alarm, startle Wingnut into manic circles.

Who can explain how quickly the impossible becomes routine? Water from an invisible spring finding me? Nibi from the skies—falling into my house?

I have told no one; I have no one to tell.

Again, no sign of damp on the ceiling. *How I live now drenched in imagining*. Resigned, I pick up the mop I've left by my bed, swish to erase the puddle.

WINGNUT DISCOVERS IT first. She sniffs and sniffs at the floor, then looks around. She watches what remains invisible to me.

But now I have come fully awake. I, too, smell the pine pitch. I find where it has dried—an amber tacky resin, curved like a bay.

I should be frightened, but this visitation by water seems no more crazy than the evening news.

Or the pine harbor I now keep pondering.

VIII.

Outside. It's four o'clock. I am finishing a report. In a pain reflex, I rub my temples. I am ignoring voices now, but this one is insistent. *Outside*.

I think outside I will find a new perspective about supply as service or at least the day's mail. Instead, I find Ma'iingan. Pacing around my garden in the slant of afternoon sun. Something's off. His presence—at this time of day, in view this long. But I drink him in—motion and colors. Mottled like my favorite heather afghan—a grey bordering on blue, dark muzzle, eyes a glint. His tension, too, a shade of steel.

My uncle used to say, *See the landscape. Memorize it. Then see the difference*. The difference was always a nearly indistinct camouflage of survival. The blending shape, pigments melting into landscape. Each wolf's coat mimics environment. The dark-furred wolves of German fairy tales hunted in shadowy forests. The guard layer of this wolf's hair sprouts in the earth colors of Anishinaabe plant relatives, his fur opens like a box of multicultural crayons, hues in natural tones—sepia, burnt sienna, mahogany, peach. *The fear of color was not an invention of Ojibwe gods*.

But mingled there, too, is bark black. Does that make him unreal—a mythic wolf? Like the villainous black beasts of settler legends, whose stories are now propagated by sports hunters? They paint Ma'iingan as danger, like they paint anti-capitalist dissenters. Anishinaabe story links the fate of wolves with the fate of our tribe. *What befalls one, will befall the other*. Yes, each targets of extermination. A bounty on both our heads. Now traps take them out; poisoned foods diminish our numbers. The prophecy, not so far off.

As I watch this wolf, something about the irregular shag on his right foreleg draws my eye. Tufts of copper and then a gap. A scar shaped like a curved dish or child's paper moon. The kind that will save you when you hang it with string by your window smudge. Sweetly there and fading as

months change. A curl of hope, a promise. Waiting like an unbaited fish hook. Or a bay named escape.

Waiting like this strange wolf. For me? For Ishko? Why did he break cover?

I am speaking before I realize it. I see the points of his ears find my voice. And then I stall. What language? He seems to tire of waiting. His shoulder hackles flatten as he turns. In a minute I am alone. In another I realize Wingnut is barking on the other side of the screen door.

IX.

As I soothe her barking, I soothe myself with thoughts of Wolf Ishko.

The local news had sensationalized his story, built ratings. Truth wasn't in it. *My brother did not abandon me. He didn't run scared, reject civilized discourse, violate public trust, become an enemy of the collective good*. I repeat this in the safehouse of my mind. Only there. There I tell him as hero.

He pulled the curtain back on the pyramid scheme of mining companies. No, there will not always be more and more. He blue-jeaned their three-piece banquets, spray-painted their extract-and-frack lifestyles with environmental truths. In letter after letter, speech after speech, he called "extract and frack for continued prosperity" a failed plan. Rallies. Protests. Full-page ads. Exposés on abandoned sites. A parade of legal cases calling attention to the remnant poisons of past mines. Polluted rivers. Human bodies disappearing like Chernobyl ghosts. Photo spreads on tailings and drinking water contamination.

But also arrests, handcuffs, fines, and ducking thugs.

Ishko walks in, wind-blown and dirty. I pretend I don't see his hands shake as he opens a beer, his limp as he finds a chair.

I don't ask who he saw, what went down. I wait.

It only takes two minutes and half a bottle, which means he isn't badly hurt.

"I am not an unstable circus freak, a malcontent, a paid political assassin—I only play one on TV. Six o'clock news, kid. We snagged some big coverage today."

Okay, enough. Push the memory out, forget the water from nowhere, forget the pitch map. Be here. Pour coffee. Click and sign in.

I hug the comfort of math for three hours until lunch. A cipher. Crunch numbers that add up to company profit, a small margin of 4 percent. How is that winning in industry? Their answer, volume. Let us fill the planet with products made cheap to compete, made cheap to obsolete. In my *Nutcracker* nightmare, automotive parts, appliances built-to-break multiply exponentially.

Mass production is the cancer of our age. I hear Ishko again on repeat speaking about the "graveyard planet." A graveyard planet he loved more than safety or money. Or me? He marked maps with landfill locations, nuclear waste sites, and global recycling. He mathed out the fossil fuels required to ship garbage overseas. The much maligned and unpublished manifesto he kept revising he titled *Atlas of Away*, as in "throw it away."

Now he has disappeared—escaped? No one knows for sure, least of all me. But one way or another, with his band of revolutionaries, he has stepped into the pages of a new atlas.

Applaud if you like; I sometimes do. But he left me here drowning in the evidence, left me stranded, on this side of the dried ink.

X.

For a week I diligently earn my keep. I am a model of efficiency and corporate speak. *Best practices. Take the lead. Core competency. Low-hanging fruit*. About Thursday, my feet nervous-tap through long phone calls. By Friday, I have abandoned shoes, makeup, and thumbs-up signs in the Zoom chat. When the frown lines across my brow look like waves in a storm, I click off the video and breathe slowly as I listen to the monotonous discussion of five fresh goals.

The first of my own five fresh goals involves communication. I need a way to send messages. And receive them.

My hungry mind paces. *If our subconscious is embodied in our handwriting, a wolf's in its body language. If a tree's history is in its bark. If the color of water is a sign*.

If Ishko is searching. If Ishko is alive. If I am an inheritance.

XI.

Because it has become a habit, I plan messages to pass the time. I think how Ishko would laugh at my scavenger hunts on his birthday. Still, I designed one every year. *Look in the woodpecker's mailbox. What rhymes with* see *and weeps?* One year I left clues in mini bread loaves (*Make like Hansel*). If anything can bait him … I stop myself at *bait*. There are bear baiters and wolf baiters. I have never been one. Are they chasing my brother that way? Are they following him or following me? How far does the scrutiny go?

After Ishko made death headlines, I was "given" personal leave. At the end of that, I was invited in for "the talk" about liability and loyalty. When my hands began to shake in the interview, I folded them on my lap like every obedient school day of my early life. I knew what was coming—another "routine" evaluation of my handwriting for "job compatibility."

I channeled every Catholic school prayer, each of my tribal helpers, and all my Buddhist wisdom on breath to calm my hands. I made my cursive small and evenly spaced. I retraced my *t*'s like a model of "disciplined worker." They scrutinized. We fake smiled. They stamped my sample. I still have my job. I am careful, but not fooled—and neither are they. I know I am on a list of "potential liabilities."

Whatever the government's plan for us, lure and capture seem part of the toolbox. Is my true job now as bait?

SOMEWHERE A COVEY of the hunted are working to build a new future, Ishko among them. The wolf's appearance goads me. His presence a call, his scar a map. A link, perhaps a fissure in the rock curtain drawn between where I am and the elsewhere I don't yet know how to define. An elsewhere that harbors Ishko? If so, is it refuge? I know I won't harm Ma'iingan nor betray either by bringing them back to the hunted conditions in which we now live. I must find another way.

To act without answer is not the same as to act without plan. You cannot build a fortress unless you first find the treasure.

I may be unraveling, but still I prioritize. My first job: Find those whose brilliance has gone into hiding themselves. My muddy uncertain second job: Go to them? Or divert?

XII.

As the earth retraces its path around the sun, the comfort of cycle fails to soothe me. Instead, my desperation builds toward crescendo. My days now consist of fiberboard and glimpses. Manic, I am making signs in Anishinaabemowin. I paint, varnish, then tack them up when I make my paddles or hikes deeper and deeper into Ishko's away.

Mistakenly devoted. That was Ishko's label for my serial preoccupations. A twist on the "Hopelessly Devoted to You" song of Olivia, my one white crush. He grinned as he hummed it, or belted it out in falsetto —always with an accompanying eyeroll or hair tousle. The lighthearted teasing made his disapproval clear while still keeping us from serious fights. *Good heart, kid. But mistakenly devoted*. We didn't always agree—maybe didn't often agree about smoothing a way into public normal. I camouflaged and compromised. He flouted. I stayed safe with perhaps a whisper of fringe. He blew it all up. Every time.

If you believe the news accounts, they blew him up finally. All the "reliable news outlets" painted him as having gone berserk over the destruction of effigy mounds and appeals court rulings on DAPL. "Environmental Media Darling Self-Destructs" was the Fox News headline. "Caught Embezzling" was a popular tagline for photos showing Ishko at a casino. I've printed the articles, assembled them in a poly envelope, and hidden them in the linen closet between carefully folded floral sheets. *The trident-wearing leader of Great Lakes Environmental Ethics (GLEE) refused to surrender to federal investigators. He is believed to have perished by drowning when he jumped from a boat in Duluth Harbor. The GLEE blockade was the latest site for a standoff between environmentalists and the multinational Enbridge*.

As I paint, spatters mark me with a new tattoo each day. Once I would have studied them and named continents or invented new ink blot therapy. Now I barely pause to wash them down the drain, to erase the scent of varnish. My mind says *search and rescue*, but I can't pinpoint my position in such a scenario. Neither do I know if I am the seer or the see-ee. Or what response I expect for my efforts.

Still I can't stop my hand or the blue words: *Daga*. *Giiwe*. One week, I use my Ojibwe dictionary, write phrase after phrase of invitation: *Biindige*.

“Come inside.” *Biidaasamishkaa*. “Come in a boat.” *Biidaapi*. “Come laughing.” *Biijikawe*. “Come leaving tracks.”

“Against All Odds.” That cliché phrase was a *National Enquirer* headline. Ishko would be psyched he made the biggest gossip magazine. I save it with the others. To show him someday. I know he’s out there. Ishko was always “going on the lam.” *Geez, jist one time I’d like to go on the moose—much more macho, huh, Kid?*

Always I am watching for a signal fire—some sign of a camp or survival. Instead, I see a flash of tail or the small orbs of spirit light. I hunger for some word—in any language—some sign. One day from the kayak I see a landscape filled with squares of MDF. And squiggles of blue. No, no, no. I have populated my safe haven with the replica of a computer screen. A code—a failure.

I have made it visible.

I EMAIL IN sick for two days and remove the *mistakenly devoted* signs. Leave tobacco and prayers in my wake. Stack these strange composite boards next to my firewood. I cover everything with a tarp and a Heineken.

Feeling beaten, I stretch out on the porch with Wingnut to watch the sun signal night. In the Northwoods the lush skirt of sky transforms quickly, like a magician’s scarf. The lift of blue now mottled with soft crème and settling to earth. Cloud curves on water flash with feeding bass, turn peach, bloom into rose. Too soon the world mutes, narrows to a ruffle of copper at the horizon, then stuns again with darkness.

Because I don’t run to electric comfort, I am redeemed. Disembodied, the wolf’s eyes float in a line through the pines. I hold tight to the old dog, to the older memories the eyes have awakened. The glow of their slant cut familiar.

XIII.

After I smudge Wingnut and bury her, I leave small symbols at the mound of earth—food and a carving. No one is here to observe my mismatch of honor.

And now no one is here to nudge me awake from dark dreams. Without Wingnut, they become relentless until my bones ache in the mornings from a deep tiredness. One night I hear the cobble alive with horses and wake. They are not there. Last night I heard the late howl of wolves across the water. I wake and they continue.

After the wolves quiet, I sink deeper into sleep and again my dreams turn. *I sit with Ishko at the rock shore where we have built a fire. Our feet and unlaced boots extend toward the warmth. His gestures, shadowed, fill the ledge*. Now his trombone laugh wakes me, pushes against the dome of stars and echoes back. My brother, refracted, remains.

I take myself outdoors, wrap in a Pendleton, and listen. How far can sound carry? Through what layers of matter or time? Has Wingnut's death journey created a temporary breach between realms?

XIV.

I pack for a week in the wild. My paperwork filed, I am legit. My absence online will not raise any eyebrows nor waken the greedy trappers.

Tell me you have not carved your loved one's return in dreams—day and night, have not plotted against the ether that swallowed them, hung purple streamers in your mind, streamers that swing above songs of their homecoming. I am you, with one edge—I believe my brother lives.

"Stay safe," his fingers signaled that last morning. He had only a camper's gear. His ponytail half covered by the neck gaiter he wore in fall —to protect his powwow voice, he always claimed. I used to think the gaiter transformed him, like the cape of a comic book hero. *He left dressed in his power*.

I know he lengthened like a mink in water—zhaangweshi—became black rock and shadow. In a den, he outlasted winter, found spring buds like the deer, and has fattened again during the lush of summer. But another season of cold might be harder to bear—for both of us. I have waited, under scrutiny, all my moves calculated to throw off suspicion. But the wolf and the dreams say *now*.

The crescent map says *follow*.

XV.

I sort and select. What I need folded small to leave room for the contraband. No, not the usual forbidden, but specially chosen items my brother might need to survive—matches in a canister, jerky and other dried foods, camp axe, and even a spare gaiter. I cover the offerings with a reflective tarp. As I tuck, it crackles, glints silver. A flash like fire. Like Ishkode's namesake.

A torero, he unfolds the fabric with a flourish. He lifts the tarp, wraps himself, red-side in—cocooned. His body now all silver surface. Gathering and reflecting the campfire.

I see you bend, Nisayenh. See you rise—a six-foot banana moon.

The elongated curve in darkness. A replica. Shaped like sky canoes, like Giizis—our oldest hope.

How you become trace—the night wolf's eye, a glimmer on dark waters. How I become whole—the steady sweep of my paddle, the angle of stroke, the funnel.

I am following, Ishko. Keep drawing the map.

The river changes with the light—blue to green to black. I study the shores for trace of passage here. No boot print. No crumpled foil. Then I notice it. One reed is draped in a tatter of blue merino fabric I recognize. A lonely flag. A clue in this scavenger hunt—at last.

I paddle closer, remove the scrap. Sniff it. Of course, no scent remains.

I do not measure the odds.

Instead, I pocket the snippet of hope.

Nisayenh, with the blade of my paddle, I write you notes in the water. Each spiral a cursive.

Ishko.

Growing Things

She found it hard to meet the man's eyes, so she turned small rocks over with her toes, half alert for a fossil. Every so often she would look up at the old oak—seventy-five to a hundred years old, he had told her. Because she didn't know the soil, climate, or insect populations, she had called in this arborist. Not the bookish, bifocaled scientist she had expected, but he had grasped the situation quickly and now spilled waves of information. "You have to go deep to do any good," Spanish heard him say. He went on gesturing and explaining to her about fertilization.

Now he was writing things down: formulas, brand names, equipment she would need. She was shelling out money for this and tried to pay attention, but she wanted to laugh every time she looked at him. Ever since he came down the drive in that sporty Mazda. Like his shirt, it was a blue she couldn't name—one of those designer colors invented in a laboratory, custom-made for yuppies. For this yuppie tree doctor.

And what did he make of her? Did the move here make her an outsider, her ethnicity make her a curiosity? Or to a tree doctor, maybe a transplant?

She squinted, trying to superimpose some distinctive character over his smooth, round, dimpled cheeks. She tied a bandanna pirate-style over his head. No, that didn't work. She rolled it into a headband, but that looked silly on his close-cropped hair, made his little bald spot more prominent. Well, maybe a hat. Or a scar across his cheekbone. Like a pruning scar. His compact build did make her think of the tough little bonsai that grew from ledgerock in the Great Lakes.

“Well, that should do it. Got it? I’d bring the mulch out to here if you don’t mind the looks of it. Miss?”

“Hmm? Oh, I think so. Mulch, fertilizer injections, pruning …”

“In the dead of winter.”

“Right. But you say you can’t promise it will do any good.”

“Know in three to five years—if you’re still here. I’ll leave my card if you think of something you forgot to ask.”

When he bent over his notebook again, suddenly, she wanted to touch the little hollow on his chin, fill it with her finger. Feel the smooth curve of it. A tree doctor after all. Some ancient blood, some spirit must have left its mark, somewhere palpable. Her hand moved to caress the concave belly of the brown spirit stone in her pocket.

He himself had hardly touched anything. The bark for no more than a few seconds. A branch pulled down for a hasty look at the leaves. All skill and scholarship. Not the play or intimacy of relatives.

“Boozhoo, my friend Oak,” her grandpa would say as he grasped a low branch in a handshake. “This here is my little Spanish.” He would lift her giggling to the handshake, to the solemn introductions he used to make. “Good day, Mrs. Birch. What fine dress you wear.” “Grandpa, her dress is torn,” she would whisper, knowing he must pretend to correct her manners.

Because of her grandpa, the world of Spanish’s childhood was furry, prickly, sticky with life. A place of rocks, cold and wet, their colors made vibrant by the waves breaking over them, rocks to be turned and admired in the hand, to be felt and heard with the palms. The world she knew was a place of sharp thorns, coarse or sleek animal fur, slippery bodies of fish. It was mossy forest floors on which they lay, bodies cushioned, remembering a nest of crisp fall leaves, imagining the soft bed of clouds.

To know the world by touch is to know it by heart. That, Spanish thought, was the single lesson her grandpa taught. Did he realize the many troubles she would encounter because she learned it so well?

Touch was of the devil—the lesson the nuns taught. Keep your hands folded on your desk in the classroom, in your lap when you sit, in front of you when you walk. Wear white gloves to church like nice young ladies do. Keep your hands clean. Don’t play in the mud, don’t put your fingers in the food, don’t play with your hair, and don’t touch boys—ever.

And yet, Spanish remembered how all the miracles in the Bible stories came about because of touch. Jesus touched the blind man's eyes, the dead, the lame, the sick. He blessed the loaves and the fishes. He broke the bread with his hands. The Bible knew the power of touch.

Was this the power that the nuns feared? The reason Spanish spent so many afternoons writing one declaration or another five hundred times, saying in words what she wouldn't say with her heart, that she wouldn't hold hands behind the silo, wouldn't touch the Host with her fingers, wouldn't swing from her knees on branches. Wouldn't trail her fingers along the tree doctor's palm during their parting handshake until he looked up startled and smiled uneasily.

"Well, goodbye, then. Call me if you want … another checkup. If you have questions. If you …" He closed the car door on his own half-expectant mumble. Spanish held up her left hand in farewell; her right hand again fingered the stone in her pocket. She stood squinting into the sun, watched the yuppie tree doctor drive off, and wondered what she had expected.

Spanish had prepared for his arrival as if he were deserving of ritual honor, summoned with a gift of tobacco—like a sucking doctor called to heal the sick. She had not completely settled in, so her preparation required she search the still-packed boxes for the odd group of items she thought appropriate. On the built-in side table she placed special teas and a tumbler of whiskey. She filled a kettle for the stove, set out a turtle-shaped bowl, matches, and cedar. She dressed carefully, slipped a heavy silver bracelet onto her wrist, added the birchbark earrings from cousin Julia, and pulled her hair back in a beaded barrette with a thunderbird pattern she had designed herself.

She had also closed her mixed-blood spaniel, Dragon, in the loft with chews, just in case. Spanish remembered her grandma consoling her when she'd had to tie her old reservation dogs away from the house before a medicine man was due to come. "Sometimes them doctors need it real quiet."

Old habits. Now she sat on the steps, her fingers buried deep in the hair around Dragon's neck, her caresses a peace offering for his recent banishment. The tree doctor—*Shelby Mathews, Arborist*, his card said—had not come into Spanish's new log home, had not tasted tea or whiskey, had not made any offering, told any story, or done any healing. Who had she

thought to smudge—the tree doctor or the tree? And who might pass the smoke for her cleansing?

Spanish told herself she was being unfair. She knew where she was coming when she transferred here. The lake country of Southern Wisconsin: rural, but still Middle America. Maybe her romps in the surrounding woods had tricked her, brought back memories, built up her expectations. But Shelby Mathews was an arborist, not really a tree doctor as she had thought of him, certainly not a jiisakiiwinini or conjurer.

"Still, he had potential, eh, Dragon?" Spanish said as she remembered his hard-muscled legs and the quiet feel of his spirit. She cringed though when she recalled his notebook and yuppie earnestness. "Should have asked him in for tea anyway. Maybe I could teach him what I know about the healing touch. Well, let's get about his mulch thing. Wanna ride in the wheelbarrow, Dragon?"

Spanish knew she felt an unreasonable amount of guilt for the oak's threatened health. Even though she had fenced an eight-foot-wide circle off-limits for the heavy equipment during building, its root system must still have suffered. Spanish had seen pointless destruction of trees, waterways, animal habitat before—the developers' targeted "improvements." Scorched-earth campaigns remained a tribal memory, clear-cutting a practice her family still battled to prevent. *So what? Now I rally all my frustrated tenderness for one tree?* Spanish could no more understand her own motivations than she could predict her future. *Never know; can't say*. That had been her grandpa's stock answer to the unanswerables. She figured for now she could continue to live the maybes. *Meanwhile, my needs won't override the oak's*.

Proximity, such a tricky business. Seven cousins layered together in the back of that old rusty pickup, their three moms crowded into the cab. Kids bouncing along, singing to hear their voices jar and crack with the bumps. Going to town, going fishing, going visiting, just going along. Spanish thought about the close kin system of her childhood. Three generations sharing beds, clothes, chores, food, and fun, living together in tight quarters. What made it work?

Living in Texas with cowboy Dale, the whole ranch hadn't been big enough for just the two of them. "You were there, Dragon. Why couldn't

we fit in the same wheelbarrow? His big, brash Texas attitude?" No. She used that story because she didn't know the true reason.

Now, as she shoveled the mulch, Spanish replayed the tree doctor's pragmatic instructions. You mulch, you prune, you inject. And you wait. Three full years and no promises. Clearly the world was not merely quid pro quo. This couldn't be all science. Was it luck or love? Maybe some other intangible, like magic?

She had long ago befriended magic, so why did Spanish fumble relationships? Always, one of the partners began to feel threatened by the closeness. Not claustrophobia, but some need for freedom. Maybe for an *I* not defined by the other. The watercolor artist in Colorado had mistaken her for his muse in his "earth" phase, and then the phase passed. She shook her head and let the memory go.

"That's incompatible soil, huh, Dragon? Not my fault." Spanish pulled on her gloves. Because she had forgotten the rake, she crouched to spread the compost and manure by hand. Despite a little self-consciousness, when she finished she spoke reassurance to the tree. "A protective layer while you heal. I hope you don't mind the scent." As she rose to leave, Dragon bounded over to push his nose in the mulch. She knew his mind said, *Roll*, so she quickly lifted him into the wheelbarrow and started back.

"Let's go round by our future orchard, Dragon." The dog stayed in the wheelbarrow only until he spotted the pond. Then he zipped off to explore every tussock and every bush that might harbor something alive. Spanish felt the same enthusiasm for the land's promises.

After Colorado, she had requested a transfer here—picked someplace within a day's drive of the reservation. Built a cabin. Fished. Roamed the countryside. Tried to belong.

Because at home, too, she had entanglements that kept her from moving back. The messy lawsuit against the U.S. government—ongoing—that had allowed T-Metals to clear-cut the forest that abutted her family's traditional homelands. A lot of hot tempers just now, and her lawyer advised her to steer clear until the whole thing was settled: *Keep cool and clean, and you'll look better in court*. And, yes, the heartache of the destroyed habitat weighed. Perhaps she needed a protective healing layer as much as the oak. Perhaps it was here.

Here, she had solitude and time. Maybe she had no history in this place. No family next door. But with luck, a future might reveal itself. Root systems took time.

Meanwhile the damaged oak reminded her about the dance we do with belonging. Spanish felt determined. *Anyone can dance, Spanish*, Grandpa had assured her. *Just watch the raindrops. Or ask Mr. Crane. Really the only rules are: Don't step on anyone's toes & toss a little joy in*. He had generally pooh-poohed her doing-it-wrong worries. She tried now to do the same for herself. In the weeks that followed, Spanish would gaze intently at the oak's bark, its leaves, trying to see signs that her care was working. She looked in the mirror for the same reason.

THE ARBORIST CAME back in late January—the dead of winter. Spanish had called him about the pruning. Small preparations this time, and Dragon at her side. She kept her nervous hands busy finger-combing the dog's thick winter coat.

"How you liking it out here?" Shelby Mathews asked while setting up. "Pretty quiet in the winter, isn't it?"

"I keep myself busy. I like quiet." *Dumb answer, Spanish, dumb*. She watched him find the rhythm of his pruning routine. Lotsa science in this guy, she thought, but some music, too, maybe a little bit of magic he doesn't acknowledge yet.

It hurt her to watch the cutting, so she turned away to her small duties on the grounds as she listened to his movements. Pruning wasn't in her blood. Not like it must be in the blood of the bonsai masters, and maybe in the blood of the tree doctor. She remembered the hollow feeling that came the first time she saw a wood chipper at work. Branches gobbled up by the shrieking machine, spat out as bits and sawdust. That was true modern wizardry, she supposed, but not for her. This, this pruning for health was a different kind of cutting, maybe an art. *Shelby Mathews, Tree Doctor, Artist*. Spanish smiled as she conjured the business card.

She thought then of the three sisters. A natural alchemy, and a better story of proximity. Corn, beans, and squash—plants that thrived together, each supplying something practical that aided the growth of the others.

Shade, a trellis, nitrogen. The arborist might call them companion plants, but she would always picture them as sister-cousins smiling and holding hands, faces upward, catching raindrops on their tongues.

He had finished. It didn't look like art, not yet anyway. Poor stump branches. "It's all about letting sunlight in for survival. Sunlight and air for the canopy." The arborist spoke tenderly with just a touch at her elbow, as if he could sense her sorrow. Together Spanish and Shelby carried the fallen pieces to her woodpile. "And the tree seals the cuts—you watch if it doesn't." The reassurance came unbidden. It surprised her. She looked up, caught his eye, nodded. They stood there, quiet, like you did at a memorial.

Then she checked herself. *Don't read too much in, you fool*. But, because Shelby Mathews still waited, his dimples showing now, she said, "Come in for coffee or hot chocolate while I write you a check?"

"Sure, thanks."

When she returned with the serving tray, he sat by her chess set, an onyx knight in his hand. He had removed his gloves and his eyes closed as he traced its lines.

She cleared her throat and he jumped a little. "Coffee," she announced as she set the tray down. *As if he can't see you brought coffee. Great banter*, *Spanish*, she chided herself.

"Pretty set."

"Thanks. You play?"

"A little, sometimes."

"Want to?"

"What? Oh, play? Now?"

"Or … sometime."

They both groaned a little at the awkwardness. "I'm sorry," Spanish began. "Out here, conversation, well, isn't my strong suit these days."

"No, I'm sure it's me. Pruning puts me in a bit of a trance, I guess."

A trance. The answer landed like a seed. An arborist, yes, but a tree doctor, maybe a little, too.

They didn't play chess. Just talked a bit about the area, his business, her house, and about Dragon when he demanded attention. Shelby didn't stay long, but he admired a lot of things in her house: the wood finishes, fish decoys, black ash baskets, books. Maybe one of them would bring him back. Maybe she would.

If only she knew about love medicines. Sympathetic magic was what the anthropologists called it when dolls were tied together to conjure a bond. Did those dolls break their leather ties when one of the lovers fled in search of personal space? What kind of love was it that created such a largeness in a relationship that no one became afraid? What kind of love had eluded her? Would this tree doctor who knew about root systems know about that magic?

As a child she had watched her old cat, Mrs. Tom, give birth and lick each newborn kitten dry. “Why does she do that, Grandpa? Doesn’t she get tired?”

“She’s waking up their blood, Spanish, the way you wake up yours each morning when you stretch. She’s getting that blood to move around in their bodies.”

Science would later tell her that the mother cat was stimulating her offspring’s circulation, but Spanish would always think of it as waking up their kitten blood. And when later she would lie with a lover whose hands gently petted and caressed her, who ran kisses down her neck and arms, she knew he was waking up her kitten blood, too, filling the life vessels of her body. What stopped that magic?

The tree doctor came back a week later, pulled into the yard in a brown four-wheel-drive Bronco. “Mazda’s kind of impractical in this weather,” he told her when she asked.

“I had a job down the road a ways, saw you in the yard …”

“I’m glad you came. I was studying this tree.”

“You won’t know for a while. I thought I explained.”

“You did, but I can’t help searching for a sign.” Spanish traced the bark patterns lightly with her fingers. “I try to encourage it; it’s too grand to be destroyed by humans crowding in.”

“I saw the tobacco.”

“Huh?”

“The first day I came. You had some kind of ceremony.”

“Made an offering. Appeasement, I guess.” She said it small on purpose, the way a killdeer will cover its young with its wings, as camouflage.

“I wondered. And me? Hedging your bets?”

Spanish glanced up at his face and his raised eyebrows. But before she could respond, he laughed. A safe laugh. An I-know-your-boundaries laugh. “It’s okay. I’m as used to skepticism as you are, I guess. After you’ve explained to forty people about some invisible fungus invading through the root system or tried to counter the story of some TV fertilizer wizard, you just accept it: Some people will think you inhaled too much nitrogen or something.”

She could have told him then, but he didn’t seem in any hurry. If anyone did, he knew about waiting. Three years of healing for the tree if she helped it along. *Oh, I believe in science*, she could have said, *just not by itself*.

Someday she might show him the tamarack stands, the jack pines, the maple sugar grounds of her childhood. He might burn with fury when he saw the scars of clear-cutting in her homeland. Or they might sit together watching the waves of heat, wiping their foreheads with a folded red bandanna, and singing for rain to feed the rows and rows of saplings set before them.

“Feel these channels, Child. They are the same on the great oak, on the marked land, and now on the forehead of your mishoomis.” She had touched the age lines, of course, her thin finger a seedling, his forehead a furrow. “Grandpa, are you turning to bark?” They laughed then. As Spanish did now with this smooth-faced tree doctor. She could almost see him turning to bark, too. And waited.

A Tally in Birch

In the sweat of summer on the rez, I used to count mosquito bites. I notched my record during a Bass Lake fishing derby in July. Five crappies, one eel-thin northern, and seven zigzagged welts—a lightning bolt across my wrist. Other punctures clustered like tracks on the pale fish belly of my forearm. I counted twenty-eight total itches on a single appendage. Minnesota has more mosquito species than the U.S. has states—fifty-one to be exact; but only twenty-four of those species bite humans. So it is possible that my skin was kissed by every biting mosquito species in the state of Minnesota on a single day—and more than once by some of them.

Sometimes while I waited for a nibble on my line, I used to calculate mosquito degrees of separation. Each female mosquito bites and bites and bites until she drinks three times her weight in blood, meaning the same mosquito that bites me and gets away before I smash her can move to the other side of the boat and keep feasting—on you. Making us mosquito blood brothers or sisters. Not only that, but mosquitoes can lay two hundred eggs at a time. I can't even calculate the cousins coming from that!

I did once try to calculate the probability that one of the buzzing biters in the far north would be a carrier of malaria. But probability is not sissy math. Identifying the event was easy, but figuring the number of outcomes was convoluted—dependent upon season and climate and clothing and repellent and … I never quite arrived at an answer. I did decide though that the probability of being pierced by the six-needled mouth of a mosquito in Minnesota in the summer while fishing was pert near 100 percent.

However, none of my own nearly innumerable cousins were impressed with that discovery.

THE MATH I do now twists cruel—in directions I'd rather not follow. It goes something like this: At the Crane Lake Hospital, thirteen Indian babies were born addicted to drugs in April; fourteen Indian babies were born addicted in May. Make it a story problem if you like: If twenty-seven Indian babies are born addicted to drugs at one hospital in two months' time, how many Indian babies are born addicted to drugs at that hospital during a single year?

Or we could do percentages—I can rattle those off faster than you can bait your hook or tuck your pant legs into your socks: At the Paul Bunyan Hospital 80 percent of Indian babies are born addicted to drugs. The infant mortality rate for American Indian and Alaska Native children is roughly 200 percent that of white infants born in the United States. If you are some pretend-you-give-a-fuck researcher who has published a skin statistic and spread it like calamine lotion over all the red welts of rez life, I've got your numbers, too. In Minnesota, an average of 40 percent of Indian students drop out before reaching high school graduation. Of course, that number is skewed because some of them don't live that long. Among adolescents, Native Americans have higher rates of suicide than any other ethnicity. Then there's unemployment rates, poverty, physical abuse.

Yeah, I'd go back to mosquito bites any day if I could just remember how to focus my counting on something unowned by terror math. A solipsism of my own skin.

I ALSO USED to count jobs: hired, fired, or quit. You might wonder how many there could be given I'm barely thirty. Seventeen. That's counting the babysitting gigs where drunken men would come home and want to give me "a bonus." I hated to leave some of them little kids, knowing I couldn't come back.

I'm not saying I'm anybody's Mary Poppins, but I know macaroni—in a hot dish and as some crazy rez artwork. Think about it. That fifteen

minutes sticking the cooked pasta shapes to paper, making a fish or a crooked dream catcher, that's fifteen minutes our kids don't have to think about who has a grudge, a habit, a welfare check, or a gun. Fifteen minutes when I don't have to, either.

Then there was lifeguarding. Pine Tree Lake, triangles of light playing across the water where little brown toes tiptoe in. The song of splash and giggle. The scent of content. Fifteen minutes times four for dog-paddling and turning somersaults underwater. One hour each Monday, Wednesday, and Friday—that job bought twenty Head Start kids 180 minutes of dream time each week of summer. 3,600 minutes. Until I was fired.

I'm sure you heard that story by now. A silver Lone Ranger badge shouldn't mean your alcohol alter ego can bruise your kid in public. But the nobody summer worker who interferes will be gone quicker than the footprints they left on the beach. That firing should really count for two since it cost me my part-time library job, too.

Seventeen jobs. My fault, their fault, too boring, not my talent, job needed for someone else, someone making it look like it was my fault—I should have counted up the reasons not just the jobs. The jobs—waitressing (multiplied by three locations), home sewing, working in the dime store, the nursing home, the horse barn. Pretty much any no-degree-needed job there is I have held or applied for at some point.

I MET THAT little Blackduck boy the fall I got fired by the tribe for the third time. Along my path, white birch limbs stretched delicately into copper, offering me consolation. But I saw everything as half bare and defeated. I scuffed along in my new Dockers, kicked up color and damp decay, determinedly eating my heartache from the air like it was bakwezhhigan. Hank Williams lyrics trailed on the wind—the chorus a kite tail. *Ever'things agin me and it's got me down. If I jumped in the river I would probably drown. No matter how I struggle and strive, I'll never get out of this world alive*.

Then Aanakwad popped out of a pile of leaf gold. *Poof!* Like in a magic act. I leaped back and shook my head, trying to clear my vision. He shook his to dislodge his crown of leaves. The brook-clear notes of his laugh

surprised me. Peeled back my sorrow. My own laugh hiccupped out then, joining his.

He'd been just waiting under them leaves. Fifteen minutes times what? I've always wondered how long we can hold our breath, in or out of water. Waiting. Like Aanakwad, waiting for someone to come along and change him. The way scarves become doves while Rick Wilcox smiles at the audience. His hand caresses the silk, opens, and releases bird after bird. He doesn't need a wand, never breaks a sweat. That job—to wake something and release it—that's the one I keep looking for. I think Aanakwad may have been like me with dreams he kept carefully contained. Like potted plants.

ONE YEAR, BEFORE my serial unemployment, I was a student exhibitor at an AISES science fair. A tiny Isleta girl, Sammy Lucero, had her booth next to mine. Her exhibit, taller than her, was about growing corn. She had played each of her corn seedlings different kinds of music. Country and western. Classical. Jazz. Turns out the plants grew best with Pueblo corn songs; their graph line was green and climbing higher like the corn stalks. So far I figure for Native people, humor is our corn songs, our growing medicine.

I've watched them sacred clowns turn the crowd at ceremonies. I guess you can't pray unless you laugh first. It breaks something open. That was Aanakwad's magic. His laughter charged the air like a crack of thunder promising rain. He wasn't a heyoka. Just a funny kid who wanted out. He kicked at the crusted edges of things the tribe wanted you to leave alone. Blood quantum. Casino money. Maybe we were both kickers there in the same closed box.

I SHOULD START at the beginning, but that's hard to find in what I want to tell. Life's tangled like that—stories, too, like a fish flopping in a net. Around here, stories go back generations. Like me being fired from the casino, which really happened because I got hired by Sonny Ford. You know, Junior—lanky, nerd glasses, always in black boots. In this story net, Sonny gave me a chance—two firings and all—because he used to work my

grandpa Ivan's tree planting crew. But then Sonny turned in the stolen ballots he found where that pickup truck wrecked by Lonesome Oak. So he's freshly unemployed—which makes me freshly unemployed. Seventeen jobs and I just keep repeating the same loop. Hell, maybe it's like that old Laguna guy Lee Francis said, Indian stories aren't about beginning, middle, end; they're about middle, middle, middle.

So maybe I met Aanakwad Blackduck somewhere in the middle. In the middle of my helping to boost the statistics on Native American unemployment rates on my rez—double digits since 2008 if anyone is graphing—in the middle of him charting survival. He made me forget about being fired and why I was fired—again—and we started this strange game just like we had been playing it together for years.

He would ask a question: *How many Indians does it take to weed a garden?* And then he'd say, *All of them*. And there was always a reason why: *One to use the hoe and the rest to smoke the weed!* Every question had the same answer. Same laugh or groan, too. *How many AIM members does it take to move an outhouse? All of them. One to lift, one to carry, and the rest to hold the protest*. Groan. *How many AIM members does it take to file a grievance? All of them. One to sign the papers and the rest to pose for pictures*. After the first few jokes, we started inventing them; one asked the question and the other had to make up the answer.

Some people wear T-shirt slogans. Aanakwad had his own brand of funny. As camouflage maybe. Or a diversionary tactic to keep safe from the pickax mentality of his hoodlum brothers. He had bland down pat. His face said: *I'm not a trickster, just a firekeeper watching rez fuckups*. Only one corner of his generous mouth tilted—like the tip of a canine ear. A signal.

I hadn't figured that out yet though. How efficiently he had learned trickster energy. A balance against chaos. Against the flatlines of a rez normal. Nor had I met the newborns with drug withdrawals—twitching, jerking, labored breathing so strong they end up in ICU. Later I was the window glass, with no power to intervene. Some clench and clench their little fists hard until they end up with damaged hands.

Aanakwad was only ten that October, but he had grown-up hands—nimble and long like his grown-up hair. You know how all those Blackducks have that Hollywood Indian hair? Well on him it fell like a silk

blanket all down his spiny back, and glistened like the fur on a wet otter. It rippled—alive when he moved.

Him. His hair. Alive. Him hanging upside down by his knees from a low branch, all that inky black hair waving like a wet sheet in the wind. *How many Chimookaman does it take to make a treaty? All of them. One to sign the paper, the rest to keep changing the rules*. His laugh a crow call—hearty and echoing. He could almost fly. Swing his body over and around and land on his feet. Around. Land on his feet. On his feet. Laughing. Singing his corn song. Evade his brothers. His destiny. On a scatter graph of Native violence he lands in the safe zone. Around. On his feet. In the safe zone again. In the safe zone. Ninety-eight percent of the time.

MAYBE I MADE it my new unofficial job to keep him there. Maybe somewhere beneath the surface my math brain was adding up sweet cedar smoke minutes. But after my getting-fired day, we saw a lot of each other. He kept me company through mouse traps, putting up storm windows, chopping wood, whatever. Afterward he'd stay for supper. *How many rez kids does it take to make hot dogs? All of them. One to boil the water, the rest to round up the stray dogs*. In the evenings, we played cards or Chinese checkers.

We didn't talk about the hard math each of us might be doing in our heads. Laughter was the cooling poultice we needed. Besides, inside hurts, just like outside hurts, heal better if we don't keep uncovering them to see how they're getting along.

By late November, biboon had come. Brought the dark. Everything that wasn't within the cast of the lamp seemed farther away. Sometimes we'd reach out, find the popcorn bowl empty, the windows frosted over, and realize we'd played past midnight. Days I'd catch myself making up Aanakwad jokes to get me through: *How many Indians does it take to keep a job? All of them. One to get hired, the rest to diagram election fallout*. My ponytail drooped lower and lower while I opened my mail—fuel bill, grocery flier, reminder bill from Lee Electric. *How many thirty-year-old Indian women does it take to put on makeup? All of them. One to smooth the foundation, the rest to count the wrinkles*.

I had unemployment by this time—$178 a week—and was getting by. I burned the want ads in my woodstove after I skimmed them. Cook. Forklift driver. Dime store clerk. All darkened and curled at the edges. One future after another becoming smoke and heat. Fuel for my bear stew. I didn't want to spin the same dead-end wheel I'd been spinning. Something churned in me for change. Maybe Aanakwad's ten-year-old soul churned like that, too. Maybe my yearning had something to do with his survival graph. With the messed-up rez statistics factored against the loon calls and powwows. I was studying the numbers hard that fall. This wasn't the sacred geometry of our effigy mounds, but the colonial accounting that dominated our lives.

One I-don't-have-the-money-to-go-to-bingo night Aanakwad helped me string a clothesline inside and hang my stiff, iced-over jeans. *How many Indians does it take to dry laundry? All of them. Only one to blow hot air, the rest to hold the clothes*. He spilled out jokes fast, one after another like he was trying to empty wash water. Finally, he just sunk down low in his clothes like last season's scarecrow and aimed the hairdryer randomly. He blew the dust off my pictures, blew away my phone notes, blew the ice off one window corner. When he turned the barrel toward himself, a shock of blackness rose around his face—all that hair suspended like a black halo. Then he shut off the blower. "I'm going to Uncle Miles," he said at last.

His mom's uncle who worked construction somewhere down by the Twin Cities, Miles had a couple of grown girls, but no boys. Everyone knew he had offered lots of times to come and get Aanakwad. Take him away from the illegal trafficking at the Blackduck house. My stomach felt hollow at his news, but I told him I was real happy he'd decided to go. We went back to using my hair dryer on the jeans. But maybe I looked empty, too, cuz pretty soon he stopped and touched my arm, serious-like. "There's lots of jobs in Minneapolis." I'm not sure why we felt just like relatives to one another. But I promised to come down for a Twins game. *How many Indians does it take to get a home run? All of them. One to hit the ball, the rest to yell, "How-wah!"*

Everything moved fast after that. Aanakwad would leave during Christmas break so he could start school in the new term. The week before, we went up by Strawberry Mountain to cut a little tree. When he bent to tie it on the sled, I saw the bruises on the back of his neck. We followed the

trail out, taking turns dragging the pine. Aanakwad whistled and sang Christmas songs; I smiled hard but curse-chanted in my head, damning his evil windigo family. *It's a holly, jolly Christmas*. Vile, worthless drug lords. *Bearing gifts, we travel afar*. Should chainsaw you money-hungry, thin-lipped dicks.

Everyone knew Aanakwad's brother Tyrus had been picked up, charged with battery. Not for the violet fingerprints I saw marking Aanakwad's flesh —although I'd put those to his tally, too—but for roughing up his girlfriend, Terri. While Aanakwad was sporting the shit-bag's tattoo, Terri was counting cracked ribs and nursing a withdrawal baby. Aanakwad was fierce about that little nephew. Brought him over one day—pickerel thin and sweating, tremors shaking his tiny body. Holding him, we learned a new way to be afraid. Azaadiins. Little trembling aspen. Meanwhile, Tyrus was counting down the days until his sentence was up. I was counting, too.

I wanted Aanakwad gone before D-Day.

For Christmas I gave him a joke book. Aanakwad Indi'n-ized every page. One joke read: *Why do bears live in caves? Because they can't afford an apartment*. But Aanakwad changed it: *Why do bears live in HUD housing? Because they're on the waitlist for a cave*.

Waitlist was part of the new vocabulary he'd been learning from Terri. She was trying to get a spot in a shelter house in Bemidji for her and the baby. "That's us, Shinnobs," he said. "Waitlisted." His crow laugh spilled out sounding more powerful than the air had blasting out the barrel of the hairdryer, but I imagined it had a new edge.

Just here in our small circling before winter, entering the season of holy remembering—the stable, the star, the angels, or the trickster's wanderings, his gifts of fire and wild rice—even here, we made a futile mark on some dark chart.

He teased me then about the great gift he would have for me. "Not stolen," he said. "Not stolen like trickster fire."

I had told him that story the way I heard it, how Trickster stole fire from Thunderbird and was chased all the way back, dodging lightning flashes. How Birch had offered shelter, got her skin burned when the lightning bolts struck, and how she still wears those dark marks on her white bark. I'd always liked fingering the birch and thinking about the safety it offered.

But Aanakwad saw it different. “How come every good thing Indians have has to be stolen?” he asked.

A better storyteller might have had an answer. Would have said something about working for what we get, about balance and the mysteries of good and evil played out in Thunderbird and Mishibizhii. But suddenly, my toes were tingling inside my shoes. Maybe it was the cold; maybe it was his question. I reached for more firewood, asked, “Hey, how many Indians does it take to tell a story?” We let the other question go then. Left it with all the other big ones we’d hooked into that season. The ones humor keeps trying to chip away at.

YOU PROBABLY READ in the paper what happened on New Year’s Eve. I wasn’t going out to no party or bar because we were having a real cold spell. Besides, I never could tolerate all those rez drunks kissing people they hardly knew just because it was midnight. My sister and her husband had come over and we were playing whist and making pizzas when Aanakwad’s cousin, the real dark one they call Mud Girl, came knocking at my door. She was crying, said something about Terri and the baby leaving, about Tyrus in his pickup. Said Aanakwad was hurt. Was asking to see me. Someone—Terri’s something-or-other—had taken him up to the clinic, where a nurse was on detox duty.

As my sister drove me there, my eyes narrowed, locked small, locked like Thunderbird’s eyes chasing the stolen fire. I saw everything through a tunnel of fury—only a little place in the center in focus. A lot of people had gathered in the parking lot, but they seemed to just glisten at the edges of my shaken world, drops of melting snow on the other side of the windshield. We walked through the wet-heavy-quiet. Our breath puffed out white cartoon balloons. They hung there, empty. We had no words for this. I stepped in the door of the clinic. Saw the sheriff, his pen poised over a report. One of those clinic aides took my arm, led me to where Aanakwad was.

Shivering. Not on his feet. Not in the safe zone. On a little stretcher, all covered up so I couldn’t really see what was wrong. His breath came out

raspy like the hiss of a teapot. Then when he shifted to smile up at me, I spotted handprint bruises on his swollen throat.

He was hooked up to some of them machines and his hand was caked in dried blood when he took out a little package and gave it to me. He wet his lips. “Open it,” he mouthed softly. I unwrapped the tissue to find his red bandanna. I looked at him to say miigwech, but he mouthed again, “Open it.” So I unfolded the bandanna. Then my mouth bit air, but nothing came out. Heat spread through my hands as if they cupped fire. His Hollywood hair all braided neatly and tied at both ends. When I looked at Aanakwad again, he winked and kind of gestured with his chin and lips and I knew he wanted me to take off his stocking cap. “Not stolen,” he laughed hoarsely.

I’ve tried to remember what he looked like with his hair cut, but all I see is his face when he popped out that first day—eyes lit like diamonds and rust leaves stuck on his hair and clothes. I hear his hoarse voice though, talking on and on, muted like a far-off song, drumbeats with no number—no tally, until the ambulance came that would transport him to a real hospital. I see his fingers and mine, brown piled on brown, like leaves fallen together on that white sheet. I hear the jokes still tumbling from him one after another. *How many Indians does it take to make a family tree? All of them. One to list the relatives, the rest to add the nicknames*.

How many Chimookaman? How many jobs? How many narrow escapes?

Just before they lifted him up into the ambulance, he smiled at me and then asked again, “How many Indians does it take to make a family?” “All of them,” I said and waited for the next punch line. He shook his head and said softly, “Just two.” And, as they slid him in, I saw him tap his chest and then point to me. I watched the door close, the exhaust puff out into winter air.

People started coming up to me after the ambulance drove off. But I couldn’t stand around with the rest talking over what had happened this time, with this boy, again. I couldn’t count ambulance trips and make them add up to any new sum.

SOMETHING OF AANAKWAD pulled me out and away. I needed winter's cold burn. Manidoo-giizis kept me awake, haunted, hungry, and half mad, for three days as I tramped around the woods like our wolf relatives hunting their survival. Ash Lake trails, one foot in the animal tracks, one breaking through the crust of snow. At every clearing, I scanned before entering. No attack came. No rendezvous with the spirits. Only crows and jays who squawked my presence, their calls echoing in the bitter air. Beyond each night's fire—concentric circles of eyes. I imagined they looked back at mine. All of us glowing there like fallen stars come to earth. A cluster of lights moving into configuration. A mythic constellation. Or points on a waiting graph.

I can't say what happened or why, but the fourth evening, something drained from me. Drained like pus from a wound. Or spilled like afterbirth. I returned home and slept, the black braid, rewrapped and worn now like a medicine bag against my skin.

Late the next morning I woke. Remembered. This is the day Aanakwad's uncle Miles Bunker had been going to take him to his new life. I got up real mad and I've been burning pretty much every day since. Birch-dark marks on my skin.

Don't need no want ads to give me direction. I've got me a new job and it ain't one no one is ever going to fire me from. So here I am teaching this new math. Not a simple accounting of biting insects. The hard problems—about human-made venom. Statistics of survival. And how to mess with probability. No more trembling aspens on my watch. No stolen lives.

This is the twentieth powwow I've been at this year. I've been to council meetings, potlucks, and schools. They hand me the mic and I stand up, braid warm against my ribs. I start with Aanakwad, then ask them to say the names they carry, names of those we keep losing, the ones who should've made it home. I keep asking the same question. *How many Indians does it take to save our kids?* You know the answer to that one, don't you?

Sky Stories

Suzie looked quizzically at the sky beyond the light of the campfire. Then back at the expectant police officer. She needed to stop his nattering. Her instinctive tell-it-to-the-hand gesture would not win her any favors, but she needed time to assess. She turned from him, tuned him out, and studied the sky. Ode-imini-giizis shone placidly, two days away from full. No fireball. No static in the air. Summer stars still telling the old-time stories of Ajijaak, of Nanabozho. Satisfied, she decided this situation belonged to the Chi-mookomaan's earth, not the Ojibwe's spirit world.

Now the tall, clean-shaven white man moved in irritation. His fists opened and closed, opened and closed like a fast-draw gunslinger. Like a comic-book sheriff. With shiny shoes, shiny badge, shiny everything—he looked all puffed up with his own importance. He had apparently been talking at her again and was growing impatient. "Hello. Earth to space cadet. Do you know something about this thieving Nono-bozo?"

No. Gaawin. She wanted to say the simple word and turn away. But Suzie Anongokwe Zhingwaak had never done simple. Someone had fed him a tale or given a false name. He had shoved his way into their gathering. Stopped their drums. He would stomp around until they put out his legal fire. But a warrant for Nanabozho? Was this for real?

She had dreamed crazy before, but never dimension-crossing crazy. Never in unison with ten other powwow 49ers. As bizarre as the situation seemed, it was happening in real time. She glanced to where her friends sat circling a small fire. Work buddies, stray cousins, adopted grandmas, and her ride-or-die besties who had been with her since high school. Each of

them doing the same quick calculations: who was this guy, how much to cooperate, how safe was it to resist.

Breathe, she reminded herself. *Stay grounded*. Years ago, Suzie's brother had nicknamed her Trance, because she fell easily into stories. Yeah, sometimes lost her way. But she'd been Suzie now, and nothing else, for years. Sane. Dependable. Educated. No illusions. Grey had started to mix in with her dark chestnut hair. She understood white real and red real were different roads. She navigated them carefully now.

But this unexpected intrusion of the law into tribal safe spaces unsteadied her. The world had shifted since she last slid red-painted toenails into dance moccasins. She was already unmoored by the changes COVID had brought. Masks. Sheltering in place. Deaths. But finally, the elders approved gathering again in person. She had feasted on drums and fry bread, on the swirl of dancers. When she closed her eyes, she saw tiny tots spinning, determined like her to stay upright. Their fancy shawls held by extended arms, a beauty stretched, big enough, she hoped, to wrap them all in safety. The river of grand entry flowed and rewound in her mind, endless as the Milky Way.

For Suzie, the stars had always worked like another alphabet—one not tethered to cramped desks and white school rules. The dome of northern skies deep with anangoog had provided refuge in her fumbling years. Zipped into a parka or on the edge of a dock in summer, she had let the night and its ancientness soothe her. Spirit paths crossed the sky world, twinkling trails and glowing edges of myths. The image and story of Wintermaker had been her favorite. Wintermaker—the tattoo the new dependable Suzie had just paid a quarter of her week's take-home to rehab.

"Shame to lose that beaut," Manuel at the tattoo parlor had said. The original image of the Ojibwe mythic figure had been inked on her thigh. A mighty being, he stood hands outstretched toward the sky, a line of three jewels glowing in his belt. "Why choose winter?" people always asked her. She felt foolish trying to explain. "Because it's a time of closeness, when we gather to tell stories."

Her answers had the naive ring of a born-again even though they came from feet-in-the-trenches survival. The family epic—from bloody removal days to her grandparents' boarding school capture and escapes—had left its imprint, as had the wine-deep folly of each lost generation since. In her

time, finally, the uncrumbling began. Native spirituality was no longer a crime. Everyone was shaking out the long-hidden mythic accounts. Phrase after phrase, they still held the old wisdoms, obligations, and joys. But when she explained about the story tattoo, even her close friends seemed to only pretend to understand the arc of ice and thaw. Under her breath, as they turned away, she added, "Because sometimes stories keep us alive."

Finally, tired of explaining the who and why, no longer confident herself in the power of myth, she had spent two agonizing sessions having the old pictograph image turned into a slightly top-heavy butterfly. Like the revised tattoo, she didn't fit perfectly within the outline of her "sane" life.

Again the badge broke the circle, broke her trance. "Ma'am you still with us? I said I'm looking for someone named …" He consulted his phone screen before speaking slowly and distinctly as if she were deaf: "Someone named Nona Beaujee or Boujoo. That name ring a bell?"

"You're kidding, right?"

"Not kidding. You know him?" He studied his phone again, double-checking. "Report says he's dressed weird." He stopped, taking in the curve of powwow-clad hangers-on in every phase of undress. Some men still wearing their roach with feathers sticking up, some face-painted, others bare-chested in running shorts and moccasins. The women, too, were in the middle of shedding jingle dresses or buckskin, some with their long braids still wound with otter fur. He shook his head. "Well, fuck." He continued determinedly. "Says here: Face painted. Red and black, white down the center. And, picture this, dressed half-man, half-woman."

Suzie inhaled and blew her breath out slowly, deliberately. No point in explaining. This guy probably starched his underwear. He would no more understand the fluidity of Trickster than he would the language of stars. In her own best Trickster imitation she said, "Imagine that."

"Well?" he demanded.

The circle of camp chairs fell silent. The eavesdropping occupants looked at one another. Tired eyes perked up. A few grins appeared under feedstore baseball caps. But only quiet murmurs and stifled laughter answered the inquiry.

The sheriff cleared his throat. His hand instinctively spread around the holster that hung on his right side. "You hippies listening? This is no joke.

We aren't out here at fucking midnight just to entertain you." Beside him his deputy shuffled like a nervous horse waiting for a parade whistle.

"Now," he spoke again with new menace, "I need you to tell me where to find this … this fugitive Nona Beaujoo."

Suz was the first to choke out the question: "You're, you're looking for Trickster? That Nanabozho?"

"That Nanabozho? How many people do you know with that name fits this absurd description?" He waited only two beats before raising his voice to loud command level. "Now! Tell me now."

"Tell you where to find Nanabozho?" Suz repeated, incredulous. She worked to keep her tone neutral, but the rest of the revelers cough-laughed or nudged one another.

This earned them another grave stare from the sheriff. "Jones?" He spoke the deputy's name like a command. Deputy Jones answered by stepping toward the loudest of the watchers. He planted himself, tree-trunk legs wide, muscled arms crossed over his chest like a bull ready to charge. He squinted and scanned the faces before him as if taking roll. The canned maneuver didn't have the shriveling effect he intended.

Instead, the powwow stragglers started ribbing him—complimenting his boots, his shiny badge, asking the caliber of his gun, where he did target practice. A short woman, who had been unbraiding and brushing her hair, offered the deputy bear grease for his beard. "Get rid of those frizzies. I'll show youse how." She reached out her hand, palm filled with a small dab of what looked like amber-colored lard. He batted her hand away and took a step back.

Suzie shot them a glare. "I am trying to deal with this situation, you morons." To the sheriff she said, "You looking for the Trickster? Could be you found half a dozen of them here." She smiled, indicating her friends.

The goodwill humor went unnoticed.

"Nana Bozo," he repeated. All patience gone.

"Okay," she began. "The thing is, you are looking for a myth—a figure from story."

"The hell you say!" He took in her stained shirt, uneven braids, the half-eaten buffalo-on-a-stick she still held. She knew he was assessing her like you would a car before you test-drove it.

And what would he see? A mixed-blood woman on the collapsing side of forty. Mature or passing for it. Suzie had a steady job with tribal food distribution. Now 132 (not the 126 her driver's license still claimed), she herself steered away from the government starches, the bright-yellow block cheese and other commod staples. Making "good" choices she assured herself—grown-up choices. She was glad to watch wild from the sidelines now. Most of the time, anyway. The friends who had joined her around the fire pit seldom invoked the past except in teasing. A Suz the Booze now and then didn't trouble her. Relatives reminded you—that was their job.

But this prick? What gave him the right? She also knew the minute he dismissed her as beneath him. "So I'm looking for a myth, you say? Well you, madam," he said, exaggerating the pretend politeness of the title, "could be looking at an obstruction of justice charge."

A kaleidoscope of emotions moved through her body, inking the skin of her cheeks, bringing a rushing fire to her ears. But in the nearly thirty seconds it took to assess, her eyes held his attention, the fake half smile never left her lips. She kept him there on the verge. She knew this simple hypnosis was her single power.

Beneath the soothing openness of her expression, she ticked off her three options. Bezhig: Keep trying the truth. Niizh: Play along and buy some time. Niswi: Turn him over to the powwow committee—if she could find any of them awake. But the condescension of his manner pushed her buttons in a way that reminded her of her skunk of a husband, Raleigh. The smirk. The not-going-to-listen-to-any-opinion-but-my-own manner. Just like all those years ago, she felt like a worm on a hook in a school of crappies. The nibble nibbling at her self-esteem always led to one wrong move or another fueled by anger.

But she wasn't Suz the Booze anymore. Even as the rage sweat dried on her thighs and she brought her lips to a full demure smile, she chose option four, niiwiin: Screw with the fucker. This particular option often got her in trouble, but it was always more fun.

"Well," he said returning her smile, sure he had won. "I assume you choose answer over handcuffs?"

"As if." She spat sideways as she spoke so he couldn't be certain he had heard correctly. Then she continued smooth as spring sap, "Okay, officer. I guess I am obliged to help you."

Her Greek chorus of skins perked up at the honey tone of her voice. They had been on the receiving end of its song in the past. Now their fingers itched in anticipation.

Suz turned to them, "We have no choice. We have to give it up—to the law." They stepped into the play as if they had written the script. Reluctant nods, a few *eya*'s and *suppose so*'s. "Stone, you know where Trickster, ah, Nanabozho is holed up? Thought I heard he went to Sweet Landing?"

The group pretended to confer. Then slowly, the most grizzled of the camp-chair sitters, who had been sharpening the ends of sticks with a hunting knife, met her eyes, bit his lip as he considered, then shook his head in feigned reluctance. "Yup. Could be I heard the same thing."

Stone. Her shirttail cousin. First crush. Stone had four years on Suz, but he had aged hard. Petty crimes paid for with jail time. A few scars from the car crash, and inside wounds, too. She never consciously remembered the scandal, but couldn't totally forget because he wore sadness—an unalterable tattoo.

Stone had been driving—driving high, and driving fast. People did it all the time and suffered no consequence. But his car had skidded on a curve, flew off the road, head-on into a huge pine tree. *A deer in the road*, everyone said. Everyone except Stone, who made no pretense. When they stood at the grave of one from their own generation, Suz and her friends saw him transform from charmer to lifelong mourner.

TT had been Stone's wiinimoshenyan—his childhood sweetheart. After her death he dropped out of school and crawled into a bottle for a year. But at the class graduation, he showed up—"stone sober" with a white boutonniere pinned to his lapel. Her class had dedicated the *Mazina'igan* yearbook to TT. After the commencement, Stone went home with Suzie and she handed him her copy.

The two sat together on her bed, paging through the volume. Stone laughed when he saw that the yearbook editors had sneaked his name and photo into the "Class Prophecies" section. "Most likely to be fingerprinted," Suz read. "That's not prophecy, that's straight up reporting."

He play-slapped her. Then pointed to her picture, apparently taken when she was caught napping in study hall. "'Most likely to sleep through the apocalypse'? Good job, wise eight ball," he quipped. "Hafta put that on your resume."

Suz held her breath when he flipped to TT's picture. She saw him press his index finger to his lips to stop their quivering. *First class member to get her wings. RIP, angel*. Neither read the words aloud, but they seemed to hang in the air of the room. Then Stone removed his boutonniere, tucked the flower into the page, and handed the book back.

At the kegger that night, both of them drank warm Coke with nothing added. They played charades by firelight, collected soppy goodbyes from two friends who were leaving on a backpacking trip, then collected car keys from those too drunk to drive and played taxi driver in Suzie's Pinto.

They had not talked about TT, the past year, or her old crush. She knew they never would. *We have ways and ways of shifting things around here*, she thought. *Not all of them need words*. At his trailer, before he got out of the car, he gave her a half smile and a fist bump. Even after all these years, she still remembered how it felt like a vow.

When Stone rejoined the community after his year of mourning, he became a doer—the first one to pitch in to put up a tipi, chop wood, fetch chairs. But, to Suzie's relief, he remained a cutup. No matter his personal ghosts, he always had a joke, a dirty song, a little dance. She counted him as a brother, felt they were plugged into the same current, fed on the same fuel, followed the same compass. Like now with this pompous cop.

At Stone's signal, all those assembled dragged themselves up, dusted off their clothes, rushed about in a three-stooges-inspired choreography, holding back their laughter as they deliberately headbutted and did prank falls.

Suz needn't have worried about the deliberately over-the-top clownish behavior. The antics matched the sheriff's expectations perfectly. He stood a little straighter, became more genial as they bumbled around seemingly anxious to follow his orders.

"Sheriff, sir," Stone addressed him, now pretending to use the hunting knife to pick his teeth. "You know where Sweet is, do you? It's the public landing by the old burial mounds. Good two-track out that way. No prob."

The main prob the group had was distracting the sheriff and his deputy long enough to give a few of the gang a chance to get out ahead of the story. Finally, when they could hold them no longer with long-winded directions, when drivers of the cars that had "accidentally" blocked the sheriff's cruiser were finally found, the remaining 49ers packed into Suz's van for the

bumpy ride out, leading the law enforcement to what they hoped would be a happy hazing.

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, when they had raised enough dust on the backroads to announce their approach, the van pulled into the small beach area littered with beer cans and a couple of stinking bullheads. The whole shoreline looked dark and deserted.

Across the road, three hundred yards down a wooded trail, in a small clearing lay the burial mounds, traditional wooden graves sinking deeper into earth each year. A place Suzie visited and knew as sacred, but that also had a reputation for eerie happenings and sightings. Various friends had relayed their narrow escapes from a powerful night force.

She figured they were really escaping beer-induced fear. Still this place had popped into her mind as she searched for an imaginary Nanabozho hideout or a reasonable place to fake out the fuzz. Now though, Suz could not see any trace that her friends had been here. She tried to calm her pulse with deep breaths. Surely someone had worked out a small ruse that would satisfy the sheriff and keep them out of legal trouble—while still, she hoped venomously, teaching this badge a lesson about making pompous legal threats on tribal land.

Come on, Trickster, she thought over and over like a prayer. *A little help, please. Just a small hoax. A little crow meat fed with flourish. Is that too much to ask?*

The sheriff had squealed in—no stealth, just flash and crash for this dude. “So where is he?” he demanded without preamble.

Suzie held her hands up like a conductor. “You asked. We brought you here. What more do you expect? I am not my brother’s keeper, only his betrayer.”

She knew her role also extended to whipping girl or scapegoat. If anything went wrong and he needed someone to blame, tonight, it was her. But his entitlement had lit a fire in her fists that threatened to spread. Before she could launch another verbal grenade, Stone took her arm and squeezed. “Great line for a period drama,” he said softly and laughed. “Keep cool, Niij. We’ve got this.”

She sighed, squeezed his arm back. “He gives me the heebie-jeebies,” she whispered. He rubbed her shoulders like a corner man loosening up his player between rounds. “I’m okay now,” she reassured him. “Your lead.”

He answered with the smallest lift of his eyebrows in the direction of the woods. Then he turned on his Indian dropout voice. “Uh, Sheriff. You fellows got some kind of protection against mischievous spirits, right? I mean we got medicine, but I guess you all have some fancy way of keeping safe, huh?”

Even in the dark, Suz heard the lure land, could make out the slight shuffle as the sheriff stepped closer to Stone to take the bait. “We, well, actually we didn’t know we would be out this way in this, uh, sort of, you know backwoods ah …”

“Shit hole?”

“No, no, of course, not. This backwoods … haven where we might need some special—uh—did you say you had medicine for protection? Could you spare … ?”

SHE HAD TO step away then; her emotions had roller-coastered beyond control. As much as she wanted to know what awful-tasting thing Stone would pawn off as an ancient protection against evil, as much as she wanted to warn him not to give the sheriff and his deputy something with too many aftereffects, she had to back away before the screaming and the laughing and finally the crying came.

The day had been long—lovely, of course, to return to the arena filled with flesh-and-blood people instead of the squared images of Facebook and blue Zoom screens. But long in the looking at everything she held dear and now knew could not last—the flag bearers coming in a little slower, a bit more bent than last time; the paper plates bowing under the weight of venison and rice and fry bread; the regalia whose brass and bright colors seemed to reflect the light of the children’s shining eyes; and the powwow MC whose voice cracked when he said, “Welcome home, my relatives.”

Long, too, in the looking past the living for the absent ones that had been here two years ago but that danced now only on the path of souls.

Then there had been the sweet small circle of after, with old friends laughing and all the unsaid words filling them as they smoked or drummed or sat quietly by the fire.

The badges had no right to break that intimacy. She knew that was partly where the screaming came from. But it wasn't today's belt-buckled arrogance alone that infuriated her. It was the long history of having every safe space intruded on. Having no defense.

But, of course, they did have one and it was the one her musty compadres were bringing to bear while she boo-hooed. She imagined it then—the wild ad-libbing, the crazy jazz Trickster plots, the Nanabozho flash mob playing out just over in the small woods where the friends had earnestly led the two law officers.

Yes, sometimes stories keep us alive—and then, if we're lucky, we become the stories.

SHE MADE IT in time to join in. Not certain what had been planned, she slipped into a side role—coaxing an understandably reluctant imaginary Nanabozho to come out and face the sheriff. With Stone and Ruby Redbird, one of the grandmothers of the group, she stood at the back side of the clearing behind the oldest graves, just where the woods began again.

Ruby, really a great-aunt on her mom's side, had been called Grandma by all the kids for years. She winked now and gave the classic Ruby signal. Deliberately, she held out the index and middle fingers of her right hand, spread the fingers, then brought them forcibly together. "Cut 'em down to size," she said, laughing.

These had been the words on a poster a young Ruby had carried in a protest against AIM leaders years back, when AIM had been trying to dictate to the tribal government. Never afraid of controversy, Ruby let herself and her sign be featured in the *State Journal*. "Too much f_____ machismo," she had been quoted as saying. "Snip, snip will take care of that. Cut 'em down to size." The gesture became infamous on the rez. Ruby laughed with everyone else when someone imitated her.

But tonight, just in case Suz didn't understand, she added, "All in, my girl." Suz smiled, squeezed Ruby's thin hand, and nodded. Together they

cajoled the imaginary culture hero to give himself up.

“Hey, bro,” Stone lobbed into the dark. “They got the exit road covered. Where ya gonna go, man?”

“You can’t stay out here forever, you’ll starve.” Suzie called, unimaginatively.

“Or get sprayed by a skunk,” Grandma Ruby said. “Howah, that would be something, you might get surprised and boogid. Then youse’d both smell.”

They laughed and laughed the way you do at night in the dark when everything seems a little funnier. Every time they tried to start up the encouragement flinging again, one of them would start laughing all over. Stone laughed so hard he got the hiccups. He walked away to join the others, so it was just Grandma Ruby and Suz looking into the dark pine woods calling a made-up person so they could fool someone they pretended to respect.

“This is crazy,” she whispered to Ruby. “I feel half real and half story. How long we gonna have to do this stuff?”

“Been doing it pretty much my whole life,” Ruby answered.

Before Suz could ask what Ruby meant, she felt Stone beside her again. Maybe he had some idea about what to expect next. When she turned to inquire, she saw it wasn’t Stone after all. Instead, the tall figure that looked back at her wore stage paint and a huge grin that lifted their eyebrows. She gasped when she realized the costumed half-man, half-woman beside her was part of the trick her friends were playing.

“Oh my god, you scared me.”

“I thought you were expecting me.”

“Kind of. Well, expecting something, anyway. How are we going to get out of this?”

“I swear you all just told me there was no way to escape and to give myself up.”

“Real funny.” She took another look. Red and black face. A white line down the center. Who had time to do that? And the face, she didn’t recognize the face.

He laughed then and put a finger to her lips. Ruby, hearing the laughing and already primed, joined in.

Under cover of the laughter, Suz asked, “You the real guy—the one the sheriff came hunting, the guy who calls himself Nanabozho?”

“Not so much with the ‘calls himself,’ please.”

“Meaning?” He didn’t answer, just danced his eyebrows. The teasing indifference lit her fuse.

“Listen, don’t mess with me. We are all out here pulling this crazy charade and now you’re telling me it’s real? I mean, that *you* are? Don’t peddle your crap to me.”

He shrugged, noncommittal.

“You know, for a guy who does so much fast-talking in stories, you have remarkably little to say. I am an inch away from just calling our brother-in-the-law over here. So spill. Why are they after you?”

Ruby didn’t notice their side chat or the appearance of their new companion. Having calmed her laughing spell, she started calling again into the woods. “We’re here for you, Nanabozho. Come out ’fore the bears feast on your little giinag.” She cracked herself up and started hooting again. Ruby was like that sometimes—a laugh machine. Once she got going on the off-color comments, she tried to top herself.

Suzie’s head threatened to burst with the circus absurdity of each new layer of the night. Plus, something about this guy—Nanabozho or whoever he really was—alternately made her want to stomp on his smug face or follow him into the woods. Before she could answer either summons, Stone sauntered up. He looked at Suz, at the fake Nanabozho, at Ruby now bent over laughing again.

“Fuck, man,” he said as he walked over to hug the man/woman or spirit.

Suzie watched this, then relaxed a little. “Don’t tell me you know him? So, fill me in.”

“No time,” Stone said, looking over her shoulder, where the sheriff was now staring intently at them. “Remember, just swing, Suz,” he added under his breath.

Of course, the sheriff and his bull deputy had at last noticed the appearance of the fake Nanabozho. They were on their way over. Their attempt at a slick saunter, though, was disrupted by small pockets of light suddenly blinking on and off around the clearing. The deputy pulled his gun, aimed wildly as the orbs flickered.

Suz had seen these lights before. Like everything else, they had two explanations: spirit lights or what the Europeans called will-o'-the-wisps. Souls revisiting this realm, or swamp gas. She had long ago reconciled the teachings and the science. One didn't diminish the other. Spirits appeared. Maybe they used natural phenomena to do so. That didn't change the message.

Nor, apparently, the impact. The sheriff and his deputy stumbled among the "dangerous spirits." Each time an orb twinkled near them, they high-stepped and quickly changed direction. The faux Trickster saw his moment and soon choreographed his own comical zigzag dance.

"This way, my fellows," he called. "You have to lift your knees high so the spirits don't mistake you for an enemy sneaking up." He hiked his pant legs and did an impressive Riverdance imitation. The worried deputy followed Nanabozho's lead immediately, but the sheriff only grimaced and kept his gun at the ready even as others from Suzie's group playfully began the same maneuvers. Then an eerie howl came from the small woods, followed by a dramatic scream. Suddenly, the striped socks on the sheriff's skinny crane legs were exposed and he lifted his knees over and over, turning this way and that, trying to keep an eye on the little floating lights.

Now a long imitation war cry sounded from the dark. *Damn*, Suzie thought, *this shit is almost scaring me*. Whoever was back there with the wood ticks deserved an award for best dramatic performance.

"Ah, they are hungry tonight," she said. The worry in her voice was only partly put on.

The screams seemed to move closer. "Maybe a little more protection," Stone offered. He pulled a retro blue fish decanter from inside his jacket. Instantly, the two lawmen were at his side. "Of course, of course," he assured them. "Just a jigger will do," he said, pouring carefully.

"No, no, I'm a big man. I'm sure it's portioned by weight," the sheriff countered authoritatively.

"He can have mine," Suzie offered. "I think the first one has me covered."

"Very generous, my dear," Stone said solemnly. He winked then before turning back to the charade.

The sheriff, meanwhile, had sandwiched himself between Stone and the next in line. He cleared his throat loudly.

“As you say, Sheriff, sir.” Stone smirked as he poured. “As you say.”

Meanwhile, Ruby and Suzie slipped into the shadows. Their attention switched between the uproar in the woods and the dancing men in the clearing. Neither knew for certain what “magic” formula Stone had shared so generously, but they expected it would take effect soon.

Who the hell cares, thought Suz. Let them hurt a little. This small, invented fantasy, as entertaining as it was, would never make up for the monstrous discovery story that had been concocted and fed her people for years.

WITH HIMSELF SAFELY protected again, the sheriff seemed to remember his duty. And Nanabozho, whose presence and infractions had apparently been temporarily forgotten, again became his enforcement focus. “Don’t think you are getting away Mr. uh, Nana-bozo. Jones, secure this man’s hands.” Jones, still high-stepping, moved toward the target, handcuffs at the ready.

As if on cue, the noise from the woods intensified; the menacing howls and shrieks seemed to draw closer. Ever the opportunist, Nanabozho saw his chance. “Quick, friends, they are getting closer. If we want to get out …” As his voice trailed off, he looked over his shoulder toward what was now clearly some scuffling in the brush, then longingly toward the path that led back to the beach.

“Jesus fucking christ!” The sheriff jumped and gripped Stone’s arm.

“No church-god is gonna save us now,” wailed Nanabozho.

“Do something!” the sheriff yelled. “I demand you … you … do something.”

“Only one thing to do,” Suz said confidently to buy the others time. “Remember where we are.”

“Of course,” Stone said gravely. “We have to offer a sacrifice.” He looked from one dancing body to the next. “But … who?”

“No fucking way,” the sheriff shouted when first Stone’s and then Nanabozho’s eyes fixed on him. “Jones!”

Whether he was calling on Jones for help or as a substitute sacrifice wasn’t clear. But Nanabozho recognized the moment of denouement. “No,

no need. I … brought you here. I will stay behind." He dropped his eyes as if in resignation and took one step toward the woods.

When Stone clasped the shoulder of the night's hero and the two embraced, Suz felt sure the soft words they exchanged were not of goodbye. Nanabozho crossed his arms—one red, one black—over his chest and gave a small bow. She imagined all the sleeping gods were applauding.

But apparently the night wouldn't be complete until the power fully shifted. Stone began shedding his clothes and piling them neatly in front of a wooden grave. "Friends, your offerings," he said solemnly. The others, too, began stripping, folding their T-shirts and jeans before they laid them down as reverently as if they were a chalice.

Ruby seemed too anxious to join in the striptease, so Suz returned to the old woman, who had unzipped her VFW bomber jacket and was slipping out of it. "Whoa, Grandma. Too much flesh and the spirits will want to take you right now. Let's sit this part out." She coaxed Ruby away from the improv and word-arrows flying around the grave area.

The sheriff and his deputy had started toward the exit path, only to find the menacing noise followed them. "Jones!" the sheriff hollered as a projectile came from the woods and landed just a yard away. "These savages are … shooting. You, Stone! I … I demand you assist us. Now!"

"Your demand is my command, Sheriff, sir," Stone replied, smiling a little at his cleverness as he turned toward the two law officers. "Oh, Sirs, I thought you understood." He gestured to his nearly bare body. All that remained were his underwear, socks, shoes, and hat. "You have to leave an offering. Clothing. Symbolic of us shedding our defenses, of course. Do keep the hat though as a deterrent to, well, you know, scalping." He shrugged. "We do what we can. Now, as in the old times." Of course, Suz, thought Stone would get a historical jab in when he could.

"So," Stone continued in an overly patient voice, as if giving directions to preschoolers. "Everything except those …" He glanced at the sheriff's striped socks. "Except those very fashionable socks and your work boots."

The sheriff seemed torn between incredulity and fear. Like a bobblehead figure, his glance moved between Stone and the exit, Stone and the exit.

"I apologize on behalf of the spirits, sir." Stone pressed his temples as if weighing the possibility of saving the sheriff from some indignity. Then he shook his head. "I'm sorry, there is no other way. It must be done."

The sheriff held his hands out, fingers splayed, ready to grab and squeeze the invisible evil. His face reddened as he realized his helplessness. He nodded to his deputy. As the two started to comply, Stone's eyes gleamed and he glanced toward the wings, where Suz could almost hear the suppressed giggles.

Suz worried how long her powwow cronies could keep themselves contained. "Ah, timing's a little close, gentleman," she called, carefully keeping the laughter out of her own voice.

"Almost, almost," Stone replied. "I'm sorry to hurry you, Sheriff, sir, but, ah, things are closing in here." His eyebrows rose as he watched the deputy and sheriff tuck their wallets, keys, and weapons into their socks or under their hats. "Oh, no, Sirs. You must leave the weapons, too. The weapons must stay. And some coins," he added. "You know, just to be sure."

This, of course, was just too much for the sheriff. "Thieving savages—even as ghosts." He seemed about to resist when he was apparently hit with powerful stomach cramps. "Jones, oh god." He bent over groaning.

"It's the spirits, sir," Stone said calmly. "They, ah, go in for torture when not obeyed. You might want to …" His voice trailed off as he indicated the stash in the sheriff's socks.

"Jones," the sheriff, still bent over, wailed. "Give the motherfuckers what they want and get me out of this … hellhole."

As the two limped off, Suz lifted her arms like a priest in prayer, then threw herself to the ground and flailed her legs to shake off her tension. Unmoved by Suzie's mock collapse, Ruby was sitting sweetly on the ground, smoking. "Not bad, not bad." She smiled, picked a speck of tobacco off her lip. Then, holding her cigarette tightly in her lips, gave a little clap. "Worth the price of a ticket."

Not certain whether Ruby meant the whole affair or her mock tantrum, Suz sat up and gave the old woman a quick hug. Ruby cuffed her playfully under the chin and they both turned to watch the disrobed dancers complete their exit. Jones and Stone supported the sheriff, who now alternately held a cupped hand over his mouth, then over his crotch as the "medicines" searched for an exit route.

SUZ HAD ACCEPTED one of Ruby's cigs to reset herself, when fake Nanabozho reentered from where he had managed to hide himself in the woods. He began picking up the various piles of "offerings." "Give me a hand?" he called. "Either of you got a tote of some kind? Maybe a travois for the bodies that will be going down about now?" He laughed.

"Right." Suzie smiled and went to join the harvesting. Ruby said she would see what kind of bag she could find in the vehicle and followed the parade, humming and moving her head in time with some internal music.

As she gingerly lifted first a gun and then a knife, Suz laughed. "Hard to believe." She was more than a little in awe at the relative smoothness of the escapade. But she worried about the aftermath—the sheriff waking, what he might remember, who he might blame.

The man beside her seemed to read her mind. "Fungi in the hands of a pharmacological genius can erase memory," he said. "Allow me to introduce myself properly. Waabooz, trickster and pharmacological genius, at your service." He held out his hand.

His grip seemed to give off an electrical charge. She massaged her hand, looking down for any visible mark. When she looked up again, the smile he gave her awakened every inch of her skin. Then he nodded and turned demurely away. Her body returned to her own control.

"Look," she started. "I can't …"

"Understood," he answered. "But I'm around. Just wanted you to know that. In case things … ever warrant a reappearance." She looked up, noticed his grey-green eyes. They locked on hers briefly before he let go again.

"And you are really? Ah, really … real?" She wanted what she always wanted—for her mind to confirm what her body already knew.

"Well, I guess we'll clear that up when you're ready." He handed her a stash of the things he had wrapped in his own shirt. "You know where to find me." He turned then to reenter the woods.

"Wait. I don't actually … Will you … ?"

"Suzie—it is Suzie you prefer isn't it?" She nodded. "Okay, Suzie, the real question is: Will *you*?"

She looked up. The scared and careful that life had taught her so well kept her from answering, from moving toward him. "I just don't …"

"You don't know if you can trust me," he conceded. "Fair enough. But my question—and it seems the more urgent—is: Can I trust you? Tonight

with your friends, here in the woods—a little spark, a little bravery, a little abandon. But what about tomorrow? I'm as real as your decision tomorrow, Suzie—no more, no less."

He stooped again to pick up another item from the ground. "You haven't taken any drugs here. If you choose to forget … ?"

"I won't. I hope I won't."

"I, ah *we* … depend on it. Maybe this will help." He handed her the item he had retrieved from the ground, now wrapped in a well-used red bandanna.

It burned in her hand as she watched him step farther and farther into the woods. Hearing Ruby and the others approaching like a hurricane, she quickly tucked the wrapped gift into her coat pocket. Then she turned, all the other treasures of the night in her arms.

ON SUNDAY, THE drums woke her at midday. For a minute Suz time-traveled —the 49er, the sheriff, the prank, a trickster (maybe *the* Trickster?), and then back to the powwow camper. She gave up her attempt to file last night's wild journey neatly among her "grown-up" life. What to make of the mythic edges, the human excretions, and (OH!) the skinny-dipping … Did they really all go skinny-dipping while the cop was splayed out as a feast for the mosquitoes? If her wild gene chose to sprout again … No, no, no. Today did not belong to worry. Today belonged to the last of the powwow. She flipped a mental switch. She stretched.

Someone had thrown a Redbone jacket over her. Suz hugged the warmth as she moved toward the smell of bacon and coffee.

"Howah!" Stone said. "Not a mark on you, babe. I've got mosquito bites and kick marks all up my shins. Price of progress, eh? What a night." He handed her a clay mug filled with what she considered her morning vitamins—good old dependable caffeine.

"Yeah. Sure was. Cripes, I still don't know how we pulled it off."

They each sat, reliving the strange night. "Oh!" she suddenly exclaimed. "What about the, uh, naked sheriff and his deputy? Any news?"

"They woke up on the beach in one piece, with a little headache," he said. "Oh, and not naked," he added.

“How?”

“Ruby.”

“Oh. Any funny business?”

“You know Ruby as well as I do,” he said. “Could be the cougar’s dating the young deputy.”

“No!”

“Don’t worry, it won’t last. He has two parakeets.” He stopped as though that explained everything perfectly.

“And? I don’t get it.”

“And … Ruby don’t like cages. Soon as she lets them go … kaboom! The relationship blows up.” They both laughed, picturing it. “Bacon?” He handed her a paper towel with four sticks of bacon wrapped inside.

“Miigwech. Listen, about the guy … the Trickster guy. Said his name was Waabooz. Who is he really? You didn’t have the time to explain then, so …”

Stone hit his head with his open palm. “Yeah. Well, I’d like to fill you in, but damn, I just remembered, I promised to pick up Bismarcks for the announcers. Gotta run.” He saluted her with the spatula, smiled, and walked toward his pickup.

“Okay. Sure.” Odd, she thought. Almost like he was keeping a secret. What was it about this guy Waabooz anyway? Why did she care? She didn’t, she decided. Coffee, a shower, then another full day of powwow—that was the medicine she needed. But, of course, the idea of medicine brought back the whole magic fungi claim and the strange thing Waabooz had said. *I’m as real as your decision tomorrow, Suzie*. Crazy talk.

But later, when she went inside the camper and remembered the small package he had given her, she couldn’t resist checking. Yep. Still there in her coat pocket. Her fingers tingled when she picked it up. *Get real*, she told herself. *No more smoke and mirrors, my girl*.

She hesitated, hefting it from hand to hand while her fickle story heart kept switching sides, too. *He is Trickster. He’s just a faker. You’ll find him today. Forget him, he’s trouble*. The package seemed larger, heavier than she remembered. *Big like your imagination*, she chided herself. Finally, to break the spell, she pulled away the bandanna, expecting a memento from last night’s escapade or a prank gift from the Trickster.

Instead, she held an exquisite pipestone carving. “Unbelievable,” she whispered as she fingered the figure. A perfect replica of her old tattoo. In 3D, or was it 4D? How could he know? The Wintermaker, his arms raised toward the spirits, calling down biboon and its snows—the mythic figure making winter, making time for stories.

Last night the line between story and reality had blurred. They had all crossed and recrossed it until she lost her solid footing. How easily Waabooz had pulled her into a spiral of perhaps. But she no longer lived a flimflam perhaps existence. She planned her life. Stayed alert for pretty predators.

Like Nanabozho.

As a deterrent, she listed all the names Trickster had been called. Clown. Emperor of chance. Shapeshifter. Buffoon.

But also culture hero. And transformer. The last moniker rang in the air like a bell. Last night he had transformed her half-formed prank into an escapade worthy of retelling. What might he make of her half-formed life if she let him?

One dance at a time, her dad used to remind her when she got ahead of herself with worries. Today she would take his advice literally. Get dressed and head to Grand Entry. Let the dances erase the creases in her forehead.

But as she reached for her jingle dress, sunlight caught the carved figure of Wintermaker. He seemed to glow. Did his burgundy eye wink as she passed? She groaned, knowing that some sky stories followed you until you tried them on.

And later, when the arena director offered her tobacco before she entered the circle, when she took it with the left, the heart hand, she accepted it as a blessing not just for today but for whatever journey lay ahead. She imagined it—bumpy and filled with border crossings. Maybe irrepressible Ruby had it right. To any spirits listening, she made her vow. *All in*.

Translation for Dummies

Finn knew it wasn't a do-or-don't kind of thing—at least a thing they covered in dog-training school. Don't pee in the house. That goes double for poop. Don't hump the lamp. He learned that himself through what his owner, Kari, liked to call *consequences*. If you ignored her command, the next word was *crate*. *Crate* translated to a lively puppy body in a confined space.

Kari was always rhyming on about what comes with consequences to her mailman boyfriend. Finn just thought of him as *pouch*. ("Don't you even fucking think about chewing on the pouch," he'd drawl before abandoning his bag and lace-ups. "Got it, pooch?")

Finn was *pooch* to him—lowercase. So he was *pouch* to Finn. Even steven. Besides, Finn couldn't give the salute of capital letters to someone who constantly undercut his Kari.

Apparently, pouch didn't understand consequences like Finn didn't understand "leave it" meant indefinitely, not just until Kari gave him a treat. (That's why the entrance rug had a chew hole. Kari caught Finn when he was just getting down to business. The nickel-sized hole meant she sighed whenever she vacuumed it, but didn't have to replace the sunflowered rug. One damaged petal. No biggie, except Kari kept rhyming on about it. Every time she left Finn alone, she pointed to the missing gold of the petal, used her projecting-to-an-audience voice to repeat, "Leave it.")

She should have tried that voice on pouch. From what Finn overheard, pouch had his own temptations he couldn't leave alone. *The pot* was one. *Two-bit gambling whores*, another. At first Finn thought that *two-bit* meant

“two bites.” He wondered why pouch didn’t just grab, run, and finish under the couch, which was what Finn did (only once in a while, mind you) with small leave-its like cookies and scrunchies.

Human talk didn’t always come straight for Finn. Same with dog talk for Kari. He ended up miming a lot. Kari understood the basic tail wag or let-me-out bark, but no matter how he danced around or warning-barked, Kari never quite caught on that pouch kicked him when she wasn’t looking. That he snaked his hand into her purse, which Finn knew was a leave-it. That he made projecting-to-an-audience faces when Kari talked to her parents on the phone.

Finn felt soothed by the phone parents’ voices, mostly because they made Kari smile. She sat on the stoop not jiggling her leg. Her face unclenched and she answered back in the same tone she used when Finn fetched a toy. Her joy voice and human happy bark lilted their welcome like a door chime, her cheeks dimpling.

But pouch rolled his eyes and spilled ash on the table as he faked an “oops,” then snarled sarcastic comments to the empty room. Finn had learned to read passive-aggressive body language during vet visits. Pouch was a terrier with a toothache. All inbounds on the surface, but growling inside and waiting for his moment.

Like a tornado, pouch’s moment came last night. The scolding started first. It woke Finn, but didn’t startle him. Kari sometimes made this kind of rhyme with this man who seemed such a slow learner. He generally just fuck-you’d and slammed the door. Instead, Finn heard pouch scream-cursing. Words unintelligible to Finn, but their siren-fire clear, while Kari first made shushing sounds, then went on in the even-toned calm-yourself-down voice.

But through the trailer’s thin walls, Finn could hear that pouch didn’t calm down. Instead, he must have begun a stalking maneuver. The air snapped again and again as his voice or fists pursued Kari. Woodpecker-swift, the *Bang bang! Bang bang!* echoed when something struck the trailer skirting. Finn pictured pouch’s teeth bared, his dirty blond hair flailing side to side—a headbanger performing. Finn’s own hair raised along his spine—a reflex. Danger awake.

The night seemed to move slowly through each action, each reaction. Finn tried to decipher them; he only remembered slivers. Part of the time he

remained locked inside—a TV in reverse. Viewing or listening to the dark drama from the hot box of the trailer. Then at one point, the door joined the fight—yanked open, then shoved shut until finally it came loose and hung askew.

Today (this morning?) it creaked as the breeze moved it where it hung on one hinge. A curtain rod, too, leaned like a tipi pole—at an angle, one side no longer attached. Kari's lacy sea-foam panels floated out like a tattered flag.

Had Finn done that when he leaped at the window, trying to get out? Things came back to him one unfocused flash at a time. He couldn't put them together.

His dreams (if dreams they were) had been bloody and ruled by instinct. Kari had crouched, her voice raw and shaking. Her mouth an O of fear. Pouch's eyes, his voice, remained sharp—a cutting tool. Getting too close. Kari a whining background against the skirting of the trailer now. Pouch a revenge advancing like a wolf.

This was no training do or don't. This was all must and fury. Somewhere the shouting continued. Finn didn't know if pouch cursed him or Kari called him. He had already launched his own rhyme. A full-throttle love that carried him—feet and fang—straight toward the bullseye.

He remembered the leap, then coming down in a heap. Had he latched on? Rode the evil to the ground? To the finish?

He listened for some sound that would tell the story.

Kari always laughed and tickled him when his feet flailed in his sleep, when he dream-whimpered. "Wake up, little buddy. You're just dreaming."

He waited now for the certainty of her voice.

He waited.

Leaving Paradise

I. A KIND OF HOME

At my grandma's, I often sit outside on the hay bales with the dogs, all of us keeping watch for visitors and the scraps they bring—meat bones or stories. They arrive in Chevy pickups, in sedans with two different color doors, or more often than you think, in wagons. While great-aunties reach in the back for pictures, uncles for fresh fish or a newspaper, Larky and Chief bark a little, they arch their backs, prowl around the car, and then crawl back under the jacked-up bottom of my grandma's house.

I'm shy around adults and, as much as I have anticipated visitors, sometimes I can hardly keep from following them dogs as they take refuge in the underworld. Rez dogs give birth in that crawl space beneath the house, bury their cache there, get out of the weather. I sometimes shimmy under to collect the scent of puppies. Or in summer, just because it's dark and cool. Tufts of grass grow there, sparse but real tall where no one mows. The damp clay earth soothes my sunburn and I can think. Away from my big-laugh cousins.

I'm lucky in the cousins though. They'll come, hair slicked back by rain, all watery-eyed telling me they forgot their umbrella when we all know none of us ever had one. The umbrella is code dressed up in a joke. On the eye chart, *umbrella* stumped me. I could see the darn picture, but the word wasn't there.

"Fuck the eye chart," Bean said when she saw me sniffling and heard my story. Bean's my Uncle Walleye's daughter. She's eleven, or eleven

hundred, as she sometimes says. She always looks after me, braids my hair, gives me her socks when mine have too many holes. Her hair is a tangle, thick and muddy brown, pushed back with a headband. She won't let me brush it. Won't let anyone touch it. "I'm in mourning," she says if I offer. I know that makes no sense. Ojibwes cut their hair for mourning, they don't grow it nasty. Besides, nobody in her family has died recently. But, some things you know better than to ask.

Bean's school name is Maribel Jean. But everyone figured she was too short for that name, so someone kind of pushed the words together and now she's just Bean. *Bean, Bean, musical fruit*. Village boys started singing that after they locked her in an old outhouse one night. They set off fireworks beside the door. *Bean's pooper goes rooty-toot-toot!* Bean pretends it doesn't bother her. *Haughty*. That's another school name I've heard the teachers calling her. Bean says it means "prisoner." Uncle Russell laughed when she told me that. According to him, it means "armour"—like a porcupine's quills.

I've been watching her lately. Sometimes I see the sharp edges and the little circle of safety they create. Bean has been trying to teach me—the way pretending can become a kind of truth. That's why she told my secret about the eye chart. So it wouldn't fester. Now we joke like we are all rez Mary Poppins, elbow bent and nose up—being lifted away by umbrellas.

None of us plans to leave. And all of us do. It comes and goes. When I feel it the meanest, that's when I sneak off for the underworld—nest with the dogs.

RUNNING JOKES LIKE those about the porcupine or umbrella are just the way we buck one another up. In Grandma's house, everyone lives off the wisecracks except Nookomis. Her conduit to survival is us kids. We have parents who appear in Buicks with store-bought cookies, make promises about new jobs and school clothes, then leave while we're sleeping. Our abandonment has kept Grandma's tongue young enough to dodge social service people and her arms strong enough to lift the littlest ones into a wewebizoning. She rigs up the little cradle swing with blankets, sticks, and

rope when someone needs her to take their baby “jest for a few days, till I kin get on my feet.”

In summer, like now, we sit at the kitchen table finishing the baking powder biscuits and playing five hundred. She mumbles complaints constantly as we horse around, then finally gives us baskets and paper bags and shoos us outside with her broom to go pick whatever is in season. Her house sits smack in the middle of the little Ojibwe village of Polecat Lake, but *village* really means tamarack and maple, white pine, medicine plants and bushes with abundant crops—chokecherry, hazelnut, highbush cranberry, cedar, wild mint, blueberries. Not the Bible’s paradise, the Anishinaabeg’s.

PL has only one paved road, County 4. It cuts through the new-growth forest that surrounds the village. The other roads are two-ruts or gravel with washboard patterns and potholes. They give the Cliff family’s junkyard steady tire business. The lake itself is only one of a couple dozen in the northern slice of Rice County, Minnesota, rich with walleyes and bullheads. It was an early tribal settlement, and our village remains a gathering place. We have a post office slash village store slash Texaco gas station, a resort with two dozen lake cabins, a couple of feuding churches, and a square, two-story, redbrick school.

I never understood why the social studies map key labels Polecat Lake an *isolated community*. The store, our roads, yards, and even the graveyards are meeting spaces. In PL, people still visit—as a pastime. We crisscross the scattered collection of houses, trailers, woodpiles, and abandoned cars just to say *Boozhoo*, return something we borrowed, or catch up on the village news. All day long, even in the deep August heat, teenagers scuff along the paved road that encloses Pole. With cigarette tips sheltered in the cups of their hands, they veer off onto the gravel road dissecting the village, and then wander down the grassy paths that lead to one or another of the lake shores. All the while jabbering like blackbirds, Grandma says.

Once when I asked Uncle Russell for help with a school worksheet, on the blank where I was supposed to put the main industry of PL, he told me to write *gossip*. I know he was joking, but he’s only a little wrong. Most of us are related here, and even if we’re not, we act like a messy family—sometimes feuding, but locked together. By blood, I guess, or history.

So people drop by regular to visit or trade. No one *makes plans* for everyday visiting; they just raise some dust on the gravel road and skid into the driveway. Sometimes they announce themselves with a honk, but more likely, household dogs send up an alert. In PL, most everyone keeps a mutt or hunting dog—bear deterrent, theft deterrent, remnant of old wolf myths. Everyone keeps stories here, too—sometimes for the same reasons. For us cousins, those stories—especially the ones that go back years—are the closest we can get to what the schoolbooks call home. We collect them like bees collect pollen or like bears bury a half-eaten carcass. For lean times.

Bean says our wild relatives survive season to season, so why should we expect more? Mostly, we have learned not to waste time wondering where we will wake up next week. But sometimes when my insides hollow, ain't nothing funny enough. Emptiness has an echo. It ricochets. Fills my ears like when I try to sleep after a powwow and I can't stop hearing the drums.

Times like that, I slip under the house. The dogs sniff me, lick the salt from my skin. When they go back to panting, I become just another pair of eyes, pupils wide, staring out the holes in the cement blocks.

II. A CAUGHT FOX

June when I was almost six, I saw the ragged work boots and green pants leg of the game warden walk up to the screen door. I heard his rap and holler and my grandma call, "Biindigen!"

Then my Uncle Russell stepped into the doorway, blocking the warden's way in. That's when the yelling and spitting started. Uncle Russell is what my cousins call bull-built—broad and a breath away from charging. Year-round, he wears jeans, plain colored T-shirts with a pocket for cigarette papers, leather gloves tucked in his Levi's, and work boots. In winter he adds a flannel shirt and a vest. His face stays smooth without shaving, and his pepper-black hair is prone to falling over his eyes, except when he turns his baseball cap backward on his head. He has sunglasses with silver reflective lenses that he uses like a shield or a weapon.

I had been about to crawl out from under the house when the jeep pulled up. I had snatched leftover salt pork, wrapped it in bread, dove into the dark so I could eat in peace. But with Larky drooling onto my pant leg, I thought I'd take my chances with the cousins. Then Matt Brune flew into the

driveway. I slinked back under and watched as he slammed his door. Both the door and the sleeve of his khaki shirt held an acorn-shaped insignia with a map of the state in the middle and “Game and Fish” at the bottom. He kicked the front tire of that government vehicle.

Warden Brune is tall and big-boned with a jaw like a cartoon villain and a toothpick sticking out of his mouth. He has a crew cut and the stubble of his hair sticks up cactus prickly on his head. Not many crew-cut Shinnobs. Maybe that whisker hair itches him, because he is always taking off his cap and running his sap-stained fingers across the crown of his head over and over.

That day, though, his hands gestured wildly as he followed Uncle Russell across the drive and around the small yard. Uncle was bending and picking up sticks, straightening stakes in the garden, even watering my grandma’s flowers. I knew he was avoiding. I do it often enough myself when I need time to figure out if I want to punch or cry. I think Uncle Russell decided punch, but just then Warden Brune stopped following, and cursed.

“Don’t snowball me, Russell. We’ve played poker—I know all your tells.”

When Uncle Russell seemed determined to ignore him, Brune called even louder, “And don’t walk away. Look, we all have relatives doing it the right way and relatives doing it the wrong way. Most of us muddle through, scrounge for money, and send up prayer smoke in between. You find them boys, you bring ’em in. You hear? I can’t guarantee anything, but I’ll try.”

He didn’t wait for a reply, didn’t make Uncle promise, just walked back to his jeep and opened the door. Then, just before he got inside and backed out of the drive, he said, “Twenty-four hours or I do it myself, Russell. Your choice. Either way, it’s gonna go down.” Then he said some words I didn’t know, real low like under his breath. He looked my uncle’s way and I did too.

Uncle Russell had slid his sunglasses from the top of his head. His grasshopper eyes gave nothing away beneath the silver reflective surface. I imagined him looking back at the warden the way a caught fox looks when he can’t get his foot loose—both sorrowful and fierce. But my uncle knows how to play a losing hand. He turned away and started to take a leak, knowing Matt Brune watched him. In poker, that’s what Uncle Russell calls

goading. The warden's face got a little more red. He shook his head, took the toothpick out of his mouth, and his spit made a little mound on the driveway. "No grudge, Russell. This is my damn job."

It felt real quiet after Warden Brune drove away. Uncle kept walking around doing the same things he had just done. I stayed put. Waiting, like you do when someone has lit a firecracker and it's taking too long to go off. You can't be sure, so you wait.

Maybe Uncle Russell would have exploded all over the tomatoes, but two more things happened in real quick succession. When I think about it now, I figure it's like when you line up blocks across the kitchen floor just so. It takes a long time to measure with your eyes, but then you just bump the one in the front and they go down one after another after another. It feels slow and fast at the same time.

That's how it was this day when two teenage girls came along—one riding a bike and one pulling a red wagon with a child, a shotgun, and a paper bag inside. They stayed at the edge of the driveway and just called over to my uncle. "Are they back yet?"

"No. Don't come in here. And don't send nobody. This is none of your business."

The girls whispered back and forth; one kept pointing with her chin toward the house. It was like watching the movies they show in school where all the motion is jerky and exaggerated. No matter what anyone does in those stories, it feels like a faraway time. I watched this scene through the narrow opening between the bottom of the clapboard house and the flat lap of earth.

Maybe that's why what happened next seemed unreal.

The girl on the bike just said, "Gaawin." She shook off the other girl's hand, dismounted, took the gun out of the wagon and set it like a carton of eggs on the driveway, then picked up her bike and aimed it back the way they had come. But like those people in slow-motion movies, she didn't go anywhere at first. She pedaled and her tires spun in the loose surface of the road. Her legs moved faster and faster, became a blur, but still she seemed to spin in place forever. Finally the bike tires caught, snaked and slid, until she built up speed. Then *poof!* just like that she was out of my line of sight.

I looked back at the girl pulling the wagon. She was dumping something on the pitiful plot of grass on our side of the ditch. "You tell them, old man.

It's their problem now." She emptied the bag, which was stained red, crumpled it up, and threw that toward the woods on the other side of the road. She was shaking and the bag fell only a few feet away. Then she started crying, and seemed to shrink like a popped balloon.

I remember watching her and trying to think of something else. I noticed the blue flowers someone had painted on the handle of the wagon. She had a hand full of those flowers when Uncle Russell walked over and picked her up. He carried her at arm's length as if she weighed nothing, as if she were a wet dog who was going to shake all over him. Carefully, he set her down in the wagon beside the little kid. Her legs hung out the sides and I saw she had lost one flip-flop. Neither of them noticed. Uncle Russell turned the wagon around and started to pull. He bent, struggled for a moment to get momentum in the loose sand and dirt, as if he, too, had entered a slow-motion film.

I kept my eye on the lost shoe, like that was my job.

III. NOOKOMIS MAKES A NEW STORY

Kids with a tentative grip on a home, we didn't never expect answers and explanations.

Uncle came back. I gave him the flip-flop. Though it had been broken, I had fed the strap back through the hole it had been torn from. Sometimes that works, sometimes it just breaks loose again.

He took the shoe, laid it on his palm like he was guessing its weight, then he hung it on a coat hook by the door. Grandma asked him something in Ojibwe. He shook his head, poured water from the kettle into the wash basin, took homemade soap from the carved wooden bowl, looked at it, put it back, picked up the yellow Dial soap, and lathered his hands. He bent down and doused his face.

I don't know what he washed down the drain, but when he turned around, he winked at me. "Come 'ere, my girl. Bring me the cards and I'll show you a new game of solitaire." Just like that the drama of the day ended.

PEOPLE I DIDN'T know came and went all that week. In wrecked cars, in pickups or farm trucks. They followed my uncle to the tool shed and loaded things in their vehicles. My grandma baked and set out plates. Every time someone passed zhooniyaa to Uncle Russell, they shook hands and then came in to eat.

Finally, I pestered Grandma with questions one night when we were in bed. I was the only grandchild sleeping at her house because my older cousins were tenting it at a neighbor's. I knew that meant smoking and raiding gardens. But I didn't care. When they were away, I always got to sleep with Nookomis.

Her hair came down. White-grey and crimped from her braid, it hung past her waist. I watched it ripple like a river in the firelight as she bent to feed logs into the round black belly of the woodstove. Between the flannel sheets, I felt the little pills with my toes and waited until she was almost asleep and then I asked in a voice that threatened to cry. That's the voice she soothed.

Tonight it took a while to get to the thing I really wanted to know. I had to start with the *when is my mom coming back* warm-up, then when she was smoothing my hair and tickling me a little, I asked, "Are Nettle and James being sent away and what did Uncle Russell say he couldn't pay for unless he sold his canoe?"

There is an ash crock next to the woodstove and it sits on a piece of tin that protects the floor from sparks. I waited so sweetly I could hear a waawaabiganoojiinh patter across the tin and then fall plop into the ash. Grandma says I imagine these things, but she always sifts through for mice when she thinks I'm not looking. I didn't tell her what I heard tonight though. I waited like the sky waits for the return of the moon. I knew it would come.

Anishinaabeg grandmothers build bridges with their bent brown bodies and their stories. Whatever those boarding schools burned of our culture, mindimooyenyag stayed alive to repair. She would want me to understand so I wouldn't be taken away from this bed, this land, our people, our way of life. Anishinaabe-aking.

The story came like a long sigh. What my beloved boy cousins did, how my grandma engineered their rescue, and how my Uncle Russell's sacrifice could save them if he let it. And just like she knew would happen, just like

she tole me that night, Warden Brune came back, loaded up my Uncle Russell's ricing canoe, and left.

The next day, the Simonson brothers showed up and returned the canoe while I was on the tire swing. "Tell Russell nobody wants this ratty old jiimaan," they laughed. This part was a surprise to Grandma. I know because she kept brushing her sleeve over her eyes while she shucked corn. Finally, just before supper, the warden pulled in. He didn't come to the door this time. Instead, he paced around outside. Then Nettle and James were delivered in the back of the sheriff's squad. They were getting tall, but were still thin like herons. I watched them unbend their long legs and stand looking around at Grandma's yard like they'd never seen it before. They ran the rim of their faded ball caps through their fingers, waiting.

Uncle Russell came out, then Nookomis. I knew this part and what had to happen. But I was tired of things exploding and tired of people disappearing in dust down the driveway mad, ashamed, or just searching. I felt ready to cry for real. "Let them stand up like men," Uncle had said to Grandma. But they were still boys without proper fathers. I was not even in first grade and I had already seen handcuffs close. Nookomis had seen too many.

As quiet as that mouse, she gave the signal and I ran to them when I should have stood still. I flung myself and someone had to catch me.

The dogs joined in the fracas, jumping, barking, and spinning in circles. The boys' smiles came out. Grandma came forward wiping her hands on her apron and then pulling each boy to her for a hug and a little smack.

"Aye ye, mitigo-head!" she said. "Youse must be tired. Bakade ina?"

I hung back now. It was like the broken flip-flop all over again. Everything happened in slow motion—a film I couldn't stop watching. Uncle dug in his jeans pocket, brought out the stack of bills he'd collected for the fine, passed it without a word to Brune. Then he took my hand, gave it a little squeeze, and I found myself pulled back—inside the story.

I understood it even then. All that could have happened, but didn't.

Hunting out of season, then hiding out. They could have been sent away. Because they were from Pole. Some people would see them as juvenile delinquents instead of just scared overgrown kids. Some paths on the reservation once followed can never be retraced. Indian boys don't get to be boys. They get marked young.

But in the Anishinaabeg world, the earth is feminine. It nurtures us in every season. My grandma turned toward the house laughing, a little clay figure of a woman between two boulders.

Learning the Directions

THUNDER LAKE, TEN MILES. Inside the van, quiet settles like fog during the last purple stretch of highway. Only the GPS sings, its mechanical voice announcing progress, giving directions. The green land darkens on the edges of the two-lane road. The headlights of the Plymouth switch on to combat the dusk. Another automated feature of this state-of-the-art vehicle.

In one mile, turn right. I can see my stepdad, Drew, getting nervous. His fingers drum the steering wheel, longing, I imagine, for an atlas to check directions. He has become increasingly uneasy as the car steers us farther and farther away from what he considered the hub of civilization.

See, my stepdad is a believer. Shuffle the readings on his night table and you find articles on hovercraft, nanotechnology, night vision goggles, and—here's how we got here—Global Positioning System. No sci-fi writer has an imagination bigger than Drew's when it comes to technology. My mom gets a martyr look every time he starts to talk about the "wave of the future," but she humors him because any passion is good passion to my mom. That leniency gets her into trouble sometimes, like it did with my real dad, whose passion took him right the hell out of our lives—*back to some imagined forgotten old-time ways* is what my mom says.

But with Drew it's different. He wants everyone to take these crazy *2001*, Arthur C. Clarke, *Back to the Future* adventures with him. I'm sure I'm the only girl in my high school to ever build an electronic assembly line to make lighted Christmas cards. That was last year. This year it's GPS—not quite a self-driving car, but the most we can afford. Give him a few years and Drew will land a flying car in our driveway.

So far, no glitches with the GPS. The car talks, Drew listens. We are somewhere in what he must think are the "wilds" of Minnesota, heading toward Canada. Winnipeg is our programmed destination.

I've been up this way before with my real dad. I don't remember the directions, just something about the light and the smells. One evening we had watched deer feed on the edges of the fields in this kind of golden dusk. Watched until they melted into the cornstalks, the points of their tufted ears becoming the paper husks protecting the corn. I suppose they had walked in the rows out of our sight, but I swear that's not how it looked. *Things become. Every moment. Something else*. The man we stayed with that time said that. Maybe he meant the deer, maybe the corn—or my dad. I try not to think about the dad transformations, good or bad—especially because now we all have Drew.

Turn right. The machine starts dinging when Drew misses the gravel road. *Follow highlighted route*. Drew backs up. Everyone is awake now and the cushion of silence dissipates like fog. "Dad, it says turn right," my younger brother, Tony, pipes in.

"Yes, but I wonder." Drew looks down the road like you would a city alley, like he expects to be ambushed.

"Drew, the kids are getting restless." Mom's contribution. "And I need a restroom. Coffee would be nice."

"But this doesn't look like it will take us anywhere."

"You mean you don't trust your machine?" This is Mom's best sarcasm, the chorus from a long-standing argument.

Drew turns down the road. We bump along and he concentrates on avoiding scratches from low-hanging branches. Then we hit it, or it hits us. I'll never be certain exactly if the car swerves—Drew swears the steering was taken over—or if the impact pushes us into the grassy ditch. We all struggle out of the car, which is dinging again and speaks now in an almost human voice: *Avoid impact. Brake*. And then a new kind of deep squawking over and over that sounds like *Makwa. Makwa. Makwa. Makwa*. Finally silence again as we stand in awe of this huge mound of black fur.

"Is it dead?" Tony reaches forward with his foot as if to prod the collapsed heap.

"Drew, *what* is it?" Mom's voice comes in a whisper.

"A bull, Mom."

“A bear, Tony.”

“Is it dead?” Mom and Tony ask in unison. But suddenly there is no need to answer because the hill of a bear begins to move.

“Back away slowly,” a new voice says. “No sudden motion.” We all turn from the bear to look for the source of the commands. They seem to be coming from the brush just beyond the ditch, but we see no one.

I remember the bear and look back. “Dad. Uh, Drew.” No expanse of black bear spilling over the tall grass. “Dad, it’s gone.”

“What? No, he must have just crawled … Aaahh!” A tub of flesh drops with a solid thud from a white pine, dislodging pinecones in its wake.

“What are you doing messing with the wildlife? You after photos or something? I can see you ain’t hunters.” The thick hands of the speaker are busy brushing needles from long grey hair.

“Messing with … ? Well you can see it was an accident. I don’t know where it came from. It just ran headlong into the van. Oh, my god, the van.”

“Dad, it’s gone.”

“Gone? Of course, it’s not gone, but the GPS …”

“Ah, Makwa.” The man gestures with his chin toward the now vacant spot where the bear had fallen. “Then I guess you met Jesus.”

“Jesus?”

“Eya’.” The man laughs. “That old one rises from the dead every time just like Jesus.”

TWO HOURS LATER we’re settled into a trailer house—what passes for a hotel room in Thunder Lake. Apparently we met Jesus just outside Thunder Lake village, population 842. The van now sits in a repair shop. “Parts in two days—if we’re lucky. Don’t worry, we’ve got a couple of young tech-college grads who know how to fix all the new-fangled gizmos you got on there.”

Everyone is worrying just the same. Drew is cell-phoning all over about the malfunctioning GPS. Mom is trying to blot two layers of grease off the take-out chicken. Tony is bummed out that the television isn’t cable. And I’m a little worried myself about the orange-colored water that comes out of the trailer’s plumbing.

“At least you have indoor plumbing.” The owner of this “hotel” has returned with sheets for the fold-out couch. “Think you’ll be staying for the Harvest Festival? I usually let my girls stay here, but they can sleep at their grandma’s if you’ll be staying on.”

“No.” Drew speaks with his best college fraternity manner. “We’ll be leaving as soon as the van’s repaired. But we appreciate the offer.”

“When the van’s fixed? Okay, then. I’ll keep this unit for you.” He’s gone before Drew can protest.

Dad hustles to the door to call after the man, but when he opens it, in walks the game warden, toothpick between his lips. Evidently, it was the game warden who found us with Jesus and drove us the remaining four miles to the eight blocks that make up the village.

“You’ll have to go before the tribal judge at ten tomorrow. But don’t worry, I’ll tell him you weren’t armed.”

“The tribal judge?”

“Yep. You were on the reservation when you hit the bear. The bear resides on tribal land. He’s one of the people. You have to explain your actions.”

“Explain? My actions?” Drew takes a calming breath. “Listen, first I didn’t hit the bear exactly. The crazy beast ran headlong into my vehicle.”

The game warden tips his hat. “Save it for court. But I wouldn’t bring that attitude before the peacemaker.” For the first time ever I see Drew impotent, sputtering words at the closed door.

THE NEXT MORNING, my stepdad and I follow the directions Sidney Vernon, the hotel owner, had given us between bites of fried fish. As he carefully sucked the white meat from around needle-fine bones, he talked us through the village. “Jest around that curve, opposite way from where you come, you’ll find two small houses sitting together like turtles sunning on a river rock. That’s where the Benay sisters live. One has the post office if you need to mail anything or get a cashier’s check. Clara’ll get it done for you. She takes mail in to Trader’s Point every day. Takes riders, too, if you don’t mind the accommodations.” His laugh ended in a coughing fit, which must have called for a remedy, because he poured some dark liquid out of a

canning jar and struggled to swallow that before he went on to describe the repair shop that had our van, a gas station–grocery store–bait shop, a taxidermy and rice finisher, two churches, an old school, and the community center building, which was our destination.

In the warm morning sweat beads under my nose as we walk. I notice various wildflowers growing in the ditches and empty lots together with knee-high grasses. A swarm of white butterflies repeatedly settle and scatter, settle and scatter, marking our progress along the dusty gravel paths. Children continue their shrill games as we approach, but move the action back, closer to the tree line, like the butterflies, keeping an escape distance from the intruders.

That we are indeed intruders is made clear to us when we arrive at Giiwekii, the community center. Middle-aged women in lawn chairs sit sewing or watching middle-aged men in coveralls or blue jeans crawl under a covey of rusted cars. Like the children, the adults continue in their activities, but unlike the children, they do so in silence. At least until we ask for directions to the location of the tribal court proceedings. Then they show us, amid some good-natured teasing and backslapping—"After bear, are you?"—to a couple of folding chairs inside the building and tell us to wait.

Twenty minutes after ten, the judge arrives. Just past fifty, I guess. A stocky, broad-faced man, with hair pulled back in a ponytail, he wears a denim vest over a western shirt so that at first we don't realize he is the dignitary we have been waiting for. "Time to talk this over," he says. This gruff statement passes as an introduction to the proceedings.

A young woman gestures that we should rise and go forward. I squint at the name on the desk plaque, but before I can decipher it, the judge speaks again. "We must stand with a good heart before the Creator." I had been dozing while we waited, but this strange call to attention works like a splash of cold water. I'm alert, my body tingling like a rung bell. Now the judge faces an open window. I think he is watching something outside and look to see what has his attention. Then, without preamble, he begins to sing in a loud rattling voice. I realize his eyes are closed. The bright sun sharpens each line on his face until I wonder how I could have mistaken his age, how anyone so ancient could still hold office. When he turns back, I glance at Drew. See Drew unnaturally subdued, standing with hands folded in front of him, eyes lowered. *He looks guilty*, I think.

Finally the judge speaks. Drew's cheek twitches nervously. I can't understand what the man is saying. Neither can Drew. I see my stepdad draw a deep breath, ready to interrupt, when the judge speaks again, this time in English. "I am one of the Anishinaabe people. I come from the crane clan. My English name is Henry Small Oak. You are Drew Griffin, and the child we know here. Where are the others?"

"Others?"

"There were four present."

Fireworks go off in my brain. *The child we know here?* Me? I pull myself back to where a flustered Drew is answering. "But I didn't think you needed to see my wife and son. I was the driver when—when the accident occurred." He seems unsure of himself.

"There are no accidents when the spirits are involved. You disrespect my people by neglecting to bring your family. An encounter with a bear spirit must be taken with great seriousness."

Do we look like arrogant city people? With just Drew and I bothering to come—two out of four in the judge's mind—do we look only half serious, half respectful of this place, these people?

Drew can't resist a reply. "It wasn't a spirit. It was a three-hundred-pound apparently suicidal black bear that ran headlong into my vehicle."

"I have been wondering what business you and your vehicle have on tribal lands."

"We didn't know we were on tribal lands, we were just passing through on our way from Chicago to Winnipeg."

"Mr. Griffin, we may be in a remote area, but this court is not naive. Thunder Lake is not on any route from Chicago to Winnipeg. I would like to know your intentions in this community."

"My intentions? My intentions are to retrieve my van and, if you will excuse my bluntness, your honor, get the hell back to civilization."

"Yes." Henry Small Oak seems to engage in a mumbling argument with the pencils on his desk as he rolls them between his fingers. I can't catch it all, but watch his face and imagine I see him consider, reject, hesitate, and then decide, "Yes, it would seem best. No complications … But the girl might be the reason … Trouble again, sure as shooting … But this is not my decision."

Back to me. Am I not only the one known, but maybe the cause? Suddenly Judge Small Oak snaps a pencil in two. “Yes, Mr. Griffin, I would like to see you leave without disrupting the balance here. But because Makwa has chosen you, we will give you a chance to learn of the spirit that you encountered. You can work in our community while we prepare for our Harvest Festival. Neeb will give you a pass for twenty hours for each member of your family.”

I think Drew is counting to ten before he speaks, but before he can get to five, Judge Small Oak is out the door. He disappears almost faster than the bear had the day before.

THEY GIVE US what look like ID cards with the picture space still blank. As I finger mine on the slow walk back, I imagine some invisible image or a message will appear in a certain light. The idea makes me laugh and I turn to tell Drew, but can see that the judge’s unexpected reprimand has him battling what Mom calls his engineer’s ego. I look around for distractions, but everyone must have gone inside for lunch. The day seems oddly quiet. I don’t dare ask the questions now buzzing in my brain. Drew wouldn’t know anyway what the judge had meant about “the girl being the reason.” Or maybe I misunderstood.

As we pass the auto shop, a small boy pops his head out the open window and calls out, “Grandpa says to come in. Your car is talking crazy talk.”

“Been trying to reprogram this GPS machine all morning,” explains Charles Redbird, the shop owner. “I reset it. Run the self-test. Everything checks out normal. Then when I turn the vehicle on, the GPS reverts to some old setting and blurts out the same message. Listen for yourselves.”

Please proceed to highlighted route. Travel two miles north on Antell Road. Turn right at the crossroad. Follow rutted lane to fishing hole.

After he lets the machine beep through its circus of words twice, he turns it off. “You been through this way before? Is that an old programmed route?”

Dad and I shake our heads. “Those directions make any sense to you?” Drew asks.

“Oh, they make sense if you want to get tangled up with Old Man Waboose. That’s where he camps, spring till fall. Don’t know where he goes in the winter. Don’t want to. Stinking tea kettle, he’s an ornery cuss. That man can talk the bark off a tree.”

“Old Man Waboose?” Drew asks, cautious now. “Is he a relative of Stanley Waboose, your community director?” Stanley Waboose is the man who will give us our service duties.

“Stanley Waboose? Community director!” Charles Redbird’s wrinkled eyes close over themselves as he laughs. “Yep. He’s your man. Talk the bark off a tree and the shell off a turtle’s back.”

I IMAGINE I see steam rise off Drew’s flaming face as he walks determinedly back toward our new home-away-from-home. “Well, Dad, look at the bright side,” I say in my sweetest voice, “at least we won’t have to ask directions.”

We do, however, have to try to explain to Mom and Tony that because of our accident with the bear we have community service, that a local known as a trickster will determine that service, and that we are to visit him … at his fishing hole! We have to repeat this several times—first Drew, then me, then Drew again—before they believe our predicament.

“Okay,” my mom says carefully. I can almost see her pull optimism out of her still-packed suitcase and put it on. She does this make-the-best-of-it maneuver often when Drew’s crazy schemes go awry. I watch the familiar shoulder shrug. “Twenty-four hours?” she asks. Then, almost before Drew nods, she continues. “We’ll consider it an adventure,” she says, actually smiling. “Lace up, everyone. Let’s go.”

But when Drew mentions the name Waboose, she freezes, her hands come up to cover her eyes as if she can hide from the name, and her Pollyanna smile deflates.

“Waboose? Stanley Waboose?” she asks.

“Yeah, that’s the name, aka Old Man Waboose,” my dad replies, oblivious to her change in tone.

My mom drops to a chair. “No. No way.” She sits limp now, rubbing her temples. As if it takes all of her energy, she says two words, “Kids, outside.”

“Huh?” asks Tony.

Me, I am just a trailer house wall trying to take in the strange scene—my mom transformed, a perplexed Drew with his mouth open, but no sound emerging.

I don’t know how long we all stand there, four mute statues. Finally, Drew’s engineer’s problem-solving energy returns. He breaks the tableau by reaching in his billfold to pull out a ten-dollar bill and passing it to Tony. “You and Gil go get us some drinks—iced tea for your mom and me, and whatever you two want.” He glances at Mom, then adds, “Uh, take your time, Tony.”

“Dad?” Tony looks torn. He clearly likes the idea of money and a little freedom, but like me, has never seen Mom so untethered.

“Go on now,” Drew repeats. “Gil knows where the store is. Your mom will be fine,” he assures us.

AND SHE IS.

When we get back, drinks in hand, she looks like herself again—a paler version, but with a pop-heroine smile on her face. Turns out the GPS may have even more powers than Drew gave it credit for. It had not gotten off track after all, but had deliberately steered us back in time, or in space.

As I thought and as the judge also clearly remembered, it turns out I *have* been here before with my real dad—and more than once. Mom says she hasn’t, which is why neither the signs nor the little village had rung any bells. My real dad had taken me on “vacations” when their marriage was “not sailing smoothly.” (She is back to using the saccharine language of careful parenting, which for once I find comforting.) My dad “found another path,” they “parted genially,” and she “moved on.” Her story sounds smooth—too smooth for the truth, but neither Tony nor I challenge her.

“That still leaves the, uh, question of Stanley Waboose,” Drew says cautiously. “He, well, he played several roles in your dad’s if not your mom’s past—and in yours, Gil.” Dad seldom followed Mom’s model of protective phrasing, so this overly careful statement seems more ominous

because of his restraint. I'd rather someone just blurt out the truth, so we can all deal with it.

I begin to worry again that I am to blame for the GPS detour and maybe even for the Jesus incident. What could want me here so badly? And would a bear, even one who might be borderline immortal, really bother with a teenager who … what? Had some unfinished business? With this place? Or with my long-missing dad? Or was it the place that had unfinished business with me?

While I batter-ram my mind with question after question, Drew and Mom delicately "share" slivers of information, their voices a seesaw—him, her, him, her—until I am dizzy with their efforts to tell me nothing that will upset me—which means nothing of any help. My father was "troubled" at having lost much of his culture. Stanley Waboose was a teacher of sorts (but, Mom's tone suggests, not a good one). Dad had hoped I would "form a bond" and live the life he had missed out on.

After ten minutes of this pitiful "family convo," I do my best teenage martyr imitation and let them off the hook, pretend I am satisfied. As things unfold, we have much more than the expected twenty-four hours of community service to ferret out the truth. Delivery of the "fancy pants" parts is delayed and delayed again. Everyone except us apparently knew the "parts in two days—if we're lucky" estimate wouldn't hold and built contingency plans for what would turn out to be our extended vacation in Thunder Lake.

But that afternoon, with no idea of how well we would come to know his teasing or how we would miss it when we leave, we find Old Man Waboose waiting at the end of the trail the GPS has repeatedly described. He could be a character in a cartoon. Or a fairy-tale gnome. A short, stocky man wearing cargo pants, his pockets bulge with an assortment of tools, rolled newspapers, and feathers. He sits on a large oak stump whistling. I see a cross between a scarecrow and an overgrown frog—lumpy and a little hunched.

He looks up, makes eye contact, and chuckles. "Not what you expected?" I hadn't said anything about his appearance and now worry he can read my mind. "Never presume. Can't judge a trickster by his appearance."

"Do you mean a book by its cover?" asks Tony.

“That, too,” replies Waboose.

I remain silent while Stanley Waboose gives Mom and Drew work in town setting up for the festival. “I’ll keep the girl and the book-boy with me,” he says when Mom takes my arm as if to bring me with her. “Lots of work here,” he says as he gestures to the small camp and the riverbank. Then he repeats the words—*Lots of work here*—as he places his fist over his heart.

Our “work” assignment seems to be to shadow Old Man Waboose, assist with camp chores, listen to his stories, and, later, attend the festival. Tony falls right in, happy to catch leeches or collect kindling in the nearby woods. Maybe I join in the activities a bit stiffly, not sure what my mom’s, dad’s, or my history might be with this backwoods man. Maybe he notices. He often studies me, then looks away when I catch him at it. He never questions me, never cajoles. But he makes up these inane story-songs with characters he names Tony and Gil.

One afternoon as Tony digs and collects night crawlers, Old Man Waboose counts them out—one dozen to each Styrofoam container—and I stick on a price label and store them in the cooler. Waboose begins tapping out a rhythm on the overturned bucket that serves as his seat. Then he ad-libs, “Hey ya, hey ya. Hey ya, hey. Straight little girlie and curling worms. Little Gil frown lines, hey ya hey. Time for a lesson from the curly worms.”

I keep my cool, pretend not to notice. Then out of nowhere he says, “Tony, give Gil a turn.”

“Huh? Oh, sure.” Tony shrugs, stands and stretches, then wipes his muddy hands on his pants leg. “All yours, Gil. You kinda hafta follow their slither. You think they’re going right, but they turn real quick.”

I look around for something I can kneel on. I reach for a piece of plywood, but Stanley Waboose stops my hand. “Won’t work, Gil,” he says gently. “You won’t be able to move after them if you have to switch the wood first.”

It’s just dirt. It’s washable. I console myself, but then think of the orange water in which I will have to wash. Determined not to look week, I kneel, the damp earth oozing beneath me. Maybe a tear seeps out, but I instantly brush it away, then use my hands to sift. My fingers close around a thick slimy worm. I pull and then pull harder. It breaks in half. “Oh my god, oh my god!” I scream, then throw the half I am still holding.

“Hey! Watch it!” Tony yells as the half-worm lands in his hair.

As he tries to extract it, Waboose starts up again. “Hey ya, hey yah. Hey ya, hey. Little Gil frown lines, breaks worms in two. Hey ya, Tony, more money for you.” His last line comes out mixed with laughter.

Then the two of them go wacko, alternately making up new verses and laughing so hard they can’t speak. I have stood frozen since I threw the broken worm. First mad, then sorry for myself, then mad again. “Ooh, you, you worm freaks!” I shout. Then before I know what I am doing I chime in with my own verse, “Hey ya, Tony. You’ve got worms for hair. Hey ya, Old Man. Won’t cha bait my hook?”

This silences them both. They look at me like I’ve grown another arm. Then Old Man Waboose hoots and all three of us fall under the trance of his wicked trickster energy. We don’t pack many worms that afternoon, but we fill the woods with a chorus of giggles and lopsided songs.

When the festival closes, no one mentions leaving. Mom and Drew accept tear-down duties. For our non-festival days with Old Man Waboose, we play canasta with a set of tattered teapot cards, pick and eat sweet heart-shaped strawberries, fish in the morning, and fish in the evening. Lucky for us, the sunfish and crappies don’t seem to mind our inexperience. Before the first fishing session ends, we have a mesh bucket half filled.

“You done good, real good,” Stanley Waboose tells us as we all sit by the bank. We unbait and remove our hooks, pocket the bobbers, and attach the snap of the swivel to the middle guide of the rod, just as he showed us. “Always break down your gear. A dried worm on a hook will betray you to the fish. They’ll know you don’t take them serious and spread the word.”

I have seldom seen Tony this attentive. I watch, wondering if he is believing or bluffing. I can’t tell. Maybe he’s filing Waboose’s words away as truth. Myself, I figure they are at least half fantasy. Like my dad. But, I can’t help hoping that means both are also half-truth.

We catch no new facts about my past from Old Man Waboose, who, per his direction, we have started to call “Uncle.” He does offer more how-tos and why-fors than anyone I have ever known. How to build a chimney for a “friendly” fire. Why we greet the sun, who he calls “brother Giizis.” How we should place tobacco when we hear thunder. How to “charm” the bait, neatly harvest the bubbly orange eggs while cleaning fish, flavor the flour you use for frying. Why we need spirit names and how we will have to

return for these in another season when we have followed his directions about holding our dreams and learning five new Ojibwe words a day that will remind us of Creator's gifts.

As the days wear on, I long less and less to hear explanations about the dad who left me. Now I think about the dad who brought me here as a child and why, about the kind of hope he might have held for me, for us.

Drew and Mom and Tony and I stay on in Sidney Vernon's "hotel." Tony and I bring him fish at the end of our workdays and he offers to cook them for supper. Mornings we still bump into one another and grumble. Tony's TV addiction is strongest then. Drew fidgets when he isn't in control, but less than he once did. The water remains orange, the parts haven't arrived yet for our van, but we all seem to have forgotten about getting to the "programmed location" for our vacation. No one says it out loud; we haven't come that far yet, but I don't think any of us mind now the odd shape this trip has taken.

Drew has even almost admitted his ideas about who and what makes for "civilization" might have been misguided. "Strange place," he says whenever he encounters someone or something that doesn't fit his techie expectations. But now, he smiles when he says it. One night Tony and I are sprawled on the grass, Mom and Drew sit in lawn chairs, and we all watch nothing but the night sky, hoping to spot a comet. "Strange place," Drew repeats. "Strange, but peaceful."

As Mom might say, every day is an adventure. I guess for a family motto we could do worse. I am never certain what directions Uncle will give Tony and me, but I believe he will help us find our way.

The Elements

Of the haunted places, the one I know best is the Luton Hotel. The shell of the old hotel leans like a forlorn lover. Below it gapes the hollow where it once stood. After rains, the pit fills with paper boats; in April, with a chorus of spring peepers. Nights it becomes a piss pot for rowdy boys testing their aim.

But when Giizis is full, shadows tall as lodge poles seem to dance around the absence. Some people claim to hear flute music, others crow-sharp laughter. Where remnant walls rise, gauzy curtains materialize in the uncertain moonlight, flutter out of open windows. Candlelight spills like memory from the time when the elegant Luton Hotel was the biggest building in town except for the courthouse.

"More rooms for the lecherous than for the sickly," Uncle Redbird would grumble. The hospital had only twenty beds; the Luton, thirty-five. Swanky, too, with lace tablecloths, imported whiskey. Redbird had no need for tablecloths, and his whiskey came from local corn and the Peabody's still. He wouldn't set foot in that restaurant, not even for the rhubarb pie.

My own aversion to going near the Luton now is based less on principle than fear. Not because people died there in the fire, but because of asiniig, the rocks. Three stories high, the hotel's white clapboard torso sat on a stone and mortar foundation. *Slave rocks*, Redbird called them.

I knew his disdain actually had less to do with the hotel's size than with that legacy of theft. "Wrong is wrong." He spat his words in the coffee can with a stream of tobacco juice.

Rumor is the hotel owners hired hobos to harvest the stones. Five men started the job, only three remained on payday. Locals tell the story differently depending upon who is listening. I've heard it short, and I've heard it long. One place all the stories converge is at the home of the Grandfather Stones.

On this rez, we know rock people preceded us. This is why Anishinaabeg built cairns by the big lake. Our ancestors who feasted on manoomin at the edge of stone chimneys, who took shelter in caverns, left pictograph stories on granite. Ochre naabe, mooz, or Mishibizhii. The spiny back and horns of the underwater panther appear next to Anishinaabeg in canoes. Many believe the creature still lives in underwater caves. Others think these figures only myth, the images just teaching stories.

But as a nation, we have always hedged our bets. Maybe belief is a job like any other. So we place asemaa at origin places, hold sings according to the sky calendar.

Water and rock. Both beings—alive. Part of an old tension. A balance, the stories say.

A practice of patience.

Maybe the tobacco offering says we will try.

WHEN THE HURRIED hands disturbed the sacred places, they brought death. But like all takers, the rock thieves abandoned their dead, and instead carried the weight of stone. Some say every trail they left is haunted. Five pairs of footprints and a drag mark.

Away from their natural home, the rocks wept. At first, the flooding they caused was attributed to poor drainage. Finally builders and plumbers shook their heads. In their dismay, they pointed at one another, then fisted their anger. The hotel owners scoffed at the local "peasants" who tried to explain the phenomenon of the tears. They believed in science, customers, and cash. From the nearest city, trucks delivered pumps and drainage pipes.

The hotel footprint in the settler town grew bigger; the goodwill of Native residents, smaller.

Time passed, but not the stones' grief.

Only a few heard their night talk. Lovers who sought the moon. The unsteady bar stumblers. Teenage garden raiders. All had reasons to misunderstand the mumbling song of rock people. If you've heard it, you know it can hypnotize.

Like other night shadows, I was drawn to the low rhythm. A sound like secrets, like the earth breathing in the dark. I told myself we were both plotting our escape. Maybe their pathway could be mine, too.

THE GRANDFATHERS BURNED the building finally. I know many think it was Redbird. Or me. Because I was his alibi and he mine.

We were together, truly. Though perhaps neither is innocent—except in the way of the white court. Redbird had apprenticed in his youth with An-Ni-Wa-Bi, the tribal chief and medicine keeper who some believed also had dark powers. Redbird turned away finally, or was released. But he carried uncommon knowledge of the elements.

And though I am neither steel nor patient like flint, I understand ishkode. Some sacred things wait for each of us. Perhaps my fate has always been as tinder. Maybe in those years I learned how tears can become flame.

However it happened, the clapboard, the soft beds—all thirty-five of them—the blue brocade curtains, the princely pantry of flours and European spices became flame. While the town watched, the Grandfather Stones glowed like clock hands in the dark. For once, they did not weep.

I AM AFTERMATH. I pace at a distance—still called, still coward. The stones, too, remain—a quiet chorus at night, their whispers turning to steam in the cold dawn.

Redbird is gone. He left me his river shack, his sweat lodge, his tools. The crowbar waits.

Perhaps I, too, am an apprentice. Someday the story will say whether to Redbird's teachings or to grief alone.

I have forgotten many of his formulas for living. But I remember stone—as a brother. On my calloused fingers I count all of the removals.

The Broken Year

I. MARSHMALLOW GLUE

The entire year—the sewing factory closing, her dad's fall, the airline strike, and a covey of AIM visitors—seemed like one long issue of *People* magazine. As if some anonymous editor was filling the pages of her life with "poignant content." Of course, no full-color gossip rag had pulled off Highway 59 to walk the three-block main street with a cameraman and a recorder. Her waterfall of unmanageable dark curls, the pert if stocky, you-can't-be-forty-five shadow that followed her everywhere would never grace their glossy pages. Nor would the blue-and-white Legion ball cap that hid her dad's thinning hair. His crooked signature smirk would make a great cover, but the corporate publishers would never find it. If the hidden rez stories of that year ever made it to print in the dark memoirs of millennials, they wouldn't include the whispering spirits from two cultures who had volleyed for her attention. That epic battle was hers alone to recall.

Maddy didn't know if she and the spirits had made peace for good, but she dreamed now of common canning jars—not ones filled with Ojibwe words—and of road trips to Deer Park with her kids, not to the River Styx. She had almost stopped glancing over her shoulder when she walked in the woods and had gone back to her funeral-and-wedding-only church attendance. Dad had recovered from the broken pelvis and could take himself wherever he wanted again, but more importantly, he had stopped dying little by little each week before her eyes.

Or maybe she had gone back to not noticing.

NOTICING AND NOT noticing. Believing and not believing. The everyday and the spirit world. She now knew these were twined together like the roots of neighboring trees.

She hadn't really returned to the mundane jump-rope rhythm of the before. The conversion year changed her. Though she couldn't say who had converted her or to what, she walked differently in the world. Heard the afterbeats of every choice. Long nap, or visit Dad for cribbage. Listen to the words of the drummers, or just tap your moccasins. Still, the change wasn't all dichotomy, this or that. A Zen master might say it was this, this, this. An oshkaabewis might simply point with their lips.

Everything spirit sits right there inside us and in front of us. Everything spirit lives tangled with the hungers and piss of bodies.

Mink had said goodbye with only blood—his slim athletic body a heap on the side of the road. Maddy's babies had arrived warm and round like inflated smiles, but only after a daze of pain. The joy mixed with loss, dark days with golden sunrises.

She lived in that raw change while a whole cycle of seasons spun by. She knew the vertigo from the broken year would diminish, but never go completely away. The locked sewing factory, the wheelchair in her dad's closet, the ghost of Northwest Airlines, and the AIM song around campfires reminded her. We inhabit the edge, the falling and not falling at the same time.

SHE HAD NOT been present when her eighty-two-year-old dad tumbled down the basement stairs—"boots over noggin," as he described it. But she saw it happening both before and after. Hadn't she contacted a contractor to build a door at the top of the stairs months before the accident? Hadn't she woken in a sweat, crying "No, Daddy!" again and again afterward until she dreaded sleep almost as much as she dreaded the postman and his bills?

Because the accumulating bills came just when she needed money the most. Her dad had Social Security and a vet's benefit. He had the VA for treatment. But anyone who lives in rural America knows good medical care is no more assured than winning at bingo on Saturday night. Sometimes you have to shop the small neighboring cities to find a non-alcoholic, non-

senile, and non-racist practitioner. Then you have to spend the time and gas money to drive there over and over.

She didn't mind.

She would do anything for him as he had for her when she got thrown from a horse at ten and needed a brace, one she kept outgrowing every three months.

But the factory chose the same season to close. Perhaps not chose, but they had succumbed to the stresses of a deteriorating building and competition from low-wage overseas factories. So she had no job and, with the pressure of her dad's care needs, no time to find another. No job meant not just no paycheck, but no teasing during the lunch breaks, no candy or chews passing from serger to serger. *I found Blackjack gum in DL. You want some?* No big gossip, no hints about hot fishing spots. *Use nightcrawlers and don't even try before six. We took us a lantern so we could stay late*. She would even miss the crude jokes that made her blush and the handwritten recipes for which she said miigwech over and over, even as she knew she would never find time to make them. On their last workday, during the last hug, her niijikwe Eileen said, "We'll have to use smoke signals now," while they both laughed and cried and then laughed at their own crying. *Friendships are yeast for your spirit*, her mom used to say. A shrinking soul and a shrinking pocketbook seemed too much to bear on top of her dad's accident.

She wasn't too proud for unemployment or for food stamps or commodities. But those stopgap programs everyone counted on had been built just to keep you alive and suffering, not to provide any kind of comfort. Her folks used to talk about "the lean years" and she always thought that meant when they first got married and had to stretch hard to make ends meet. She hadn't thought it would mean she literally had to choose between food and gas. The gas won because the doctor visits gave her dad a chance to get back to walking. Using the commodity food took ingenuity if she didn't want macaroni topped by macaroni to become a regular menu item. She tried to supplement it with fresh produce, but the quantities she could afford were meager. Dad and her two kids came first. She finally dropped the extra five pounds she had been carrying since her last pregnancy. Then more. Then almost more than was healthy.

When her dad needed a specialist in the Twin Cities, she spent one long night figuring out how to juggle the balances on her credit cards so they could fly down. The airline deregulation of the late ’70s had not been kind to rural communities. Flights were always minimal and overpriced, but with the strike, the situation had been exacerbated. Just when she had mapped out the timeline—an early morning drive to Fargo, a flight to Minneapolis, a relative on the other end to pick them up, then straight to the doctor’s office—her dad changed his mind.

“Dammit to hell, Maddy. I can’t cross the picket line.”

So, instead of driving an hour and a half to Hector Airport, she drove most of the night—five and a half hours—to Minneapolis–St. Paul. They slept at her Auntie Baagan’s for three nights so they could fit in both the needed doctor visits and a rotating shift of family visits. Her dad was on pain meds that made him sleepy, so he missed some of the relatives coming and going, but overall the time with family cheered them both up.

They both needed the boost. The orthopedic surgeon was able to realign the fracture, but warned that healing at her dad’s age took time; walking well again took a commitment to physical therapy. Maddy knew her dad had the grit to get through the months ahead; she hoped she did.

BIBOON TESTED HER. Cruel winter days when her dad moved hunched in his coat, determined to try his walker. “The doctor said *walk*, Maddy, not *watch*. Let me be!”

Some days she thought he would never get anywhere, that the whole rest of her life she would see him creep across slick sidewalks, eyes on his feet, not taking in the sun glint off the icy branches. The unimaginable glitter of rays, rays, rays almost broke her that winter. The winter wind would blow, the trees tinkle in their ice dresses, their frosty smiles lost on her dad.

And everywhere Maddy went a ticker tape of “father” and “daddy” words seemed to follow. “Papa Was a Rollin’ Stone” appeared as song of the week in the record store; Father Christmas in every New Year’s Eve ad. Plus, the Ojibwe variants of the words—like *baabaa* in the alphabet book Maddy bought for her cousin Van’s baby shower. Of course, the letters had

always been there, but now some conniving spirit kept throwing a spotlight on the "Father and Daughter Dance" headline in the local paper or the movie club's showing of *Daddy Long Legs*. Maddy's life became one big word search. Hidden in a drawer she kept the haunting photo she snapped of a murmuration of birds, birds in the unmistakable shape of a capital *D*. Winter crept by an alphabet of worry.

But finally ziigwan came and with it a fast melt. Mud and more mud, while Dad sat like an ogimaa in his cane chair directing her as she turned over the soil, broke up the moist clods.

"This is a prince's life, Maddy," he laughed.

Her arms had grown strong from pushing the wheelchair. The shovel, the hoe, the rake all felt lighter. Or maybe it was her spirit. Her chief was coming back. He insisted he needed to hold the earth and smell it. "That's how I know what the rows need, my girl."

That image—him thin and wrapped in a blanket against the spring cold, eyes closed, inhaling the perfume of the sweet dark earth—stayed with her. Did he cry? Did she while she watched him? She knew they both laughed for a full ten minutes when an angleworm crawled out of the clod onto his nose. "What the hay!" he shouted, then like a small child, he held it in his hand like he had never seen one before. "Howah, lookit you." Finally he kissed it and set it gently at his feet. "Go do your job, Niiji."

As Maddy tried to do her own job, she expected caretaking to get easier with the kids out of school, with her dad walking more steadily, but summer hurt. Though everything flowered and fruited around them, fear filled her every day. Could he push his old bones one more time to mend? The doctor harrumphed at the slow progress and prescribed extra vitamins: *At his age, he needs a boost to get those bones to knit*.

Could she stretch herself and her meager income enough to cover meds, care for the kids, her house, the cranky car that broke just when they needed it most? She shooed her dad outside and insisted he let Giizis warm him when he became sour from pain. And she made him work—shell peas, harvest and clean berries, make them salad suppers with whatever the garden gave.

"KP, Daddy. Just like in the army."

"Like the army hell! You think we had fresh veggies?"

Relatives offered kid sleepovers; she accepted. They offered "dad-sitting"; she hesitated. She hated to trust anyone else, didn't want him out of her sight. Finally, they convinced her she wasn't the only adult in the whole county.

When she took half-days away, the manic adrenaline state of her body started to ease. She rode her bike to the park, got a haircut, once had a midday beer with Eileen and two of the other "girls" from work. They played "9 to 5" on the jukebox, sang along, and talked. *No crying!* Eileen had made them promise. Eileen, whose twin sister had taken herself out of the struggle with pills a few years back, somehow kept up a determined cheerfulness. Gifts of sourdough starter, lessons in the lazy daisy stitch, and her signature sticky note messages always signed "♡+E, heart-y!" Yes, Eileen was the medicine Maddy needed.

Among the four women gathered, they had at least two centuries of experience, but anyone watching the salted peanut shells fly or the beer foam blown toward one another would have believed they were teenagers playing hooky. Hooky and a freebie manicure gave Maddy a new lease. By August, she could manage picnics by the lake and campfires in her dad's backyard. Maybe, just maybe, the marshmallow glue would help heal his pelvis. Quietly, somewhere in the cavity near her breastbone, she sang a little song about family and sticking together.

Fall was always her dad's favorite season. Maddy's, too. The crazy patchwork trees showing off. Each day they filled with more yellow, mango, impossible purple, and red red red in a hundred shades. More even than the color, they loved the scent—the damp, the crisp, the almost flame taste before decay—dagwaagin, never the same year to year, yet it swallowed you again and again. Held you suspended, at the edge of transformation. Her dad had stopped using his walker, had moved to a cane. That fall year, the breezes whispered, *He's still here he's still here* over and over.

In early October, Auntie Baagan had come with a diamond willow cane carved by her late husband Blair and presented it to Maddy's dad. *Bimaadiziimagad, nisayenh*. *Just like you*. They had both cried, and though Maddy didn't know for sure what Baagan had said until her dad told her later, she felt a holiness of family different from the Bible's holy family story. This holy thrummed—bigger and older. It knew genocide in the

familiar way age knows evil, knew honest fear, but despite that chose generosity. Her auntie had told her dad, *It's alive, my brother, just like you*.

Maddy knew the cane was alive because of the way the diamond willow had been treated in the harvest and the carving. Uncle Blair had shown the tree respect. He offered asemaa, thanked and blessed the being that still lived inside the wood. But the *alive* Auntie Baagan meant went beyond the physical beings—beyond the wood, the maker's breath on the creation, or Maddy's dad's bones. That beyond was an essence it had taken Maddy a year to approach.

She went from *Damn this shit storm!* to *Whoa, check out this sweet shit!* The world hadn't changed much, but the aim of her personal spotlight had. She still found Dad words everywhere, but now they gave her heart-y smiles.

SHE KNEW HER own rejigging was a miracle. Someone—Gizhe-manidoo, the little people, or the Christian god—had nudged her, every step.

Yes, she had not prayed when she should. Had gone to the holy places with a cold heart. She still didn't know which ritual, which song, which spirit. But she didn't feel hollow anymore.

THE SWEETENING OF her niggling dread had started oddly in a crucifixed building, but spread across the reservation woodlands, prairies, and lake landings. She was a god whore. She had entered fire circles, chapels, and sweat lodges. Made gifts to every little spirit in every little being she could find. It was blackout bingo and she was daubing wildly. The stakes were higher than she knew possible. She didn't want the lead weight of caution to control her days, nor to wake tangled in fear. She wanted to live spitting and biting, filled with fire. She wanted her dad to receive the command *get up and walk*, and to hold his hand as they stepped on water together, signing and singing in every fucking language they knew. She hoped she would become a Babel, so full of every voice, so loud that one of them would be heard by a great and powerful being.

Maddy was small-boned, small-voiced, and had always been called timid. When her world broke apart, she knew that wouldn't do anymore. In the early days after her dad's accident, her body stayed sedate, her voice remained steady. The doctor told her she was in shock. She wasn't. She was conserving her energy. When exterior changes came, she wanted to have built the interior strength to face them. Instinctively, she studied ma'iingan and gwiingwa'aage, the fierce wolf and wolverine.

Maddy blushed now at her audacious plan. She had grown neither growl nor fangs. The flashes of boldness she occasionally displayed had been hard-earned, and surely not the result of only her human determination. Though the twists and turns of the holy ones remained indecipherable, they had placed their several earthly servants smack dab in her path. After her sojourns in their lodges and churches, she knew now for certain the world's most powerful gods were tricksters.

II. ALL THE UNKNOWN LANGUAGES

Her dad had surprised her when they first came back from the hospital by asking her to take him to mass at St. Anthony's. Maddy had known he was still a member, just not that he attended the services. When she was growing up he had given the church a wide berth. When her mom or grandma were hustling her off and scolding him for not offering a better example, he remained unruffled. On the porch in his favorite chair, his fishing tackle waiting beside him, he sweetly quoted his grandfather: *Them spirits lost some of their power from being caged in that church building and even more from being captured in that big black Catholic book. No, I can hardly recognize them in captivity*.

But if Dad now needed a little religion, she would skirt it up and take him.

The little clapboard Catholic church on the rez had always felt homey. When she used to attend with her grade school catechism class, she felt proud of the Ojibwe elements in its design and decor—woodland florals on the altar cloth, birchbark collection baskets. Even the priest's vestments had a local influence. The red-haired hulk of a man who had been the pastor when she was a child seemed more like a granduncle when she saw the ribbon work on his sash, the beadwork on his funny square hat.

When she pushed her dad up the ramp and down the wide aisle the first time they attended after his accident, the scents hugged her. Candle smoke, wood oil, and the faint hint of incense. Soft light hummed through the stained glass windows as deep organ music spilled from the loft. The bells clanged and echoed, calling latecomers. She could have been eight again and dressed in a fancy white dress, nervous for her first communion. Nothing had changed. *Wasn't that the point*, she thought. The solid tradition. Something ethereal that suggested eternity.

So when the scene broke that first time, she wanted to fix it.

It was a Saturday in January. They had decided to catch an afternoon mass because it offered easier logistics—no rushing through the new morning requirements, no cramped parking lot. Maddy had been in town doing her usual list of chores while her dad read the newspaper in the car. They came in just a minute before the music started. She was stamping snow off her boots and trying to tame her hair. She saw her dad dip his finger into the holy water fountain by the door and signal her to follow his lead. They were both in the midst of a sign of the cross, she a little self-consciously, when a green-robed figure with two young female servers made his way toward the double doors. Her body fluttered, perhaps with nervousness. As she maneuvered her dad's wheelchair, she noticed the priest's height and the way he seemed to dwarf even the lector.

The usher invited them to sit up front, where an extra space had been left at the ends of the pews, specifically for congregants in wheelchairs. She sank low in her seat, trying to blend, become furniture. There had been reasons she left. Essential incompatibilities—about the sacredness of women, about earth's animacy. Did those differences override the reason she now sat front and center trying to recollect an old ritual if not the faith itself? Did they override her father's need? *No*. The answer came easily. Her dad had given only one directive about disagreements: *Hold respect*. As a child, she had pictured respect as a layer cake in her lap. She smiled at the memory. She sat with both held carefully now, the respect and the memory of his words.

Entrance song, blessing. She worked hard to concentrate. Then a dead silence came and tension mushroomed in the room. Did they miss a cue? Was the first row supposed to answer? She scanned those next to her, but no one seemed sure. She looked at her dad; he shrugged.

Finally, she looked up toward the altar and realized the priest couldn't find the opening prayer. He tried ribbon after ribbon. The whole church waited in silence as if the scene were on-screen and this was a climax. Finally, the dark-haired server intervened, touched a purple ribbon. With those enormous hands, the nameless priest flipped the ribbon to the passage, his voice boomed out, and everything returned to rote.

Except for Maddy. Something about the incident shook her, hooked her. My god, they weren't supposed to see his humanness. Frailty in this ordained figure. It made her heart hammer. With what? Fear or compassion? As if she had any compassion to spare just now. She looked at him—the center of something ancient. Alone at a great age and carrying the heavy weight of expectation. Yes, she *felt* for this man. Felt she could *see* him, or through him.

When he spoke again in his big Irish voice, the words were lost on Maddy. Latin or English, it didn't matter. She suddenly fixated on his hands —watched every ritual gesture. How could she not? They expressed more than the words could. He held them out, elbows at right angles to the upper arm, wrists at a precise forty-five degrees, hands slightly cupped but each finger straight as a pipe and abutted against its neighbor, thumbs pointing to heaven. She studied the smallest movements of those hands, wondered at the countless repetitions as over the years he signed himself or lifted them in prayer on behalf of some half-drowsy congregation. Yet they hadn't become sloppy, no gliding one movement into the next. In that angular body the lines remained distinct, clean. Ageless as marble.

She had never seen him before. Of course, there would be a new priest by now—but such an old new priest? Her dad didn't seem to notice. Perhaps because he, too, was not young. Not young, and in a wheelchair. In a wheelchair, but still responsible for spreading his own gospel? The practices of a lifetime—the old shattered language, the precious pieces of a culture. Did what he saw console him instead of scare him the way it did her? She knew they would not mention the priest's age, his struggle; they didn't. And in the weeks and months that followed, they only talked about the decor, the sermon, or the other people they met coming and going.

They learned he was Father Adolph Reilly, retired and only filling in while the regular priest was on sabbatical. A sabbatical seemed strange in religion. Did you get to stop believing for a year? Try out evil or

agnosticism? Put on some other robes? With such thoughts she distracted herself. Her dad said a sabbatical was for study, time to learn the latest scholarship, or undertake a project. From her own life, she would never have a sabbatical. Was this fantasy Catholicism something like a project? This year with her dad was she secretly studying loss?

Truth. The more skeletal the priest's hands became, the more she saw her father's hands. Maddy didn't know if they reminded her of decline or of the deepest beauty of the human species. She both dreaded and longed for the strange hours in St. Anthony's. Working in the garden, she sometimes imagined she heard the murmur of the priest's voice, a quiet prayer coming from a long distance—indecipherable words, but with his distinct brogue.

She couldn't explain to herself what had begun to happen to her. Or why. Only that as they came again and again, as she watched Father Reilly immersed in ritual, she started to believe. Not in the doctrine, which she couldn't even fully remember, but in him. In his faith. During each service she felt an almost blistering joy. But when the hour passed, she departed mute and fragile as an egg.

Of course, she wondered if a conversion of some kind was involved. But it wasn't overt. No vows, no sprinkling or submersion. Nothing physical or even verbal. In the call and response of the mass, she barely spoke.

He is nothing but an aging Roman Catholic priest, she told herself over and over again. *Not an oracle. Not a saint*. Father Reilly stood taller than average even now in what was apparently the eighth decade he had known. Big-boned in a handsome way, he still carried himself erect. When his knees bent to descend the steps from the altar, she could see age in his giraffe-like movement. But it was only slowness; the graceful precision remained. Everything in the man reminded her of something else, something gone or a leaving yet to come.

Don't think that way, she warned herself. Not when your dad sits beside you trusting in a future when he can't even get himself in and out of that wheelchair. She dishonored them both to clock the signs of this priest's decay, the raw beauty of his transformation. Death wasn't a game to which we come as spectators. Still it gut-punched her. She looked on transfixed, if helpless.

WHEN MEMORY PLAYED back reels of the priest's or her dad's deterioration, during the day Maddy could redirect herself, but she couldn't control her dreams. The "beauty" priest kept showing up there, offering her his hand. Once, when she shook it, it broke off. She looked down at their locked hands, only to find herself holding a skeleton. Her dad, of course, also made appearances in her nightmares. He came, looking just like himself, but bearing a pelvis-shaped valentine or a glass of Chablis—on a pelvis platter! In daylight, she could laugh off the ludicrous scenarios, but dream hangovers often spoiled her mornings.

The routine parts of her day also veered out of her control. As Maddy bargain-shopped, took her dad to PT, juggled the kids' softball schedules, and struggled with the new "normal," her feet worried, her hands fretted—both often tapping nervously. As her guilt increased over her inappropriate fascination with the aging priest, she developed an eye tic she put down to stress. Maddy didn't want to focus on his aging and her father's aging, on their progression toward their eventual, yes inevitable, death. But dread had become her shadow.

Eileen suggested she get herself to a sweat. "A double whammy—healing and heartthrobs," she had promised. When Maddy looked skeptical, Eileen laughed and amended her claim. "Okay, heartburn from the post-sweat food." Maddy agreed to go. If the ceremony didn't take, at least she would get a badly needed friend fix.

She hadn't participated in any tribal ceremonies for a long time, just as she had "fallen away" from the faith practiced at St. Anthony's. She and her high school friends had been enthusiastic when the spiritual practices resurfaced on the rez after passage of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act. They had been to all-night ceremonies with the Native American Church, attended Big Drum, sweated, and even been hangers-around with some of the visiting shamans and their apprentices. That last experience, especially the domestic scenes of the spiritual leaders—boisterous quarrels or backstabbing—laid bare their human flaws and effectively shifted her spiritual progress into park. She had expected an infallibility she didn't find. Had age cured her of her naivete? If the priest could lose his place in the ancient liturgy, perhaps she could cut the tribal leaders some slack, too.

Dad didn't think the teepee circle had a place for him in his current condition. "Those ceremonies can drag on, my girl," he said. "I have limited sitting and standing capacities, as well as a bullshit meter that might go off if someone takes too long to make a point. Unless you can't do without me, I'll pass. Your babies and I can play cards and they can pretend I beat them at their computer games."

So, on Friday night in a long flowered ribbon skirt, she headed to the community center with Eileen. Maddy wondered how much attention her spiritual life could take in one week and if the services would counteract one another. On the drive, she hastily went over the etiquette with Eileen—which direction, making the tobacco offering, smudging, and anything else she may have forgotten. Before they stepped out, Eileen pulled her sleek butt-length hair into a beaded butterfly barrette. Maddy had pulled her messy curls into one fat braid. Now she smoothed the edges with Eileen's balm. *All I can do and good enough*, she told herself.

"Nerves?" Eileen asked.

"Nerves busy having baby nerves," she answered with a half smile.

"Don't worry, they'll remember you," Eileen reassured her.

"Who, the teepee squad?" she asked.

"The spirits, Niijikwe," Eileen responded. "Though maybe *one* of the tipi squad."

They laughed then, easy. *She could do this, too*, she told herself.

They expected the same old-timers who had always run the ceremonies to be holding the sweat. But the parking lot had a bunch of out-of-state plates. The conference tables in the meeting room had some fancy-toed boots parked around them. She stuck close to Eileen, Eileen stuck close to her. Outsiders sometimes meant trouble.

Did she imagine it or were some of the swanky cowboy boots craning their turkey necks to watch while she and Eileen found a few former work friends? *AIM workers*, the friends said. *They heard about the potential pipeline here and wanted to get us psyched in case we needed to sponsor a protest*. In Maddy's experience, you didn't *sponsor* a protest, but she didn't want to quibble. So she waited with the rest to hear what would be said. It felt good just sitting ankle-to-ankle with her peeps again. They tried to keep it serious, but some giggles found their way in.

The honcho AIM guy had punk hair, two different colors. Maddy found she could listen, but not look at him. Not looking at the honcho led her to make eye contact with a handsome silver-haired man on the other side of the room. Their eyes kept meeting. Finally, he motioned with his lips and chin that they should step out. She whispered to Eileen that she was taking a break. Eileen was not fooled. “With him? Be careful and don’t stray. You plan to go anywhere farther than the parking lot, you come and tell me where. Got it?”

Maddy smiled and nodded. She loved Eileen for her motherly ways. Was she right? Maddy didn’t know this guy and had little experience with men since her partner Mink’s death. She put on her brakes and went through the gym doors ready to excuse herself after ten minutes. An hour later, when Eileen came out, they were still talking. He was the cousin of an old schoolmate and had come from Horse Lake for a visit. Chibenashi, Little Big Bird. He sat easy on a wood stump, felt familiar—just a ribbon shirt and blue jeans telling fishing stories, asking about their community. When the “information session” had ended inside and a shortened sweat was about to start, Chibenashi stood up. “I guess that’s my cue.” Maddy and Eileen exchanged a look. Apparently, their new friend was leading the sweat.

Together, they went in with the second group. Maddy surprised herself—she felt no awkwardness. The dark, the steam, the womb-like symbolism soothed her. She sank easily into the circle of murmured prayers. She hadn’t mentioned her dad’s accident, her job loss, really much else about herself, so when Chibenashi talked about special needs in the circle and someone searching all the ways they know, she figured it was a broad statement that could cover different people’s needs. But he looked directly at her when he said, “Let’s send up some prayer smoke for those old-timers whose bodies need a little extra help healing.”

When they emerged into the cool night air, she did feel cleansed. *Spit-shined and bucked up*, her dad would say. With a new, lighter step and her eyes still adjusting to the brightness, she walked toward the fire. Could some being really have picked up part of her burden as Chibenashi instructed the helpers to do? Did he believe they would? Did she?

He had a lot of people around him after the sweat, so they didn’t talk again. Before she and Eileen left, though, he gave her a quick hug and a

“Come back.”

She repeated those simple words all week. *Come back* might mean he wanted to see her again, might mean she should return to her own culture. Hell, it might be just an innocuous phrase he used with everyone. She shouldn’t read into it. But his words reappeared in her dreams, literally. His *come back* as well as Ojibwe equivalent commands literally strode around her dream world in moccasins. Omaa bi-izhaa (“Come here”) sat on her garden bench. Aabiziishin (“Come back to life”) had a cartoon body whose legs and arms were a string of letters. She got the idea the words needed to be canned. Maddy sometimes woke in the middle of the complicated preserving process, only to fall back asleep the next night and find a shelf full of Ojibwe words in Kerr canning jars soaking in a fragrant brine. She could no more decipher her dream world than she could her waking world. Chaos had invaded and all she could do was ride it out.

TWO DAYS AFTER the sweat, she was back with her dad at St. Anthony’s. She felt the ricochet. Dad had started to take communion, which meant she had to push him up. But, it embarrassed her to just bow her head. Like her sinner status was on display. Still, on the way up, she consoled herself by looking more closely at the beatific priest.

Once she had taught herself to bear the vision of those marbled hands, she noticed his finely shaped head. Although blessed with a thick layer of hair, in his austerity he wore it cropped close. Against the harsh reality of skull, the grey-white hair clung with hint of a wave. That bone structure in a sculptor’s hands could inspire another *David*. But the irreverent flesh failed to pay homage to the awe-inspiring frame. Slightly loose and bearing age spots on its parchment-colored surface, his skin advertised the advances of mortality. Perhaps it was the juxtaposition of his magnificence and his decline that unsettled her, or the priest’s apparent indifference to the process. She envied his self-assurance. If it took a confidence in some hereafter to make the present disintegration irrelevant, where did that leave her?

At one service, her failure to fully participate turned her into spectacle. On Ash Wednesday, the service varied from regular days. She thought she

was just pushing Dad up for communion, but it was to receive ashes. For *both* of them to receive ashes. She fumbled her part in the simple ritual badly and caused graceful Father Reilly to spill ashes. She ended up marked on her forehead, her nose, her chin, and her chest.

When the endless *dust to dust* language had ended and she and Dad were in the car, he chuckled while she tried to clean up. "Got your share, didn't you? Making up for lost time?"

"Why the hell didn't you warn me?"

"And miss this fun?"

She slammed the car mirror back into place and started the car. "Ah, Maddy …"

"Whatever. Never mind. Just buckle up."

They didn't speak on the drive home. Her dad tried to put on a sober face, but by the time they reached the driveway, both of them were ready to burst. "Ashes to ashes, my foot," she said. "It's ashes to eyebrows, up your nostrils, in your teeth. God I must look a mess."

"No, no," her dad demurred. "No worse than any other day."

"Dad!"

Finally they broke. Both of them spit-laughed and she slugged him in the arm. Just like she used to do before.

Before the accident.

They both knew they had reached a turning point. A rebalancing.

AS THE MONTHS passed, ordinary began to return. She had more time to herself; he did more things on his own. She and Eileen continued to attend the AIM meetings and the sweats that followed. The songs they had started singing in the meetings held her attention better than the protest plotting. She needed transport right now, away from the struggles, not toward them. The most haunting of the songs was the AIM anthem, an intertribal without words. No English, no Ojibwemowin, nor any other tribal language. Only vocables. A caravan of sound—rising and falling vowels with the drum beating behind them. Maddy cried more than she sang along. Maybe her heartbreak needed a conduit. She didn't question the spirit in the music or

the politics behind it, she just held it—gently, as if it, too, were a sweet layer cake placed on her lap.

Chibenashi had also become a regular. He and Maddy often had a conversation when the meeting went too long for them, but he kept it light. She collected his small wisdoms from the prayer circle and repeated them during her hard days: *Don't dodge the truth—only honesty makes you brave. If you made it, claim it*. And, her favorite: *Make each footstep a prayer*. Each of the phrases could apply to many situations—she knew that was their power—but she still felt wonder at how they applied to her current struggles.

One long weepy night after her dad had fallen and suffered a setback, she embroidered the footstep quote on his socks—half on one sock, half on the other—so he would see it when he dressed in the morning. Putting on his socks the next day, he looked at her a long time, smiled, and shook his head. "How'd I get you, Maddy?" Only later did he tease her, asking, "Does that mean you're done doing my laundry and this is it for socks?"

Father Reilly had his own pithy sayings. Of course, he would probably have said they were Christ's. *Have you tribulation?* he would ask at least once during every sermon. Then immediately after an anecdote he would add, *Take heart; I have overcome the world*. Sometimes he changed it a little, gliding away from biblical text in a way that interested Maddy more. *Take heart; we are not of the world*. Or, *Have you tribulation? Leave it in the world of the senses*. Very zen for a priest, she thought.

Her toe-dipping in both spiritual houses had left her filled with zen-like mantras. Perhaps for that reason, she noticed the absence in the AIM anthem. During their regular private convo, she asked Chibenashi why the AIM song had vocables instead of words.

He looked down at the stick he was holding, lifted it, and gestured—a drumstick playing air. "Does it mean something to you when you hear it?" he asked.

She rolled her eyes at him. Of course, it did. Of course, it touched something beyond words—like the ritual motions of the priest. "How many ancient languages do you suppose we know?"

He shook his head and lifted his hands in an I-got-nothing gesture. Then he smiled and added, "All the big stuff is beyond words."

“Like all this?” she said, gesturing to them, the tree stumps, the rocks heating, grandmother moon.

He broke their routine then. Stood, looked long at her as if he were angry, bent slightly, and kissed her, then repeated her words in a low voice, “Like all this.” He walked toward the sweat, not looking back.

Eileen had seen. “What was that?”

“I don’t know,” was all Maddy could reply.

Chibenashi had never failed to say, “Come back” when she and Eileen departed. That week he said, “Welcome back.”

“I really don’t know,” she said, deflecting Eileen’s question before she could ask.

IN THE MIDST of Maddy’s wading into the waters of two spiritual lakes, she noticed the regional TV stations had picked up both the airline strike and the pipeline protest stories. AIM coming to the rez now involved recruitment as much as education. As their members stepped over the line of acceptable demonstration activities, they suffered more arrests and their numbers diminished. Gravel in an engine seemed like a metaphor, but it also broke the law. Meanwhile the airline workers gained national attention and support from the governor. Pizza started being delivered every day to keep them fed. Maddy thought her dad might be willing to fly if he knew someone was feeding the protestors.

Everything that shattered in the world that year had personal reverberations. Just like the spiritual leaders’ teachings seemed to. Perhaps it had always been this way and she had been shuffling along looking at her feet, refusing to see either the ice or the glitter of the universe.

The last time Maddy went to St. Anthony’s—with her dad walking—they no longer needed to sit in the front row but instead sat four pews back. Perhaps the extra distance made her mind and feet restless. It took a herculean effort to center in just that place, just that moment. Father Reilly moved flawlessly through half the mass, racing as if he had somewhere to be or had read her mind and wanted to accommodate her need for haste. Then, at the offertory, the old priest completely forgot the script—or he abandoned it. After a dramatic pause that got her full attention, he stopped

searching for his place in the text and simply went on. Though he expressed the right meanings, he spoke in his own words, not in those he had recited verbatim year after year.

Maddy listened in fascination as if the whole service were in another tongue. She came unhinged. It didn't work to flip pages to find the correct place in the missal. The priest had transposed the old score. The mass felt strange—new. The postures of his body, his hands, seemed yet more stylized. Her breath came ragged and searching. This archaic ritual, despite human frailty or because of it, had become timeless.

How, she wondered, did lexicon change everything? She remembered the AIM song made up of only vocables. Of course, it made sense. After all, what is the spiritual if not an unknown language we struggle to learn? As the light slanted through dusty stained glass and cast rainbows across her folded hands, she answered as she had at eight, softly and unsure. All around her other people's words misfired. Faces flushed as the entire congregation came awake, labored to keep their place. As the force of the priest's voice struck the church walls, the rebounding amens and Latin *mea culpa*'s filled the tiny church. Her senses and every body cavity also became a pyx.

At least for that moment, she tied the pieces together. An old man in a wheelchair kissing a worm, an old priest drawing sacred pictures with his body, an AIM drummer sharing a lean and hungry language beyond words. She figured her personal trinity or doxology might be some kind of sacrilege, but it kept her that year as the world's inevitable crept closer.

MONDAY, SHE DROPPED Dad's car at the garage, anticipating him driving again. Her kids chaperoned him at the senior center's Wednesday card-playing while she interviewed for a new job at the grade school. The Sunday paper said Northwest Airlines was swallowed by Delta (as many small things are by those bigger). But the AIM case opposing big mining in the tribe's paradise still had legs. She and Eileen had joined Chibenashi in writing a *Rez Resistance* newsletter. Her dad had offered to deliver it—by foot, in the special socks she had darned at least twice so far. She had grown neither growl nor fangs, but amid the cacophony of the year's competing

voices, Maddy had found her own. And she raised it—for family, for tribe, and yes, to every spirit being she could find.

No glossy magazine had come to write her epic, but Maddy figured it was just as well. She was still daubing madly, trying to keep up with the celestial caller, still waiting for a spiritual bingo.

Like Some Old Story

I.

We sit at the old man's table. I trace the knife cuts in the oilcloth as he talks.

"We got that deer way up by Strawberry Mountain, skinned it, butchered it, and packed it out, all the way back to Twin Lakes. I remember thinking how much warmer I felt wrapped in that deer meat. But it weren't very long 'fore it began to feel awfully heavy. Jeezus we was sure happy to get home that night. All youse little kids woke up and wanted to eat right then."

His words conjure a half recollection. My face pressed against the cold window, waiting. For the uncles and fresh meat? I can't be certain, but I pay him with a good listener's smile and nod.

Soon he's off again. His hands remember the journey in the air. His chin, his lips know the directions. I see the dance in his cloudy eyes and hear him laugh at the memory of that feast. "How-wah, we sure took the wrinkle out of our bellies that night!"

We hunt this way together often now.

Between stories, we clean and oil the guns, sharpen the knives. He brings out a new box of shells from the kitchen cabinet. (*Good thing about being a bachelor*, he always says, *you can keep your bullets handy*.) We make us a lunch. He shuffles around the trailer, breathing pretty hard as he gets dressed. I pretend not to notice the way he has to lift his bad leg with his hand to get it into the boot. We sit down to a cup of coffee before going out. It's still dark and too early anyway.

“Wonder if you could show me how to make snares.”

He answers in that way that he has. Gesturing with his neck and chin, his head bopping slightly, a throaty series of *ahh*s, and then a long drawn-out “Well, sure I kin show you. You know what pitcher wire is?” I bring him things from here and there about the trailer. He shows me each of his tools, remembers just what he used to use and how he came to get the ones he has now. By the time I get the hang of the cutting, the tying, the sun’s been up a while.

“Well, lookit that. Them deer musta wondered what heppened to us. S’pose they’re out there looking at their clocks saying, ‘Where is that ole hunter?’ Jeez, what kind of hunter you gonna make, if you forget all about going out? I spose you gonna hunt just like my girls—out of my freezer. Well, we might’s well eat these sandwiches. Heppened to Dad and me like this one time we was camping where that ole McDougall used to have his sugar bush. I remember it was raining jest hard.”

II.

Everything felt heavier than usual—the water kettle, the broom, even the air. When the world weighs on you like that, Grandpa used to say the wind had a secret. According to the old-timers, a story can arrive and you feel it before you hear the words.

Maybe after that night, I believed a little in secret winds.

I had sat at the table to shell peas. The boys came in looking kind of funny. Awfully quiet, too. No teasing. Just set themselves to cleaning up. Boiling water to wash, emptying their pockets of spare shells and the matchsticks they always carried.

Then Little Lynx went to get some tobacco and a kind of mumbled argument got going in the back room. Tried to keep it secret they did, but Mum and Dad wouldn’t have it. Sent for one of the uncles. Sent us kids upstairs to the loft. Then they got the story out.

It was that man-deer spirit that’s said to appear when them graves have been disturbed. Happens every forty years or so. Someone forgets. Gets too cocky. Pretty soon it’s there on the edge of the clearing, antlers catching the early evening light.

It looks straight at you when you take aim. Some reason you pause. Get a chill, a funny feeling. Talk yourself out of it. And just as you set your finger to the trigger, the thing stands up on its man legs. And then is gone. Don't seem it was really there. But you're shaking.

I don't know much about the weight of story or who the boys thought to safeguard with their silence. But I watched them afterward, shuffling cards and spitting sunflower seeds in the ashtray. No loaded words. Nothing hunched in the shadows. Voices rising, sweet and steady like the song of spring peepers.

III.

When the women were cooking together I'd have my hands in—kneading the dough, slicing apples, anything just to stay close and hear the other side of family stories. Like the one about the year the two deer were stolen from that tree down in the hollow. You know who always got blamed for that, don't you? I wondered at first why Aunt Maggie let those boys take the blame. But then I thought, well it was true often enough and could just as well have been true this time, too. "Good enough for them," Maggie would have said. Later I realized how it was good—for them to realize what a reputation they had earned. So I never told what I learned.

You remember when the men heard the news? They were all at Gram's having the big dinner the women had cooked in between their card games that day. Those pies were on the cook stove, looking jest juicy and waiting to be cut into. I saw when that blue pickup went by cuz I was sitting on the steps outside the screen door, you know, just far enough away so they would forget I was around, but close enough to hear the stories. Anyway, pretty soon someone was walking up the path from where Ron's house used to be. It was June Bug's uncle—I forget his real name, but us kids used to jest call him Antler cuz he had that funny bump on the side of his head and it was covered with pale soft hairs so it looked to us like an antler jest beginning to pop out in velvet.

He never said boozhoo or nothing. "Somethin's after yer deer." Them's the only words I remember him saying as he stood outside on the steps looking in on those happy hunters. His nose was against the screen door when he spoke, but he jumped back pretty quick cuz the chairs started

scraping inside and six guys came out in a real hurry. Not mad, yet, cuz they thought dogs or maybe a bear.

I was just about to run after them when my aunt showed up, coming from the other side of the house, wiping her hands on a rag. “Your ole man sure can tie ’em up tight. Thought sure I was going to get caught there. Then what would we have said?”

“You manage?” It was my mom asked that.

“Eya’. Got that Brown boy to haul ’em. Said he could have a hindquarter.”

Plenty of kids would have tole, you know, right that night. But I was patient, even then. I knew if you wanted to find things out you had to wait. Turns out I didn’t have to wait long. Next day the women couldn’t tell it enough, how they tricked their husbands into hunting for that half-blood woman Sarah Goes Lightning. She was a Sioux, you know, and had those five kids. Used to live out on the Snyder Lake road—way back. I guess the men had it in for Sarah cuz they thought she done wrong by one of their own, LeRoy Beaulieu. But the women thought differently. I’m still hunting that story, but it’ll come along someday. I know how to wait for stories.

IV.

I’m driving, windows down. Fall trees keep throwing confetti. My mom can’t get enough, so we’ve been cruising the lake roads slow, feeding on the color and gossiping. The old man is standing there just where he said we should pick him up. He has his gun and a stick about a yard long, which he holds up when he sees us approach.

“Looks like he got him one,” Auntie says from the back.

“Wonder how long he’s been waiting,” my mom says. “Wish he wouldn’t go out like that alone.”

“You could go with.” We all laugh at that. *This one ain’t my hunter*, Grandpa used to say about my mom. *Sure about that?* Grandma would ask. *That girl is gonna surprise you with what she brings home someday*. I guess she did, too. Brought home my dad. But I don’t think that’s what Grandpa meant, although it might be what Grandma had in mind. Never could tell about that woman either.

He holds up his stick when we get out and lifts his head toward what's hanging on it—a deer heart pierced through. "Had to fight a great big animal to save this heart for youse girls." It takes him a long time to say this because his words are always surrounded by gestures and because certain sounds he draws out, moving them up and down in his throat. He laughs then at what he's said, but doesn't tell us the story until later, until we've managed between the four of us to drag a small buck out of the woods where he left it, until we've heaved it into my trunk onto the gunny sacks I've laid out to catch the blood drippings, until we've driven back into the little village and we're inside drinking coffee and getting ready to butcher.

"It was a little weasel. Come out and tried to steal that heart right off the stick. You know how them little buggers are. Tough. Sure was mad at me, and didn't want to give up his supper. So I cut him a little piece." He looks over at me. "Shoulda said, 'Do your own hunting.'" He knows I'll take the part of the weasel. We both pretend I have to convince him.

I DREAM ABOUT the weasel that night. He's a least weasel in my dream and he's old. He sits on a log in the sun watching the birds, thinking of the time he was quick enough to snatch a bird before it could launch itself out of his reach. Dreams always come that way from life and life from dreams, don't they? I saw a least weasel snatch its dinner just that way once, a bird twice its size, too. That time becomes this time when I sleep, but it's only the weasel's dream. He's too old now. He needs some help, too, just like any old hunter.

I wake up to deer meat frying and come out to find him cleaning his gun again at the table. "Thought you were gonna sleep all day." I look outside. It's still dark, maybe 5:00 a.m. I smile when he cranes his neck toward the stove. I take the cups from the counter where he's laid them, pour in some canned milk, take the hot pad, letting myself sniff its stale flour smell, before I reach for the coffee pot.

"Spose we could be out and back before them ladies even wake up," I say pretty casual-like when I put the cups and plates on the table, like this is part of something old we've always done.

He nods, pretending with me again. “There’s some boots you kin wear behind that woodstove there. You gut gloves?”

We both begin to eat fast and hearty, as if we hadn’t just stuffed ourselves last night. “Howah, pretty good stuff.” We’re laughing too loud and wake up my mom.

“What are you two doing?” she drawls between yawns.

“Going hunting,” I say, dropping my voice like it’s the last line in some old story—like someone is going to answer, *Aho*.

Vision Confidence Score

I always wake when the Joker's face changes to Trump's, when Dad's changes to Rusty's to Claude's. Sweat-damp and chilled, I grab a robe, check my phone—wait out the dark. But the tired sun spills no warmth, only imprisoned silhouette—and regret.

Just a dark shadow cast across a world of code, Claude showed up first in Hamburg in 2014. Another hacker body bent over his PC, fingers melded to keys. Even then his face was half hidden by glasses and hood. His monosyllables—*hey, check it out, ciao*—revealed little more, but his fierce eyes branded me.

I came on an official government dare—to become a fake hacker and run surveillance on Chaos Computer Club. In the carnival atmosphere of the annual congress, amid the beamers and sensors, futuristic illuminated tunnel, robot statue built from boom boxes, and the endless snaking of internet connection cables, I channeled quiet geek. Black sweater, grey slacks, hair pulled back, little makeup—I should have slipped under his radar. I had had clear instructions on how to present myself. Always wear neutrals. Downplay everything else—your accent, your intellect, and your sex appeal. According to my superiors (and all popular films and comics), flamboyant hackers like Trinity or Skye never go undetected. I remained aloof while dark bodies gyrated in the giant dance bubble.

But Claude's eyebrows lifted a fraction, the corner of his mouth twitched a silent *I gotcha*. In that moment I knew he knew. As I turned away I fell deeper into the vat of deceit—does he know I know he knows? I was green and didn't realize then how many layers were in the refractive

espionage and counterespionage of a government mole's hellish world. Claude would teach me.

WE MET AGAIN at 32C3, did the same dance. He sat in the background wearing innocuous black jeans, a T-shirt sporting a bad binary joke—and the ever-present black hooded sweatshirt. I was with a group of hacktivists gathered at an open project space. We were tossing around pros and cons about the belated UK release of *The Interview*. Claude added a *humph* or other noncommittal grunt while we talked motives for the Sony fiasco.

"Obama was right," I said. "You can't just cave to Kim Jong-un. Makes him think he's a power player."

Claude seemed to come to life. "Ever been doxxed, Winona?" he asked, never lifting his gaze from his keyboard. I didn't turn. I'd been trained in cool. But I felt my ears go hot even as I fed the conversation, squeezed lemon into my tea, laughed at pwning stories.

You see, my name isn't Winona—it's Dell. Winona's a nickname, used only by my single bureau indiscretion, my now missing—most likely dead—boyfriend Rusty. A shorthand reference to my Native identity. I crafted my operational security to keep that past past.

That night, in my tiny boutique hotel room, I paced, building my threat model. What does Claude know? Where the hell did he get his access? My slipup? And where was I vulnerable? How deep was the breach into the office? If Winona was out, who was at risk? Did that mean Rusty turned informer? He wouldn't. Ever. The sharp corners of the room prodded me. I wrote my questions, then tore up the phone pad. Pointless. So where did Claude get his info? And why? Why me, why now?

He showed up. I knew he would. And I was ready. No lip quiver, no shake to the hand that let him in, that buried itself next to the pistol in my sweatshirt pouch.

"You came … alone?" I ask, glancing up and down the seemingly empty hallways before closing us in.

"Alone. Thought we should have a private talk. Mind?" He's checking things out, counting steps to the double window and every other escape route while seeming simply to inspect his reflection in the full-length

mirror. Our eyes meet there. His turn vacant almost immediately. Become marble. But I saw the movement. Glint of an old copper dish. Suddenly darkening, the fire stamped out.

My eyes have known the sharp flash of copper before. Exactly once. Suddenly, I know. "Oh my god."

"My god, good?" With a learned nonchalance he runs his smooth hands over the stubble on his chin. "Like what you see? Looking for a patch to fix the missing boyfriend situation?"

I grab him then, and he doesn't resist. I push back the hood, lift the hair. "Open your mouth," I say, all pretense of cool evaporated.

He does it again—the little eyebrow lift that singed me all those years ago when we first met, that singed me last year in Hamburg. I let the hood drop and sit down hard on the no-nonsense bed. No need to check the dental work. "You bastard. You stupid, stupid bastard. Why?"

"I had a little work done. New face. Tweak to the voice box. You know death is the only true exit from our job. Now you're in, I'm out. Perfect setup, don't you think?"

I stared. Couldn't catch up. This, this hooded, sable-eyed—yeah, okay, sexy-voiced and presumably white-hat hacker—was my Rusty? Too much ego for the Marcel Marceau faces some hackers sported, he had to hide in plain sight another way. Of course, given our business he had an in with the best forgers, the best surgeons. Hell, he could have made himself into an Elvis reincarnation, and the world would have bought it.

NOW NOVEMBER IS in the rearview mirror and the U.S. is tracking for disaster. Where I stand at the magazine rack in Barnes & Noble, every other cover reminds me ICE is unleashed and hunting. The wall promise looms over us like a boogeyman. Seems Rusty saw it coming or someone he is still protecting did. Who the hell does he even work for now? I pick up a bot magazine and then *Mother Jones*, scanning for names of activist organizations. Can I even believe his smooth-faced talk? But the Hillary/Donald leaks, continuing legal battles, and post-election tweet wars are like truth serum in our drinks. Bad is brewing. We choose to face it together. We work fourteen hours, pentest one another for weak points in

the off-hours. To the world, I am still bureau; he is still dead. And I have taken up with French hacktivist Claude Brisbois.

Who, by the way, *Wired* makes mention of this month as a "misanthropic computer genius." Claude gets a kick out of this when I bring a copy home. He prides himself on his "genius" prestidigitation. Computer sleight of hand. He makes things appear and disappear using hacker hocus-pocus. Titles, bank accounts—and of course, past identities.

Tonight, I sit alongside him on a porch glider listening to its squeak, listening to the mimicking call of a catbird. I hug my bare knees in the evening's cool air and watch his magic. "You used to live here, Winona? Can't have that address hanging around connecting you to trouble, can we?" He tweaks my cheek playfully. "Oh, look, no Big Timber Road in your 'known locations.'" For fun he fills his screen with photos of wild places, his face submerged in each one. His features a hidden picture in Yosemite Valley, Stonehenge, Owyhee Canyonlands. So hypnotically strange, but not malicious. At least while I watch.

I like to think of him as a nowadays code talker. Touching story really. How I've fallen for him—again. But this time, I keep my secrets, too. You see I need his faces. Not the Rusty before, Claude after. Not the Marcel Marceau masks that hang on our apartment wall, that star on the hacker T-shirts we wear to DEF CON. The goal now is to overload the algorithm. With eyes, eyes, eyes. To divert the gaze of facial recognition software. With noses and more noses, faces and hyperfaces. In the new invasive America, I am perfecting a formula in which facial confusion equals camouflage.

Because I'm Winona again—a Native first-born daughter. Presidential declarations have boomed like live ammo in the energy wars. In the new Indian wars. When Standing Rock captivated the world and gained support around the globe for #NoDAPL, the Trump empire was invested—literally. You saw the pictures. Vanessa Dundon's eye. Light gone forever. Sophia Wilansky's arm mangled by a concussion grenade. In the safety of our living room, I page through the accounts I've collected. They remind me why I play good at the bureau, why I can't give in when sleep wants to pull me deep into something people call normal.

I stood in the dark night, trapped, felt the water cannons. Thought of Rusty transforming into Claude. I left the Sacred Stone Camp empty. Dell

was gone. I wore my clothes, my skin differently. Three hundred tribes and thousands of pipeline protestors made news. Their faces on CNN, in *Time*, and all over the internet. While you cheer, admin insiders laugh with manic glee—clones of Scrooge McDuck counting their lottery winnings.

I'm inside. I keep telling Claude—and I'm telling you—they are scanning faces at every protest, tracking movements, and building bogus files. The AIM leader who was found to have "terrorist activities records," the Dakota activist who was deported as an illegal immigrant—not fluke "discoveries" as the press reported.

"Trumped up?" Claude asks when we hear it on the news. I groan, and he laughs. "A little humor to lighten your day."

"Very little." We are tangled together under a puffy comforter covered with stars. This tiny safe sky a replica of nothing.

"We have to get the word out faster." We both know tribal resistance groups are in the crosshairs. Shutting down the Dakota Access and Keystone XL pipeline protests was just warm-up. Reviving coal. Challenging all the rulings against copper mines. Reactivating nuclear plants and transporting the waste from sea to shining sea. Somehow inside Trump's twisted logic this is making America great.

Among those opposed—Indigenous people, protectors for more than 80 percent of the world's biodiversity. Winnibigoshish Lake looking like a garden giving her harvest of fish and wild rice. Our water poured from the blue belly of the Mississippi, the Missouri. Here among resources like ours, protection means resistance. And resistance will be shut down. Unless we find a way to protect the protestors—not from guns and water cannons, but from intrusive technologies. *Keep your head down, Winona. Your hands gloved*. All the old hauntings tell me captured features will be criminalized—or now, painted as terrorists. I long for the skies of my childhood, the northern lights spilling color, our small brown bodies anonymous—secure.

"They have networks—the same ones you have. Can't you use them or at least track them? You are literally walking by their secrets every day, Winona. Get your hands a little dirty." Claude has thrown off the comforter, stands to challenge me.

"An evil maid attack? So damn risky." I pull the stars closer. "No, we have to lay low for now." Or hide in fake multitudes—that's my plan. Fuck with the algorithms. "I need a little more time."

“We don’t have time.” The now familiar bass Claude voice growls in anger. I long for the old soothing tones. My grandpa’s songs, my dad’s hand drum a wave of background rhythm. “What’s the point of having access if you don’t use it?” He turns off the TV and spits this last question at me. We have this argument every few days. Any patience he had gets a little more frayed each time another activist gets arrested, another EPA office is locked down.

IN THE CAR mirror, I watch my own transformation, eyes sinking deeper each day. Moon craters. What *am* I waiting for? Another fascist regime? Trump to perfect his PR about who is a terrorist, who is a danger to national security, who is standing in the way of American prosperity? No white arm band, no Star of David this time. We have lip curvature and other facial landmark geometry to tell the same racist stories. This is phrenology and Francis Galton’s eugenics all over again. You want to know what the contour of an eye socket really tells you? How deeply fucked up our system. How dangerous.

As I park the Volvo, the fish-eye lens of my backup camera is beeping. About obstacles. Ditto my now turbocharged innate computer. I measure escape distances every day. Remember the story of Marcel Marceau and the Holocaust orphans he saved with his sleight of hand? This time when we go underground we have to do it as illusionists. I need Claude’s anti-surveillance textiles. I print and morph, then print the patterns again until my eyes look as hollow as the spooks on the computer-generated designs. Claude’s aristocratic nose, my almond eyes, Claude’s square jaw, the exaggerated clown turn of each. We have become more faces than lives.

Today I’ve picked up a bolt of the latest prototype fabric. I want to spread it out, modify the ground, and then check the computer vision confidence score. My arms quiver under the weight—another sign of my exhaustion. I try to catch the door with my foot, but miss. The house echoes around me when it slams. The thud says *do it, it, it* … “Claude? Hey, hey, hey, look what I have?” I inject extra enthusiasm to cover my sudden wave of uneasiness. I can’t find him in the kitchen, where he is supposed to be making lasagna, so I check down in the basement.

“Oh, man.” He has projected himself all over our lab walls. Him as the bent C hooded heads repeated, repeated. The half-moon of face beneath is covered with ones and zeros. He could be one of them. I lose myself in the flickering 3D images.

“Find me, babe,” he taunts. “Sign in.”

“I … this is creeping me out. Claude?” I look for him, feel my hand miss, touch one flat surface after another. My stomach says I have been here before. Was it training? A dream? Why can’t I remember? “Shut it down, Claude. I’m not playing.” I turn, leave him all over the walls, laughing at me, as I walk out the door I came in.

I pack and go—no fake death, but no goodbye, either.

IN THIS LOOP of fate, the dreams start. The Joker’s face changing to Trump’s, Dad’s to Rusty’s to Claude’s to the last flashing mob of detention. All day I see the real, only at night the horror replays. We have gathered for a peaceful march. I am still bureau by day, Marcel Marceau in the off-hours. Oh, we have all taken to wearing the MM masques for rallies and the camouflage hyperface clothes. Hooded hyperface, naturally.

This is the big unveil. Like the Women’s March and Native Nations Rise before us, Water First activists have come to Pennsylvania Avenue chanting for change, our signs and banners spelling out resistance: MAKE WATER SAFE AGAIN! PACK UP THE PIPELINES. DEFEND THE SACRED. KEEP IT IN THE GROUND. WATER IS LIFE. But this time our privacy will be protected. No one will collect identities. Trailers carry little kids and anybody who can’t walk. Picture it. They are all hyperface carpet and awnings. The huddled hyper masses baffle surveillance cameras, oversaturating them with thousands of faces. The walkers, too, create waves of computer-generated hollow, blinking eyes, smiles, and straight-line mouths. Who do you see now, Washington? Can you find us in your database?

As we march time drifts. I keep checking my phone’s digital reality. I count down to high noon, to when hacktivists have programmed the city water service to fail for one hour. A short but dry reminder of what head-in-the-sand energy policies might bring. My nerves stretched like manic yogis, I jump when I see the flash of metal beneath the curtain of false faces on a

marcher's coat. No guns. We said no weapons. I see huddled security officers. Summon my agent cool. Remember to breathe. They have no grounds to interfere. None.

Metal equals phone, equals tablet. No worries, I tell myself. So far, flawless. I think of what anonymity will mean. If eco-saboteur The Fox could plug sewer outlets and dump buckets of dead fish in a Chicago company's executive offices, imagine what daring escapades the camouflage will inspire. We are the new Everyman. I see the infrared illuminators mounted surreptitiously along our path. Hello, Homeland Security. Go ahead, use your invisible power. We have our own now.

Then I start seeing Claude on the video screens we've posted along the route. Screens meant to confound with more eyes eyes eyes—eyes watching, moving across the thousands of gas-filled cells and refusing to be captured. But I see Claude images. Claude kneeling, saying, "Please." Saying, "Please no, no more." At first I think I am hallucinating again, or experiencing a planted memory.

But then one of the marchers stops and screams, "What are they doing to him? Isn't that Brisbois?" Then I know someone has hacked our botnet.

"Who has him? Where are they holding him?" another marcher asks. Or maybe it's me. I've come unglued in the faces. Maybe I am mere computer, too. Sabotaged.

Again.

No one ever told me not to look. They forgot the first time, too, when my dad was taken from our house. His long grey hair spilling from the strands of his braid, he turned his face back to find us over his shoulder. I saw his fear become hopelessness. For a week his sad eyes stared at me from every newspaper in the village store. They followed me and followed me until I arrived here. I always knew I would see them again. They said, *Please*. Or maybe all the eyes say that at the end.

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I grew up among wealth—not money, but a wealth of storytellers. Somewhere in our cells we carry the people and places of our past: My brother Robert tells the land, sometimes his voice pitches low to recall one or another uncanny encounter. My cousins' laughing accounts of a shared adventure come braided, layers of their story crossing and recrossing. My uncles' or aunties' emphatic declarations clamor to correct historical "truths." The old tellings stay close. My fingers bend around women's stories when they hold a needle, and collect long-ago tales as I fill my berry basket. When I cast on Bass Lake, I reel in lake legends as well as fish. I count this inheritance a blessing. In dreams, I stitch tellings together.

This book owes much to drives with my children when inventing cliff-hangers took us years and miles down the road. It owes much to days spent in the woods, building a small cook fire, watching a storyteller's stick point and conjuring old hunting camps, and to meals at my parents' or grandparents' tables, where retellings and laughter were served late into the night. Countless moments have fed my story-heart: Gerald Vizenor's fine wit sharpening itself on political irony. My cousin Doyle strumming a guitar in rhythm with recollections. Plus all the natural dramas: eagles flying with live fish in their talons, sandhills' courting displays, bears that visit our cabin, storms that trap us on islands. These tangles and snatches of story shadow me, tug at my pen hand. Chi miigwech to all human and more-than-human relatives whose voices inhabit me—and thus, inhabit these pages.

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Red Ants

This is a work of fiction. All the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this collection of stories are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously.

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