

Going Home 2015

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From above the ponds and
Creeks and
Rivers have gone
Feral and hold hands

I always forget how humid Oklahoma is, how, in the heat, the Tulsa airport is the tropics with wild aggressive plant smells. I've come because of family, home and rain. They're not, on the face of them, complicated ideas. Still, two of the three have become major features in constructing identity for Native Americans, American Indians, First Nations People... whatever we're being called these days. As for the rain, Oklahoma had been awash for weeks. On the ground waiting for my luggage there was no evidence of the reported flood. The sunlight was loud and hot, not a cloud to the western horizon.

Route 66 was the river we all
Lived with knowing its
Habits and fauna the
Sacred diners and
Cafes on its
Shores and the
Seasonal overflow over
Flow

The map that came with the rental car was a cartoon, similar to those given out at amusement parks. Still, it's not that difficult to find north in Oklahoma. Up through the Port of Catoosa, past the whale, the area around Tulsa unfolds along 66, and although

there is a Turnpike that will spit you out finally in Vinita, my heart belongs to the long way through, I lost it there as a child and haven't bothered to collect it back.

Grandpa had a
Bronze American
Leviathan the
Horehound drops
Jerky moccasins gas and the incandescent constellations of
Towns at night telling their very own stories

My family is an assembly of shared tales: linguistic, chemical, and behavioral. I could have never even visited Oklahoma and still I'd have wanted to call it home because my father called it home. As a child I made myself a mental necklace with more than a few meanings for this word: the way I had to tug upwards on my grandmother's doorknob to make the key turn, fishing, locusts, the hills in San Francisco, bay water and creek water and lake water. Our stories, our definitions are not tidy things unless we sacrifice some of our selves to the imagined order. It is up to the individual to decide if being multidentified means eternal exile or frequent belonging. For myself, well, I slip into Oklahoma as if it were one of grandma's flannel nightgowns.

It's just a river but the name
Trips me up the
Bridges the mythology of
Route 66 all of the family
Stories running those shores

This was Indian Territory when my grandma Mae was born. I have pictures of her on a buckboard with her sisters along some of these very routes to and from. Her grandfather, David Rowe, was a Cherokee court judge born in the east in 1820. On some paperwork he is called Oo-sut-sut-ee. His son, Mae's dad, was named David Lucullus. Lucullus was a Roman politician and general. His brother, Mae's uncle, was named Napoleon. If

naming is a kind of wishing we can guess at what was wanted for these boys. In life they were called Pol and Cull.

Chasing Horse Creek north and
East north and east and back to the 70s it
Runs back and forth dancing the
Road under old bridges and the
Flickers perch on
Slouching thigh high
Fences

Here was the flood. Horse Creek was more enthusiastic than I remember it, up on the tree trunks. Pecan, butternut, black walnut: they aren't just a collection of botanical curiosities, but another part of the family. They are dye and food and calendar and map. I have to smile at how green the pecans are with their feet in splashing water. I can see squirrel nests and think of soup and climbing. All of the flood worry of coming back here was fading and I was coaxed into an expectation of play. The hot wet relentless air talks me out of my half century and replaces it with coneys and creek water and trees and trees and flickers and hawks like bait for fishing and I was happy to be the fish, glad to strike on familiar treats.

WPA bridge over the Neosho I
Stood on it in full flood with my
Dad the water just
Kissing the underside of the boards the
River moans shivering up my legs it stood until a
Flood licked out the
Footings they
Replaced it but when I dream the Neosho the old bridge is there

Oklahoma is a unique place in Indian Country. There are lots of us in many varieties here and the non-Indian people know it too. Oklahoma was the giant relocation camp for Eastern Indigenes, but that's too simplistic. The best horror stories keep the victims on edge and make them somewhat complicit in the process of their terror. The Cherokees were moved here smack into other peoples' territory, they landed us in the middle of Osage and Kaw and Quapaw and others as unwilling invaders. We fetched up in these woods and by these rivers wracked with illness, loss and lack of food, and then we rebuilt. It took a lot to bring Cherokees down: a collection of wars, influenza epidemics, small pox epidemics... the usual theft and lies and then allotment. It's easy to write the misery of colonization. It's just as easy to write the romantic frosting of connections with the land, of religions that seem mysterious to outsiders, of the exotic. Unfortunately for a storyteller some of each of those things is true and contributes in varying degrees. There is a traditional story telling style that I've heard called 'walking around the tree', in which you indicate where the tree (truth) is without nailing it too firmly down. Unfortunately at this writing many of the trees in Oklahoma are a few feet into water and walking around them is a daunting proposition fraught with potential snakes. What's more there are a lot of trees.

We who steal ourselves back
From the songs and
Laws and habits that
Claim us and
Everything about us the
Long men the wide
Hipped and
Generous bays
Protective as any
Mother

There is a surprising lack of road kill at the moment. I caught sight of one dead armadillo but none of the usual dead possums, dead raccoons. There were more dying roadside

buildings than I remember. Considering the current state of that part of Oklahoma I'm not surprised. I suppose that I should come clean. My family is from Picher OK. If you are a particularly avid environmental activist you may know that when Love Canal was also on the EPA most polluted list Picher was at the top of that list. It sits on an old lead and zinc mine. There is radon gas and cadmium. There are huge piles of mine tailings that we called chat and used to ride down on pieces of cardboard. After playing we'd blow our noses and my nose would kick out material that was orange or yellow. That's the cadmium. It's not exactly a health aid. Anyway, Picher was toxic, had been forever. Then the mines started falling in more frequently. Well, it wasn't the first time. Downtown had been fenced off since the 50s I think, before my time anyway. The final nail in the coffin was a tornado. The government condemned the place a while back. I've heard that there are ten or so people still living there. I'm probably related to all of them. My grandpa told me that in my lifetime it's likely that there will be a cave-in from Joplin, Missouri to Miami, Oklahoma which will then fill with water and be the tri-state area's own Salton Sea. I suppose we'll find out.

They took the zinc out until they hit the
Daylight of 3rd street you could
See the crack in the pavement
Looked like another pothole and there was
Sunlight in the mine
Sunlight just there with the
Dull ache of lead and the grim
Scowl of jack

My uncles and grandpa worked the mines. Grandpa died of esophageal cancer and Earl died of... I don't know, stomach cancer. David died in WW2 when his ship was torpedoed. I think Larry died from something heart related. Frank and his wife Eb lasted the longest. It's embarrassing that I don't remember what took each of them. If I had a think I'd probably remember. There's a whole culture of death. I know people who collect those prayer cards from wakes, pictures of the dead in their coffins. They should

be commemorated, celebrated. I remember grandpa's funeral quite well. One relative may have been selling meth at that. Here's what I remember better, the Shuck boys were stunners in their time and into old age. They were athletes, coordinated and in shape. People would turn to look at them. Larry was thought to be the prettiest. Frank, or Tede as he was called more often, told the best stories and at the risk of betraying my grandfather's memory I thought that he was the most adorable. My point here is that I'm not unaware of the deaths but maybe I'm just wired wrong because I like to remember who they were happy and healthy and strong. They were thought of as good men, did things for people. They weren't perfect but they were good, very good.

They were the hearth ends the
Ones who grew up in that house
Lead miners by day until 4pm
Branch hobos
Would drop a hooked line into every bit of
Water in the county

Maybe it's been done already but I've always thought that there should be a Native poetry anthology about trains. Not just those ledger art images of plains people chasing the train on horseback, but also the 20th century childhoods spent alongside tracks. We can lose the bridge walking cliché, but there are a fair few moments that I spent fishing near collapsed trestles or cutting between roads by hopping from wooden tie to wooden tie. I like trains. I know that their split note cries make some people lonely but for me the sound makes me think of my grandfather and my great grandfather's railroad pocket watch.

State Highway is
Charting the weeds just there she is
Alone
Busy we
Hit Ottawa County near the

Railroad crossing complete with
Red lights and the train looked as
Shocked as I was

There is something appropriate about trying to navigate a place I haven't been in years, in a state of flood, at dusk. It takes some focus, is exhausting. Some of my navigational aids have weathered out, fallen down. Some are under floodwater. Cannibal retail has taken over from small stores and more than one remembered main street has a ghost town feel to it. Sometimes there are visible people. The man chain smoking in a rattan chair on the corner in downtown Afton reassured me. People, there are still people. The Avon Motel, also in Afton, is a series of roofless rooms full of old tires and trees. An equally roofless restaurant still advertises free coffee refills. There is no shortage of space here, no need to pull down the bones and reclaim the land. My eyes and memory replace the flesh and I recognize family history.

Branches pulling at the old
Ceiling studs just outside of
Afton can just about make out the
Name on the sign the
Free coffee refills the
Old red bridge near Vinita

I found cousins on a social networking site. It was an accident, I wasn't looking for them, but there they were, threads of family leading off in other directions. We admired one another's thoughts and work from Florida and California and Indiana. We compared, shared, basted each other in stories we all knew, if not true at least consistent. We passed information hand to hand as if it were an eyeball we took turns with, a way to view ourselves in the mirror of family history.

Among those hatched turtles
One found his way

Not into Grand Lake but to the
Screen door of gran’s old house she
Fed him with fried catfish and
Biscuits
With crayfish and that turtle was
Your Grandfather

At some point anyone’s family story becomes more mythology than reality. For Native people this mythologizing gets a helping hand from other peoples’ expectations and, I think their hopes. For most families the myth probably takes hold at the point just past living memory, just around the corner. When I was a kid all it took was for people to meet my dad for them to start asking what my “Indian” name was. I did an arts residency at a museum once where I was asked if I’d killed the deer whose hide I was beading. Not many deer at large in San Francisco. I imagine them wandering down Market street past cafes and strip joints and ‘fell off the truck’ stores. I wonder how many painters are asked if they make their own paint.

We will stand in the
Very center of the sacred lake and
Blaze so brightly that our
Enemies cannot help but see us

My uncle Rufus ran a Wild West show. Ok, Rufus was my great grand uncle. To be absolutely clear Rufus was married to my great grand aunt Goods, my great grandma Mae’s sister. Anyway, Rufus had a few career high points in his life. He is in the cowboy hall of fame for riding two hall of fame horses. The Marty Robbins song “Cowboy in the Continental Suit” was based on a true story about Rufe. He also drove the first getaway car used in a bank robbery, but I can’t remember if it’s the first in the country or the first in Oklahoma. Either way he was driving for Henry Starr, who is related to the Rowe family so everything comes around in circles. Rufe taught my dad how to spin a rope, which he can still do at over 70 and counting. Wild West Shows have their own answers

to give for the rewriting of the American west and I guess that Rufe had a hand in it, though I suspect that his was more a display of riding and roping than the kind of storytelling that Buffalo Bill lumbered us with. When they used to introduce Rufe at the rodeo they called him a ‘squaw man.’

Simian grip against

Equine lunge

He waits for the slippery shift of muscle

Waits for a

Fluid denial of the

Idea of cowboy

Ride against

Toss

Rufe waits for the buzzer

I can read Oklahoma. I know the weather, the creeks, the roadside food. I know bingo games and pecan trees and unexpected berry bushes. As much as I know Oklahoma it's also a closed book. My father's mother was adopted. She had been born into a large family and during her lifetime had found a brother and a sister. After she died we were contacted by the children, or grandchildren of another sister. They were scattered. It's possible to tell any story about her background. The name of her birth father is pretty generic and if I were moved to do so, I could choose from a variety of Native and non-Native men who might have been her dad. If early life sets our character, my grandma was always going to be confused and needy. She didn't have an easy, or even understandable path.

That year the wind took the

Topsoil and the children the

Maps all changed and not

Everyone found a pair of

Magical shoes or good

Company

My grandmother's is a classic Native story with no ending whether or not she's Native. There are no welcoming songs, no family eating macaroni salad around a kitchen table, no clan beading patterns. She just was and then she stopped being. She wrapped herself around my grandfather and held on until he passed away. She left no one for us to tell. Pat was a complicated person and I can't say that I liked her, but I'm here to sing for her and I do. We're often curios, we indigenous Western Hemispherians. We're accused of hanging on to a legacy of sorrow while these things are still happening to us, while the fallout of these things is still happening to us. I have no idea how this helps me to map the Oklahoma roads and waterways. It's just more pictures of little girls in flour sack shirts. Pictures that look as scoured by dust storms as any of the fall down buildings they also took pictures of. She was stolen from herself, whatever the reasons for it. She had a collection of Avon sales awards. She was a scrabble wizard. At her funeral there was an honor guard of Hell's Angels on their bikes, her remaining long-term friends, her children and people from her church.

Renewing the dust

Baptism the dry pink

Making its way into my shirt my

Thoughts

We ramble down through Grove. A pair of round hay bales float in the floodwater and two angry oaks surrounded by pecan trees. The string of streetlights vanish into Grand Lake. A no parking sign is adrift ten feet out from the current shore. The lake has a selective memory. We drive over another bridge, water stretching up nearly to the road. Two boys fish from a boat. My grandfather may have been born in this town. One of the stories says so. We're headed to Talequah. There are things to do there.

Young girl in

Temporary escape from the

Upper middle class the
Pipes in her apartment are loud and two men
Sleep on her stairs with their
Things a
Museum of lives she has no
Decoder ring to understand but I
Talk story talk Cherokee
Navy story and she tells me why it's wrong
Tells me that if we don't visit the
Battlefield there is no battle she
Explains war to me is
Earnest has
No crackerjack replacement cypher
No window
No insight

We visit the Cherokee Veteran's Center. My family is not unique, not unusual, not even one standard deviation off. It may be, as has been suggested, that we always feel at war, or that we are brave and need to express it or maybe that we're angry and need an outlet. It may be a way to get educated. We do this. We do it individually and in families. We are pretty good at the military. Look at the records.

Ozark roads spool out and
Out and
Storefronts and
Cinder block churches painted white and the
Water can't wait to tell you
Can't wait in
Every voice it can think of these
Foothills have news there is news

My Dr. Pepper habit has reasserted itself. I can't bring myself to drink the sugar free version, so I sit there with my feet dangling off of the stone wall and sip my sweet soda like a kid. The heat is. A child catches a wild baby rabbit and brings it over to us. It's scared and probably won't survive now. It pants in his hands. We tell him to put it down in the roots of a tree and it pants there for a while. There we are, three or four Cherokee women talking family and forced relocation each with an eye on a scrap of bunny pretending to be tree roots. I sip my pop. We figure out how we are related, because we're always related. Suddenly the bunny rubs herself in the dirt. Rubs and rubs and then jumps straight up, four feet or so into the air and runs off to the brush. Maybe she'll live.

Some people die and some
 Become a day a
 Street a
 Church festival some people become a
 Day a
 Definition a punishment a
 Curse that can mean half of a
 Planet

“Who do you write for?” This is the classic question for authors, for poets. This thing that we do, this message, where is it meant to go? The all too easy answer is that I mean my writing for other women like me: educated, mixed-Ndn, over 40. I'm writing what I'd like to read, not always with the clarity that I'd choose. Then again, everyone is part of more than one conversation. Who are the voices in my head? They change daily but some characters are more persistent than others. I write to the creeks and rivers and puddles. I write to my mom, my daughter, my sons. I write to my dad and my grandfather. I write to the grandma who was proud of me and to the one who was always disappointed that my poems don't rhyme. I write to ceremonies that were banned and to the everyday ceremony of family supper. I write to ideas and places and people, both living and dead. I write to the weather, to gravel roads and dirt roads and Grand Lake. I write to silly people

and to angry people and to willfully ignorant people. I write for myself. I only ever speak for myself.