

MY MOTHERS, MY UNCLES, MYSELF

LEANNE HOWE

LeAnne Howe, an enrolled member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, was born in 1951. In addition to being an author, lecturer, and playwright, she has published legal essays and written scripts for public television documentaries. Her stories have appeared in many magazines such as Callaloo, Story, Fiction International, and Cimarron Review, as well as anthologies such as Spider Woman's Granddaughters, Seventh Generation: An Anthology of Native American Plays, and Earth Song, Sky Spirit. Her plays have been produced around the country and she has received a number of awards and fellowships. LeAnne Howe has taught at Carleton College, and is currently on the faculty at Grinnell College.

My mother walked her shoes off on the bare floors of the boarding-house in Edmond, Oklahoma, as she carried me in her soft round belly the final three weeks before I was born.

Auntie Mm's was a holding pen for pregnant white women and unwed Indians. Local church women preached to the women of Auntie Mm's on why they shouldn't give up their flesh and blood to adopting families; why they should have remained celibate; and why men with grace and the courage would someday come along...if they were good.

In 1951, in Oklahoma, in that time, there was a difference between being "a woman in trouble" and "a big-bellied Indian." When my mother speaks of this time, she waits a moment. There is silence. Then she clears her throat.

"Those church ladies made the white women mad," she remarks in a low thin voice. "One older pregnant woman hollered at those church ladies. She said it was the men who put us here. Go talk to the men."

My mother omits how she felt. I am supposed to know. I have learned the language of silence that she speaks. Non-Indians may think I mean "reading between the lines," but it is more than that. It is the language that cannot be verbalized. It is codified and understood by the listening heart and becomes clearer as the listener grows older.

Belly Mother is Choctaw. A full-blood. When she knew I was coming, she went to her older brother for help, and together they found Auntie Mm's.

About this time, a family from Stonewall, Oklahoma, had heard that there was a famous Indian lawyer living in their midst. This family of Cherokee women wanted an Indian baby so they went to him. The lawyer began to ask around.

"Is there anyone who will give a baby away?"

Although he never said so, my uncle must have heard this message

floating in the air around Tannehill, the small community of Choctaws where my relatives lived just outside McAlester, Oklahoma. So my uncle contacted this Indian lawyer about his sister, the one with the growing belly who was swelling out of her shoes in Edmond, Oklahoma.

The circumstances must have seemed natural for the Indian lawyer and my uncle, although they never said so. It was an old-time trade between Indian families: one had something, one wanted something. To add to the accord, my father was part Cherokee, at least that's what he told my mother the night they made me.

On April 29 at 3:26 A.M. I arrived. The baby born before me was blinded when someone put the wrong solution in its eyes. With me, however, they were careful. I was lucky. I was healthy. My trade could be executed.

Five days later, my Cherokee mother tenderly folded her arms like a basket and carried me away from the whites of disgrace. In the photographs taken on that day, Basket Mother holds me in front of her body like a prize. And it has been in her arms I have stayed. Periodically, though, I return to lay my head against the belly of my mother, relearning old rhythms.

This is my story. This is how I came to have two mothers: Belly Mother, the one who carried me inside her, and Basket Mother, the one who carried me in front of her. Looking back on all these loose pieces of memory thread, I realize I weaved them into the wholeness that is me. And I see the symmetry.

DO YOU SEE WHAT I MEAN?

As I thought about my identity as a Native writer, as a Choctaw woman, it became clear to me that "everything does matter." When I write fiction, poetry, or history (at least the kind of history I'm interested in writing), I pull the passages of my life, and the lives of my mothers, my mothers' mothers, my uncles, the greater community of *chafachúka* ("family") and *iksa* ("clan"), together to form the basis for critique, interpretation; a moment in the raw world. My obligation in that critique is that I must learn more about my ancestors, understand them better than I imagined. Then I must be able to render all our col-

lective experiences into a meaningful form. I call this process "tribalography." Whether it be fiction, poetry, a play, or history, American Indian writers and storytellers create tribalography to inform ourselves, and the non-Indian world, about who we are.

I am part Cherokee and I was adopted by a Cherokee family, although I am wholly Choctaw. What I mean is that until the twentieth century, Choctaws were matrilineal by custom and laws, meaning that we traced descent through our mother and her relatives. The French colonial records are full of discussions in the early eighteenth century on how simplified Choctaw culture was in terms of identifying kinship: a child made belonged to its mother and her kin. The French were astonished at this cultural difference between themselves and the Choctaws, so they wrote about it. Even as late as 1906, the Choctaws were still trying to apply this old tribal custom to maintain cultural identity. In that year the Choctaw and Chickasaw Freedman's Association argued to a committee of U.S. senators that they were entitled to Choctaw allotment lands. The Freedman's Association based their case on the fact that many of their members were illegitimate descendants of Choctaw fathers and black mothers. Melvin Cornish, who was the attorney for both the Choctaws and Chickasaw nations, pointed out that according to the tribal customs, illegitimate children always followed the "status of the mother," meaning they were the children of their mothers. Congress took the argument seriously and closed the rolls to the Freedman. In other words, motherhood mattered in determining who and what the tribe was all about. There is one more thing: mother's brother mattered too.

Uncles matter in Choctaw culture, in ways that are different from European American "uncle ways." In those eighteenth-century French colonial records there are clues as to how different the role of "father" was from "uncle." Uncle was responsible for the education of his sister's children. He also fulfilled the disciplinary role, which is a little bit different from European Americans' "uncle" role. Fathers loved their children and could play a Peter Pan kind of role, never disciplining their children, *especially* the girls.

In my own case I have found it very interesting that my uncle helped with my adoption. When I returned to my Choctaw family and reintroduced myself as a young adult, I visited my uncle's house first,

telling myself into existence like a storyteller returning from a long journey. My uncle nodded and listened to my narrative, then sent me to my mother's house. At that time, I didn't know how to spell "matrilinal kinship system," but after studying our history, it seems to me that our culture is not dead and gone to "acculturation hell." What I had been doing "naturally," meaning that I identified as entirely Choctaw because my mother is Choctaw, was historically "the way we were." Today (at least on paper), our identification system is open to children whose mother *or* father is Choctaw.

When I was growing up there were no men in my life except Basket Mother's brother. At the time of my adoption in 1951, I had a father, but I can't remember a single thing he ever said to me. The main reason for this, I think, is because I was very sickly with scarlet fever as a small child and always in the care of women. Later, I was hospitalized with rheumatic fever, and again, always in the care of women. After almost two years in bed, when I'd recovered enough from disease and overmedication, my adopted father tried to kill himself. He was hospitalized for insanity and never returned to our house. Later he succeeded and that was the end of him. As a result I grew up without a male voice in my ear. I grew up believing women are in charge of everything. I think a poem I wrote called "Evidence of Red" explains, even as a child, that I thought that women had power.

First, the night opened out.

Bodies took root from rotting salt
and seawater into evidence of red life.
Relentless waves pumped tidal air
into a single heartbeat.

In the pulp of shadow and space,
water sucked our people from sleep.

That's how it all began. At least
that's all we can remember to tell.

It began with water and heartbeat.

In minutes we tunneled through
corn woman's navel into tinges
of moist red women and men.

Yawning, we collected our chins,
knees, breasts, and sure-footed determination.

A few thousand years before
Moses parted the Red Sea, and a
God with three heads was born in the Middle East,
the Choctaw people danced
our homeland *infra* red.
Finally when the stranger's arms
reached to strangle the us,
Grandmother eavesdropped
on the three-faced deity
who said that Chaos was Coming.

When he turned his lips and tried to kiss her
she made it rain on him.

"Maybe you've forgotten,
you were born of water and woman,"
she said, as she walked away, laughing.

(from *Nebraska English Journal*, 1994)

ABOUT MY MOTHERS' MOTHERS

Basket Mother is an artist. When life seems to fall down around her, she paints up a beautiful sky on canvas. Her stories tend to be visual, not verbal. However, my Cherokee grandmother taught me the power of a good story. I've wished many times that I could remember how she said what she said in Cherokee. When she spoke the language her voice resonated like the wings of hummingbirds.

"Come and eat." "Come and sit by the fire." "Let's go outside and have a smoke. Wash your hair in rainwater."

When she had a story she would say, "Do you hear what I hear? Listen! ygiea. e-e."

I am not able to write in Cherokee or make her words come alive on paper. But I remember her voice and how she cocked her head side to side just like a bird.

"Do you hear what I hear?" Then she would begin.

"I don't know if you remember old Lum Jones?" she'd query again.

"I was standing right here when I saw the Angel of Death appear on Lum Jones's front porch, go inside his house, and before I knew what happened, it had snatched him up through the treetops. Who-ee, that

is the truth!" (I'd heard this before but every time she told it, I'd be scared.)

Of course, everyone in the family testified that Lum Jones was as dead as Andrew Jackson right after Grandmother saw him being pulled up through the elm tree. It was a fact. She could see life and death and I was told not to be afraid of living or dying. That was the lesson.

I learned that she knew what she was talking about. One night while I was in the hospital with rheumatic fever, I overheard someone say I was dying. Later my grandmother appeared to me, first as a huge bird hovering over my bed, and then as if at the same time she was standing with her hand on my forehead. She said a few words I couldn't understand. Then she left. I have written about her in *Indians Never Say Good-bye*, combining her visit to my hospital bed and her story of the Snake People. Both are very real experiences and important because just as I became a part of my adopted Cherokee family, she became a part of my story. However, as I explained, I couldn't or didn't learn Cherokee, and have since learned a bit of Choctaw; thus all the second-language texts in my work are Choctaw.

There she was standing over me. She inched her face close to my face. She put her hands on my face. I remembered her immediately, but did not speak. My eyes blurred. They were hot and heavy. It hurt to look at Ain't Sally. It hurt to see.

I closed my eyes. I felt her cool touch. She chanted. "You will be well. You will not die. *Chim achukma taba che*. You will be well. *Chi pesa taba che*."

She sang to me. Then I heard her leave.

A woman whose bed was surrounded by white partitions moaned again. This was not a new sound. It was a constant. Her breath whistled irregularly. There was no escaping the whistle. The whistling sounds were everywhere in the white room. Then they stopped.

Another woman in another bed called out. No answer. She pushed the bell. Women wearing white dresses came into the room. They pushed the partitions back. They said the whistling woman was dead. I went back to sleep. Before the hospital. Before rheumatic fever. Before the dead woman. I had met Ain't Sally. I was seven years old.

Ain't Sally was an ancient Indian relative who lived in Hayrick, outside of Dublin. A place of the Snakes. A place of memory.

Once a base camp for nomadic tribes following buffalo, once a county seat, Hayrick, Texas, took its name from a solitary mountain standing in the breadth of open grasslands. Only a state government road sign remains, marking the place of Hayrick. Marking the sign of the Snakes.

The only time we visited Ain't Sally, I rode in the back seat of our green 1950 Chevrolet, and listened to my Indian grandmother tell stories about our family. Chapters went like this:

—Life in a Dugout

—Making Lye Soap

—How Grandfather got VD

I don't remember much of the drive to Hayrick. We drove the rural roads of West Texas. There were two lanes of dust and dirt, stagnant, green-belted river beds, and one-lane bridges.

When we arrived at Ain't Sally's the old woman ambled out of a rusted screen door of a paintless wooden house. Breasts sagging, her thin body lacking in strength seemed unable to support her weight. She wore a sleeveless dress which revealed naked brown skin, skin that was no more than a sheath for aging bones. Hairless underarms.

She fed us saltine crackers and cold squirrel dumplings. She asked me questions. She asked me about my secrets. I don't remember having any to tell. She told me hers while I ate.

She said I reminded her of someone she'd seen a long time ago. I remember dancing for her. I told her I was a bird. The manbird. A hunter. I danced around the kitchen table and sang and pretended to be Pow-wow Dancer. A bird of dance. A bird of rhythm. . . .

. . . As we walked farther from the house, I remember a hot gusty wind picked up her voice like dust tendrils on bedrock and blew it away from me. I ran to catch the sound. I found Ain't Sally sitting on a granite rock.

—"Indian girl. *Alla Tek*.

—"Come and see, on our land, the four winds of the old days will blow through our hair." Then she rugged at my black braids.

—"Come and visit the Snakes, *Alla Tek*.

—"When I was your age they blew across this place like red dust devils on flat neutral plains.

—"Can you see them?

—"Do you hear the Snake People calling us?"

—"Yes. Yes. I can see them. I hear them. They are naked and wild. Their eyes, like black grapes, shining in the Sun, stare back at me.

—"They're hungry."

I watch the Snake People eat the fleshy intestines of my uncle's butchered cow. I taste the hot blood, roll it around on my tongue and remember. It makes me sweat.

I watch the Snake People play games around the carcass. And before we walk back into the house, the old woman and me, she ran her crooked fingers across my eyes and said:

—"Indian Girl. *Alla Tek*.

—"The ghosts of your ancestors will visit you there."

(from "Indians Never Say Good-bye,"
Reinventing the Enemy's Language, 1997)

The Snake People my grandmother told about in her story were Comanches who'd travel across her great aunt's land. When Grandmother told me that story for the first time we were looking across the same land she'd seen as a young girl with her great aunt. Today the Snake People live on in me through her stories. I didn't know it at the time, but Grandmother was coding her family in my head and teaching me how to communicate after she was gone. When she ended a story, she'd squeal, "Whee-e-e-e, that's enough, I can tell you no more today." Then she'd whistle at her birds. Then she'd have a smoke.

There were many different birds in my grandmother's head. She said so. Sometimes she sang them there. At her death she said the birds never stopped chirping in her head. Kept her up all night. Made her ears ring. And it is their music that she died hearing. Not our voices. When I want to be in touch with her I tell her stories.

"INDIAN WOMEN DON'T DOCUMENT CHANGE; THEY MAKE CHANGE"

I am paraphrasing a Rayna Green-ism¹ in her 1980 article, "Native American Women."

So far I have been writing as if growing up in a house of women was

no big deal. Who am I trying to kid? Life was complicated. As a young adult, dealing with two families was not easy, particularly when they were so similar: both Southeastern Indian tribes, both matrilineal, both believe they are the real people! Everyone else is the "Other." As I said, growing up in the sixties, I was not able to verbalize this because I didn't know the meaning of patriarchy, even though I lived it. In short I didn't handle it very well. My biological sister and I led very similar lives even though we lived apart. And sometimes I felt shame at being adopted.

When I married in the late 1960s, I began making change. Two of them. Both boys. (This year my sons are ages twenty-six and twenty-eight, and I have two granddaughters, ages one and four.) As a mother of two babies, I wanted my children, but not my husband. I also realized that both my mothers really never had men in their lives for long periods of time. I was following the same pattern.

By the time I was twenty-three, a young divorced mother with two sons, I entered college and my life became more and more schizophrenic. I wanted to be a mother, a student, a lawyer, a writer, an Indian in a job where I didn't have to ask, "Can I freshen up your coffee, hon?"

In an early poem I wrote, "Coyote Dancing with Twisted Sister Running," I am trying to reconcile my past and present, my multi-families, and as I said earlier, render a meaningful critique. (About myself.)

I

My life is made up of 30-minute intervals.

30 minutes to get dressed,

30 minutes to drive to work,

30 minutes to eat lunch,

and thirty minutes to watch the daily news

Coyote mother

is this what you had in mind

when you moved your pups to town?

I learned the language

I learned how to blend my colors

to match the grayness

I learned how to dance their way

II

Ah but,
 She-za-tickle-to,
 ain't that the name of a quarter horse?
 A black-haired horsewoman
 nasty dancing with
 fat fingered midgets
 and slender black winos
 drunk up, fucked up
 sweatin' the blues
 A wild thing
 She-za-tickle-to,
 swiggin' slugs of Jack Daniels
 a switchblade strapped to her thigh
 teasin' the regulars
 trying to pick fights,
 passin' for white,
 passin' for Lebanese,
 passin' for Jew,
 just passin' through
 Coyote woman
 where are your pups now?
 No doubt skulking from the German Shepherds
 and trying to remember . . .

(from *Coyote Papers*, Wowapi Press, 1985)

Today, if I had to say one thing that is changing in fiction about American Indians, it is that it is okay to write about the urban Indian experience. More than okay. It has become necessary. At the time I began writing fiction, in the early 1980s, it wasn't. Most of the material being written was about reservation Indians, their politics, their problems, events that happened somewhere "out West." This left me hungry both as a reader and as a writer of fiction. So I wrote about that invisible fence that surrounds urban Indian communities in American society: the city. I wasn't very successful. I was told that my writing was not about *real* Indians, that no one wanted to hear about urban Indians who'd "lost" their culture to the city. I wrote *Biodegradable Indians*, which was published in a chapbook. No other editors besides Roxxy and

Judy Gordon would touch it. I received a lot of feedback, but most people were appalled at its grittiness. I wrote in the piece, which was from the streets and Indian bars in Oklahoma City,

It was the night of the crescent moon, Christmas Eve, 1980. Harry Bull Coming's big night. Wearing a buckskin shirt and moccasins, with an Eagle feather tied to one of his long black braids, Harry Bull Coming was about to make his debut as a professional comedian at the Red Race Hideaway in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

For the twenty-two-year-old Indian, this was the most important night of his life. This was the night he'd rehearsed in his dreams. This was the night he'd speak to his ancestors for counsel. This was the night he'd gamble the respect of his father.

The Red Race was one of those places white people never go unless they want to get cut. The bathrooms worked only part time. There were pictures of naked blonde women plastered to the walls with their "scratch and sniff" decals torn off, and occasionally you could find personal items at the Red Race.

It wasn't unusual for bar owner George Billy, a Choctaw from McAlester, to find a pair of false teeth or partial plates on the concrete floor, accidentally puked up along with the liquid dinner of some daring romantic who'd stayed too long listening to B.B. King and the blues.

But nobody seemed to care or worry about missing teeth at the Red Race. For urban Indians, the Red Race was one hangout where would be warriors fought old battles and tried to remove the cosmic brain scars of the last century . . .

(from *Coyote Papers*, Wowapi Press, 1985)

My recent fiction involves late-nineteenth-century history. In *Hope at the Reservation*, I've written about a Choctaw boy in 1889 who was a captive of a cross-cultural experiment in education.

My interest in this area began when I joined the University of Iowa's Office of International Education and Services. In 1990, I was producing media aimed at educating the university and local community about the issues of cultural diversity. I worked with foreign students from eighty-nine countries and had a chance to see how international education theories and paradigms had changed, and also how ignorance about people who are culturally different continues to be perpetuated in and out of the classroom.