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## In memory of my long lost grandfather homer

i would like to write the next great american poem  
verses humming with thunderbolts and  
the laughter of an entire reservation  
god how easily we could fill the pages of an epic

but somehow i don't quite believe  
that it would be a bestseller in the new york times  
hell, those huge chain conglomerations of caffeine and novels  
probably wouldn't even bother carrying it on their  
ever so illustrious shelves

because america doesn't really want to hear  
about our story of survival  
and there isn't a huge margin of profit  
in the pain that accompanies it

we all know that the next great american anything  
still has to make a buck

so i'll just sit here anyway and pretend  
that the whole world is my audience  
and i'll scream about how much it can really suck  
when you're just a kid and your tennis shoes don't look  
quite like those on all the commercials  
or when the christmas checks aren't enough to buy  
the warmest coat for another freezing winter  
hell, maybe your parents even cashed the check and forgot  
all about your coat on their way to the horseshoe bar

god how winters like that can sting

---

M. L. Smoker (Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux) is currently a second year graduate student in the American Indian studies program at the University of California, Los Angeles. This poem is dedicated to her mother who will always fill the pages.

but that's not all  
damn you if you thought that was all  
i'm not about to just sit here and grieve over  
what was stolen and trampled on  
or whine about what it's like because it won't  
ever mean a thing, even if you could understand  
instead i'd like to take a moment if you don't mind  
to sit back and smile to myself  
because i know the secret, our best kept...  
(just when you thought you knew it all and could actually make a movie  
about our sun dances)

we have it better than the rest of america  
more than they could ever dream of owning

we have stories  
woven threads of dirt and fire  
yes, stories  
you forgot all about those didn't you?  
and we aren't about to invite you  
into our homes again one snowy december  
just so you can take a seat and transcribe  
every last word of our grandfather sitting at the kitchen table  
(insert photo here of german poet john g. neihardt and lakota holy man  
black elk going to the bank together and cashing that first big check from  
the profits for his visions)

his quick murmurs and laughter pass from him  
and only into our bodies where the blood is old and familiar  
where images breathe and grow with new generations

no, his stories are ours  
and you have nothing quite like them  
(even though you may cheat and lie and coerce to get them away from us  
you are just fooling yourself and all those curious readers)

yeah, i guess maybe if you're greek  
living here in america after three generations  
of immigration you could always say  
that you have homer  
blessed homer  
(he and my ancestors were dreaming stories together, didn't anyone ever  
bother to tell you?)

but do you really know the feel of the islands' landscape?  
do you ever smell the salty aegean air on your skin?  
probably not

so i wouldn't go claiming homer up and down  
when you don't even know where he's coming from

at least i can say i've been to the black hills  
or rather, they have been to me  
i have seen where we entered the world and danced  
and danced in circles until our feet bled  
and our lives fell upon the earth because all we could do  
was love her with our flesh  
i have been there and i have felt those stories throb  
through the voices of the trees and down onto the plains

so i guess its safe to assume that the next great american poem  
will never come from indian country  
"the least great american poem" i'd like to call this little number  
because you and i know that's just what it is  
(and that's fine with me because your least has often been our greatest and  
you still haven't caught on)

i bet that homer and my grandmothers are sitting together  
somewhere laughing because you messed up his story  
and now all you can do is go on messing up ours  
because somewhere down the line  
you got too caught up in alphabets and phonetics  
maybe you just didn't have the time anymore  
but one day you stopped  
stopped sitting and really listening to the stories  
the stories that hold us all up  
when all we seem to be able to do  
is fall

— *M. L. Smoker*

### Face Of A Thousand Wisdoms

I don't know what his Navajo name was  
or the indignities he endured  
in a million moons. His face became a sequoia:  
hewn circles for each ravaged village.  
His spirit shuttled on the prairie  
long before Nazi trains were in vogue.  
But as I digested his grasp  
of a trespassed tongue, I forked more  
than folk lore, or herbs, or the dirt itself.  
I saw Dürer etch a thousand wisdoms,  
with thoughts too great to be tamed—  
a busy, bison sky.

— *Mike Catalano*

### Lonni Little River

He could fish before he walked;  
and he was more attuned to the speech  
of Sockeye salmon than any human.  
It surprised no Athabaskan  
that his fish were hooked  
before bait spanked the white rapids.  
When he became one with the water  
without ripple or bubble,  
he petrified himself like a totem  
and speared the most unruly Cohoe.  
But the legend of Lonni Little River,  
long after his death,  
came when he snagged fish  
with one hand. Some say he trained  
his hand hours a day playing a game  
akin to jacks. Some say he plucked a bee  
from a grizzly's paw, becoming the bear  
with all its instincts.  
I say he kissed the land, the water,  
and all therein, never wasting its spirit,  
long drained by settlers.  
So the river rewarded him  
as one of their own with more  
than Houdini's hands,  
with a love none dare equal.

— *Mike Catalano*

## Signs

Crescent moon  
sings a silent song  
this autumn night.  
A crisp, cool wind  
washes over everything.  
Coyote sniffs the darkness  
for signs.

Stars follow trails  
laid down long ago. The old ones  
are somewhere, dreaming.

— *Edward Henry*

## Losing The World

A cool March wind called at my window all day, but it was late afternoon before I listened.

A good friend's email put me in another place. Her husband is dying and she told me of the ceremony people from his tribe conducted in his room; burning sage, dancing, chanting...all to send him on his way. But he's not going and it hurts my friend to watch his agony. She said he was covering his bases: His people did the ceremony and wrapped a blanket around him; but there's also a crucifix over his bed and time spent with a priest. Why not I thought....

My friend said she leaned over his bed and she almost lost the world, it started slipping away but she caught herself and returned to her present before anything happened. Maybe it was the pull of her own death just testing, I thought. Or maybe this place is the nightmare world she was pulled into from the other side dream on time long ago, when she turned away from home for only a moment and was lost.

Later I was feeling lonely and went for a walk. I saw five hawks circling high above the neighborhood. There was a message coming for me I knew. All I had to do was lose the world and it would come. When I looked again, the sky had changed, the hawks were gone.

A cool March wind called at my window all day, but it was late afternoon before I listened.

— *Edward Henry*

**Mission La Purisima**  
(in memory of the Chumash people)

**I**

The entire settlement is a museum now,  
the dusty low slung rooms fixed in a past  
no one wants to relive, but outside  
the hummingbirds still bathe  
in the old fountain and the breeze from the ocean  
is crisp as spun linen in the leaves.

Purisima it was  
when the padres arrived,  
consecration of the land close on fresh supplies  
from the Pious Fund,  
as though the silent, dun-colored figures  
who peered at them from the speckled wood  
were but knot holes in the bark:  
chaparral, oak, Indian  
rooted and knotted to the dark,  
like the moon invisible  
in the wax and wan of day, yet always there  
as now watching  
Nature purified.

Leather jackets and shouldered metal  
kneel in a clearing. Two soldiers  
steady the Spanish flag against gusts  
from the Pacific. Sharp, snapping sounds  
on the makeshift rigging beneath a large white canopy  
rippling over the white robed priest holding up the chalice.  
Sunlight splinters on the polished gold,  
and behind him, on a cloth of pure white damask:  
a wooden cross on which hangs  
the bleeding figure of a crucified man,

cut down in his prime, this god incarnate  
flings Nature into far off spaces  
where red turns chalcedonic

and things made precious by impurities  
 like carnelian or sard, like  
 those watching from the shaded edge,  
 can not survive            the pallid host.

A fisherman's spinner—  
 white overlay; the bait rainbow hued:  
 whiskey, bobbles, colored glass  
 and the tale of a god's Agony, how  
 a body wrapped in stripes of wounds  
 had staggered under the weight of a cross, just as they  
 found themselves at the end of a line  
 hoisting a framework into commerce & time:  
 tallow, tanning, and olive oil—  
 a god at work overcomes... Look

the women are arriving  
 with soft bundles on their heads.  
 They kneel at the great stone vat  
 and the laundry billows up and sinks  
 in the placid water that runs from the open mouth  
 of a stone gargyle to drive away the Furies  
 and keep the flow going toward  
 the beating of the paddles on the coarse muslins:  
 blouses, skirts, sleeves in church... Falsetto

tones from the *monjerio*  
 and lower registers from the barnyard leaven the day  
 into the fullness of sunset  
 and from behind the shops, the distant ring of a hammer  
 aligns the minutes around the face  
 of an invisible clock.

## II

Datura people. Limbs entwined  
 in seaweed and the leaves of laurel,  
 ears to the hummingbird's stillstand,  
 nostrils to the smoking sage, as fixed  
 in time as turtles, having traveled farther  
 than any Spanish galleon or satellite in space,

you became the star-crossed actors in a passion play—  
 no victory, the *masa* of your grinding down:  
 syphilis, smallpox, diphtheria, measles.



Your peace with bear and rattlesnake drowned  
in European holy water, while stock  
and lash enforced a conscience  
too ponderous for the tulle sandals  
that so lightly touched the earth.

Voices from the entrance road strain  
over the rattle of wheels, over  
the hum of Hail Marys  
rising like smoke from the dark of the church, over  
the damp whirring of wings, over  
the curved, pulsating bodies  
of the women washing—

La Purísima Concepción  
in the shade of the blue green olives  
civilization begins.

— *Barbara Bates*

## Synopsis NAGPRA

1. What sacred objects or sites SHOULD be determined by the Tribe. (one tribe's chairman said he couldn't even say what was, as he was not given that sacred position, it was the medicine men, and they couldn't say either as it is forbidden, all they could say is it IS sacred but would not tell the anthros how the arrowhead was different or how it was used, that is forbidden, so rather than tell, they had to turn away, the telling would be a greater loss.)

the "Words" that the federal agencies try to hold to the letter  
 the narrow definition they cling to  
 are mistaken  
 it is not the words that make up the 'act'  
 the intent of the act should be embraced  
 unwritten laws, customs, oral history TELL the tribe what our WORD is  
 our word is our voice  
 not marks on a paper the agencies wave and point to  
 not computer printouts  
 not date stamps  
 this is a spiritual thing  
 that transcends pieces of paper  
 this is our life  
 we are all sacred beings  
 it is unfortunate that this respectful concept  
 seems to be lost in a bureaucracy  
 we are Indian  
 those items were created by us and our ancestors  
 they are our bones, clothes, and sacred objects  
 they were taken from us and held  
 we want them back  
 like that little story you used to tell at slumber parties  
 about the itsy bitsy woman who found a itsy bitsy bone  
 and put it in her cupboard to make soup  
 she was haunted by the owner  
 who said 'give me back my bone'  
 we say  
 'give us back our bones!'

— nila northSun

---

nila northSun's (Shoshone and Chippewa) fourth and most recent book is *a snake in her mouth* from West End Press. She works on NAGPRA issues as a cultural liaison for the Fallon Paiute Shoshone tribe.

### The dirt around them

is still them  
as their flesh decays  
it is welcomed back  
to mother earth  
she slowly  
gently enfolds them into her  
& they return to her  
as once long ago  
we came from her  
we know she gave us life  
she birthed us  
housed us, fed us  
she is sacred & to be  
treated with respect

when archeologists  
rob the graves  
take the bones  
they leave  
an ache  
as they separate bone  
from flesh, heart, soul, dirt

we, as the descendants of  
our ancient ones  
feel that ache  
passed on through generations  
as we are part of our mother  
we feel her pain

as the destruction of this earth continues  
with pollution of air and water  
with toxic waste garbaging the land  
with violence and hate in the people  
we can only wonder how  
mother earth feels  
as she is being slowly killed  
as if her children have betrayed her  
for this  
I say  
I'm sorry mother  
your native children tried.

**NAGPRA Poem/Prayer**

Grandfather we come humbly before you  
to give thanks for your many gifts to us  
that of our native culture, our language, our stories  
our people  
past, present, and future.

Grandfather,  
we thank you for looking over us  
providing the air we breathe  
the water we drink  
the food we eat  
for our animal brothers and sisters  
for grandmother moon  
who guides our women  
for our mother earth  
who provides the bounty of her breast  
to nurture us  
for the 4 directions—east, south, west, and north  
and the spirits that guide us.

But grandfather, we come now with heavy hearts  
we have tried to live in a sacred manner  
but we cannot control all things around us  
we ask for your guidance in this matter:  
grandfather,  
many of our ancestors have been taken from their resting places.  
Their bodies, bones, clothing, and personal items have been disturbed  
and wrested from our mother earth's bosom.  
We know this is wrong.  
Yet those who wish to learn more about our people, our culture, our ways,  
have chosen this path of analysis, research, & examination of our sacred sites  
& bones of our ancestors to further their knowledge.

This is contrary to our Indian ways of obtaining knowledge. It is disrespectful of  
our elders, and of our future generations.

We ask that you touch the hearts & souls of those people in agencies,  
committees, museums and collections.  
We ask that you touch their hearts and souls, and that way  
give them the knowledge that they are being disrespectful and  
not in harmony.  
We ask that you touch their hearts & souls and give them new knowledge that  
comes from their heart & souls and touches their minds.  
Grandfather,  
we ask for strength to carry on in a sacred manner

please bless those around us  
bless those that cannot be with us  
bless those that have yet to come  
that we can carry blessings from our ancestors  
who know we are fighting for them  
who know we are trying to bring them peace  
so they may be with you Grandfather  
and not  
in some wooden box or Rubbermaid plastic container  
on a dusty shelf,  
or in gunnysacks lining hallways, or locked in files  
where the prayers and cries of their grandchildren  
can never reach their ears  
where their ribs and skulls and legs are catalogued  
and tagged  
where their teeth are counted  
and their beads taken from their necks  
where their clothing categorized and taken from their bodies  
their moccasins taken from their feet  
the hair DNA analyzed  
saved in glass tubes  
far from the hearts & souls.

We humbly come before you  
hoping our prayers are heard  
that we may continue to receive your blessings  
of strength, knowledge, and love  
that we may continue our work  
for our ancestors  
and  
for our future generations.

Me'gwitch.

— *nila northSun*

## **NAGPRA-Prayer Poem**

from the beginning of time

it is precious, this body  
it has been returned to us  
we have finished it in a satisfactory way,

we will not have to look for you  
you are here  
you are here

safely with us

our prayers for guidance  
from our ancestors  
can be heard again  
this is precious to us.

— *nila northSun*

## Peaches

In that strange amalgamation  
of white and brown, a place  
without seasons, a boy hiding  
behind a rifle poses for pictures,  
the desert sun fused in his eyes,

Peaches, the light-skinned scout  
of General Crook, with an expression  
of a runaway horse, ears laid back  
to bite,

unwanted child of the Ocotillo,  
bleached as a Yucca,  
green as Palo Verde,

pulling his words out  
one at a time. Half-and-half,  
the whites said, combining  
the worst of both races.

No one asks you to smile  
in this land where night sleeps  
with all ears open, where  
everything speaks with thorns.

—Jack Rickard

## Sitting Bull at Fort Randall

Here in the repetition of the wind,  
in the dying light longing for the hawk,  
each sunrise more difficult  
than the day before, forced  
to insensibility in the confines  
of other's faith,

---

Jack Rickard, former American and world histories teacher, received a distinguished teacher award from the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education, a Presidential Citation for environmental work in the Grand Canyon, and a Pablo Neruda Prize for Poetry from *Nimrod International Journal*. He is the author of *Staining the Grass Red*, *The House at the Edge of Winter*, and *Change in the Weather*.

watching the children change,  
wrapped in white man's wool,  
lives weary as government rations,  
stoic beggars—

how easily they turn their backs  
among the rotten timbers  
of inconsistent truth, ghosts  
of their fathers dying in the grass.

—*Jack Rickard*



## Jamestowne Revisited

*after Wendy Rose*

*(upon being asked to attend a gathering at the site of the Jamestowne Colony, where church people intended to apologize to Virginia Indians for everything since 1607)*

Here you come again,  
asking. Do you see  
we have nothing to  
give, we have given  
like the ground, like our  
mountains rubbed bare by  
hybrid black poisons  
concocted from tobacco.

You would spread us on your  
platform as graven images;  
you could repent to us,  
weep into your robes an  
emotional, talk-show-like  
moment to absolve almost  
four hundred years, then  
go home to mow your  
lawn or something.

You are not the ones  
who burned our cornfields,  
passed infected blankets,  
treated pilfered raped or  
gave us rum. You are not  
those who ask how can I  
help, offer Indians your jobs,  
return some land to tribes  
or even vote to save the earth.

We are not the ones  
whose infants froze in rivers,  
whose mothers wore bullets,  
whose fathers left hearts  
on this ground. We are not  
those about whom was said,  
*They haven't the rights of dogs.*<sup>1</sup>  
We are not the ones to ask.

---

Karenne Wood (Monacan) writes grants and directs a historical research project for her tribe. She has studied at George Mason University and the University of Virginia and is a member of the Wordcraft Circle.

We are words of tongues  
no one dared speak. We are  
nameless ones named by others:  
*mulattoes* and "*mongrel*  
*Virginians*."<sup>2</sup> We are white flints  
and chips of bone, pottery  
sunk in red clay, black glass

like spear points found here,  
of obsidian mined among tribes  
who lived a thousand miles  
west. We are refrains of our  
grandparents' songs that drift  
on night winds with our dreams.

You call us *remnants* now:  
what remains of a fabric  
when most of it is gone.  
You have no memory:  
we sank to scarred knees,  
we said there was  
nothing left to give.

And ask again, Will we  
come to your apology?  
A southeastern wind  
answers you. Our ears  
are not visible. Lips are not  
visible

... *we are the bones*  
*of what you forget, of what*  
*you thought were just lies...*<sup>3</sup>

Only our eyes look around.  
Earth-tone eyes, forest  
eyes, thunderhead eyes,  
eyes flecked with gold, eyes  
like obsidian, eyes that are  
seeing right past you.

— *Karenne Wood*

## NOTES

1. Bertha Wailes, *Backward Virginians*, unpublished Master's thesis, University of Virginia, 1928.
2. Arthur H. Estabrook and Ivan E. McDougale, *Mongrel Virginians* (Baltimore: The Williams & Wilkins Co, 1926).
3. Wendy Rose, *Going to War with All My Relations* (Flagstaff: Northland Publishing Co., 1993), 58.

### Oronoco

Then, we showed settlers our ways  
to grow plants, and a fever came to  
all of us; Virginia's alluvial bottomland  
greened, we cleared it all, even hillsides,  
not for food crops but tobacco. Dark  
gold it was, and we gave our land  
to it, built towns to trade it; it was  
like money, you could buy provisions  
with it. We developed the dark-leaf,  
called Oronoco: harvested, tied it in  
sheaves, sledded the heaped leaves  
down mountainsides, and mules pulled  
the loaded wagons to Lynch's ferry.  
The leaves were cured, stacked in  
hogshead casks, then poled down-  
river to Richmond by black men  
in boats. A gift to us, it seemed,  
this money and land enough for all  
until the earth itself failed us, its  
richness spent, and the topsoil drifted  
away. We saw children hungry in  
drought of our making, the plant  
a new way of destruction. We went  
by moonlight to the fields, hacked stalks  
down, held ceremonies, prayed, but  
greed spread like blight; others took  
the money, then the land. When tobacco  
went south, we planted apple trees  
for them, became pickers of berries  
and fruit but were never the same;  
we stood in the orchards at break-time,  
smoked our ready-rolls, coughing  
a little; we scuffed the ground  
with our feet when we spoke  
and did not see each other's eyes.

— *Karenne Wood*

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### **Site of a Massacre**

Can you say you see  
only a field or hear  
nothing but breeze  
where the earth raises  
grass now, the wind  
in soft gusts like a  
barefoot dead run before  
gunstock crashed into  
her skull, or like thuds of  
the children collapsing,  
limp spattered dolls in the  
center of a village on fire.

Blessed are those who  
cannot hear cries cut short,  
or gunshot or hooves,  
who cannot feel lingering  
grief. In the afternoon sun,  
each rock flashes like a  
sword. In the wind, each  
blade of grass is screaming.

— *Karenne Wood*