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There Was an Old Woman Who Lived All Alone

A long time ago, there was an Old Woman who was tired because nobody seemed to care about her, now that she had lost her beauty and form in the winter years. So she decided to leave this earthly place and go to the Spirit World.

One night, just before the harvest, no one noticed when she packed up her things and snuck away. She walked a long ways—many days and many nights—to where the river becomes a lake, and the lake becomes a river, and the river spills into an ocean. She stopped at the ocean's edge.

There, she waited for a Masked Being to show her face. The Masked Beings live in the Spirit World but come into the physical world to take care of the four-legged ones, and every once in a while, to set things back in balance when they have gone awry. The Masked Beings move between the worlds through Trees and Water, which serve as their gateways. The old people know that if you can see them in their physical form, it is a sign that something is wrong. If this is so, you must work hard to set things right with all of your relations—to “clean house,” as it were. For if the Masked Beings stay too long in this world, to take care of things here, they will not be able to return to their own world and will lose their power.

The Old Woman waited at the edge of the ocean. “This is a big body of water and I will surely find a Masked Being to show me the way into the Spirit World,” she thought. But she watched for many days and nights and could not see anyone let alone find a gateway. Out of loneliness, her heart ached so much for her people that she began to feel her body change, change with the sadness of her spirit. First, it only transformed a little bit, like the shape of her nose or the curve of her hips. Soon she could control the changes. And then she learned that she could change into other kinds of life. She was a bird for a while but feared the great responsibility of being a messenger. She was a whale for a while but got too cold in the waters. Then she made herself into a beautiful tree, thinking that she could lure one of the Masked Beings next to her and

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follow her back into the Spirit World. She waited and waited but no one showed up. So the Old Woman made herself into water and lay at the bank of the river that spilled into the ocean, hoping that Masked Beings would come by and she could follow them. Still, no one showed up.

One night at the end of the long winter months, the Old Woman caught her reflection in the water. She started to play with her shape and found that she had gained great powers and could fool even herself into believing that she was an Old Man or a great bear or a huge boulder. She forgot herself one night and became the wind and rustled the trees, waking up and back into her self. She loved her life, there by the ocean, but she was lonely for her people, so she decided to return to them and teach them a lesson for not valuing life in all of its stages. She walked back, along the river and to the lake and back along the river again, until she found her home. It was, she thought, a beautiful spring night. She snuck back into her lodge and under a warm blanket and slept well. When the morning came, though, she found that no time had passed at all. It was exactly the morning after she had left—but for her it was months later. She felt older. More wrinkled. More hunched over. But then she realized that the Masked Beings must have tricked her and that she really had been in the Spirit World all the while that she was at the ocean. She wondered if the medicine that she had discovered there could be brought back to her here. So she looked inside her jug, into the water, and found that she could still change herself into other beings and elements. She decided to test it out.

She walked out to where her people kept the horses and became a loud noise that frightened them into a stampede. For days, the people wondered what had happened as they tried to round up the horses who had run to faraway places in fright. She laughed to herself every time she heard them talking about the stampede and decided that she would have to be careful so as not to misuse the power that the Masked Beings had given her. But she still wanted to teach her people a lesson. So she waited for the right time.

She waited a long time and became older and grayer and weaker in her body but more and more powerful in her spirit. One day, the people began to complain about the burdens of the old people. They were tired and bored with all the demands of the ceremonies to respect the Spirit World and they started to grow lazy, buying saws to cut down the trees, buying

tractors to cut their fields, buying cans of corn and soup to feed the widows through the cold months. So the Old Woman—who had grown very old indeed—decided that it was time.

One night, just before harvest, she turned herself into a fire and burned down the people's fields where food and herbs grew. She even burned down the huts where they stored dried meat and furs for the winter. The people were frightened but did nothing. So the next night, she turned herself into an eagle and carried away all of their water. The people were frightened but still did nothing. So the next night, she turned herself into clouds and for days blocked the sun. The people were frightened but still did nothing. So the next day, she made herself into a beautiful young woman and tricked the people into believing that she was a great and powerful spirit. They treated the young woman like a queen—pampering her, listening to her stories, giving her gifts of moccasins, beaver, and wild turkey and anything else that her heart desired. They even made her an Indian Princess in a beauty contest out of season. All of the men wanted to be with her and all of the women wanted to sit by her and she took all of their gifts and attentions and sexual favors and giggled when no one was listening.

She had a great time.

She tricked the chief into promising her all of the privileges of his position—access to all of that BIA money and prestige—as she promised to return the harvest, water, and sun. She made wild and unpredictable decisions about the people's lives and they listened and obeyed her believing that she could return all that they needed. After all, she was young and beautiful. The people lavished her with everything they could think of but when the spring came there was still no harvest, no water, and no sun. They were cold and hungry and exhausted from treating the Old Woman—oops, I mean Princess—like a queen. They were broke and without any food for giving her everything that they had. They were angry with the beautiful young woman. And confused. One night, they gathered around her and begged for mercy. She looked at them and asked gently, quietly, what had become of the Old Woman who lived at the edge of camp? Everyone looked at each other. They didn't know who she was talking about so the Princess had to describe herself to prod their memories. When they finally remembered and tried to find out what had happened to the Old Woman, they found an empty lodge—dusty and unkempt with piles of unopened canned corn and

soup just inside the door. They returned to the Princess, confused, and she asked them what had become of all of their old people. Everyone looked at each other. They didn't know, exactly, and so went about asking the old people what had become of them. The old people told them that their hearts were broken because the people had not been living in a respectful manner and had been ignoring one another. They had spent all of their time giving everything to the fleeting and unimportant and had done nothing to safeguard the entire people, and now that the spring had come, they had nothing.

The people were terribly sad and remorseful. They left the young beautiful woman and went back to their lodgings to purify their spirits. Some of the people went searching for the old people who were missing and found them in strange cities in faraway places. Some gathered all of the seeds that they could find and started preparing the fields for planting. Some went looking for the animals, to make sure that they had enough to eat and were safe. They had started to take care of one another. But it took a long long time. A very long time indeed.

After the ceremony of cleansing in the big house, the people turned their attentions to the old people and orphans and sick and stopped lavishing the Indian Princess with stupid gifts, mourning the loss of the loved ones that they had neglected instead of wasting their attentions on things that would pass without the sky's notice. Like the casinos and other wishing wells of greed. Their mourning brought the Old Woman to herself again. And back in form, she asked Corn Mother to return all the life back to her people and she was happy to do so—because for the first time in a long time, she heard her name spoken with respect.

—*Joanne Marie Barker*

jumping through the hoops of history
(for columbus, custer, sheridan, wayne, and
all such heroes of yesteryear)

10 little, 9 little, 8 little Indians
7 little, sick little, live baby Indians
poor little, me little, you little Indians
the only good Indian's a dead 1

a lot of young Indians got dead in the '80s
just like the '70s and the '60s
both 19 and 18 hundreds
and all the other OOs since 1492
a sucker's #s game over the sale of the centuries
with 99-year leases and 1¢ treaties
with disappearing ink on the bottom line
signed by gilt-eyed oddsmakers
whose smart \$ bet on 0 redskins by half-time

in the 4th quarter, when this century turned on us
we were down to 250k in the u.s.
from the 50m who were here
but who just didn't hear about
the lost italian lurching his way from spain
with scurvy-covered sailors and yellow-fevered priests
at least 1,000 points of blight and plague
in 3 wooden boxes marked "india or bust"
and "in gold we trust"

columbus washed up on our shores, praising paradise on earth
and kinder, gentler people
who fixed them dinner, but laughed so hard
at those metal-headed, tiny whitemen
that they fell to their knees
we please them, dear diary, columbus wrote home

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they think we're gods
so the knights of the lost boats
spread syphilis and The word of the 1 true gods
and planted OOs of flags of the 1 true kings
and sang their sacred 3-g song

*"a,b,c,d,g,g,g
glory, god and gold, gold, gold"*

rub-a-dub-dub, a nina tub
rub-a-dub-dub, a pinta tub
rub-a-grub-grub, Native gold and lands
rub-a-chop-chop, Native ears and hands
rub-a-dub-dub, santa maria sub
rub-a-rub-rub Indians out
8m by 1500, or thereabout

meanwhile, back in the land of wicked queens and fairytales
serfs were sowing and owing the churches
and paying dues to the papal store
all for the promise of the kingdom of heaven
starving and dying to make it to that pearly door
the inquisition kings reaped peasant blood\$, but wanted more
than those in robes could rob from the poor
so the captains of invention
designed the missions to go forth and mine
with tools of destruction to kill the time
so cristobal colon led the chorus in the same old song
kyrie, kyrie, kyrie eleison
a new world beat for average savages
who didn't change their tune
and were bound by chains of office
and staked out to pave the yellow brick road
at invasion's high noon
and wizards in satin read their rights in latin
kyrie, kyrie, kyrie requiremento
and a lot of Indians got dead
as was, by god, their right
to the sound of death songs in the night
kyrie, kyrie, kyrie requiremento

and amerigo begat the beautiful
and the bibles grew and the bullets flew
and the pilgrims gave thanks
and carved up turkeys and other peoples' lands

and mrs. gov. stuyvesant bowled with 10 bloody skulls
and begat up against the wall streets
and shopping mauls on OOs of mounds
and the 7th cavalry prayed and passed the ammunitiion
and loaded gattling guns LOOK times
and shot off extra special 45/70s
for any Indians or buffalo
between europe and manifest destiny
meanwhile, in most of Indian country
no one heard about the ironhorse or goldwhores
or the maggots in the black hills
with no-trespassing signs
or what's yours is homestake mine's
but that's what they called ballin' the jack

then it was 2 late, about a 25¢ to midnight
and us without a second hand to tell the times were a changin'
so, we jumped through the hoops of history
on mile-high tightropes without a net
with no time to look back or back out
with no time to show off or cry out
look, ma, no hands
no hands
no hands

and the calendar was kept by #s of sand creeks
and washitas and wounded knees and acoma mesas
and OOs of army blankets of wool and smallpox
and a lot of chiefs who made their marks
no longer able to thumb their way home
where x marked the spots on their babies
and pocahantas haunted england
singing ring-a-ring-a-rosy
ashes, ashes, all fall dead
and a lot of fences got built
around a lot of hungry people
who posed for a lot of catlins
who shot their fronts
and snapped their backs
just say commodity cheese, please

and a lot of Indians got moved and removed
relocated and dislocated

from c to shining c
from a 2 z
from spacious skies to fort renos
from purple mountains to oklahoma
from vision quests to long walks
from stronghold tables to forks in the road
from rocks to hard places
from high water to hell
from frying pans to melting pots
from clear, blue streams to coke

and we got beads
 and they got our scalps
and we got horses
 and they got our land
and we got treaties
 and they got to break them
and we got reservations
 and they got to cancel them
and we got christian burials
 and they got to dig us up
and they got america
 and america got us

and they got a home where Indians don't roam
 (now, follow the bouncing cannon ball)
and they got a home where Indians don't roam
and a lot of young Indians got dead
 and those were the glory daze
and we learned the arts of civilization
reciting the great white poets
 (*oh, little sioux or japanee*
 oh, don't you wish that you were me)
singing the great white songs
 (*onward, christian soldiers*
 marching as to war
 to save a wretch like me
 amazin' race, amazin' race)
sailing down the mainstream
 (with land o' lakes butter maiden
 and kickapoo joy juice role models
 for good little Indian girls and boys)

and we got chopped meat
 and we got buffaloed
and we got oil-well murders
 and they got black-gold heirs
and they got museums
 and we got in them
and they got us under glass
 and we got to guide them
and they got the kansas city chiefs
 and we got a 14,000-man b.i.a.
and we got pick-up trucks
 and they got our names for campers
and they got rubber tomahawks
 and we got to make them
and they got to take us to lunch
 and we got to eat it
and they got richer
 and we got poorer
and we got stuck in their cities
 and they got to live in our countries
and they got our medicines
 and we got to heal them
and we got sick
 and they got, well, everything

and we got to say please and thank you
and good morning, america
you're welcome, y'all come
and have a nice hemisphere

then, all of a sudden, a new day dawned
and america yawned
and the people mumbled
 something about equality and the quality of life
 some new big deal to seal the bargain
 and jack and jill went to the hill
 to fetch some bills to save us
 and the united snakes of america
 spoke in that english-only forked-tongue way
 about cash-on-the-barrelhead, hand-over-fist
 in exchange for Indian homes on the termination list
 and bankers and lawyers and other great white sharks
 made buyers-market killings when more chiefs made their marks

and lots of Indians packed their bags and old-pawn
for fun with dick and jane and bussing with blondes
for a bleached-out, white-washed american morn
while we were just trying to live and get born

and a lot of young Indians got dead
in america's 2 big wars
and the little ones they tried to hide
like the my-lais
and other white lies
and the millions on the grate-nation's main streets
with holes in their pockets
and tombstones for eyes
you see, america was busy lunching
and punching clocks
(and each other, don't tell)
and pushing paper
(and each other, do tell)
and loving and leaving cabbage-patch/latch-key kids
in the middle of the road and nowhere
(where everything got touched but their hearts
where \$ bought the love they were worth)
and america's daddy and mommy looked
up from their desks
out from their ovens
over their shoulders
behind the times
down their noses
and right before their eyes
but just out of sight
behind flashlights in abandoned buildings
through crack in the walls
and in the halls of boarding schools
a lot of young Indians got dead, too
girls with bullets, booze and lysol for boyfriends
boys with nooses and razor blades for cold comfort
and a few grandmas and grandpas
on their last legs anyway

and we who were left behind
sang songs for the dead and dying
for the babies to stop crying

for the burned-out and turned-out
for the checked-out and decked-out

ain't that just like 'em

we said over cold coffee and hot tears
for getting themselves dead
forgetting to tell us goodbye
for giving america no 2-week notice
forgiving america with their bodies

ain't that just their way

to gather us up and put us down
gee, kids really do the darndest things
like get themselves dead
like a lot of them did
just yesterday and today
and a lot of young Indians got dead
faster than they could say
tomorrow

oh, say, can't you see

they learned america's song and dance
from the rockets' red glare
to god shed his light on thee
they read america's history
where they weren't
or were only bad news
they laughed when president rip van reagan
told the russians the u.s.
shouldn't have humored us
they passed when senator slender reed said
this is the best deal for your land
find another country or play this hand
they learned the lessons about columbus
in child-proof, ocean-blue rhymes
along with other whiteboy-hero signs of the times
they saw the ships sailing, again
and a future as extras
in movies where Indians don't win
they knew they were about to be discovered, again
in someone else's lost and found mind
in an old-world/bush-quayle
new age/snake-oil
re-run as much fun
as the first scent of those sailors

fresh from the hold
exhaling disease, inhaling gold

and a lot of young Indians escaped just in time
to miss the good wishes and cheer
have a happy, have a merry
have a very nice columbus year

*10 little, 9 little, 8 little Indians
7 little, sick little, live baby Indians
poor little, me little, you little Indians
the only good Indian's a dead 1*

—*suzan shown harjo*
(*on the eve of 1992*)

Morning Star Children

Morning Star radiates blessings
for Mother Earth
and all the worlds
Her brilliance is
a gift of the Spirit

Maheo sent Morning Star Woman
with Corn and Squash
and Beans and Tobacco
to nourish the People
to feed the Spirit

She delighted the People
as a shining Star Child

She inspired the People
as an Enlightened Elder

She encouraged the People
as an Everyday Woman
sparkling with hope

Maheo told the Cheyenne People:
"The Nation will be strong
So long as the hearts of the women
Are not on the ground"

Dakota and Osage People sing a song, and it is Wakan:
"We are not defeated
While the women are strong"

Messages of Creation
for all Peoples
for all Time

Messages in the hearts of women from Arawak and Acoma
as they turned away from hairy faces
and fixed their eyes on severed hands
and fixed their eyes, and fixed their eyes

Messages in the hearts of women from Washita and Palo Duro Canyon
as they were stampeded and invaded
to the sound of ponies screaming in the sunset
to the sound of screams, to the sound of screams

Messages in the hearts of women from Bosque Redondo and the
Crazy Horse Bar
as they traded themselves for their children
as they sold themselves for food and drinks
as they gave nothing away, as they gave nothing away

Messages in the hearts of women from Warm Springs to Siletz
as they end a century of missing memory
as they once again dance in emergence dresses
as they sing their lost and found song:
"They Never Touched Me"
"They Never Touched You"

Messages in the hearts of Native Women

for all who are touched in unkind ways
for all who pray to end unholy days
for all who shelter the disheartened in loving ways

"They Never Touched You"

"You Are Blessed By The Morning Star Woman
And Your Heart Is Not On The Ground"

"You Are Blessed By The Morning Star Woman
And The People Are Strong"

"You Are Blessed By The Morning Star Woman"

"You Are Blessed By The Morning Star"

"You Are A Blessed Star Child"

"You Are Blessed"

—suzan shown harjo
(1997)

Sacred Ground

eagles disappear into the sun
surrounded by light
from the face of Creation
then scream their way home
with burning messages
of mystery and power

some are given to snake doctors and ants
and turtles and salmon
to heal the world
with order and patience

some are given to cardinals and butterflies
and yellow medicine flowers
to heal the world
with joy, with joy

some are given to bears and buffalos
and human people
to heal the world
with courage and prayer

messages for holy places
in the heart of Mother Earth
deep inside the Old Stone Woman
whose wrinkles are canyons

in the roaring waters and clear blue streams
and bottomless lakes
who take what they need

in the forests of grandfather cedars
and mountains of grandmother sentinel rocks
who counsel 'til dawn

messages for holy places
where snow thunder warns
and summer winds whisper
this is Sacred Ground

Sacred Ground at Spirit Falls

where small round stones have secrets
that clear-cutters can never discover

Sacred Ground at Steptoe Butte

where wild roses in grasslands dull the roar of microwaves
and screams of Tohotonimme ponies in the night

Sacred Ground at Mount Graham

where Apaches pray for a peaceful world
invisible through the vatican telescope

Sacred Ground at Bear Butte

where Cheyennes and Lakotas hide from tourists
to dress the trees in ermine tails and red-tail hawk feathers
and ribbons of prayers to the life-givers

Sacred Ground at the San Francisco Peaks

where Navajos and Hopis dodge ski-bums and bottles
to settle the spirits
where they walk

Sacred Ground at Snoqualmie Falls

where condo-dwellers and hydro-sellers
cannot harness power
at the center of Creation

Sacred Ground at Chota

where even Tellico's dam engineers
hear Tsalagee voices
through the burial waters

Sacred Ground at Thunder Mountain and Mount Adams

Kootenai Falls and the Jemez Mountains
where vision-questers seek gifts of the Spirit
and fire clouds and walking waters stand guard

Sacred Ground at Badger Two Medicine and Crazy Mountain
and the Black Hills

Red Butte and Chief Mountain and the Sweetgrass Hills
where miners have drills for arms
and gold in their eyes

Sacred Ground at the Medicine Wheels
and all the doors to the passages of time
to Sacred Ground of other worlds
where suns light the way
for eagles to carry
messages for fires on

Sacred Ground

—*suzan shown harjo*
(1992)

Green Winter at La Push

Winter's shapelessness is here all right.
A single gull, lost in visions of the sea,
brings gifts of kelp, green shoots of spring
washing up on the shore despite the season.

He knows the explanations of the sweet ferns
waiting to upholster the forest floor,
the windy reason for the willow's skinny
leaves, the sky green and weeping silver.

But here at La Push, where the trees never lose
their color, the winter that rages in the hills
gets lost in thickets of cedar and pine.
The magic of green magic outlives the cold

season boiling its way to the sea. Some part
of us gets lost when winter lifts its way
to the creatures' wooded places. Small dreams
gather the sky into their arms, lift like songs

to the wings of a single gull where everything
remains a single chance. Along this river
a green winter is a sure sign that this year
there will be no winter in the human heart.

— *Fredrick Zydek*

A Dream of the Beginning Time

I walk the strange passions
of the world's first season,
move languid and timeless
through the urges of light.

Great drums call mountains
from the sea. They are snow-
capped gods filled with great
chants and radiant thunder.

I watch the first day sprout
its branches across the land,
the sting of life coaxing itself
into willowy shapes of green.

It is a time when animals and men
all speak the same language,
Eagle and Coyote are still friends,
Bear Mother and White Buffalo

graze along side one another
in fields of wild strawberries,
a single heron sleeps on one leg
at the edge of an endless sea,

everything that wants to be slips
from invisibility into the ripe
moments of becoming. What the world
wants to be begins its dancing.

— *Fredrick Zydek*

Moonfish

The Old Ones say they could take back
the past by singing to Moonfish
on the first night of the summer solstice,
providing the moon came full-bellied
and they caught them with their bare hands.

Moonfish—old as the germ of man—
spin low. All your brothers wait fossiled
in stone, have molded their sweet mineral
calm in the hearts of bright agates,
the powdery silt of sand and sandstone.

But your coming can call them back
to the watery stream where the sequins
of their skin rippled in the moonlight
like small fires beneath the waves.
Moonfish—old as the first fire, spin low.

For when you come back all the tribes
will gather again at the river to name
the mysteries they lost when the world
changed and cities took over the plains.
They will wade into the stream and gather

back their belief in miracles where easy
dreams roam the land like buffalo and elk.
They will take back the sky and drape
themselves in feathers of eagle, hawk and jay.
Moonfish, I'm bare-handed and still singing.

— Fredrick Zydek

In Chaco Canyon, in what is now the state of New Mexico, there is an unusual Anasazi rock painting. "With red paint on the underside of a low overhang, a Chacoan artist depicted a sun, a crescent moon, and a star, signing his work with the hand print that marks a site as sacred in the Pueblo tradition. It's possible ... that the Penasco Blanco painting represents the A.D. 1054 supernova that resulted in the formation of the Crab Nebula. That supernova would have been visible in the American Southwest at the beginning of Chaco Canyon's peak period as a cultural center. The exploding star, which would have shone brightly enough to be visible during the day, would have appeared in conjunction with a waning crescent moon."

—J. McKim Malville and Claudia Putnam
Prehistoric Astronomy in the Southwest

Chaco

Penasco Blanco, Chaco Canyon July, 1054 A.D.

Nothing is as it was
all changed now as the land absorbs
the light of this new star burning
by day.

Always the heavens have directed us
homes and shrines in accordance
that we not live against the grain
of the cosmos that we become
integral part of pulse and flow
but this new presence shining above
what can it mean?

The people look to us but no priest
can explain. Concerned faces in the village
quiet confusion in kivas
fire messages blaze nightly and
runners run the roads.

Sandstone pressing
into my back I lie
on this ledge with my paints
record mysteries of the sky.
Below, the wash all appears
as it was but the
bright light brings wonder brings fear
will the rains continue to love
this place?

Sun, I paint
moon in crescent, fiery star
my palm into pigment pressed
against rock acknowledgment
Nothing is as it was.

—Paul Young, *Chaco Canyon*
New Mexico 1992, re-vision 1996

Yanomami

Brown eyes peer from behind green leaves
watch intruders hack their way.
The quest—shiny yellow flakes.

An old story—
Black Hills, Sierra Nevada
the fever frenzy decimation.

Below vine draped trees
on shadowed jungle floor
souls of native feet speak with the giving soil.
Indigenous call this place
home.
The foreign ones call it Brazil call it resource.
Yanomami—
like Rio's street children
you have no economic value.

Eighteen more massacred.
Mourning haunts the jungle night.
To those who seek metal, so precious,
the cries
sound almost human.

—Paul Young, Bisbee, Arizona, 1993

Tarahumara

In the spirit of Columbus
Custer and Cortez
assault on the indigenous continues
long fingers reaching deep
into remote canyons
penetrating the hearts
of jungles.

Logging corporations
briefcases full of leases. The scrawl
of ignorant signatures releases
oiled machinery to slash across countryside
aftermath of denuded landscapes, plagued by erosion
as if the drought weren't enough.

Centuries ago
Tarahumara retreated to these isolated canyons—
Mexican army hadn't the heart
to follow. Now drug lords
send their executioners
terrorize people from their land
cut down corn for opium.

Dispossession follows—
down the eastern slope they stream
to beg with the others
on the gray streets of Chihuahua.

Tarahumara—that's their Spanish name—
the people call themselves Raramuri—the great runners.
But they can't run fast enough
to evade automatic weapons
and nowhere left to run besides.

—Paul Young *Barranca del Cobre, Chihuahua, Mexico, 1994*

For My Grandfather

His face has more cracks and lines in it than the hardened and
forgotten dirt
of the same lonely road that he's traveled for years.
He shuffles his feet now because he's gotten old,
but my grandfather is a warrior,
still fighting,
still fighting.

He carries an old pail to draw water from his pump.
It is almost too heavy for him to carry.
His body is tired
and his eyes are dim,
but my grandfather is a warrior,
still fighting,
still fighting.

His hair is white,
His skin is brown,
from too many days
in the morning sun,
but my grandfather is a warrior,
still fighting,
still fighting.

His hands are twisted from trouble
and times of hatred
and pain.
And though his back is bent,
it is not bent from shame,
because my grandfather is a warrior,
still fighting,
still fighting.

—R.J. St. Patrick

Night Bird's Song

How lonely the sound of a night bird
upon the darkening air.
Such a mournful, desperate cry.
I see where my people once stood,
it is empty now.
Even their bones have gone;
returned to the earth.

How lonely the sound of a night bird
upon the darkening sky.
It sounds like the crying of women
holding their dead children to their breasts.
I see where they once stood.
It is nothing but empty ground.
Even their bones have gone;
returned to the earth.

How lonely the sound of a night bird
upon the darkening breeze.
It sounds like the death songs of the Old Ones.
I see where the buffalo once stood.
How different it all is now.
No more is the land filled with them.
No more do they trample and rumble the ground
as they come like soldiers marching.
Even their bones are gone;
returned to the earth.

—R.J. St. Patrick

You Cannot Displace My Heart

Will the earth remember my name?
Will the soil remember my sorrow
as I was forced away to another place that I do not know?
Does our blood still stain the grass?
Do the mountains still echo my screams of anguish upon its
jagged face?
Does the ground still hold the bones of my Old Ones
or were they spirited away like me?
Is the sod still soaked with the tears of my people
as we walked on mile after mile
away from the place where the Creator meant for us to be?
Who will teach the children about us
after our footprints have faded with time?
Will the earth remember my name?

I look to the east and remember my home.
I will not see it again in this life.
But my spirit will return there someday.
Back to the arms of my Mother
Who has mourned her stolen children
And waits for their return.

—*R. J. St. Patrick*

On the Reservation Without Buffalo

Horses' ribs heave in heat, muscles jerk
under sweating flanks. In the pacing place
there is stampede fever, flight from the smoke
of cigarettes, smoke that rises from solitary men
smoke lacking the old power to bless like smoldering sage.

Men standing apart from one another drift in shade dreams
of council fires, of sacred tobacco burning—
their feet confined in rigid cowhide, store bought.
Better the unyielding shoe, safer now
than woman-chewed buffalo moccasins
made too pliant to hold sundance feet still.

Only the flies know enough to be frightened
by shifting horseflesh that strains
to bridle bones, to halt memory hooves
in their flight through dust clouds.

Wind stings, and dark eyes close to seal out the fence
close, to see ghost buffalo run a mild wide, a day long
to see spirit contract into busy arrowmaker
flint, shaft, bow string, bow.

Nostrils flare, manes fly
leaving behind naked tent poles
their tips leaning in
to touch lightly
like fingers meet
to lift arrow
from quiver.

—*Kennette Harrison Wilkes*

Kennette Harrison Wilkes received a master's degree in creative studies. Her poems, reviews, interviews, short stories, and novel excerpts have been published in numerous periodicals.