

Beth Brant

## This Place

“Mother, I am gay. I have AIDS.” The telephone call that it almost killed him to make. The silence. Then, “Come home to us.”

David came home because he was dying. He expected to see his place of birth in a new way, as if he were a photographer capturing scenes through diverse lenses. *Scene one: through a living man’s eyes. Scene Two: through a dying man’s eyes.* But the beauty remembered was the beauty that still existed. Nothing had changed in ten years. The water of the Bay just as blue and smooth. The white pines just as tall and green. The dirt roads as brown and rutted as the day he had left. His mother as small and beautiful, her dark hair with even more grey streaks running through the braid she wrapped around her head.

Had nothing changed but him?

He had left this place and gone to the city to look for other men like himself. He found them. He found a new life, a different life. He found so much. Even the virus that now ate at him. David came home and was afraid of death.

David could feel the virus changing his body, making marks on his insides. Outside, too, his body was marked: by the tumors growing on his face and the paleness of his skin. He worried that the virus was somehow taking away his color, bleaching the melanin that turned him polished copper in the summer and left him light terra cotta in winter. He could feel the virus at war with the melanin and he could not check the battle. He couldn’t hold this virus in his fist and squeeze the death out of it. He could only wait and look in the mirror to see the casualty of this war. David was afraid.

“Mother, am I turning white?”

“No, my baby son. You are dark and beautiful. Your hair is black and shiny as ever. Your eyes are tired, but still as brown and strong as the day you left this place.”

He knew she lied to him. Mothers lie about their children’s pain. *It will go away, they say. I’ll make it better, they say. Oh, Mother, make it better, make it go away. I’m afraid of death.*

He felt the virus eating his hair. It fell out in clumps as he combed it. His forehead got broader and receded further. The blackness of the strands had dulled to some nondescript color. His braid was thin and lifeless, not as it used to be, snapping like a whip across his back, or gliding down his back like a snake.

David’s sister brought her children to see him. They crawled on his lap and kissed him. He was afraid for them. Afraid the virus would reach out of his body and grab these babies and eat at them until they, too, disappeared in its grip. The virus put a fear in him – a fear that he could wipe out his people by breathing, by talking, by living. David saw, in his dreams, the virus eating away at this place until it was gone.

His dreams were also about a place called death. Death seemed to be a gaping hole in the world where David looked and there was nothing. He would wake from these dreams sweating, his limbs filled with pain. He had lived his life so well, so hard, clutching it to him like food, swallowing and being nourished. He wanted to greet death like that, opening his arms to it, laughing and embracing that other world. But he was afraid.

“Mother, I am afraid of death.”

“Joseph is coming to visit.”

On a day when David was seated in his chair before the window, looking out at the way the bright sun had turned everything in the yard golden, he heard the pickup truck making its way down the dirt road to the house. He also heard a voice singing. David laughed out loud. The song being sung was “All My Exes Live in Texas,” and he knew that Joseph was on his way to him.

The truck came to a screeching, convulsive stop. David’s mother went out to greet the man who jumped from the truck laughing, “Where’s the patient?” As David watched, Joseph extracted a brown paper bag and an orange-striped cat from the truck. “Meet my friend, the Prophet. You can call her Prophet.” David’s mother reached for the cat who nudged at her breast and looked into her face. Joseph kissed Grace on the cheek. Prophet licked Grace’s face. David wondered at the fact that Joseph looked the same as he had when David was a child. Dressed in faded jeans and a flannel shirt, Joseph’s face was lean and unlined. His nose was sharp and slightly curved at the end, like a bird’s beak. His eyes were black and round, reminding David again of a bird, perhaps a kestrel or a falcon. Joseph wore long, beaded earrings that draped across the front of his shirt. His hair, black and coarse, was tied back with a leather string. His fingers were covered with silver-and-garnet-studded rings, his hands delicate but used. Joseph looked at the young man in the window and lifted his hand in a greeting. Then he smiled and his face took on the unfinished look of a child. David waved back, feeling excitement – the way he used to feel before going to a party.

“This ain’t goin’ to be like any party you ever went to,” Joseph remarked as he stepped through the doorway. “Here, have a Prophet,” and he lifted the orange cat from Grace’s arms onto David’s lap.

Prophet looked intently at David’s face, then kneaded his lap and settled herself on it, where she purred. David stroked the orange fur and scratched the cat’s head. She burrowed deeper in his lap. “I would get up to

greet you, but I think Prophet's got something else in mind."

Joseph laughed. "We wouldn't want to disturb her highness. David, we have not seen each other in many years." He bent down to kiss the young man on his forehead. "You don't look so good." Joseph eyed him critically.

"Thanks. But you look the same as ever."

"You in a lot of pain," Joseph said in a statement, not a question.

"Yeah, a lot of pain. I take about fifty pills a day. They don't seem to make that much of a difference." David continued to stroke Prophet.

"You think I can cure you?"

"No."

"Good, because I can't. All of us are afraid of death, though. We don't know what to expect, what to take with us." He looked in his paper sack. "Maybe I got the right things here."

Grace went into the kitchen, and Joseph pulled up a chair and sat beside David. Looking at Prophet asleep on David's lap, Joseph remarked, "Cats is smart. This one had a brother looked just like her. I called him Tecumseh. One morning I woke up and he was gone. I asked the Prophet if she knew where her brother went. She looked at me and blinked, then turned her head away like I'd said somethin' rude. I went outside to look for Tecumseh and I found him, layin' dead under a rose bush. It was a good year for the roses, they was bloomin' to beat the band. He had chosen the red roses to die under. That was a good choice, don't you think? I buried him under that red rose bush. The old man knew what *he* wanted, but he had to let me know, me not bein' as smart as a cat. Prophet came out and sat on the grave. She sat there for three days and nights. Cats are different from us. We worry about fittin' things to our own purpose. Cats don't worry about them things. They live, they die. They get buried under a red rose bush. Smart, huh?"

"You got any spare rose bushes? Only make mine flaming pink!" David laughed, then began coughing, blood spattering the kleenex he held to his mouth.

The Prophet jumped from David's lap and sat on the floor, her back to him.

"Now I've done it," David gasped. "Come back. Here kitty, kitty, kitty."

The Prophet turned and gave him a look of contempt, her back twitching, her tail moving back and forth on the floor.

"Huh," Joseph said. "She ain't comin' back for a while. Don't like the name Kitty."

Grace came in to announce dinner. David grabbed his cane and shuffled to the table. He sat down, gasping for breath. "Takes longer every time. I think I'm losing feeling in my right leg, but what the hell. I'd crawl to the table for Mother's beef stew." He half heartedly lifted the spoon to his mouth. "My appetite's still pretty good, isn't it, Mother?"

Grace smiled at her son. "The day your appetite goes is the day I go."

She had made fresh bread to eat with the stew and set dishes of pickles and cheese on the table. Joseph rubbed his hands together in glee. "This looks good!" They ate, talking local gossip, the Prophet sitting daintily beside Joseph's chair. David's hands shook as he barely fed himself, spilling stew on his blue shirt. Grace fussed and tied a napkin around his neck. David smiled, "Next, she'll be feeding me or giving me a bottle." He winked at his mother and blew a kiss across the table to her. She caught it and put it on her cheek.

Joseph watched while he fed bits of meat to Prophet. He looked in his sack and pulled out a dish covered in waxed paper. "I made these this mornin'. Butter tarts. The flakiest crust you'll find anywhere. You gotta use lard, none of that shortenin'. Lard is what makes a crust that'll melt in your mouth. It's my gift to you, David."

As David bit into the sweetness of the tart, he looked at Joseph, his earrings swinging against his shoulders, his hands making patterns in the air as he described the making of the tarts, and David thought, *He acts like a queen*. He looked harder at Joseph, thinking, if you put him in a city, in a gay bar, the old nelly would fit right in. David laughed out loud.

Grace looked startled, but Joseph grinned and nodded his head. "Catchin' on, my young friend?"

As he helped clear the table, David smiled with his new knowledge. Collapsing into his reclining chair, David swallowed his medicine and laid his head back, closing his eyes. He could hear the murmurs between Joseph and Grace, his mother always a living, vivid presence in his life – his reason for hanging on so long to life. "I love you, Mother," he whispered. He opened his eyes to the dry touch of Joseph's fingers on his face. His mother was bringing out the moccasins she had made from rabbit hide and had beaded the nights they sat and watched TV She presented them to Joseph. He unlaced his red hightops and slipped the beautiful moccasins on his feet. He put his feet out in front of him in admiration. He got up and walked in them. He jumped and clicked his heels together. "Thank you, Grace. You haven't lost your touch, have you? Now it's time for you to go. Don't come back till the mornin'."

Grace gathered her things together and stood looking at David. Her face shifted with emotions: sorrow, pride, fear, love. She kissed her son and hugged Joseph. They watched her leave.

Joseph turned and asked David, "You tryin' to be brave for your mom? Let me tell you somethin' about mothers. They know everything. She feels what you're goin' through. Can't hide it, even though you try."

“No! I don’t want her to know how bad it gets. I can see it in her face, she gets crazy not knowing what to do for me. But this is the real crazy part, I don’t want to let go of her. That death ... that place...she won’t be there.”

The Prophet jumped on Joseph’s lap and began washing herself. “That’s true. Her time isn’t here yet. David, you have lived your life in the way that was best for you. You think Grace didn’t know why you left here? Think she didn’t know you was gay? You can’t tell someone like Grace not to go crazy when her son is dyin’. You can’t tell her how to mourn you. And you can’t be draggin’ her along with you when you leave this place.”

“I don’t want to do that. I feel like a little kid when I was scared of a nightmare. Mother would make it go away. Death is like that nightmare. I gotta meet it on my own, but I’m scared.”

“Yes, I know you are,” and Joseph reached for David’s hand. David’s bony fingers closed over Joseph’s.

“When I lived in the city I used to get so homesick for this place. I’d picture the way it looked – the sky, the trees, my relatives. I’d dream it all up in my mind, but I never thought I would come back. I made my life in the city thinking that I couldn’t come back here. My people don’t want queers, faggots living among them. But now, some of us are coming home to die. Where else would we go but back to our homes, our families? What a joke, eh? They couldn’t deal with my life, now they gotta deal with my death. God, I think about the guys that really can’t go home. They have to die alone in some hospital, or even on the street. There was guy I knew, Ojibwe, and he died outside his apartment. I heard about it after it happened and I got in this rage! People just walking by him, probably thinking, oh here’s another drunk Indian, just walking by him! And him, getting cold and no one would touch him.” Tears were moving down David’s face. He lifted his hand to wipe his face. “That’s when I hated being an Indian. My own people, hateful to that guy. He was scared to go home. Probably thought they’d throw him out again, or stone him or something.”

“Well, Indians got no immunity from hatefulness or stupidity, David. Maybe he had made his choice to die alone. Maybe he didn’t have a home to go to.”

David looked shocked. “No, that can’t be true. I know what it’s like. I grew up here, remember? It seemed like I had to make a choice, be gay or be an Indian. Some choice, eh? So I moved to the city.” David sighed, then began to cough.

Joseph stroked Prophet, whose ears were twitching. “Even a city can’t take the Indian part away. Even a virus can’t do that, my young friend.” He dipped into his sack and held out a piece of metal to David. “Look in this. What do you see?”

David held the piece of metal to his face. He saw a blurred image of himself, tumors covering his face. When he tilted the piece of tin, he saw himself laughing and dressed in his finest clothes, dancing in the bar in the city. He tilted it yet another way and saw himself dancing at a pow wow, his hair fanning out as he twirled and jumped. In another tilt, he saw himself as a child, sitting on Grandmother’s lap.

“Which one is you?” Joseph asked.

“All of them.”

“When the Prophet was a kitten,” Joseph said, petting the now sleeping cat, “she used to keep me awake at night. She’d jump on my head just as I was dozin’ off. I’d knock her away and turn over, but just when that sweet moment of sleep was callin’ me, she’d jump on my head again. I thought maybe she was hungry and I’d get up to feed her. She’d eat, then start the whole routine all over again. She even got Tecumseh in the act. While she’d jump on my head, he’d get under the covers and bite my feet. I finally gave up and got out of bed and went outside and looked at the sky. About the fifth night of these carryin’ ons, *I really* looked at the sky. I saw all the stars as if they was printed on the insides of my eyes. I saw the moon like she really was. And I started to pray to Sky Woman, blinkin’ and shinin’ up there. She answered me back, too, all because the cats was smarter than me. Nothin’ hides in front of old Sky Woman. You might think *she’s* hidin’ when you can’t see her, but she’s there, checkin’ everything out. People can’t hide from her. And people can’t hide from themselves.”

“Is that what I’ve done?” David asked, his face sad. “I’ve always been proud of being Mohawk, of being from here. I *am* proud of being gay even though everywhere I turned, someone was telling me not to be either. In the city they didn’t want me to be Native. In this place, they don’t want me to be gay. It can drive you crazy! *Be this. Be that. Don’t be this way.* So you get to be like an actor, changing roles and faces to please somebody out there who hates your guts for what you are.” David laughed. “When I was diagnosed I thought, well, now I don’t have to pretend anymore. It’s all out in the open. I’m going to die, and why did I waste my time and tears worrying about all this other stuff? I got real active in AIDS work. I wanted to reach out to all the Indian gays I knew, form support groups, lean on each other. ‘Cause the other guys just didn’t understand us. I was a fireball for two years, real busy, but then I got too sick to do much of anything. My friends were good, but they couldn’t take care of me anymore. I came home. Here I sit, Grandfather, waiting for death, but scared shitless.”

Joseph began to hum and sing. “Crazy... I’m crazy for feelin’ so lonely.” He stuck his hand inside the sack and handed David a piece of paper.

*We, as the original inhabitants of this country, and sovereigns of the soil, look upon ourselves as equally independent and free as any other nation or nations. This country was given to us by the Great Spirit above;*

*we wish to enjoy it, and have our passage along the lake, within the line we have pointed out. The great exertions we have made, for this number of years, to accomplish a peace and have not been able to obtain it; our patience, as we have observed, is exhausted. We, therefore, throw ourselves under the protection of the Great Spirit above, who will order all things for the best. We have told you our patience is worn out, but that we wish for peace and whenever we hear that pleasing sound, we shall pay attention to it. Until then, you will pay attention to us.*

"My ancestor. Quite a man." David held the paper in his thin hands.

"Yes, he was. Diplomats, they called him and his sister. We call them warriors."

David read the words again. "Grandfather, I would like to be a warrior like this man. I would like to see death coming and run to meet it, not afraid, not hiding behind my mother."

"Who says you ain't a warrior? David, the bravest people I knew were the ones that lived and kept on livin'. Those two, Tyendinaga and Molly, they fought to keep us alive as a people. Looks to me like you're as fine a warrior as they was. David, you lived!"

The Prophet suddenly came awake and stretched to her full length. She sat up and washed her face. She blinked at David, her yellow eyes staring at him until he looked away. She jumped off Joseph's lap and settled herself in front of David's feet.

"Trust the Prophet to interrupt the proceedings. Let's go outside and sit on the porch." Joseph stood up and stretched his arms and shook his legs.

David reached for his cane, his body curved and stooped. Joseph got a blanket to wrap him in against the cool night air. David made his way toward the front door. Joseph went to the kitchen and brought out two mugs of coffee and the rest of the butter tarts. They settled on the porch steps.

"David, look at the moon. When she's a crescent like that, I think Sky Woman's smilin' at us. More than likely, laughin'. She has big jobs to do like pullin' in the tides, and we sit here yappin' about life and death."

"The moon is beautiful. Somehow, it never seemed to shine like that in the city." David began coughing again, his body shaking and throbbing.

Joseph held onto him until the shaking stopped. "David, you're just a rez boy, ain't you? Nothin' looks as good as here, eh? But I think so too. One time, a long time ago, I thought about leavin' here."

"Why didn't you? It can't have been easy for you. Or were things different then? Maybe not so homophobic, not so much hatred?"

"Oh, things was bad. But not in that way. There was hatred, alright. The kind that makes people turn to the bottle or put a gun in their mouth and shoot." David winced, remembering his father's death. Joseph continued. "That kind of hatred, self hatred. I stayed because I was supposed to. I fought it, but I had to stay. It was my job." He began a song. "*Your cheatin' heart will tell on you. You'll cry and cry, the way I do.* Sing with me, David." And they sang until the last words were finished and Joseph hugged David.

"I thought medicine men were supposed to chant and cast spells, not sing old Hank Williams' songs," David teased.

Joseph looked surprised. "Oh, some do. Some do. But how many medicine people you know, David?"

"Only you, Grandfather."

"Well then, there you go. What you see is what you get."

"When my father died, I remember being shut out from what was going on. I know they were all trying to protect me and Sister, but we were scared. One day he was there, the next day he wasn't. He wasn't the greatest dad, but he was ours! You were there, Grandfather. Why did he do it?"

Joseph took a deep breath and let it out. It lingered in the night air like a puff of smoke. "Because he didn't know any other way. Are you judgin' him, David? 'Cause if you are, you can forget it. Too many people made a judgment on your father all his life. He doesn't need yours to add to it." Joseph's face became angry, then softened as he took David's hand again. "Children get scared. We fail you because we fail ourselves. We think *you'll* get over it because you're younger and have fewer memories. Grownups are fools, David. Your father didn't know what else to do with his life, a life he thought was worthless. So he shot it away."

David wept. "I've thought about shooting mine away, like him. Like father, like son, isn't that what the people would say? So, I didn't, all because I didn't want to be mentioned in the same breath with him. Pride, that's all that kept me going. And I couldn't do the same thing to my mother and sister that he did to us."

"You're a lot like your dad. Sweet, like he was. Oh yes," Joseph looked at David's disbelieving face, "a sweet man. When we was at residential school together, he's the one that took me under his wing. He fought the grownups and the other kids that ganged up on me. He was always my friend. He didn't fail me, ever. And I tried not to let him down, but I wasn't enough to keep that gun out of his hand. Nobody was enough, David. Not you, or your mom or your sister. Don't you judge him. He wouldn't have judged you." Joseph raised his face to the crescent moon and closed his eyes.

David felt a small piece of pain dislodge from inside him. It floated away in the night's darkness. "Thank you for telling me that, Grandfather. I always loved him."

Joseph smiled, his crooked teeth shining white in the moon's light. "Love is a funny thing, David. It stays constant, like her," he pointed to the crescent. "When you cut through all the crap, the need and greed part, you got the good, lastin' stuff. She knew that," and he pointed again to the moon. "She put herself up there to remind us of her love, not to admire her pretty shine. Of course, the pretty shine doesn't hurt, does it?" And they laughed together.

David said, "I met my pretty shine in the city. He will always be the love of my life, even though he doesn't feel that way about me. We're still friends.... God, the city was so different for me – I loved it! Excitement. All those gorgeous men. If I'd stayed here, I wouldn't have known the world was full of gay people. If I'd stayed here though, maybe I wouldn't have gotten AIDS." David pulled the blanket closer around himself and shivered.

Joseph squeezed David's wasting fingers. "Do you regret any of it?"

"No. I've thought about that a lot. I only wish I could have stayed, but I thought I had to make the choice and don't know what would have happened if I hadn't left."

Joseph rustled in his sack. "Who can read the future? Well, maybe I can, but can you read the past as well? Here, take this."

David held out his hand. A dry snakeskin was deposited into his dry palm. The skin was faded but still showed orange-and-black markings.

"I saw this snake shed her skin. I was walking in the bush and heard a very small noise. I watched her wriggle out of her old life, just like she was removin' an overcoat. It took this snake a long time, but then, there she was in her new overcoat, her old skin just lyin' there waitin' for me to pick it up and give it to you."

"Thank you, Grandfather. It's beautiful." David touched the snakeskin and looked into Joseph's face. "I think it would be wonderful if we could shed ourselves like this and have a brand-new, beautiful skin to face the world. Or maybe, to face death."

"We do, David. A snake doesn't put on a new skin with different colors. She has the same one, just layers of it. She doesn't become a new snake, but older and wiser with each shedding. Humans shed. We don't pay attention to it, though. We get new chances all the time. A snake makes use of her chances; that's why she's a snake and we're not. We never know when we got a good thing goin'."

"That's true! Mother used to tell me I was lucky, I had it good compared to other little boys. She was right, of course." David giggled into his hand. "She is always right. Why is that, Grandfather?"

"Now you got me. That's something I'll never know either!"

They laughed, the sound filling the night air. Prophet scratched at the door to be let out. "The Prophet's afraid she's missin' out on something. Those butter tarts, maybe." Joseph got up to open the door.

The Prophet streaked out the open door and ran to the cluster of apple trees. She climbed one and sat on a branch. David could see the yellow glow of her eyes as she watched the men drink their coffee and bite into the tarts.

Joseph remarked between bites, "Prophet does it every time. I'd sit around all night talkin' if she didn't remind me why I was here."

David started to shake. "I'm afraid, Grandfather."

"Yes, I know, David. We'll go inside, and you can lay down while I make some special tea. I'm here with you, David. I won't leave you."

David clutched the snakeskin in his hand and struggled to his feet. He made his way into the house and to the couch where he started coughing and spitting up blood. Joseph cleaned David's face and wrapped the blanket tightly around his skinny body. He went to the kitchen, and David could hear him singing, "I fall to pieces... each time I see you again." David smiled, the voice reassuring to him.

"The Prophet's still in that apple tree, starin' at the house," said Joseph, as he brought a steaming mug of liquid to David.

David sipped the tea and made a face. "What is this stuff? It tastes like wet leaves!"

"It is wet leaves. Drink up. It's good for what ails you."

"Yeah, right," David smiled, "I notice you're not drinking any."

"Well, I'm not the sick one, am I?"

David drank the brew, watching Joseph walk around the room, picking up books and stacking them neatly, straightening a picture hanging on the wall, tidying a lamp table. "There's a dust rag in the broom closet. The rug could use a shake and the windows need a wash," David said teasingly.

"You're a regular Henny Youngman, ain't you?"

"Who?"

"All finished?" Joseph pointed to the mug. "If you want more, you can't have it. I only brought enough for one cup."

David pushed the mug toward Joseph. "Please, no more. I think I'll survive without it."

"Ah, survival. Let me tell you about that one." Joseph sat on the couch at David's feet.

David felt heavy in his body. He tried to lift his hand, but it was too much of an effort. He tried to speak, but his voice wouldn't move out of him. He looked at Joseph who was talking, but his voice was thin and far away

He saw that Prophet had come back into the house and was sitting on Joseph's lap. The Prophet stared at David with her yellow eyes and smiled at him. Was that a smile? What was that tea? Wet leaves... and David was falling was falling back into wet leaves and it was autumn the air smelled like winter he was a boy a boy who jumped up from wet leaves and ran he ran he was chasing something he felt so good so good this is what childhood is you run you laugh you open your mouth you feel the wind on your tongue the sun on your head the apple trees were giving up their gifts of fruit you picked an apple you feel you taste the juice running down your throat the apple made a loud crunch as you bit and the swallows in the tree were waiting for the core to be thrown down so they could share the fruit of the tree the geese were flying you ran you ran into the cornfield and scared the pheasant who was picking at the seed you laughed you laughed it was a perfect day you picked up a feather and put it in your pocket the day was perfect when you were a child you ran you laughed you played you were loved you loved you were a child it was good so good good to be a child in this place this place this place never changed this place this place.

David opened his eyes. The Prophet was washing her tail. Joseph held a turtle rattle in his left hand. He was talking... *and then the church people sent their missionaries here to teach us to be christian but we...*

David was falling he fell into the sound of the turtle's rattle he fell into the turtle's mouth he shook his body shook and ... *fought them ...* he fell into the sound of the rattle he was the rattle's sound the music he was dancing dancing with the first man he ever loved they were dancing holding holding the music the music the turtle's music was in them through them in them ... *killed us ...* he went home he went with the first man he ever loved the music was beating was beating their hearts the rattle the music they fell onto the bed the music the music touched them the turtle touched them the rattle touched them they touched they touched the touching was music was music his body singing music his body the rattle of the turtle the first man he loved ... *we fought back ...* their bodies singing shaking joining joining everything was music was music so good so good good the first man he loved Thomas Thomas ... *they kept killing us off ...* Tommy Tommy singing sighing joining ... *but we ...* singing our bodies singing Tommy David Tommy Tommy ... *survived...*

David's eyes opened. The room was dark. The Prophet was staring, smiling, her eyes brilliant yellow. Joseph was staring also, his eyes sending out shafts of brilliance, laser beams into his soul.

"Grandfather."

Joseph held up the rattle and sang a song with no words, a song in a high, quivering voice. Joseph's face changed shape. He became a cat. The Prophet sat smiling, her teeth white in the dark room. Joseph sang and became a wolf, lemon-yellow eyes steady on David. Joseph sang and he became a snake hissing his song, his eyes sending out shards of light. Joseph sang and shook the turtle. He sang.

"Grandfather."

David was falling he fell into the song of the cat the song of the wolf the song of the snake the song of the turtle he fell he fell into the turtle's mouth the turtle's song he was shaking was shaking his grandmother was singing was singing a song a song in Indian his grandmother was singing singing he was singing with Grandmother he was sitting on Grandma's lap her lap she was holding him close so close ... *our people survived ...* she sang his mother sang his sister sang his father sang he sang he was singing in Indian Indian the voices the songs in Indian ... *the sicknesses came...* singing singing his grandmother holding him his mother his father singing ... *measles, smallpox...* Grandmother talking singing in Indian the language the song of Indian the people the song Grandma's hair brushing against his face as she whispered and told him he ... *AIDS...* was an Indian Indian Mohawk singing songs Mohawk the voices Kaniienka 'ha'ka the song the song of this place this Indian place this place.

The rattle was silent. The Prophet was sitting in a hump, the fur around her neck electric, like an orange ruff. Joseph sat, his laser eyes bright in the face of an old, old man. He spoke, his voice not audible, the words not recognizable, and David heard.

"They took parts of us and cut them up and threw them to the winds. They made lies we would believe. We look for the parts to put ourselves back together. To put the earth back together. It is broken. We look for truth to put us all together again. There is a piece here. A part there. We scavenge and collect. Some pieces are lost. We will find them. Some parts are found, and we do not see them yet. We gather the pieces and bring them together. *We* bring them together. *We* make the truth about ourselves. *We* make the truth."

David was falling was falling he fell he fell into the sound of the ancient voice the ancient words he was falling into the sounds of screaming screaming in his face dirty Indian faggot fucking faggot the voices screaming you dirty Indian you the sound of fists of fists the sound of hate the sound of hate you dirty Indian you dirty faggot the sound of hate the sound of blood the taste of blood in his mouth the taste the hate the hate ... *we collect the parts that have been damaged...* the hate the pain as they raped him you dirty Indian faggot the hate the blood the rape the sound of rape ... *we hunt for the pieces...* the hate the pain the fear the dirty Indian faggot ... *we gather it all together...* you filthy Indian scum you dirty you dirty you dirty ... *we are resisters, warriors...* you dirty Indian you dirty faggot the rape the sound of you dirty filthy ... *we do not believe the lies they ...* the taste the taste the taste of hate in his mouth.

David cried out. Joseph stroked his thinning hair, the turtle held over his body. "They hurt us in so many

ways. The least of what they did was to kill us. They turned us into missing parts. Until we find those missing parts we kill ourselves with shame, with fear, with hate. All those parts just waitin' to be gathered together to make us. Us. A whole people. The biggest missing piece is love, David. *Love!*"

The Prophet leapt in the air and hissed. She leapt again and knocked the turtle rattle back into Joseph's lap.

"The Prophet says we are not finished. Who am I to argue with *her?*"

David tugged at the man's arm. "Joseph. Grandfather. I am so thirsty, so thirsty."

David was falling was falling into the shake of the rattle he fell he fell into the turtle's mouth he fell he was flying he flew he was inside the turtle the turtle shook he fell into voices voices asking him are you ready his heart his heart was beating are you ready his heart grew larger his heart was beating his heart the turtle asked him are you ready his grandmother held out her hand and touched him are you ready are you ready his grandmother touched his heart are you ready his father touched his heart are you ready the people held out their hands are you ready he reached for their hands his heart was beating inside the turtle a drum a drum are you ready Turtle touched his heart are you ready he fell he put out his arms he held out his arms I am ready they touched him I am ready I am ready I am ready.

David opened his eyes. The taste of tears was in his mouth. "I saw it." Prophet jumped delicately on David's chest and licked the salt tears from his face. She sat back on her haunches and watched David speak. "I saw my grandmother, my father. They touched me." He began coughing again, retching blood.

Joseph held a towel to David's mouth and touched the young man's face. "You found your parts, your pieces." Digging into his sack, he pulled out a white feather. "This is from a whistling swan. They stop here in the spring before goin' on to Alaska. The thing about them – they never know what they'll find when they get there. They just know they got to get there. When our bodies are no longer here, *we* are still here." He stood up, his joints creaking and snapping. "Your mother is comin'. The sun is real bright today. It's a good day to go." He scooped Prophet up from David's lap and draped her across his shoulder.

"Thank you, Grandfather," David whispered, his breath coming in ragged bursts.

David heard him go out the front door. He couldn't see, but he heard Joseph talking to the Prophet. He heard the truck door slam and the engine start its rattling and wheezing. David moved his hands on the blanket to find the tin, the snakeskin, his ancestor's words, the feather. He touched them and felt Joseph's presence. The sound of his mother's car made him struggle to sit up. He heard the door open and the footsteps of his mother coming into the room. He felt her standing by him, her cool fingers touching his face and hands.

He opened his mouth to say good-bye.