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Call it instinct] [Poems and essays]

Mandy Smoker Broaddus

The University of Montana

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Call it Instinct

by

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Mapping / 1  
Territorial / 2  
Frazer, Montana / 3  
Grandfather poem / 4  
Lies lies lies / 5  
Venom / 6  
On leave / 7  
Intertribal / 8  
Assemblages / 9  
From a tin box / 10  
Can you feel the Native American in me / 11  
From the river’s edge / 12  
Variola / 13  
The Necessary Bullet / 18  
Casualties / 20  
The offering / 22  
Untitled / 25  
The hi-line / 26  
Seven days is never enough / 27  
Migratory / 30  
Several poems for the non-Indian in me / 32  
Forward and reverse / 34  
Call it instinct / 35  
Letter to David James Duncan, February 16, 2003 / 36  
Near the White River / 37  
Full moon over North Dakota, President’s Day / 38  
For everything/ 40  
Another attempt at rescue / 41
For my mother, Yvonne Smoker Broaddus

Ina, je.
Mapping

There are stories to be let loose with comb and water:

*Mikushi,* my grandmother, who stood among the warriors as the bones on her breastplate jingled and she was proud.

The young niece who drives hastily into ditches and thinks of forgiveness as the car turns over and over.

A son who will tighten copper bells to thin ankles and then fancy dance among fluorescent feathers.

The cousin who chose not to cry out when the walls of her Chevy burst around her in flame.

One nephew who returns from living in the city, only to realize how much can change, and how little.

We gather these up again on shoulders and around waists where they endure. This begins and does not end with a secret: we know only this route home.
territorial

as the river drafts a new course
the bank grows steeper
more the antagonist

(and these stories we are born into
they are just as conflicted—my own
and my mother’s)

we do not know how to witness
this change and so what do we make
of the silt

what do we make
of the insufferable heat wave
she is born within

even the insects so rampant
and wild in september
hold themselves
to small pockets of earth
i too invent winter
callous and frozen shut

in the nearly broke-down
car she opens the door
to the highway and asks

why—not of the storm
but of me these
arrivals

are they false
record or the stubborn
tangling of leaves

will i grow to be as unforgiving
let them say no you were born
into a rain-filled month say no you were

born here – look again
the river is turning back
stems in their moment of breaking
Do you remember the place
where a dusty afternoon
smells of old buffalo
who speak their thoughts as trains
rattle by?

You never know who might be listening.

They know all about this
this place
this moment
this endless grating vibration that is the very
crushing of their own bones.

I have seen these ancestors birth calves,
my own memories held within tiny hooves.

We shift together between these barbed wire
fabrications
name together lost cousins
who refused to cross on over
to the other side.

We all know
that our search must
begin
again
Grandfather poem

His words are the ones no longer spoken, rising instead from the steam in a kettle on the blackened wood stove. He is almost blind but pours the cups with a steady hand. *Coffee for this granddaughter, nighttime is on her mind.* In his cabin he is drumming, singing and the words are not so full of pain.

_Oyade wihamna. Hageji._
_Iyuha ezhedu wihamnabi._
_Oyade wihamna._

I pack fresh tobacco, begin the long walk. Winds cross and cut over ravine, plateau and ravine again. Once I have arrived I enter a door which faces south and I do not feel ashamed for entering this way. I think of a mother and father in sleep. I know then of the distances we will devise, navigate imperfectly.

_Oyade wihamna. Hageji._
_Iyuha ezhedu wihamnabi._
_Oyade wihamna._

My grandfather and I sweep down through the yielding riverbed, walk the quiet rushes of the Mni Shoshe, then move north, to higher ground. He motions toward the ponies as they rise up and release their tears, large drops the size of ripe apples. They dance then, as the mother and father shift in sleep, dreaming to the rhythm of horses hooves.

_Oyade wihamna. Hageji._
_Iyuha ezhedu wihamnabi._
_Oyade wihamna._
Lies lies lies

heyoka, my tricky one
is it up or down—danger or safety sitting at my toes

don't talk to me because I am never lonely

wheat fields turn fiercely silver
against wintry skies

i begin to howl at crescent moons
pale as the skin on the soles of my feet

he asks me to dance again
I say you must give me another year

don't invite me in because my belly is always full

turquoise dreams swallowed by glaciers
the size of ten thousand buffalo

train tracks rattle through nightmares as my brothers
find shelter in their alcoholic love

mountains never really move
only whisper that maybe we should begin with a pebble

if you come looking, I'll say no one is home

heyoka you laugh, pain stands guard between cackles
living in two ways is never easy

maybe tomorrow things will be different
and you can speak the truth to me

*Heyoka:* A cultural, trickster-like figure among the Sioux and Assiboine, often referred to as contrary.
We are the kids outside the bingo hall. My brother is inside calling the numbers as they show their faces on the fluorescent ping-pong balls, my mother helps to serve Indian tacos to all the old people, my auntie plays with three cards and her own fierce luck that makes people wonder. We are all outside in June, charged by mosquitos who aim for the spots we can’t see—behind kneecaps, in the parts of our dark hair, on the edges of ear bone. We forget all about our boredom, the blood and the bites when one of our cousins yells he’s found a rattlesnake in the tall grasses around the corner. We all run to see it, to hear it, to get close enough to tell stories about it later in the summer. One of the older boys gathers his young courage and moves toward it with a stick. He realizes before the rest of us that all it is is the long shredded skin of a rattler that has moved on, probably down toward the river. He picks the discarded shell up with his knobby birch stick and then throws it high into the air. We all run and scream, afraid of poisons and pain. We cannot say enough about the poisons and pain.
On leave

Several of my cousins lean up against the house taking long drags from the pack of Marlboro’s we share. We have always been this way – addicted and generous. An auntie has asked our family to come for a feed, to welcome back her son from the Army. While telling stories of drill sergeants and mess hall food he laughs a new, peculiar laugh. Meanwhile a pow wow tape plays from inside the open garage where two old uncles think to themselves from the safety of its shadows. They know their nephew is leaving out the details of all the extra miles he’s had to run, the sit-ups he’s had to perform. They are grateful he keeps their secrets too. We keep eating, though we are growing full with the sounds of Assiniboine deep in mouthfuls of boiled meat and chokecherry soup. No one thinks to say we’re missing the wild turnips still simmering in a pot on the stove.
Intertribal

We dance to our clan song, wearing the red shawls from a cousin’s give-away. We step carefully, shoulder to shoulder, hair dyed – all of us girls wanted to try black cherry last time. Still, dust from under the arbor turns our hair gray. We begin to look like our mothers. This makes old women resting in folding chairs grow nervous. They sit along the outskirts of the dance circle and whisper about us, this next group of Indian girls, all cousins, who come from Frazer. They know it will be us who stop their grandsons to talk after the pow wow. It will also be us who sing to them in the early morning hours, hold them, and ask them to stay.
I hastily dug broken glass out of my little sister’s toe as she refused to cry. She knew I might slap her cheeks if she did: what shattered glass on the back patio can make happen. You must understand, we were not allowed to run near the pool. Recently I have heard from a friend that her next move might be all the way to Florida. Does she remember the sound of gulf waters as we woke one morning when we were just nine and thirteen? Our dad drove all night from Atlanta just so our breathing could follow the cadence of waves. We spent a day gathering fractured seashells and worn-down bits of broken glass. Our favorite was the particular color of green from 7-up bottles flushed by sand. Eventually things would change, we could no longer live under the same roof or even speak on the phone. Somewhere too along the way her favorite color became turquoise, mine red. We are still searching out a pattern among these differences, our lives.
From a tin box

in my uncle’s old army chest the teeth of an elk rattle – a full grown male elk who gave up his life one December. The chest is standard issue, safe on the side of my uncle’s bed. Every morning toes touch down, four inches from the metal, from the strong ivory-tinted teeth that listen for this awakening. He smiles at this, smiles at their intertwining. He calls the teeth a shelter, a low ridge stemming new grasses. My uncle opens the chest and gathers them into the shadow of his thick, cupped palms. He confides in them a dream from the night before, ever careful to listen for its meaning as the teeth click quietly together and sing.
Can you feel the Native American in me

We pull into dirt driveway in Marla’s blue Celica. The car came from her 18 money last year and it’s got only one dent on the side from a white girl in Wolf Point who slammed the door of her boyfriend’s Ford pick-up into the passenger side of Marla’s then new car. Marla was pissed, got out to kick the girl’s ass but they sped out of the Town Pump’s parking lot too fast. That girl was scared. Marla came back to the car and we laughed at that dent, but most of all we laughed at that fear. Driveway to uncle’s house, we’re bumping Tupac, get out, step into sweat lodge. Got a sick auntie. Take in a towel, leave out hip-hop beat, add in hand drum. Our uncle forgives us this time for being late and we are more sorry for this than we were for quitting the basketball team or for getting pregnant last year.
From the river’s edge

Is it poetry to say that each time I cross over a certain bridge on the Yellowstone I remember the way green vinyl felt on the back of my legs instead of how my own mother’s feet felt in my hands, stiff from death. I did not know that a poet could feel words rising from drops of sweat around her knees or that what my palms pressed to was only silence. Can a poet turn around instead and speak of a second version of her mother? One in which she lives in a silent cave where she allows no visitors, gives no interviews. Her memoir is being written there by a shadow that is seven feet tall. This shadow can hold no pen or pencil, both hands missing. My living mother dreams of new waters which have no adequate translation.
Variola or When a body loses its name

"Tomorrow is promised to no one."
- Assiniboine saying

"Could it not be contrived to send the Small Pox among those disaffected tribes of Indians? We must on this occasion use every stratagem in our power to reduce them."
Lord Jeffrey Amherst, 1763
Commanding General of British Forces in North America

***** *

We pass this on, one
to another, lose count.
He bestows gifts that will
cramp pore. We accept.
Skin assembles itself into
grave without ground.

This is how pocked markings cris-
cross our bodies. He says
there is a message taking root
in the space of shoulder blade
to blade --
an alphabet:
marks made by hand
that speak on brittle paper.

He writes of his life, the future --
words that seem to say
we will not be stopped.

Pock-markings on skin become
first signature with no hand,
no tendon left
to scratch or scrawl.
Sweat seeps from the inside,
fires stop burning outside.
We become cleared space.

Today we think of blindness.

*** ***
Our nation is called Village of Rock People.
When the French people arrived, that is how they named us.
We are known as the Little Girl’s band.

A long time ago, in one year, only little girls were born — there were twenty five of them.

At that time there were many of our people
We numbered ten thousand and because of this, we were strong.

At that time the Light was our Chief.
The Light traveled east, down the river and visited with President Andrew Jackson.

The President shook the Light’s hand and said, “I am your friend.”
The two had a photo taken together.

But the Light did not know this President, we did not know how things would be.
The President and all his friends laughed when the boat left to bring the Light home.

This was 167 years ago.

This is how it happened.

**** **

Stage One: “Symptoms appear suddenly. High fever, chills, dorsal-lumbar pain, myalgias and prostration. Nausea and vomiting also common.”

***** *

A child should not know these words, but the curse is still there, secure
in the girl’s acrid mouth.
She grinds small teeth
and would like to be set loose,
away from the body and ache
and never enough water.
She digs into prairie dog tunnel,
where dirt smells of sour meat.
Deeper underground is where
she knows the water will be.
From their crowded dens the prairie dogs
begin to click their small tongues.

She knows then that there will be
no water. The animals gather
her near, tell her more:
the waste and the ruin and all
of what will not be stopped.
She is grateful that here, in these
dark burrows, is where she will remain.

*** ***

When the Light came home
we stood on the banks of the Missouri
as the steam boat arrived.
When we saw the Light, we were glad
He brought many gifts home to share.
He had a big give-away that day.
He shook hands with his father Left
Hand
and gave him a heavy Hudson Bay Coat.
To his good friend who always helped
him
he gave a beautiful red prayer cloth.
And then he returned to his lodge to
give other gifts away to his family.
In two days his daughter became sick
with chills all over her body.
This was a bad sickness, the small pox.
Stage Two: “After 2 to 4 days the fever will relent and a rash will appear on the face and inside of the eyes. Rash will subsequently cover the entire body.”

***** *

One old woman looks to the future, flesh peeling, eyes cloudy and sees a man circling her on the plain, a flame making motions of a dance she has never seen. He throws his limbs about in wild, disjointed movements. She thinks of a dying birch, branches tossed in strong winds. It is struck with the lightning burning from her cheekbones, splintering into silver white shards which plant themselves again.

* *****

Stage Three: “Skin lesions evolve into vesicles and pustules and finally into dried scabs that fall off after 3 to 4 weeks. Death or blindness most often occurs.”

*** ***

Wana wichoyazambi.

Amnigiya napab.I.
Azhazhana wana yaza.
Tawinju, chinjabi kowa t?abi.
Estenax t?inkt.
Wana onowa waka tawa nowa.

Ahagam, winchinjana wazhi omaka doba ehanki
Paha saba hinkna hegisu.
Mini shoshe gakna.

The disease is among us, growing stronger.
The people try to scatter, flee. Finally, The Light grows sick too. His wife and children are already gone. He will die soon and meet them. He is now singing his sacred song

The last is a little girl. She is only four years old. Her hair is black and loosely braided. She waits by the River.
There is body and body
and no sight.

No one left to mourn
in the right way.

Scaffolds cannot be placed
on bare hills.

Possessions are not burned
to carry on into the next world.

Our bodies remain in the open –
out in the winter as it turns.

The skin of two hundred lodges
flaps in the blowing snow.
The Necessary Bullet

[begin excited, anticipatory voice]  
surely this is the route, the very route

[lose the excited, anticipatory voice]  
... we never once moved across. in how many ways can we make this argument?

Asia is the blanket flashed across eyelids  
the final scene unwinding, crumbling  
against black edges.

[movie set make-up trailer, artist applies heavy bronzer with care]  
we are our own proof

our language, july’s mosquitos, a man  
with medicine all within three-four-five dimensions as frozen waters subside.  
it was the shape of our unspoken names  
that etched out badlands and red rock plateau.

[university library, child seated among high book stacks]  
we will not ask again – do not use myth or legend.

another antelope crests the hills to the north  
of a town remembered for the slaughter of wolves,  
wolves stacked high beside train tracks – you build such strange monuments to yourselves  
she says to the view.

[archaeology lab, male expert explains the value of carbon dating]  
there is no other way to take these things.
it is dark, there are train tracks to the east
in ice. men touch down palms to the cold
knowing each other is thinking
this is science, most holy of holies.

can you hear the sound of old women clacking
their old tongues to the roofs
of their mouths in the dust?
this is prophecy so never
ask the Indian whether she’d take
the million dollars or the match.
gasoline is on the shelf in all our houses.
Casualties

“...linguistic diversity also forms a system necessary to our survival as human beings.”
– M. Krauss

The sun has broken through.
Breaking through,
this sun ---- just the same
today my words are dying out.

Still as I tell of stillness
of a very word
as ( ) as it leaves this world.

*My grandmother was told that the only way to survive was to forget.*

Where were you?
Where were you? Speaking of myself,
for my own neglect: too often
I was nowhere to be found.
I will not lie.
I heard the ruin in each Assiniboine voice.
I ignored them all. Of

the vanishing, I have been
mute. I have risking
a great deal.
Hold me accountable
because I have not done my part
to stay alive.

*As a child I did not hear the words often enough to recognize*

what I was losing:
There are a great many parts of my own body that are gone:

where hands
belong there is one lost syllable.
And how a tooth might sound --
its absence
a falling.
Sound is so frail a thing.

( ) hold me responsible,

in light of failure
I have let go of one too many.

I have never known where or how to begin.
The offering

"Give me back my language
and build a house
inside it.
A house of madness.
A house for the dead
who are not dead."
Joy Harjo

Riverside, Montana is a high spot on a bend of the Missouri River, not more than fifty miles from North Dakota, thirty from Canada. It can’t be called a town since there’s only one Presbyterian church down the hill a little ways, and an old house or two to the east. Despite the white steeple and those square frames one can always sense an isolation, one shared only with the constant wind, the kind of wind that moves constantly through these grasslands.

Above the church is where I go, to the cemetery where my grandmother and mother are buried. Standing between their graves I can make out the steep fall of the river bank several hundred yards away, framed between the wheat-worn fields and the grays of that muddy water.

This ground is where my body will too lie some day, on this gradual slope. And knowing this does not make me feel uneasy or fearful. How can my place beside the women of my family – my mother and her mother – not be something to trust in? Instead, what I have come to distrust is my ability to reach them before that day. By “reach” I mean: how do I offer up prayer from this windy rise when I feel they are waiting patiently for the language to come from me that they understand best. How do I speak at all when I fear they cannot hear me, because my attempts to learn are in no way sufficient, my skills childish, and I imagine them turning away each time I come to them.
It is strange not to have the words to reach them, say with words like *isolation* and *inclusion*. Words that mean more than just *I'm sorry, or I will never know.* Words I may never know. There is something more than just life, just physical presence, missing between us. I sense them asking me to do more. I feel too that perhaps they have already shed their English, that this was the first thing they did once they were among all the old ones, and that they did it joyfully. How could that shedding not be a joy, after white-run schools, after the shame they were told to have for our language? I feel them saying to me: *We can't go back there again.*

Returning to their tongue, I feel they abandon me to mine.

And so I struggle here, hoping for a fluency of expression that will let them hear, hear in a language that never scorned them or wounded them with lies, my grief and my love.

This is my failure. And it is also what makes me angry – angry because the past seems irreparable; angry because I should have been raised with the sounds of my mother and aunties speaking our language from the kitchen in early morning hours. I should have been steeped in that music as I got out of bed each day of my life. It should have been, from that moment on, the truest way in which to know my world. Instead my grandmother was mistreated for wanting to speak her native tongue at school, and so raised daughters who turned their heads away from the sound of their own music, daughters who thought only of what English would allow them.

But they did listen at times. A person can't help but hear, and so learns in this limited way. But they never spoke. For fear, or for trained shame, they never spoke the language of their ancestors.
I am the third generation to undergo this forced assimilation. I never had the speaking as a part of my daily life. I am of the generation that travels to its grandmothers', its mothers' its own graves in a foreign tongue, feeling an inadequacy and isolation that can never be eased.
But on a train between Browning and Izaac Walton Inn, perhaps as some form of penance, I witnessed a grizzly tear into a fallen tree trunk with muscle, claw and all the force of her own body. (She too sought a form of sustenance.)

I find that certain words arrive first: in the woods heavy with near darkness she could only be known by one name — *wakan sija*. As in instinct: “this bad holy thing.”

In the passage that exists between word and thought I have been forced to learn a great deal of the collapse of one language upon another. I offer up many explanations for this too often conflicted tongue, never arriving at any shape of reconciliation.

If forgiveness were molded between my hands what might it resemble?

And why not? Haven’t millions prayed for the transubstantiation? I am asking for this same miracle, the blood and body of the language I want to be known by only.
The hi-line

Words can do more than fail. Here they exist as landscape – remote yet convincing. Vocabulary grows sparse just as towns only this far north can do. The people waking up here, they too find themselves far between, aloof.

What defines us most are these extremities: January, with winds bitter and left to themselves. (And what of the child whose coat is not warm enough for another freezing winter?) July, and still more wind. This almost feverish, rattling through dry husks of wheat.

Men stride this highway at dusk, knowing each bend each rise – if only for their proximity to town, to drink. And words fail again, fail to turn them around and face the traffic head on.
Seven days is never enough

monday

a dazzle of Christmas lights on seventh street
my mother’s image
tattooed with the precision of a shaky
hand upon my back
reds on greens on yellow
a fusion that seems to say:
someone still lives here – don’t
even think of knocking

tuesday

when I throw handfuls of salt
over my naked shoulder they become
a swarm of bees
which do you prefer?
the taste of sweaty skin
or a perfect bite of honeycomb
they ask
the freckled boy next door
tells me I should never talk to strangers
he plays cowboys and Indians
bang bang

wednesday

my nephew cobra
storms in to the room
he craves more than pepsi these days
so I hand him a seven-up
but he says I don’t have cable
or a satellite like grandma
so we drive down to the river
and guess what belongs to who
as the trash floats by

thursday

maybe I’m back home
caught in a february blizzard
icicles frozen black from the stain
of glossy prayers that our dead
look away from
i smack my jaw
down hard
on the perfect
eye of a concrete sidewalk

friday

tano yudabish
the day they don’t eat meat
lets all go out and slaughter something
the fattest animal
running across highway 2
a celebration, yes a celebration
of our own lovely carcass
rotting slowly on the bone
i smile for the cameras
a sweaty dollar bill feels good in my palm

saturday

the miniature man
comes to my side at night
your mattress is too tall he says
i dream of golden threads
tied throughout my golden hair
then tremble when the mirror
laughs among fluorescent lights
who would ever guess
these confused blood cells
curse and curse throughout the night

sunday

the battery in my watch slows
but i do not remember how
to go outside anymore
the door is an abyss
filled with coyotes
that know too many songs
my grandfather
used to sing
only this time the words are backwards
where i come from
everyone knows
what that means
monday

someone slaps me hard across the face
i don’t give a fuck
if you ever know
what this is like
because this is ours, all ours
my cries combust into purple flames
and the smoke alarm sets its wail
alongside mine
a perfect harmony
always makes my hair tingle

tuesday

there is a certain shadow
that says it knows me
so i call my sister
because maybe she remembers
but the line is dead
should i ask what the lesson
is here
should i roll on the ground
for the secret message
that says someday
your life will never change
your life will never change
Migratory

“We don’t really know it, but we sense it: there is a sister ship to our life which takes a totally different route.”

T. Transtromer

What if there is a catch? Or some slight of hand we should pretend to not see. Because the shadow can be so near the truth.

I am hiding my mouth, again telling myself there is no room for the first six words.

Questions are always such a mess. (And so are mirrors for that matter.) I am not trying to be vague.

Again, the only thing we know for certain is a setting apart.

_Sisters are not the same. There is plenty of room down near an ambiguous sea shore._

This is why I never visit oceans.

I am unsure of this strange current of air moving so close to another self. And speaking of birds what is it they say exactly when the v-pattern is broken?

This memory is not my sister and still this could be her name if she were allowed to have one.

She is my likeness who beads moccasins, speaks Assiniboine effortlessly.
How does one make amends
or know for certain who was at fault?
I might consider abandoning this place,
or any other. If only
we could each be granted one trial run.

We might be left to discover the sound
of contradiction in those wings.
Several poems for the non-Indian in me

“And you remember who killed who.
For this you want amnesty.”
Linda Hogan

1.
She asks only that you forget
all of the usual questions like
where are you from?
or when will you return?

2.
As a young girl she tried the violin
forcing her fingers into the neck—
stiff motion of bow upon string.
Hands would grow tired, not hold
true to form. She had not yet learned
to blame the past for their unruliness.

“Collaborate: v. to work together.”

3.
Casting language about, calling herself
in control
she contends that words are wild but willing.
Often this degenerates into quite
an uncivilized competition.
This causes some confusion
as she is unable to remember
the most accurate truth:
a) she might have learned indifference, to forget
the stories she never heard one gramma
speak of. b) she listened each story, careful
to set them down in true Boazian form.

4.
Her father calls to say how much
he misses her. She does not pick up.
“The fog was not so heavy this winter.
You should see how the orchard is growing,
green shoots above my head.”
She cares little, if any, for such mobility.
“Collaborate: v. to work together. or, to help the enemy.”

5.
She can only blame him for Removal
and for battle scenes she relives.
Commands are given, portions further split.
Her new home, she finds,
is built on tilted land.

6.
Planes circle overhead like angels.
Water runs beneath the crack
of a door memory cannot unlock.
She fails to see how words
might belong to that flood,
an instrument of reinvention.
She tries.
Forward and reverse

There is an old blue Dodge, skyish silver color heading south as memory clings to bone of Continental Divide. There is no radio in the truck, the heat does not work, the girl is five years old but not shivering.

At a truck stop in Lodi she watches a short crack in the cement turn her mother’s distant laugh into a future filled with accomplishments.

In her home she knows the water is spilling over from the tub onto the wearied linoleum. She almost remembers the color of the bath mat her mother sits upon, head in her hands.

Back on the dimming highway a woman in the next car over passes illegally on the right. She sees the girls cheek pressed to the window in sleep and thinks of pumpkins cut from the vine.
Call it instinct
For Rob

Earlier today when I crossed the Rockies at Roger’s Pass
I recognized how beautiful graffiti can appear on boxcars
moving carefully in this light winter.
This was the ninth time I have made this drive in three months.
Two of Theimer’s poems were lying on the truck’s dashboard,
and I saw the word fantastic twice – Chris’ version
spelled with a c, talking about polished secrets.
And again later, crafted by a tagger in spray paint,
ending in k. It is getting more and more difficult
to leave Missoula each time I return.
This is not meant to be a betrayal of home,
it is much more than that really.
It means I am resorting to standard forms of expression
for missing people and not knowing how
To finally arrive (or depart for) some other place.

I have been meaning to tell you that early
one morning on my drive to the school
I too saw a wolf, her matted fur whitened
for movement across this patchy, snowy plain.
She stood just a short distance off the highway
and I saw her eyes, just in that moment
of passing. I saw her eyes but I can tell
you nothing of their color. This too is instinct.

What are we native to?—all along
I have said it was landscape and the language
wrought there according to wind and need.
But I have begun to change my opinion, not of where
and who I come from, but instead of how
we might establish a particular resonance:
as in wolves and stones and the full
relationship between thought and deed.
The fantastik we all might choose
to name ourselves again if given the chance.
Dear DJD, at a rundown gas station in Circle, just off the rez, a dead porcupine
lie on gravel near the men’s restroom and a rusted fuel tank. It was morning
and the last of his pale yellow quills shifted according to the wind’s changing
temperament. It reminded me of dying grasses this time of year, how they give
the only hint of color against the pale blue horizon. As if I thought he might not
have noticed, I told the elderly station owner, “You got a dead porcupine out there.”
(You see, I’ve only been home two months and already I’ve made some of the
necessary adjustments – for instance, statements are taken easier out here
than questions ever could be.) My Auntie Almira, who will turn 88 later this year,
crafts beautiful wapeshas out of porcupine quills. She is famous for this work.
At any pow wow you can see the grass dancers wearing this detailed head regalia
walk over between contests to shake her hand. If they were lucky enough to win,
they might pass her a ten or twenty bill as their palms lightly brush hers, a quiet
recognition. The dancers are grateful for her craftsmanship in this piece of their
dance outfit, a piece made up of quill, cloth, and prayer. “Somebody shot him,”
the white haired owner says, perhaps in anticipation of the next non-question
to form between us. Standing there, I wanted the name of the person who took
that porcupine’s life. (I wonder if you had a similar feeling when you first
recognized your need to write of rivers?) It occurred to me then that the man
might be one of the McCabes, the name on a repair shop’s window in this dying
Western town. The senior McCabe married a local girl and the two had sturdy, hard­
working sons. It is one of them I imagined, with knowing hands that can grab
a rifle from the backseat, load it, and steer these gravel roads all at the same time.
I’m surprised when the old man breaks the conversational taboo, mentions
that the quills go for ten bucks an ounce and then asks, “Can you believe that?”
Just last summer Auntie Almira complained that they were getting more expensive.
I have heard the story of how the quills help the dancers imitate the motion
of the grass, the essence of their performance, as they recount the dangers endured
by scouts of the traditional Grass Boy Society, Pezhi Hokshina. These young men,
lacking the attachments of wives and children, would go out on dangerous missions
to scout for enemy. They would tuck grass in their hair and buckskin to blend in
with the plains landscape. I imagine them crawling on their bellies in summer,
maybe because warmth seems so far away from this long winter. But really,
June is just around the corner and once it arrives my young nephew Julian will hit
the pow wow trail with his parents. He is growing famous for his technique as a grass
dancer, winning contests all across the country. We, his family, like to say he has
a little of his grandfather’s spirit in him, as he was well known for his performances.
People still talk about the way my Grandpa Allen, while dancing, could dip down and
pick up a dollar bill on the ground between his teeth effortlessly. The motion was
continuous and beautiful – the kind of movement we all place our trust in, don’t we?
Near the White River

Outside the tent they are cross-cutting.
I know that the jagged saws are made of steel.
Pines roll from a mountainside nearer the camp
and I am asking, what of branches snapped away, forgotten.

An hour before we talked of how strange two languages
can rise and fall in our own mouths.
And of the possibility for beauty in the things which disturb,
then linger. All the while water on the stove
gently created distance from itself as steam.
In a book of poems I was reading someone put I
in quotation marks and I thought of separation
as finally being so simple a thing.

(I might also have wished for a “we” somewhere
in the verse, but this might be the place at which to leave
such a longing.) Here the horses are set loose at evening,
each group knowing the best place to rest, to drink.

This is what I have come to as they arrive
at the splitting of wood
while you attentively hold words
between your hands, safely, in sleep.
I have intruded upon the lone bison and his home
Here in the river basin. I am aware of this
In the same way I hold to the vision of a young Indian girl
Who said goodbye to her aging grandmother
In my rural hometown.
She waved an unsure hand, her camouflage
Army bag stored in the belly of the bus. Later at school
The children will write letters to her, careful to spell
Kuwait in large block letters on their envelopes.
They all send similar messages, “Come home soon.”

A friend from Casa Blanca has told me he will return
To his native land once this nation goes to war.
He is a student here and I am ashamed of knowing lists exist now.
When visiting me last summer he asked that I point out
Which direction was east. It was close to sundown
And my home took on a new correlation.
His faith calls this moon a blessed one. I know
So little of these things, but enough never to ask him to stay.

I do not dream of bison as I did the night before.
(My father and I were running together up a steep incline,
One massive buffalo edging closer and closer.)
Hours later, when morning reflects from snowy mesas and scattered
Prairie dog towns, we will hear reports: the first
American surveillance planes are flying over Baghdad.
Among the river bottom cottonwoods the buffalo, an old bull,
Thinks nothing of my presence.
Long ago I was taught to leave tobacco, and I have come
To live by this rule. A sense of gratitude
Is often all we have to offer.
We call this month *amhaska*, the long moon.
Temperatures are steadily dropping while
My uncle and his lingering death are of this same season.
He can no longer rest and soon his sisters
Will gather near him. They will talk of what he was like
As a child. They will reach for his hands, hold them
Time and time again.
This morning there was fresh snow on the ground. I can’t think of any more poetic way to tell you this. The world was white and ready for the fresh tracks of my bounding dog. We set out together for nothing in particular, except maybe for the knowing of how soon we’ll drive away from this town. My dog always surveys the streets ahead, running back every once in a while to check on me in my slower pace.

I noticed a woman farther down the block. She had a lame leg and I felt as though there would be nothing I could write about: not her condition, nor my friend’s who is close to having her first baby down the street, nor my own which admits two places can be farther away than miles might ever measure. I lived a few years in the San Joaquin Valley where Levine writes much of his poetry. I never saw anything beautiful about the always browned, dying hills. I think he described them as golden? The ridiculously thick fog was nothing more than a pain in the ass and all I wanted when I was there was Montana. And when I left, made my way back home, I read Levine and still did not long for those snowy fields of cotton one of my own grandfathers ginned.

But I did come to admit a new longing. I wanted and still do, to write of the many places we willingly and unwillingly inhabit, the movements we make, those impulses. Of our first moments as well as our last – and all the resurrections in between. I believe in the ghosts Levine prayed to while walking among the Sierra’s. I know here I have my own to follow.
Another attempt at rescue

And to think I had just paid a cousin twenty dollars to shovel the walk. He and two of his buddies, still smelling of an all-nighter, arrived at 7 am to begin their work. When I left them a while later I noticed their ungloved hands and winter made me feel selfish and unsure. This ground seems unsure of itself for its own reasons. Real spring is still distant and no one is trying to make themselves believe this might last, this last unreasonable half hour.

It is six thirty in eastern Montana and the cold has finally given way. The time is important not because this has been a long winter or for the fact that it is my first here since childhood, but because there is so much else to be unsure of. At a time like this how is it that when I left only a week ago there were three feet of snow on the ground, and now there are none, not even a single patch holding on in the shadow of the fence-line.

We do not gauge enough of our lives by changes in temperature. When I first began to write poems I was laying claim to battle. It began with a death and I have tried to say it was unjust, not because of the actual dying but because of what was left. What time of year was that? I have still not yet learned to write of war. I have friends who speak out — as is necessary — with subtle and unsubtle force. But I am from

*this* place and a great deal has been going wrong for some time now. The two young Indian boys who might have drowned last night in the fast rising creek near school are casualties enough for me. There have been too many just like them and I have no way to fix these things.

A friend from Boston wrote something to me last week about not having the intelligence
to take as subject for his poems
anything other than his own life.
For a while now I have sensed this in my own mood:
this poem was never supposed to mention
itself, other writers, or me.

But I will not regret the boys who made it home,
or the cousins who used the money at the bar.
Still, something is being lost here and there are no lights
on this street; enough mud remains on our feet
to carry with us into the house.
With / out

These days I have begun to tell myself *do not think of north, do not think of rivers*. Today it is *do not talk of autumn*. The leaves on my neighbor’s oak have let go. The wind is serious as it sets off these small tornados. Small, yellow tornados circling my house, keeping this quiet in.

If I could go back I would remove even yellow. Each solitary larch tree branding itself against a forest quickly gathering for winter is too much. I would ask Claire if she saw the one half-covered in black moss. It was so near dying and still the branches facing east held on. She would say *no one should have to choose* and I could then easily forget. These are favors I must remember to thank her for.

A light fixture in this small room is ornamented with gold stalks trapped in a moment of wind. Must I resist here too? Can the stalks speak for themselves or break free? Should I say *no northern fields, no distance of rivers, no mother*—for all our sakes? (And if one removes mother, then must father also be left behind?) This could go on for some time.
Dick, the reservoir on my end of the state is great for fishing. Some of the banks are tall and jagged, others are more patient, taking their time as they slope into rocky beaches. If the kind of fisherman I imagine you to be were true then you might consider it a great place to cast from. My family has gone up there ever since the water on the Mni Shoshe was dammed off. My grandparents put on their moccasins and beadwork and danced for FDR when he rode the train out to see the finishing touches of this great industrial project.

I haven’t yet decided if this is something I wish to be proud of. Maybe this summer I’ll spend more time up there, on the edge of a lake that was never meant to be a lake, and form a better opinion. Maybe too I’ll write back. But you have probably already decided as much. I almost thought of not returning to finish the writing program you began with your own severe desire for language. But I did. And now I’m to the end. Already though, I’ll admit to you, I’m thinking of home. I have been this whole time. Once, in one of the small creeks that runs from Ft. Peck Lake I saw a catfish, swimming upstream, trying to make it back to the shelter of a larger body of water. It was late summer and there wasn’t enough of the creek to cover the top half of his fins. Still, he pushed down into the mud and kept on. I did not envy him. Nor did I devise some plan to help him make it back to safety. I’ll let you draw your own conclusions about what type a person this makes me. Since we’re on this track, I have a sister I haven’t spoken to in years. And the language my relatives spoke while getting ready for the dam’s inaugural ceremonies is close to extinction, but I have always made up something more important to do, rather than take the risk of saving it. I am still angry at times with my father because I long for the type of mother mine could never be. I go on mourning her, even though a medicine person has told me it was time to let her go to the other side. I wonder if she is still close, or if she ignored me years ago and went on. I certainly didn’t know that today, when I’m a week away from packing up, leaving Missoula for good, and making my way east for home that I would sit here in the purplish light of the first real snowfall of the year and write to you. I could go on, tell you about my poetry, about how much it’s meant to spend time with Ripley, about the influence Jim has been. (Thank you for telling him to write what he knew. It allowed me to write what I know, twenty-five years later, from another rez a little farther down the road.) I’ll just close by saying the salmon are plentiful, even if they begin their lives in a hatchery down below the dam. For the time being, I don’t mind this as much, and I have an idea you wouldn’t either.