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Laura Da'

WINTER DANCE OF THE OLDEST CHILD

1.

First light.  
the oldest girl patches cracks in the wall  
with sacking soaked  
in potato starch.

Long strips of burlap  
freeze solid  
before she can work them  
soft with the tips  
of her fingers. Hint  
of ice-shard light and smell  
of last summer's harvest rot wafting  
from the stacked cornstalks  
insulating the cabin's western wall.

She papers the walls  
with old newspapers from last year's missionary basket:  
*American Agriculturist Colman's Rural World, Prairie Farmer*  
Advertisements stare her down  
all through winter's tallow light:  
threshers, ploughshares,  
leather martingales to tamp the necks of  
draft horses into more pleasing lines.

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LAURA DA' (Eastern Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma) is a teacher and poet. Her poems have appeared in *Prairie Schooner, The Iowa Review, Red Ink, Hanging Loose, and First Intensity*. She studied creative writing at the Institute of American Indian Arts and the University of Washington. Laura has taught middle school for the past ten years and currently lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband and son.

On the table—pale green and amber beads  
creep up unfinished moccasins  
in a woven pattern of geometric corn shafts.

Her granny sleeps  
under an unfinished morning-star quilt  
still in piece work,  
baste stitched.

2.

Drowsing on the milk stool,  
the little brown Guernsey's soft eyes soothing  
then piss-heavy tail  
whipping her into reality.

Blunt cries of the baby  
lowing through the cabin door  
while her thumb and pointer finger  
pinch into the warm milk,  
dripping the heat down her throat in a shamed rush.

Her baby brother roots desperately at her  
new breasts  
through the calico warp of the apron—pain so bright and urgent  
she thinks her body's been peeled from its skin  
as she trails a creamy snake of milk  
down the channel of her pinkie finger  
into the baby's mouth, crooning.

Whimpering and wide eyed, her brother  
is like a green broke horse, shying at the sound  
of icicles splintering off the branches and  
dimpling the ground outside.  
Until, soothed by the milk,  
his features wrap and tuck  
into a mask of self-satisfaction  
as he settles  
into the straw.

And for the first time since waking,  
the girl lets her body  
settle for a moment too,

seeing milk, eggs, a finger of molasses, even some flour  
on the table.

3.

Winnowing afternoon light  
plucks at the zigzag line  
of spring-green seed beads  
running up the seam of the leather moccasin.

The girl pauses momentarily  
to cut the wick,  
lick her needle,  
dip her wet fingertip in the beads  
and hold it studded in the light—  
the beads like a cluster of pin headed beetles.

She's waiting for her father to ride home  
with the start of the month rations.  
Perhaps the preacher is  
making the most of his captive audience  
waiting out the back of the mission church.  
The wicker baskets of salt pork  
and coffee sitting in rows  
just inside their line of sight.

But she worries  
as the sky darkens  
and she strains her ears against the quiet,  
fatigued by the absence of hoof beats.  
Her worry becomes a dancing  
honey finger of whisky in her mind.

She flicks the beads from her finger  
and huffs out to the coop  
breaking an old hen's neck  
with a breathless  
snap over her shoulder.

Fries the bird, crackle of the skin on her tongue  
the warmest thing she's felt in weeks.

## LAZARUS RIDING HOME

Skin for skin  
my senses know  
    the lanky, liver chestnut  
    canter-song  
        scattering pebbles  
in front of my cabin

and before I see  
the Indian Agent from Neosho  
looming beside my corn

my ears wince.

Old panic  
    to have such a man in my sight,  
    carrying his trade in saddlebags:  
    full burlap sack of tobacco  
    and calico to barter  
    for my compliance.  
Singed smell of the vinegar and smoke  
    he uses as a screen from Indian dirt.

Miami, Seneca, Shawnee and Wyandotte—  
head men from each tribe are singled out  
in a vulture-slow loop,

    beckoned into town  
    to stand—silent as field stones  
    to greet the fearsome Modoc.  
A new tribe  
exiled from the West  
and punished like us  
onto this land that our feet still mistrust.

We ride to Baxter station,  
busy with city folks, ranchers,

soldiers, Indian agents, gawkers.  
A newspaper man  
jots notes on a grimy fistful  
of paste cards.

Waxy-still cattle cars straddle the tracks.  
Deep in the corners, an arm  
slithers through the creosote soaked slats.  
A child's dark eye  
meets mine  
through a knothole.

My sorrel starts under me  
as I dismount.  
A young soldier  
hauls an axe  
and chips ineffectively  
at the chain  
that holds the cattle car doors together  
in a crooked embrace.

The agent preening for the crowd,  
his starched collar growing dusky.

Behold the fearsome Modoc.  
That chain snaking down to the ground like a panther's howl.  
A scattering of men  
dressed in prison stripes and leather  
are bound at the wrists  
and watered from buckets held up to their chins.

The youngest soldier, red-faced,  
points his rifle to the ground  
and swallows hard. A Modoc boy  
holds his sister and swings his legs  
on the station ledge  
kneecaps massive against his slender limbs.

I was that child's age  
when I walked  
from Ohio  
to Indian Territory.  
Eighteen months  
with my arms rucked up around my baby sister  
and my eyes locked on my Mama's shoulders,  
harried by soldiers and agents.  
So many times I heard them call  
boy if you slow us down  
we will crack your skull  
and the baby's too  
on those tree trunks promise  
swear to God you are not worth bullets.

After fifty years, this is what it tastes like: thistles for wheat  
at the root of my tongue.

The Modoc boy turns his sister's chin into his tunic,  
covering her eyes  
and I draw stares as I haul my body up into the saddle to leave.  
Sometimes I need  
a horse under me  
to share the weight.

Having grown old in that meager shelter  
of shadows cast by horses.

Indian Territory, November 1873.

## SPRING THAW AND THE LAND RUNS

Zinc mining wives  
traipse through the muck,  
black leather toes  
like picks. The station market in Neosho is a little reward  
waved before them by prospecting husbands  
to ease the burden of being a territorial spouse.  
The exotic spread across the tines of the railroad tracks.

Women selling blankets  
drape them across the hitching posts  
for the settlers who come in waves.

A Shawnee girl places her beaded  
moccasins on a bed of corn husks.  
When she stands,  
her baby brother  
clings to her collar,  
splays his bare toes  
against her instep and shins  
trying to crawl back up into her arms.  
He dangles there unwilling  
to put his feet back onto the ground.

The mining wives cluck  
at the growing crowd of sooners,  
offer the girl half price for a tiny set of moccasins,  
not bothering to smile at the baby's antics.

In the next season's turn,  
the prairie red blossoming of the unassigned land runs  
will color the ground.  
Next fall's threshing:  
Sac and Fox, Pottawatomie, Iowa and Shawnee.



## DELLA

What I remember of my life  
the season before  
I was sent to school:  
I rose every morning on the beach  
of our summer grounds, pushed aside a veil of canvas—  
lake water so vast  
it curved across my eye and startled me awake.

I learned with my milk teeth  
to suck the sweetness from wild rice hulls.

I was just old enough  
to trail behind my older cousins  
berry picking.  
They argued over who would  
carry me over each hill,  
it was a matter of pride  
between them  
that my feet—bare or wrapped  
in bear cub skin—  
rarely touched the ground.  
They praised the soft thumps of  
my berries in the wicker basket.

That winter I was shipped across the flat lands.  
My eyes filled with dishwater, my feet no longer swept  
off the ground by generous arms.

For the next ten years  
just when winter was breaking into spring  
I would glimpse the Sandhill Cranes  
tuck and lift in flight  
from the ponds out behind Haskell Indian School.  
They paused so briefly before flying north and home  
on that sparse water that gaped across the prairieland  
like bullet holes in a deerskin racked too thin.

## THE GRADUATES

They sit out the back of the boardinghouse,  
tin plates across their knees.  
Scratchy smell of linoleum tacked to creosote.  
Through the door  
they catch a crescent glimpse into the kitchen  
of sausages on waxed paper drawing flies.

He crumples a handbill lauding new statehood  
and promising cattle work  
in New Mexico, jots a quick map in the dust with his boot heel.  
She pokes warily at the mutton stew  
spiced with green chile  
that brings bile up her throat and makes her baby batter and kick.

An old man shuffles out of the boardinghouse,  
his silhouette lurching in the starlight.  
He sits and pares at his nails  
with a pocket knife  
groans and holds a spent bullet  
in his tobacco-stained fingers and  
flits a line of blood across the bucket of peeled potatoes.

He twists his finger up  
at the almond sliver of moon,  
freckled splatter of the Pleiades  
then back at the couple.  
He points with his lips south to the foothills  
so that even when he has no intention of smiling  
his teeth force his mouth into a half grin.

They wake under what the locals  
call the tortilla stars,  
and light out into the west.

## RAVEN TALKS CURRICULUM

1.

Raven curls his talons  
against the newspaper rag  
of a seventh grade textbook  
that attributes his  
myth to an anthropologist  
who traveled along the Pacific Coast  
fifty years ago  
recording tribal creation stories.

2.

In fifth grade, I rode the bus  
to the local museum on a school field trip.

The river was splitting its banks,  
creeping up the margins of the road.  
Mottled stones  
with the patchy lichen-skin  
and bulky silhouettes  
of kids slumped on a couch  
were disappearing  
under the murky slush of flood water.  
Bright pink flash of molting leaves  
glimpsed through the bus window  
hinted at salmon in the eddy.

At the museum, I was unhinged by old bounty signs  
from the fur wars  
offering the largest pile of gold for men's scalps,  
less for women,  
a token amount for children and infants.

I traced my finger over the name Snoqualmie, unbelieving.

Listening to the curator read aloud from the myth of raven,  
I counted on my fingers  
back ten years at a time to 1860  
until the teacher jerked them away into my lap  
and snapped my attention to the front.

3.

Fifty years ago,  
*the five most likely themes employed to describe  
Native Americans in textbooks:*

*Noble Savage*

*Warrior*

*Chief*

*Protestor*

*White Man's Helper*

In 2013, the school district procured  
new texts—feigned Native narratives.  
As if to say with a shrug,  
colonialism had children and grandchildren too.  
In the end, even the stories are acquisitions.

Essential Question: Who is this trickster  
sauntering receding coasts and  
scattering light and darkness?

4.

Heavy thud of the book  
slamming shut  
pinions Raven into a bentwood box of pulp  
where dark seeps out of the feathery ink of the font.

The students shade the standardized test  
in fine, soft strokes of graphite—fish-scale dents  
on the show and tell arrowhead.

## SIXTH GRADE

Leaning in  
to hear a recorded sample  
of a sixth-grade student  
reading haltingly  
from a script of Rip Van Winkle,

I see a child,  
    arms stretched  
    mid-yawn  
acting out the part of  
Rip as he wakes  
supine  
from his long sleep  
in the woods.

Five of the children  
    acting as villagers in the background  
wear airbrushed shirts  
commemorating deceased relatives.

A girl pouring  
bright colors of tempera paint  
into paper Dixie cups  
    winces when pigment  
bleeds together on her backdrop.

A bright hair molts  
from my scalp  
and falls diagonally  
    across the keyboard.

Sometimes my sleep is interrupted  
by dreams of urgent hands  
    waving in the air,  
students slanting  
frantically in their desks  
floating beyond  
    my peripheral vision.

## WILLFUL SUSPENSION OF DISBELIEF

Silver dollar kneecaps sliding into place  
make my son surly  
and sleepless.  
His nighttime cries jerk me awake.

When I carry him outside  
wrapped in a blanket  
he stills, gazes at the apartment complex parking lot  
and points up  
pronouncing the moon  
broken.

The next day I wake  
fatigued by the absence of his wails.

Brittle December's second law of  
thermodynamics.

The last day before break and a week  
since the last school shooting  
on the other side of the country,  
I tidy the computer lab detritus  
of spit-soaked candy wrappers  
and Bic pens deconstructed into  
tiny projectiles.

One of my students  
spritzes her head up above the monitor  
playing lookout for the kids who sneak peeks of the  
Christmas blockbusters:  
007 bleeding and shooting,  
Ragged spaceman  
stepping on the skin of a spent earth,  
the ubiquitous closeups of wrists  
torture tied behind chairs.

I grant them these distractions,  
looking for villains in the pixels—hatchet  
faces that cut out without marking  
    into the green wood of their suspended disbelief.  
    Imagine, we are all born with uncapped knees.  
Live long enough  
and one day the knees will lose  
the lubricant that eases their movement  
    and nothing made by hand can replace it.