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Topography of the Family Plot

I. Uprising

In 1862 warriors rose
beyond the world receding into
claws of German migrant plows
and under houses raised
as if by ants in a day.
The bad tongues were spitting
divine destiny, their god
of the ledger, black-book gospel.

Of braves who began it,
thirty-eight names written
in the troubled hand of Lincoln.
Names from the hundreds
who rose on immigrant thieving,
rose in young men's unknowing
of the torrent of whites.
Rose in the name
of a world.

Thirty-eight mounted beams together.
Together rose song to meet the Creator
through the noose that Christmas
in Mankato.

II. Civilize

For survivors was the camp,
the pox and the hunger,
men of the plow and men
of the steeple, the new tongue
bringing, dividing
history: Savage from civil.

Kim TallBear is a Ph.D. student in the History of Consciousness Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She is a member of the Oak Lake Writers, which is comprised of Dakota, Lakota, and Nakota writers, and a member of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate in South Dakota. She has published poems in journals including the *En'owkin Journal of First North American Peoples*, *The South Dakota Review*, *The Wicazo Sá Review*, and *Five Fingers Review*.

Temporal clergy gaveled
out a Nation's tongue
and prayers, the chasing gifts
of animals to belly.
Rather, scratch the earth
and seek the glory.

Twenty families learned it
that year we broke from the people,
took that cross and built that steeple.
Took the plow and the ox,
lacerated the ground.

Now, in fields of conversion
one unharrowed mound rises.
Our dead interred inside it.

While thirty-eight hung,
were cast without a stone to mark,
at a white fence, survivors lie
with stones and English
words and crosses.

We are born to these dead.
This is the colony
we have inherited.

III. At the Stones

Here at the stones of our women.
Here at the stones of our men,
earth-anchored, rising stories:

*Little Crow, grandfather of grandfathers,
knew the numbers, still led young men in war
until he needed his journey moccasins.
His boy tied them on, hands red in blood
in a field of berries, ran for the trees from the gun.*

At the grandfather's modern stone—a hundred years
to petition his bones.
We help roots to flower.
So long in the hidden museum basement.
Now, colors, the sun and sky to gather.

*Great-grandfather, -grandmother came
for acres, a house—one room on the river.
Great-grandmother spent the money
for pine soap and brushes, scrubbing
out the rhythm—Indians are dirty, dirty.*

At her stone, flowers are stolen.
A relative with night comes quiet
to revenge a scarcity; cut gifts of blooms
away

*like Great-grandmother cut the children living
from her mother-heart steeped in grief.
Baby boy licked up by the river.
That day took even a mother's fidelity.
But, Great-grandfather had the tongue,
the hunt, the dancing, the talk some days
where the gypsies drank. In the circle of trees,
no signs—No Dogs Allowed, No Indians.*

At the stone of the facile memories,
plastic flowers, words fragmentary,

*their second daughter lies
with her desecrator, her childrens' father;
when he dies,
though she stood more
after him.*

At the stone of the first daughter, the painter,

*she taught crafts in the boarding
school basement,
her brown eyes and hands caging
dreams, history meant for canvas.*

She, my grandmother, passed
in unthawed spring.
The night before she was ash,
walked in her house of unfinished work,
materials bundled, packed.
Pressed her body—her memory
—to her daughter's bed of grief.

At the stones
in acts of fidelity.
For purity-seekers, for the conflicted,
for the dead and living, for warriors
buried and not buried,
we tend the roots
and bones and rise
the stories.

I tell them faster
than any story-seeker
at once can gather.
The one charmed at my side
or the one I might one day
decide to bleed for.
This one at my side
wants to enter the family.
He kneels in to the black earth,
spreads it. I lay the green shoots in;
we smooth and press it.
I circle around energy woven
through grass, the perimeter
of the bone box.

Stories rise and repeat.

I tell him one: How I notice
some people walk right to the stones.
We were taught never.
Even my sister's child
once felt Grandmother's fingers
poke up to the surface,
remind him. Move his little shoe.
That first day
he came with my mother, faithful,
to tend the roots and bones.

—*Kim TallBear*

Great-grandmother in the Second World

I.

In winter's hot room I am dreaming,
above tracks that shake the building
and Portuguese bakeries steaming
gold panes in the night.

I drop through the blue night, blue planet,
to a second still world never turning to sun
the eastern city.

In the second world it is ever
the northern, black-earth town, ever under
the dream's dim sun,
mocking the first world.

There, Grandmother is dying again.
She is in her house of my conjuring.
Aunts, like quadruplets, ring her bed until
I forget and fade them.

Grandmother has found her skin and hair.
She's turning to colors again, like plums,
like the bruise of a hot sky, blue-black.

She's come for prayers after we lived together,
our years without ceremony.
There's a shifting
between my body
and where she speaks.

I am of earth; I do not know the terrain,
the flat place of her eyes.
She says death-days are hell; some, she's just out there.
She never climbs the stairs.

She meanders the strand,
The first and second worlds meeting,
the edge of my Earth dreams,
her lone purgatory.

The church cast her out.
She embraced the other
with a white, wooden spire.
She comes to me
in the mind of their violent rendition,
the origin story: Twin myths that loathe one another.
One flaunting the gold river; one bleeds fire.

Dakota words never prayed,
three days at her casket.
No tobacco, no prayers to directions.
But, a little man—an escort waited
two days at her sick-room ceiling.
She slipped by him.

II.

In a previous year a ponderous spirit
in windchimes twisted
into the weight of my dreams and quilts
in a time she wasn't yet dead.
That deceiver entered in her voice to my bed.

I share it tonight unwillfully again.
Another one's chased her into my dream,
seizes her tongue and warns me:
Do not pray it, do not pray!
My voice hauls me out.
Coming solid, I emerge on Earth again.
Out through the ceiling, the other one twists.

I rise, no time to dress.
I am an unlearned intercessor.
3 a.m. eastern standard,
another world's work to do,
for the prayer, I call my mother.

—Kim TallBear

15 minutes till grand entry

15 minutes till grand entry
and I looked for you
and the summer evening sun
frolicked from eagle plume
to eagle plume – in that powwow
celebration last night.

I asked a woman from New Town
to braid my hair.
I gave her my brush and two elastic ties.
15 minutes till grand entry
and I had a zig zag part –
two tight braids
adorned with green and black floral beadwork.
And I carried and caught the scent
of long evening shadows.

And I found you.
I found you standing with arms crossed
fringe hanging –
standing with your Skin brothers,
speakin' with lingo of colorful dancers
on the Powwow Trail – scent of cedar
and sweetgrass minglin' with smooth laughter.

My jingle dress was new
to that Athabascan reservation night
and its people understood the medicine
and the healing way of its origins –
and I danced for my father's Turtle Mountain people.

And I caught your eye –
and I understood the way your family designs
complimented your Old Style dance – your sway
and closeness to the brown earth – your steps
each a touch into the land of our ancient relatives.

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15 minutes till grand entry
and you caught my eye –
I know you understood
the connection we have to the circle
in that southern mountain air last night.

—*Venaya J. Yazzie*