

Walking with Ghosts

QWO-LI DRISKILL is a Cherokee Two-Spirit/Queer writer and activist also of African, Irish, Lenape, Lumbee, and Osage ascent. Hir work has been included in *Shenandoah*, *Many Mountains Moving*, and in the anthologies *Revolutionary Voices: A Multicultural Queer Youth Anthology* and *Speak to Me Words: Essays on Contemporary American Indian Poetry*. S/he is currently living in Three Fires (Ojibwe, Odawa, Potawatomi) and Huron territories while pursuing a PhD in Rhetoric and Writing at Michigan State University.



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Walking with Ghosts

QWO-LI DRISKILL



CAMBRIDGE

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For those who survived

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Tal'-s-go Gal'-quo-gi Di-del'-qua-s-do-di Tsa-la-gi Di-go-whe-li/ Beginning Cherokee

I-gv-yi-i Tsa-la-gi Go-whe-lv-i: A-sgo-hni-ho-'i/

FIRST CHEROKEE LESSON: MOURNING

Find a flint blade
Use your teeth as a whetstone

Cut your hair
Talk to shadows and crows

Cry your red throat raw

Learn to translate the words you miss most:
dust *love* *poetry*

Learn to say *home*

My cracked earth lips
drip words not sung
as lullabies to my infant ears
not laughed over dinner
or choked on in despair
No

They played dead until
the soldiers passed
covered the fields like corpses
and escaped into the mountains
When it's safe we'll find you
they promised
But we were already gone
before sunrise

I crawl through a field of
twisted bodies to find them
I do everything Beginning Cherokee
tells me
Train my tongue
to lie still
Keep teeth tight
against lips
Listen to instruction tapes
Study flash cards

How can I greet my ancestors in a language they don't
understand

My tear ducts fill with milk
because what I most love
was lost at birth

My blood roars skin to blisters
weeps haunted calls of owls
bones splinter
jut through skin
until all of me
is wounded
as this tongue

Ta-li-ne-i Tsa-la-gi Go-whe-lv-i: A-ni-s-gi-li/

SECOND CHEROKEE LESSON: GHOSTS

Leave your hair
at the foot of your bed

Scratch your tongue
with a cricket's claw to speak again

Stop the blood with cornmeal

Your ancestors will surround you as you sleep
keep away ghosts of generals presidents priests
who hunger for your
rare and tender tongue

They will keep away ghosts
so you have strength
to battle the living

Stories float through lives
with an owl's sudden swooping
*I knew some Cherokee
when I was little
My cousins taught me
My mother watches it all happen again
sees ghosts rush at our throats
with talons drawn like bayonets
When I came home speaking
your grandmother told me*

I forbid you to speak that language
in my house
Learn something useful

We sit at the kitchen table
As she drinks iced tea
in the middle of winter
I teach her to say *u-ga-lo-ga-go-tlv-tv-nv* tea
across plastic buckets of generic peanut butter
wonder bread diet coke
Try to teach her something useful

I am haunted by loss
My stomach is a knot of serpents
and my hair grows out
as owl feathers

Tso-i-ne-i Tsa-la-gi Go-whe-lv-i: A-nv-da-di-s-di /

THIRD CHEROKEE LESSON: MEMORY

Raid archeologists' camps
and steal shovels
to rebury the dead

Gather stories like harvest
and sing honor songs

Save the seeds
to carry you through the winter

Bury them deep in your flesh

Weep into your palms
until stories take root
in your bones
split skin
blossom

There are stories caught
in my mother's hair
I can't bear the weight of

*Could you give me a braid
straight down the middle
of my back just the way I like*
So I part her black-going-silver hair
into three strands
thick as our history
radiant as crow wings

This is what it means to be Indian
Begging for stories in a living room
stacked high with newspapers magazines baby toys

Mama story me

She remembers

Great Grandmother Nancy Harmon
who heard white women
call her uppity Indian during
a quilting bee
and climbed down their chimney with
a knife between her teeth

She remembers

flour sack dresses
tar paper shacks
dust storms blood escape

She carries fire on her back
My fingers work swiftly as spiders
and the words that beat in my throat
are dragonflies

She passes stories down to me
I pass words up to her
Braid her hair

It's what she doesn't say
that could destroy me
what she can't say
She weeps milk

Nv-gi-ne-i Tsa-la-gi Go-whe-lv-i: U-de-ny/

FOURTH CHEROKEE LESSON: BIRTH

Gather riverbank clay
to make a bowl

Fill it with hot tears

Strap it to your back
with spider silk

Keep your flint knife close
to ward off death
and slice through umbilical cords

Be prepared for blood

Born without a womb
I wait for the crown of fire
the point where further stretching is impossible
This birth could split me
I nudge each syllable into movement
Memorize their smells
Listen to their strange sleepy sounds
They shriek with hunger and loss
I hold them to my chest and weep milk
My breasts are filled with tears

I wrap my hair around their small bodies
a river of owl feathers

See they whisper *We found you*
We made a promise

This time we'll be more careful
Not lose each other in
the chaos of slaughter

We are together at sunrise
from dust we sprout love and poetry
We are home
Greeting our ancestors
with rare and tender tongues

Map of the Americas

I wish when we touch
we could transcend history in
double helixes of dark and light
on wings we build ourselves

But this land grows volcanic
with the smoldering hum of bones

All that's left
of men who watched beloveds
torn apart by rifles
Grandmothers singing back
lost families
Children who didn't live
long enough to cradle a lover
arms around waist
lips gently skimming nape
legs twined together
like a river cane basket

Sometimes I look at you
and choke back sobs knowing
you are here
because so many of my people
are not

Look: my body curled and asleep
becomes a map of the Americas

My hair
spread upon the pillow
a landscape of ice My chest the plains
and hills of this land My spine
the continental divide
my heart drums the
rhythm of returning
buffalo herds Do you
notice the deserts
and green
mountains
on my belly's
topography
or the
way
my
hips
rise
like
ancient pyramids
My legs wrapped with the
Amazon the Andes the Pampas
the vast roads of the Incas
here are rainforests
highlands
stolen breath
trapped deep
in mine
shafts and
my feet
that reach
to touch
Antarctica