

The Places We Exist

The Baptism

I was born in an in-between.

It was a December in 1998, the 13th. Not the beginning, not the end, but the middle.

I was not named for a while, because my parents could not find a name that fit me, a name they could agree on. My mom had decided that I should be Elle Sofe, a beautiful little Sami girl. My dad on the other hand, had decided that I should be Solveig, a strong little Norwegian girl.

I became neither of them.

Our priest suggested Mathilde. He said he had never baptized someone with that name, and he found it truly beautiful. It was not especially Sami nor Norwegian, but a pretty name indeed, a name that allowed my parents to meet in the middle, the space where I would continue to exist. That day, three girls were baptized Mathilde. I wondered if they were in the middle too.

All three of us were baptized as mighty in battle, or that was at least what our name meant. This meaning was important for me, because I wanted to know who I was and where I came from. It would take me a long time to figure out that there was more to me than a name.

Maybe this was where it all went wrong. I was convinced that I started this life with the identity of a soldier, but no one would tell me which side of the battle I needed to fight for. When I think about it, no one even told me what the fight was about.

The Birth

Six years old.

It was 17th of May, the Norwegian constitutional day. This meant a day off from school, hot dogs, ice cream, and cotton candy. In other words, every child's dream scenario, because there seemed to be a general consensus that this was the one day children were allowed to eat crap until their stomachs hurt.

For my mom, it meant a chance of getting a nice photo of me and my brother, with the sole purpose of sending it to our grandparents. My mom knew we were cute already, but the grandparents we seldom saw after we moved up north needed some proof from time to time. She would also send a photo to our dad, because even though they had divorced years ago, she figured he deserved a nice photo of his children. Mom did not mention her plans to us right away, because she knew it would be messy, as both of us hated posing for photos.

We were about to get dressed, and she knew it was time.

"Honey, can you please put on your *bunad* first so I can take a photo? Then we can change into your *gákti*?" *Bunad* is traditional Norwegian clothing, and *gákti* is Sami. If an outsider saw a photo of the two, they might think they were variations of the same traditional clothing. For the ones owning the clothing, it was *very* different.

Differences seemed to be more important than similarities.

Whenever I think back on this memory, I remember that I obediently put on one piece of clothing then the other. I remember that I smiled for one photo, and then for the other. One smile for each side of the family, for each side of me.

My mom remembers a different story. She remembers a crying six-year-old who just wanted to wear a pretty flower dress like everyone else.

Maybe this was when the devil and the angel on my shoulders were born. I imagined that the devil was the Norwegian part of me, and the angel was the Sami part, because that was what my mom had taught me, consciously or not.

I called my devil Solveig and my angel Elle Sofe.

The only issue was that I did not know who I should be listening to.

The City

A city of 75, 000 inhabitants on a tiny island in between rows of beautiful snow-covered mountains in Northern Norway.

A city split in two.

The official name was Tromsø, but it had been named Romsa centuries ago.

As a tourist visiting, you would probably not notice the split between the people living there, as the tourism industry invested time in portraying the Indigenous population as loved.

What a joke.

The Sami population was never loved.

This was not the only place making a mess out of their Indigenous population, as the Sami people were spread across Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. That being said, the mess was not constricted to the Sami people. The whole world seemed to have made a mess out of the people who were here first.

Lucky for you, if you know something about the destruction of one group of Indigenous people, you actually know a lot about the destruction of most groups of Indigenous people. Still, one should never gloss over specificity. Forgetting the specifics of an event, of a people, has the tendency to move towards complete erasure.

1851: A fund was created to “educate” the Sami people and teach them Norwegian.

1898: The church instructed the schools to become stricter. Kids would get punished for speaking Sami, and teachers would be rewarded for every kid they managed to “civilize.”

1900: Boarding schools.

1900 – Present: death, both in the spiritual and the literal sense.

1997: Apology.

No worries, we survived after all! (Some of us at least)

But the truth is that the colonists made it pretty easy to for us to keep track.

Invasion, genocide, denial, denial, denial. And then some more of the same.

Thus, Romsa was no exception.

Phrases used by politicians in this loving place:

“Why do we pay so much attention to 0.2% of the population?” *Why do you think we are only 0.2% of the population? So much for an apology.*

“They can read Norwegian can't they?” *Yes, we can, because of people like you.*

The beauty of ignorance.

One would think the biggest split was between the adults, yet it was by examining the children that you could find the biggest rift. The children went to the same schools and had the same education but somehow, they ended up learning different things.

Main Norwegian learning objectives:

Be nice to others. Be humble. Share. Be respectful.

Main Sami learning objectives:

Indigenous youth is at higher risk of suicide. Let your parents know if anyone bullies you because you speak a different language. Take extra good care of the other Sami children around you, they might need it. Be tough but kind, you need both. You are at a higher risk of suicide. Please just talk to us if anything happens.

The city was very proud of its education system.

The city was very proud of its beauty.

The city was very proud of its loving people.

But I guess as with everywhere else, everything depends on who you are.

The Lesson Plan

Twelve years old.

At school was usually where the screaming from my shoulders would be the loudest.

Subject: The Indigenous People of Norway	Name: <i>MATHILDE</i>
Unit Name: The Sami People	
Date: 09/28/2011	
Objectives:	
Students will	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identify who the Sami people are 2. Understand where and how they lived 3. Pinpoint the differences between Sami and Norwegian culture and language 4. Reflect on the issues farmers experience when faced with reindeer herders 5. Identify the benefits the Sami people brought to our nation? 	
Materials:	
<i>Horizons – Social Science for Elementary School Level 1-3</i>	
Chapter 6: Norwegian Culture and Society	
Pages: 102-103 (& one paragraph on p. 107)	
Resources:	
The Sami exhibition on the second floor of the local museum	
Lesson 1 Title: You	
Lesson 2 Title: Don't	
Lesson 3 Title: Belong	
Lesson 4 Title: Here	
Assignments and Activities:	
Place the Sami people on a map	
Draw and color the traditional Sami costume	
Class trip to the museum: notice the differences between Norwegian and Sami culture	
Write down what you found most fascinating about the Sami Culture	
Ask at home if you have any Sami ancestry and share with the class	
Notes:	
<i>BUT I AM RIGHT HERE</i>	

Elle Sofe told me that this was racism, while Solveig said that I was overreacting.

I stayed silent, afraid that either of them would be right. I cannot remember ever completing the assignment.

The Car

Fourteen years old.

We were driving around the area with no special destination in mind. My mom wanted to show our guests around. This time around it was my aunt and cousin from England. My aunt had married my mom's brother a couple of years ago and had been in Norway multiple times.

Yet, she had never been in the Sami parts of Norway.

I wanted to come along for the ride, because I loved being around my tiny five-year-old cousin who I very rarely got to see. I was excited to show him all the cool places I knew he would enjoy.

But my mom had other plans. She started talking about the dark history of this place.

“To be able to own land they had to change their Sami names...”

“The farmers wanted their land, and forced the Sami people into countless court cases...”

“Isn't it awful? They lost everything”

At this point I was fuming, ready to explode. Once again, everything good had been taken away. Any chances of laughter and fun stories were gone.

Solveig was screaming in my ear, telling me that my mom should stop complaining about everything, she only wanted everyone to feel sorry for the poor Sami people. Elle Sofe was screaming back, scolding me and saying that it was my responsibility to listen to this story and to continue telling it to others. At this point, I was just as bad as the colonizers themselves, Elle Sofe assured me.

I was silently falling apart in the backseat. The screaming was so loud that my whole body twitched in pain, but nobody saw it, nobody heard it.

Shut up. Shut up.

I just wanted to show him around. I just wanted everyone to smile.

Please just shut up I can't breathe.

I just wanted her to stop talking for once. I did not want to hear it.

I did not want to be Sami.

I did not want to be Norwegian.

I just wanted everyone to stop hurting for once, including me.

My aunt listened to my mom intently, shocked by what she was learning.

The Ancestor

The ancestor would be known as Mattaráhku, which means great grandmother in Sami.

She was born somewhere between 1910 and 1911, no one really knew for sure. She would live for about 98 years, outliving one of her own sons.

She was kind, patient and resilient. She would be the grandmother of many beautiful grandchildren, yet only one of them would speak the language she grew up with.

That one girl would be known as Nieiddažan, little girl in Sami.

She was blessed with the heart of a storyteller, always coming to Mattaráhku, begging for another fairytale. For years, Nieiddažan would listen to stories about their people and how they came to be. This was how the girl would learn the language that no one else wanted to teach her.

The older Nieiddažan got, the bleaker the fairytales got, and she would soon realize that these were no longer fairytales. Mattaráhku made sure to tell the girl to not mention to her dad what the two of them were talking about.

“Why not?”

“Because your dad doesn’t like talking about the things that hurt”

But Mattaráhku wanted her to know the truth, even when it was painful. Therefore, she told Nieiddažan about the two wars she had outlived, and how their relatives were killed. She told her about how all the reindeer would either get trapped on the Russian side of the border or get killed during the bombings. She told her how speaking Sami suddenly became the most sinful thing one could do.

Mattaráhku also told her that Nieiddažan’s dad had stopped speaking the language after the second war and that he had changed his name to try to erase the man he used to be. She told

her that this was why he was hurting so bad, because he had killed the most important part of himself. Nieiddažan asked why she had not done the same.

“Because I had lost enough already, I could not lose myself too”

Those words would stay with Nieiddažan the rest of her life, as the girl grew into a woman and became a mother herself. Even as an adult, Nieiddažan would go to Mattaráhku asking for more stories. She would now bring her own daughter, the daughter who was responsible for the name Mattaráhku.

The stories and language would live on in the daughter too.

The last time Nieiddažan would see Mattaráhku, she asked about a part of her past that they had never spoken about before.

“Mattaráhku, what happened to your parents?”

She was silent for so long that Nieiddažan thought she was not getting an answer.

“My mother died of disease when I was three or four years old. The only thing I remember is her long black hair”

“What about your dad?”

A tear escaped from Mattaráhku’s left eye. This would be the first and last time Nieiddažan would see her cry.

“The shame was too much for him to handle. It was not enough to only kill the most important parts of himself, he killed every single one.”

Nieiddažan did not know what to do with this information, so she tucked it somewhere deep in her heart, where no one would be able to find it for a very long time. She swore that she would teach her own children to be proud, and to love every part of themselves.

At the funeral, Nieiddažan held her own daughter’s hand.

“I want you to never forget that woman. Do you hear me? She is the reason we are here today”

The daughter nodded.

The Dance

Seventeen years old.

I was visiting the States for the first time, a trip orchestrated through an organization that wanted youth from mostly Scandinavia to learn about new cultures through traveling. I had not known anyone prior to departure, and I had not asked any of my friends if they wanted to come along for the trip. Being alone was a welcomed change.

I was starting to build a relationship with the other students whom were all from the southern parts of Norway, Sweden and Denmark. I was the only one from the northern region.

We started our road trip in New York and had now reached Monument Valley, homelands of the Navajo Nation. Apparently, this was the highlight of the trip for many, because we finally got to visit “the cool natives.” Most Scandinavian countries had these “cool natives,” which made me wonder how they could still think like this. Did they see me as a “cool native?” I could not remember if I had told them I was Sami. Probably not.

I suddenly felt cold to the core.

I was more exposed than I had been so far on this trip, and both Elle Sofe and Solveig started whispering again, and in the end, it turned into the familiar screaming.

Say something.

No. Don't you dare ruin this for everyone else.

The fear seeped back in.

I was afraid of saying something, I was afraid of not saying anything.

Silence.

Later on, the natives wanted to show the tourists a dance. The chief said he needed a dance partner and looked around, scanning the huge crowd. I was hiding all the way in the back, calming myself with the thought that he would never see me.

He did.

For years, I would think about that moment. I would wonder if he saw me, or if he saw the angel and the devil on my shoulders.

I would wonder if he had angels and devils of his own.

In the end his reasoning for choosing me did not really matter. The only thing that mattered was that he did.

He saw me.

I swear he looked through me and through all this tourist crap. I swear he could see that I had betrayed our ancestors by not sticking up for them, for us. That I had pretended not to hear all the comments made in the bus less than an hour ago.

Then again, who could really judge any of us for being in the position we were in?

I bet he did not dance with tourists because it was what he had dreamed of accomplishing in life. I bet he did not dance with us because he loved it. Likewise, it was not like I enjoyed being silent. I just never knew what to say.

Maybe we were both trapped in a dance we did not want to be a part of. Maybe we were both dancing out of responsibility, not desire.

Either way, I felt guilty. Elle Sofe whispered cruelly that I should have responded to the inappropriate comments made in that bus, only then would I be worthy of dancing with the chief. Solveig whispered that it was okay, he did not know I was native either way, no one did. So it did not matter. No one would know that I should have said something.

I tried to calm down, telling myself that at least I had preserved the good atmosphere in the bus full of excited tourists.

I really regretted not saying anything.

But then again, I knew I never would have.

The Flight

Eighteen years old.

I was leaving. I had known that I was leaving this place for about a year, because the second I stepped on Norwegian soil after my US trip, I knew that I would not stay for long.

The thought of leaving, of starting over somewhere far away, was intoxicating.

I was running away.

Little did I know that I could never run away from Elle Sofe and Solveig. One does not leave angels and devils behind, even when you run for 4132 miles.

My mom and my stepdad traveled to the US with me, because a part of me was not ready to leave everything behind all at once. They would go back home the following week. A part of me was terrified, but I hid it with excitement. I bet my mom saw right through it. She usually did.

I was about to set foot on the campus of Pacific Lutheran University, where I was spending the next three years of my life.

I was ready to play hide and seek in the sea of American culture.

Elle Sofe and Solveig were quietly laughing at my naivety. I ignored them.

Instead I focused on the history of this place.

PLU was founded by Norwegians on December 11th of 1890, on the stolen land of the Nisqually, Puyallup, Squaxin Island and Steilacoom peoples.

Wait a second. One of the Norwegians was actually Sami, but he didn't use his Sami last name.

Instead he chose *Xavier*.

Most of the students and faculty roaming the building named after him would never know who he was. They would probably never even think about the fact that this was a man who was not from this continent, that he was native to somewhere far away from this place.

In other words, another Sami playing hide and seek founded a college on stolen land in the month of December. And here I was.

The irony was too real.

At least he succeeded.

I changed my focus once again.

Because of the origins of the founders, the college had a strong connection to Norway, thus, there were a lot of Norwegian students attending every year. I did not know if this was a good or bad thing. Did that make my hide and seek easier or harder?

Stop thinking goddammit.

“Do you want to go to the dinner for international students tonight? You might get to know some of the other Norwegians!” my mother happily suggested.

I quickly said that I would rather spend time with my family.

Little did I know that in the end the Norwegians would become a second family.

Little did I know that they would not let me hide.

Little did I know that they would eventually ask

oh are you Sami?

Little did I know that eventually I would say *yes* and start explaining the rift created between us decades ago.

Little did I know that a rift did not always need to be permanent.

The Guide

<p>How to Kill an Entire Indigenous Group: A Quick Guide to Colonization and Genocide</p> <p><i>Disclaimer: These steps do not have to be done in any set order; one can choose the order that best brings about the destruction the specific Indigenous group in question.</i></p>		
Overall Goal	Strategies	Results
Take their land	Remove them.	Homelessness.
Remove their source of food	Kill their animals, take the food for yourself.	Poverty.
Remove their native language	Create boarding schools where they will learn the white man's language. Punish them for speaking their native language.	Silence.
Ruin relationship with family	This can also happen pretty efficiently in the boarding schools by taking the children away from their family and teaching them that everything their family thought them is wrong.	Loneliness.
Make them want to become white	Create so much shame around their native identity that they will want to leave it behind. Tempt them by assuring rewards for becoming white and betraying their own communities.	Shame.
Kill them	Either spiritually or literally. Both are effective.	Death.
Introduce and maintain stereotypes.	Examples: drunks, criminals, savages, uncivilized, unintelligent, violent.	Alcoholism.
Pretend like it never happened	Deny it. Can possibly apologize, as long as colonial structures stay in place.	Denial.
Make the natives into criminals	Either by forcing them into committing crimes through colonial structures or simply make everyone believe they are criminals.	Violence.
Teach the next generations to maintain and cultivate the colonial structures.	Teach them the Western side of the story. Enforce stereotypes, racism, systems that oppress the group, politics that work towards a clean white society.	Suicide.

The Phone Call

Twenty years old.

It was a sunny Saturday in Tacoma, about two years after I had first moved here for college. I had finally begun to adapt to the weather and was no longer surprised that I could wear shorts and a tank top in May.

I had been looking forward to this day, we all had. Today was the day of the scavenger hunt that all the Norwegian students at PLU did every year. We would also invite our closest American friends. If I had to guess the number of attendees, I would say we were about thirty people sitting in a circle in the backyard, waiting for the games to begin.

I was in the middle of a conversation when my phone started vibrating, and I saw my mom's name on the screen. I figured I could just answer to say that I was busy, and we could talk the next day.

I answered.

My mom was crying.

No, my mom was *sobbing*.

I don't remember the sequence of events after that, the only thing I remember is a feeling of fear that I had never felt before.

I thought my brother was dead.

I had never seen my mom cry, except at the funeral of her parents, my grandparents. Someone in my family had to be dead, and for a split second my shoulders were screaming so loud that I could not hear anything else.

Indigenous youth is at higher risk of suicide.

Your brother is at higher risk of suicide.

You are at higher risk of suicide.

My mother finally managed to stop crying for a second, sharing the info that ruined me and saved me at the exact same moment. I was right, someone had committed suicide, but it was not my brother, but his childhood best friend.

The next thing I remember is that I was lying on the grass, sobbing with my mother, a continent away.

Maybe this was what I was so afraid of and why did not want to choose sides, why I never knew who I should be listening to.

I was so afraid of making a wrong step.

My shoulders were silent that day.

The whole world seemed to be silent, the only echo being the absent of another boy who did not want to fight anymore.

The Eyes

I once read that when you start crying, and the first drop comes from the right eye, you are crying of happiness. The left signifies pain.

I could never decide which of my eyes leaked first. To me they always seemed to come at the same time, in an overwhelming wave that flooded my whole face. The wreckage caused by the flood always took some time to clean up.

I used to say that I had overactive tear ducts. Then I would laugh to signify that I was okay. Even when I wasn't.

I was the girl who cried. I had always been the girl who cried.

Everyone else would look away, uncomfortable by the waves that never seemed to stop.

I was the girl who cried when I read a beautiful sentence or listened to a sad song. I was the girl who cried when I argued, when I was stressed, when someone got married. I was the girl who cried in class when talking about something that mattered, I was the girl who cried in a presentation when I mentioned my mother. I was the girl who cried.

Maybe that was something I had inherited from my ancestors. Maybe I was crying for every Sami person who came before, as it never felt like I was crying only for myself. That many tears could not belong to me alone.

But never think that Sami people only cried when they were hurting. There were so many good things to cry for too.

Maybe I had learned to cry from the mix of beauty and ugliness of survival, which might be why both my eyes always seemed to leak at the same time.

Maybe my tear ducts were connected to my people back home, as everyone cried the day of the phone call, the day another fight was lost.

Maybe my eyes made of tears were pain and happiness and shame and pride all at once.

Maybe it was not me who needed to stop crying; maybe it was everyone else who needed to find the courage to see my tears, the magic of resilience.

The Theory

I once read the word *postmemory* while doing research for an assignment for my Holocaust Literature class during my first semester in college.

It was a theory created by Marianne Hirsch, the daughter of Holocaust survivors. She explained how parents could pass on their own trauma to their children, which would leave children traumatized by events they had never experienced.

Children of those directly affected by collective trauma inherit a horrific, unknown, and unknowable past that their parents were not meant to survive.

Mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection and creation.

I let out a sigh that I felt like I had been holding for a very long time.

So, this was what was wrong with me. Solveig and Elle Sofe were the products of my ancestors' trauma, which was now passed down to me. I was obsessed with this theory, because it explained me. I was struggling to make sense of my own existence because of those who came before me. Or rather, because of what was done towards those who came before me.

It was not my fault. It explained why I was confused and angry all the time. It explained why I cried more often than anyone else. It explained that I was not crazy for having Solveig and Elle Sofe screaming at me all the time, making sure that I was aware of all my mistakes.

At least I thought it did.

If none of us were supposed to survive, it made a lot of sense that our survival was ugly, confused, and angry. I had found the answer, so I could finally gather up my mess into this theory and tie a bow over it. I was done; I had done my work. I could finally hide all the ugliness.

However, I did not consider that being an Indigenous woman was different than being the daughter of Holocaust survivors. I did not realize at first that both identities brought very different things to the table.

No matter how hard and long I searched for an explanation for why I was existing the way I was, I would never find it. Postmemory, generational trauma, they were a part of my story. But they only explained a tiny piece of my existence.

I seemed to have forgotten about the things I *had* experienced.

I seemed to have forgotten the comments, the questions, the mental blows taken again and again. I seemed to have forgotten the everyday life of not being seen, of being seen the wrong way.

I seemed to have forgotten that I was not only a child of traumatized individuals; I seemed to have forgotten that I could possibly be traumatized myself too.

The Contest

Still twenty years old.

I was eagerly staring at the screen waiting for them to announce the winner.

Every year they threw a song contest back home, called “Stjerne Kamp,” which was a contest where they would find a mix of singers that had just started out and famous singers, to compete against each other. Every week they would sing in a different genre, and the winner would prove that they could handle everything from rock to rap to opera. They would be the ultimate Norwegian entertainer, *the singer of all singers*.

This year one of my classmates from High School was participating. Her name was Ella Marie Hætta Isaksen. She was only twenty years old.

She was Sami.

The nine-hour time difference made it challenging, but I had been planning for this for a while. I would not miss this. She had gotten all the way to the finale.

My shoulders were silent. Maybe they were as nervous as the rest of the country. Everyone seemed to be holding their breath. Could a twenty-year-old Sami woman possibly win a Norwegian contest?

And the winner is...

I burst into tears.

This time it was my right eye that leaked first.

She did it. She won.

I could not stop crying as my heart was drowning in pride and an overwhelming feeling of relief. I did not know what I would have done if she had lost. A part of me thought that our people could just not deal with one more loss, even if it was just a stupid contest.

Yet it wasn't stupid. She had won, which means that not only the minority voted for her. It was not only Sami people who wanted her to win.

We had won.

Not long after the contest, she released her first album, called Ealán.

Alive.

My right eye was leaking because I was so overwhelmed by the fact that the girl who had always worked so hard had finally won. Except she never said I won. She always said *we*. Since day one, she had fought. She wrote her songs in both Sami and English, so both her language and her message would travel as far as possible. Through her songs, she had screamed at the top of her lungs,

Can't you see the earth is in pain?

No matter how we hide it,

the memories remain in a city in disguise

that tries to hide the cries of Indigenous eyes

It was impossible to explain the power she had brought to so many. The only way it could be explained in words was this:

our bodies *felt* it.

But then there was my other eye. Maybe the other eye cried because I had never been that certain. I had never had the courage to scream. Instead I had been silent when I should have said something.

Once again, my eyes were all mixed up.

Once again, my eyes were leaking of both shame and pride.

The Concert According to Solveig

Almost twenty-one.

My best friend and I entered the building, filled with pleasant conversation about the concert that was about to take place.

Solveig told me to smile at the eyes that met mine, some of them coming our way, either to compliment what we were wearing or to strike up another friendly conversation.

Everyone found their places. As always, we were late and found ourselves sitting in the back. Solveig told me to talk to the very sweet lady behind us as we were waiting for the singer to come on stage.

What a wonderful lady, show her your best side now.

Solveig wanted me to behave, to be civil.

The lady asked me if I could make her a joik, a traditional Sami way of singing. I was about to tell her that that first of all that was not something you could just give to anyone, and that second of all I didn't know how to joik.

Don't do that. Don't ruin this moment, can't you see how excited she is? Just nod and smile.

Good girl.

The lady asked for my number. Solveig told me to give it to her.

The concert was truly beautiful, the whole audience was inspired by the words most of them did not understand, as she was singing in our native language.

We got to talk to the singer afterwards. Mari Boine is her name.

My mom lived with Mari during college and had told me to say hi. After some hugging and quick small talk, we told her we had to leave, as we had a long drive back from Seattle.

Solveig intervened.

Stay and talk to some of the people in the audience before you leave. Make a good impression. Answer the questions. Smile.

Finally, I managed to shut her voice out, excused us, and head for the door.

I heard someone saying “wow, such beautiful young ladies,” as we were walking past.

See? What do you think they would have said if you hadn't behaved? Good girl.

The Concert According to Elle Sofe

Almost twenty-one still, but from a different perspective.

My best friend and I entered the building, and boom. Everyone was staring. And I mean every single person in that room. Elle Sofe pleaded me to just look away.

But it was difficult. Those hungry, fascinated, and honored eyes.

They are not looking at you, they are looking at who they think you are.

People hungrily touched, grabbed, and felt the fabric. I forced myself to smile.

Please stop smiling. This is not okay. Don't answer the stupid questions.

Say something.

Thank you, yes, my mom made it for me, and yes, I know, aren't the colors beautiful?

Thank you, that's very kind of you. Yes, I am very proud of it. No, I do not know how to make my own. Yes, I might try to learn it when I go back home to Norway.

There were hands on me at all times. No one asked me if I actually wanted to be touched, but I knew that's not how it works. I was ready to step into this role, into the product of fascination.

You shouldn't be.

We ended up sitting in the back, right by a lady who was ecstatic to sit by us. She asked uncomfortable questions. She asked for my number.

Say something.

After the concert, we waited for the singer to come out, so we could hug her and thank her for the beautiful concert, say "my mom says hi", and then leave. When she finally entered the room, she saw us right away, and I saw her face warming with recognition. I could feel Elle Sofe sigh in relief.

“Ollu giitu go bohtet! Cealke dearvvuodaid eatnai, mun vailahan su.” *Thank you for coming! Say hi to your mom for me, will you? I miss her.*

We hurried out of there as quickly as possible, exhausted. Elle Sofe scolded me for not staying for longer, talking to the singer.

The next morning, I woke up with a text from the lady I gave my number to.

I sat behind you last night

I am still inspired by Mari's concert.

I work with young women who are trying to make a difference in the world.

You impress me as someone who is like that.

I would like to stay connected.

I did not respond to the text.

Look what you did.

The Laughter

“Look what you did!”

My grandfather was laughing at me.

We would spend every summer with my grandparents. Every single morning, I would find my grinning grandfather in the kitchen alone, waiting for me to join the table and eat my egg.

“I know it’s empty grandpa!”

“I don’t know what you are talking about, sweetie”

I would fake annoyance, but on the inside, I would be grinning just as much as he did.

The egg resting by my plate was an empty shell, because every morning my grandfather would eat his boiled egg with a spoon, and then switch the empty shell with my untouched egg. I would pretend to look surprised every time my egg was already eaten. My grandfather’s laugh would wake the whole house.

“Look what you did! You ate your egg in your sleep!”

His warm laugh wrapped itself around my tiny heart, and his smile sneaked upon me and suddenly found itself on my face too.

That was how I remembered him. Laughter.

Even if I fell and hurt my knee, and came in crying, he would laugh. If I screamed because I stepped on a slug, he would laugh. If I was scared of the thunderstorm outside, he would laugh.

I remember how I was sitting on his lap one day, crying. I have no idea why I was crying, but I remember that at the time my seven-year-old world was falling apart. As usual, he laughed. This time I was annoyed. I could not understand how he had the audacity to laugh at a moment

like this. With tears streaking down my face, I asked him why he always laughed, even when everyone else were sad.

“Oh honey, don’t you know that laughter has healed the most bruised knee I have ever seen? Laughing can heal any cut and dry every tear!”

I stopped crying. He laughed, tickled me, and I started laughing too.

“See? Always listen to your grandpa!”

And I did.

A couple of years later he died.

I cried during the whole service, but then as we were about to walk outside, I felt the laughter grab a hold of my heart once again.

My mother’s eyes were filled with tears as they met mine. She asked me why I was smiling. I did not answer, but my smile grew bigger.

She suddenly realized whose smile was on my lips. She squeezed my hand. I could see a hint of a smile, catching the tears leaking from her eyes.

Laugh the pain away, my little sunflower.

The Book

A Native American woman named Deborah Miranda from the Ohlone/Costanoan-Esselen Nation once wrote a book called *Bad Indians*.

A Native American woman named Deborah Miranda from the Ohlone/Costanoan-Esselen Nation once broke my heart by writing *Bad Indians*.

I once broke my own heart by reading *Bad Indians*.

But through her writing, Miranda told me that it was okay to break my own heart, that she had needed to do it, to come to terms with what her ancestors had experienced. To come to terms what she had experienced. She had broken her own heart because she had found all the pieces of herself that were damaged, truly felt them, held them in her hands, and then showed it to the world.

Now it was time I found the courage to do it too.

Being brave enough to feel the hurt is powerful.

Miranda told all the dirty secrets that I also shared, and she told me that it was okay that we shared these secrets.

I am afraid that our people aren't capable of mending in the ways we keep thinking we must. If I think about this too much it breaks my heart.

My eyes were flooding with her, my heart

it started breaking

breaking

breaking

broken.

*We think we are too broken to ever be whole again. But it's not true. We can be whole—
just differently.*

The waves flooded like never before. I was whole.

I stopped breathing

breathing

breathing

breathe.

I'm not whole. And yet, I am whole. What the hell! I'm a whole mosaic. Deal with it, world.

She brought it all together for me to see, for everyone to see. She showed pictures, graphs, historical documents, poetry, rage, heartbreak, honesty, love, courage, generosity, stories. So many stories.

And she didn't tell me that I had to learn to deal with being messed up. She told the world to learn to deal with the fact that they messed us up.

It was never our fault.

It was never my fault.

I was finally learning to break my own damn heart, and the sound of something shattering had never been so loud, so powerful.

The Truth

I want you to listen, and I want you to see me. I want you to see my people. Oh, but not like that. Don't stare at me like that.

I want you to care about us and pay attention to us, but don't put *all* your attention on us; I would not know what to do with it.

Of course, I want to change the world, but don't dare put that responsibility on me just because I am an Indigenous woman.

You better believe Indigenous women are strong, but don't assume I am strong just because I am an Indigenous woman. Don't assume all Indigenous women can survive anything, and don't dare assume that Indigenous women are the only ones who can survive anything.

These are the words no one dares to say. No one admits that it is not easy telling you what we want, because it somehow ends up wrong either way. I cannot tell you what I want, what I need, because I have never had it, and I never will.

We are always invisible and too visible at all times. I know I should not complain about being too visible, and I know that it is better to be too visible than not seen at all. But what does it help if I do not know what to do when you look at me, those fascinated eyes waiting for something?

How I wish I would change the world. How I wish I was the strong Indigenous woman everyone seemed to be talking about. How I wish it was as simple as that.

I am smiling back, I am meeting those eyes, I am answering your questions. I am talking, writing, thinking, and fighting. I am trying so incredibly hard, and I will never see it as enough. I will be annoyed; frustrated by the questions that should not be asked, and hurt by the questions that are never asked, but should have been.

See me.

See me.

See me.

But please.

Just don't stare so intensely.

I do not know what to do with the spotlight.

The Assignment

Twenty-one years old.

My last year of college in the States is halfway through, and I am sitting here, trying to write my second and last capstone. This is my chance to show what I have learned in these years, to show my best work.

This is supposed to be the capstone for a major in which a student creates their own path, because the paths that already exist does not fit the student in question. This is not a regular occurrence at PLU, because most students seem to find a field that works for them.

Yet, this was apparently a regular occurrence in my life. Therefore, I once again had to carve my own path, a place for myself in the middle.

I got to decide which capstone I wanted to take to fulfill this, as long as it could be tied to my topic somehow. There were not many choices, but the most natural ones would have been literature or maybe history.

But I chose creative writing.

These last three years I have spent analyzing and discussing some of the most brutal violations in human history. Day in and day out I have been arguing about how we understand stories of genocide victims, how we understand the effects trauma has on identity.

I was always critical, looking for how I could be better and work harder to understand and listen to those usually not heard. I was probably more critical than most.

My friends and I joke about the fact that by now, I basically have the UN genocide convention memorized. But analyzing, discussing, arguing and knowing can only do so much.

When I was going to decide how to create a capstone on this topic, I did not know where to start. What is the best way to write about these topics?

Someone once said that history is always personal.

But what happens when you don't really understand your personal?

What if you were to create? What if you were to try to imagine? A voice whispered in my head. I was shocked to realize that it wasn't the angel nor the devil on my shoulders. For once, it was my own voice, shy and shaky, but at least it was there. The least I could do was listen to it.

Miranda had told me to break my own heart, so I might as well try.

However, that was apparently much easier said than done. As I began writing, I realized I had no idea how to tell this story. My head started spinning out of control. My eyes were leaking once again. Elle Sofe and Solveig were back, screaming at me, telling me to do the right thing.

How can I represent a beautiful culture with so much pain?

Do I owe it to my ancestors to teach everyone about the suffering?

Or do I owe it to my ancestors to not show any weakness, as they fought so hard?

Who was I writing for? The white society, my ancestors, or myself? Was it possible to do all three at once?

How do you write about something that began centuries ago?

I began with admitting that I did not even know what I was fighting for, and I still don't always know what I am fighting for.

So, what do you want then?

I am waiting for the ones on my shoulders to start screaming, listing off their demands. But none of them know how to answer that question. Elle Sofe and Solveig are quiet for once.

As I am writing, I am realizing that maybe that question was never for the angel nor the devil on my shoulders, the names that never belonged to me to begin with.

So, what do I want?

I want to write.

Write and create and imagine until I feel okay, until I hear my own voice clear and steady, ready to discuss, argue and criticize all those things that I wish never would have happened, but still did. But until that happens, I will have to imagine a strong voice. Until it becomes real, I will have to exist in the place of the imaginative. I will write until I know how to exist with all parts of myself.