

BLOOD QUANTUM

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# BLOOD QUANTUM

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Abstract: The following collection of poems deals primarily but not exclusively with the idea of ethnic identity. Moving through themes of family, love, religion and race I am examining how one comes to define themselves racially, especially when he or she is of mixed race— a term I have only recently adopted. In each section there are poems that seem out of place but they are meant to represent an absence of self. Another subtle aspect present throughout is a shift between light and dark which is meant to represent the trials and tribulations we all face in life. As someone pushed toward defining himself as Native American I am also pushing back by writing less about this part of my history as an act of rebellion to bring back into focus the fact I am of mixed race.

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# Part I

## A Day in the Life

## Remembering In Reverse

I pull away from the donut shop,  
coffee in hand, unsure where to go,  
the sting of our separation still fresh.

The blinker's rhythmic click signaling  
an unwanted detour away from you,  
a direction opposite my usual route—  
Monroe, 9th, McFarland, 12th.

Overhead, the stoplight's red glow  
delays my course correction  
long enough to remember the feel  
of my calloused hands on the pale,  
freckled skin of your shoulder,  
kissing the scar on your collar bone  
you said was from a horse riding accident,  
and how you shuddered each time my fingers  
grazed the skin beneath the hem of your shirt.

At the edge of my vision a green arrow burns,  
reminding me to move. I turn left  
instead of going straight,  
retrace steps from before we met.

Forgetting is just remembering in reverse,  
so I'll start with your cello, half hidden  
in its blue case in the corner of your room.

## Taxidermy

My uncle mists the quillwork,  
his airbrush's pneumatic breath  
shakes dust from the porcupine.  
Each slick quill is handmade  
and painted to match the pelt  
which he stretched over the skull,  
the only original piece.

He gave me a barn owl,  
wings wide as if in pursuit of prey,  
and my closet became its cage.  
I appreciate his crafts difficulty,  
I just don't need it in my room.  
He wants me as an apprentice  
but I make a better spectator.

His movements are meticulous  
touching up any discolored quills  
under the scrutiny of sunlight.  
He stops only to wipe sweat  
from his brow and flex his fingers,  
the mechanical hiss dying slowly.

A tremor navigates mauled nerves  
in his shoulder and he cups the gnarly scar  
a tigress lying in wait gave him—  
a souvenir from his only safari.  
He leans into the workbench,  
drops the airbrush on the tile.

I can see his jaw muscle go taut,  
know he's fighting the pain.  
His left elbow strikes a small pot  
precariously placed in the window;  
Liriope leaves nod in his wake  
and sunlight soaks acrylic eyes.



## Ventriloquist

Voices curl around ceiling joists  
as I watch my reflection,  
the way my mouth moves,  
the turbulence of my own voice.

Trevor's drawl strains my vocal cords.  
He knows I've taken to swigging honey.  
Sounds can grow stale like bread,  
which is the difference of a paycheck.

Transition is not without sacrifice—  
*Out with the old and all.*  
I'm his life support and I'm pulling the plug.  
I press a match to polyester pant leg...  
*Dearly beloved, we've gathered here today...*

and watch the fabric snowflake down  
to smolder on the oil stained garage floor.

A powder burn marks the spot.  
I write my name in the remnants  
and feed Trevor's ashes to my fish.

## The Familiarity of Strangers

I feel you lying dormant beneath the surface.  
The emptiness of your stare has made me selfish  
because I long for one second of recognition  
to break the silence that defines our relationship.  
but it too has faded like your memories of me.

We were able to talk before you slipped away  
and you apologized for someday forgetting me.  
Your mind is simply going through the motions,  
conducting bursts of gray into clusters of the same.  
I stroke the back of your hand with my thumb,

trace the wrinkles back to before the diagnosis.  
I have grown to love your curious half-smile  
and the absent way you sit and listen to me talk.  
The way your brow furrows when I call you daddy,  
as if trying to piece your life back together.

Time has done its best to prepare me for this—  
my inevitable metamorphosis into a stranger.

## Medium

This is her, fractured memory be damned.  
Her body remembers, arms and legs move

more from years of practice than recollection,  
and I know to wait until she sits at the table.

A strange calm, like meditation, radiates  
from her every time she settles down

as if the room captured the few seconds  
of silence just before an explosion

draws it out as long as her mind will allow  
before the chaos of dementia resuscitates.

No one uses the bell. The tone is too binding  
and often a gentle rapping goes overlooked.

From the fifth step I wait for them,  
grandmother's customers, their tentative knock.

The heel of my shoe drums worn wood,  
eyes drawn to a strand of sunlight

resting atop a hollowed out console television.  
In the haze I see the frayed edge of a moth-eaten,

crocheted pot holder, threads curling back  
like her fingers before she takes her medicine.

The terra cotta pot bears an array of tiny fissures  
branching out like tributaries in need of water.

I fill a metal watering can every morning,  
the spout formed to look like a sunflower.

Liquid seeps from the largest of the cracks,  
tints the edge of the pot holder reddish-brown.

I imagine the water corroding the varnish,  
blistering the wood enough so that every channel

shows the pot shattering in Technicolor,

but I would be the one to clean up the mess.

She is murmuring to invisible people  
as the security light's artificial glow

bathes the dining room amber.  
She pauses and looks at the cherry red

'68 Olds Cutlass in the driveway,  
a flash of familiarity shows in her eyes,

maybe of Sunday drives with my grandfather,  
or things too intimate to be shared.

My grandmother presses a bony hip  
against the stolid oak table, her skirt caught

between skin and lacquered edge.  
She buoys her thin frame

upon a diaphanous, liver marked arm,  
practices pointes in orthopedic shoes

gaunt muscles and arthritic joints  
recalling lessons long abandoned,

and runs fingernail through a groove  
etched cross grain into hoary wood—

a forty year record of struck matches  
and attempts to commune with the dead.

And in the eerie silence that follows  
we wait for one last customer to knock.

## Metronome

The process begins with the neck and my left hand,  
calloused fingertips, anxious for a progression.  
My brain works majors and minors alphabetically,  
tracks each position's root as the composition evolves  
and vibrations fill the body to produce a sound.

Mood dictates my stroke upward or downward  
as the rhythm rises and falls, hardens or softens,  
and improvisation is my weapon of choice.  
Time exists between notes and is not constant.

Inspiration lies with your scent in our empty bed,  
the homeless harmonica player busking,  
or the street corner preacher peddling faith.  
Rhythm is guided by a persistent metallic click  
ricocheting wall to wall as chords take shape.

Words are unnecessary, they muffle the sound.  
I read frets like brail, my fingers comfortable  
as if tracing your lips or your body's curves,  
knowing there's a moment in each breath we die.

## Transmission

Veins splinter desiccated earth  
as summer's breath rouses dust devils,  
sprays sun burnt particles against steel.  
Liquid sloshes sheathed in aluminum  
as I raise my uncle's canteen,  
dented on one side from a stray bullet,  
and the water is cold.

My uncle spent three days up there,  
skin blistering against cross beams.  
Then his 9mm's mechanical crack,  
the force unable to peel his body free,  
turned the tower into a tuning fork—  
his canteen caught in a moonlit  
gravitational free fall.

Power lines cast concave tightropes  
that sway as the sun drifts westward,  
solid enough for me to traverse  
the arid expanse between towers.  
But there are only miles of desert,  
no clarity beyond the temperature  
as I retrace his steps;

walk out into the middle distance,  
mimic a march but I'm no soldier.  
I didn't accidentally shoot my brother  
on a hunting trip after Vietnam.  
Everyone blamed it on the alcohol  
but my father told me he'd lost it;  
confused them for VC.

The closest we have ever been  
is a family photo when I was six.  
He is a collection of stories to me,  
like the time he lost his ring finger  
to an alligator snapping turtle,  
or how he survived wrapping his truck  
around an oak tree.

I've walked out until the tower  
stood shimmering in the distance  
canteen in hand, but his resonance fades.

I need the electric hum beneath the quiet,  
the semi sacredness his death  
has given the transmission tower,  
the way the air trembles.

At least here I can touch the steel,  
finger the massive bolts and rivets;  
mistake the subtle reverberations  
for echoes of him seeping through,  
as if the tower were a magic lamp  
capable of conjuring spirits  
and he was my wish.

## Aerial Coverage for the Folks at Home

One sweeping shot is of my house overlooking the devastation:  
surface fires devouring scrub brush, regurgitating embers  
that flare against copper needles like a fuse, payload igniting  
birthing fresh scraggy rivers of flame— their languid flow  
guided by indecisive torrents shifting across the plains.

The evening air is thick with the scent of burnt land;  
the odor permeates my shirt and seeps into my skin.  
Gray-black smoke paints a rust colored sky,  
swallows the forest in ash and heat, licks veined foliage,  
ready to drink sap like marrow, and consume green innards.

I soak the earth surrounding my house with a garden hose,  
ignoring the helicopter's thump as it circles overhead.  
In the middle distance, treetops burn like candles, signal fires  
releasing cinders into the night. Beneath the fire's crackle,  
a sound like bones breaking, a voice urges me to evacuate.

I think about flames strumming my guitar's bronze strings,  
the Indian Rosewood body and mahogany neck burning—  
chrome tuning pegs scalded, left to lie in ash like teeth.  
The helicopter hovers, camera fixed on me and my hose,  
a bit of tension for viewers, as I contemplate: Stay or leave?

A murder of crows slips free of the exhaust,  
joins the chopper and waits to scavenge my house's remains.



## Bone Yard

Branch tips scrape paint and glass,  
their leaves sliding like tongues  
flat against the windows  
as I drive a path between unkempt sycamores.

In the passenger seat, she siphons smoke  
from a hand rolled cigarette.  
I hear the paper burn, a soft sound  
like someone sketching with charcoal or pencil.

There is no time for intimacy, not yet,  
we must wait until the dark at the tunnel's end;  
the clearing fenced in by chain link

where a small rail station once stood  
before lightning reverberated its bones  
and fire licked it clean:

the railroad tracks swallowed  
by grass budding around steel.  
No one comes here for the ruins.

The car's parking lights are too dim  
to conjure more than a silhouette  
as we sit listening to each other breathe.

In the distance boats troll the river.  
Their deck lights drift right to left,  
the opposite of my hand toward hers,  
a gesture greeted by a lungful of Marlboro.

## Preacher Man

Your crooked teeth  
make it easier  
for me to believe  
the truths you spin  
from the corner.  
Since the beginning  
this was your plan  
to make God proud,  
to spread the word,  
and your slant  
sounds beautiful.  
Somehow your words  
traverse the gaps,  
the sharp, enameled  
angles of your teeth  
and slip into my ears—  
there's something  
about how ten percent  
from my pocket  
to yours isn't thievery.  
The furious thwack  
of one scarred hand  
against The Book  
builds into a rhythm  
and draws me deeper  
into the spectacle.  
Your shoes clack  
on the concrete  
like a tap dancer  
and I feel your unsteady  
hands on my head  
ready for a healing.  
But, first things first,  
you collect your cut.

## Recycle

I examine the birdhouse's remains,  
roof charred by a lightning bolt,  
the hole a mouth full of blackened teeth.  
Inside a trio of birds lie huddled together  
bodies burnt and naked, left for flies.  
I bury them beneath the pole.

My father's trashcan is only half full  
as I fish out another of his rejects.  
Some of his work I've given away,  
sanded and coated them with paint  
to salvage his losses— my act of defiance.

Sometimes I think about digging him up,  
like pulling a rabbit out of my hat,  
whenever I renovate another failure.  
Once I dress it up, no one knows the difference.  
*You can dress anything up real nice*, he'd say.

I made him believe he was forgiven,  
let him squeeze my hand one last time  
and returned the gesture to let him go.  
All I kept was his pole and his can  
to remind myself that he was human,  
that his failures had nothing to do with me.

## Part II

### The Company of Light

## Breath on Glass

I watch you discreetly from my side of the street  
with binoculars I told the clerk were for ornithology.  
I described you as a ruby throated hummingbird—  
more for your quickness in the yard than your hair;  
did an evening's worth of research to sound official,  
but said there were other species to identify.

I'm pretty sure there's a Pacific Loon further down,  
at least I think she is from the West Coast: California.  
I ache for the Mississippi Kite because she spoke to me,  
and her accent lingers like my eyes on you, my hummingbird.

In the half-light of my living room I adjust the resolution  
until you come into focus. You're planting four o'clocks  
and mums, red hair pulled up, legs smeared with dirt;  
the muscles in your calves tense as you tamp soil.  
Your movements are graceful, you lift the spade  
with purpose and loosen the churlish earth.

I lose you as night falls, binoculars heavy in my lap.  
I track your movements with each light you turn on.  
You come into view backlit by a dim kitchen light  
and I raise the binoculars. The living room furniture  
has been rearranged and I failed to notice, until now.

I like to imagine the blinds are open for me—  
the dull green roman shades beckon me to the sill.  
I wonder if you would notice my breath on the glass  
if I ever dared cross the street.

## Room

Diffused amber light hindered by shades  
illuminates wandering dust and muddies the walls.  
The room, abandoned, smells stale.  
A patchwork quilt covers a sliver of twin bed,  
crayon pictures scattered on the walls.  
and a night-light struggles to find itself.  
The clock, its hands floating over a baseball field,  
no longer keeps time but forgets.  
Occasionally the knob turns and pauses  
before the door opens and the visits begin.  
First the father who can only stand in the doorway,  
and later the mother who sits on the floor among the toys  
wishing the carpet would overtake her.

## Remnant

Hands shift through remains,  
grateful for no lives lost.  
Survival and recovery begin  
beneath trees repurposed as clotheslines,  
and a helicopter surveys the tornado's path.

A tree split by lightning leans close.  
Its leaves whisper to mosquito larvae  
and recount being up-rooted  
as one crooked branch scrapes dual panes.  
Chimney bricks lie half submerged  
with waterlogged photographs for company.

The afternoon sun casts broken shadows,  
opaque sarcomas that stir in the breeze;  
high water allows the stump to sway,  
to gouge the roof like a blunt blade,  
remove shingles, undress the supports—  
make a crude incision perfect for gutting.

Amusement

We make crop circles with our bodies,  
crush wheat stems whose beards  
lean low enough to kiss skin  
before falling back broken.

Dirt settles on our tongues  
diluted by sweat and saliva,  
as wind sluices a fresh path,  
gives the field a voice—

the friction between kernels  
and dried stalks breaking apart  
like an ocean swell  
pounding Natural Bridges.

We ignore crude edges  
clawing our sunbathed skin.  
Unable to fight, I come  
and feel you tighten.

I hear the tide again  
as a murder of crows caws  
wings wide, riding thermals.



## Squalor

A boy sits huddled in the corner,  
nearly hidden by his soiled bed—  
a rank mound of sheets.  
Outside a wooden shepherd's pole  
leans weak with rot,  
a copper birdhouse at one end.

Sunlight glints off the bronzed roof,  
casts an oblong sliver of light  
through a broken window  
that shimmers on a water stained ceiling.  
He sways watching the beam,  
thankful for the company of light.

He hears the muffled squeal  
of the corroded hook  
as the wind jostles the copper house;  
feels the walls breathe,  
jumps at the sharp crack of wood  
behind drywall as they inhale.

He closes his eyes, fighting the fear,  
counts to ten,                   reopens them.

## Between the Needles and Nightfall

I lie languid, finger a square of light  
bathing the tile wall above the tub,  
note there are more light blue than dark;  
imagine the Cetuximab inking my veins.

I think about how quickly the end will come,  
whether it's instantaneous— with one motion  
silence, the brain simply cuts out, breaker tripped.  
Death waits like an angler fish baiting me with its illicium.

I am in a perpetual state of near death experience:  
*you* must be this tall to ride this ride.  
Birdsongs harmonize with the clink of glass on concrete—  
thirsty broken bottle mosaics soaking up light.

I pry myself free of the waterless bath,  
the stress sends a current curling around my eyes  
and for a moment I can hear my blood flowing.  
As my senses resettle a new sound joins the fray—

the monotone peal of a swing's busted chain  
stroking a rusty support like an urban dinner bell.  
I don't clang but I'm being eaten. More's the pity.

I stare down into the alley at the spray paint fresco  
spanning its length— marine creatures swimming at varied distances,  
an oily residue beginning to climb the cinder block façade.  
I listen to the city breathing, attempt to inhale its noise.

My saliva tastes coppery and I feel a tooth, no teeth dislodge.  
I tell myself it's just a side effect, stay calm,  
as their blood-stained white enamel shells  
skitter down the drain like a pair of dice.

## Weight

Your callused hands, carpenter's hands,  
move along my thighs  
as if touching my skin were unnatural.  
You trace my left calf with a fingernail,  
lingering at the back of my knee,  
then grate your anxious fingers  
along the goose bumps you awaken.  
My bed creaks under your added weight  
and I feel your breath against my neck  
as you bury your face between the pillow  
and flesh, offering me reassurance,  
maybe asking forgiveness.  
The more excited you are, the more you talk  
and the alcohol on your breath burns my nose.  
I focus on the plastic stars' faint glow,  
their fake constellations my only escape.

## Abandoned

There's no elegant way to tell a story about a hand job  
so I made up something about history,  
how amusement parks are imbued with innocence.  
No sugar coated: *Once upon a time*.  
I left you there, hand down my pants,  
in the bumper car I convinced a friend to help me salvage.  
Like Aladdin's lamp I rub the vinyl seat  
to recreate the sound of your weight shifting.

Outside sunlight stains the horizon, extinguishes streetlights.  
I leave my coffee to cool and return, unaccompanied,  
because you've been written out,  
to the entrance flanked by ticket booths—  
glass long shattered, grass in corners like brittle cobwebs.  
Sometimes I can see our shadows pressed against the wall,  
mine has a hand down your pants returning the favor.

I listen to the park breathe, the decay of amusement,  
and walk the midway split by grass veins.  
Sunlight warms sockets where bulbs once burned.  
Signs hang weather worn and bloated,  
my fingers peel the top layer like a scab.  
Wooden animals run through by barley twist poles,  
their pelts preserved by the carousel's shade,  
hang midstride abandoned to the elements.

A skeleton hangs over the bumper car's concrete floor,  
rusted squares once humming with electricity.  
One section has collapsed, gnawed over time,  
impaling what might have been a red colored car.  
Wind rattles the cage, a sound like the tide.  
I lie beside the remains, outline my body with rust,  
and as the quiet returns close my eyes like Orpheus.

## Nursing Home Holographic Jesus

My grandmother's lips are slick with Vaseline  
which magnifies an array of slits splintering pink flesh.

She stares at the device, having forgotten, again,  
that I've seen it before and I press the switch.

His likeness shimmers an eerie greenish-red  
inside a four by two crystal on a base that rotates.

As in Oz, His head floats; instead of thinking, Savior,  
holographic Jesus reminds me of Linda Blair.

Grandmother mutters something, a prayer maybe,  
hands intertwined as if ready for a healing.

Her muffled breathing harmonizes with the motor  
as Jesus' head spins, slowly.

## Unwelcome

Some walls are not meant for flies  
lost amidst floral wall paper or left behind blinds.

She flinches at the sound of the zipper,  
his fingers on the slider loosening teeth;  
his breath, his knuckles and tiny wings thrashing.

His breath smells of cinnamon  
as he whispers unintelligibly into her neck  
and sugary spittle dissolves on her collar bone.

• • •

Some walls are not soundproof enough  
to filter noise from an ear pressed to drywall.  
The curious often hear what they want.

He imagines himself with his neighbor,  
mistakes her sobbing for moans,  
and jerks-off, fantasy is better.

He doesn't know his neighbor is being raped  
and comes with his mouth on the wall.

## Monochromatic

I can hear the bottle spinning,  
its hollow body grinding the floor  
as our seven minutes ticks down.  
We bow our heads to avoid the rod,  
and feel the limp caress of jackets  
as your wintogreen gum sparks.

I want you to electrocute me,  
to fill the ears pressed to the door  
with something more than quiet.

You open the door early;  
slip out leaving me untouched.  
I hold the closet's darkness close  
and follow you home like the moon.

## The Decay of Amusement

You drive to the rhythm of hazard lights.  
We don't talk about the gun in the glove box,  
its barrel drums like a kidnap victim.

I turn the radio dial trying to tune you out,  
but like Zeppelin you ramble on that the end is near,  
and you're reading the streetlights glow like tea leaves.

You mention Natural Bridges and ask:  
*If we took communion there, would the sea taste of stone?*  
I want to say something about alkalinity or ocean acidification  
but hear the gun's tell-tell thump and think of Poe  
while Jimmy Page plays his "Fool in the Rain" solo.

• • •

Water chilled by darkness tastes my sockless feet  
because my tread is not light enough to walk on water.  
You wade into the Pacific and I tell you about firefly jellyfish  
washing ashore in Tayoma, Japan, how their bodies tint the coast blue.

The click I hear is not your tongue whispering to the water like a finger pressed to lips.  
Perhaps there is nothing beautiful about mass suicide.  
I imagine your bones caught between high and low for the moon to polish.



## Progression

My first night alone I watch the clock,  
count the minutes— four, five— between outbursts;  
stand hand on the knob, forehead on the door  
until the last wet rasp slips beneath the gap  
and your humidifier's deep hum returns.  
I sit eyes fixed once more on the digital face.  
Such a peculiar hell, lying awake all night  
tracking the span of quiet between fits.

You make me sleep in the guest room,  
the mattress unfamiliar like the pictures,  
said you don't want to keep me awake  
with your phlegm inhibited breathing.  
I could have fought you, plead my case,  
tried to convince us both I want to listen  
to each breath claw its way out of your throat.  
A hallway and drywall couldn't asphyxiate the sound.

• • •

I find you barefoot on the deck tracing the grain  
saying the weathered wood reminds you of fishing.  
One year post diagnosis and you are testing yourself.  
You want to talk about whom to invite to your funeral  
while Billie Holiday fills the gaps in our conversation.

You tell me there was blood in your urine,  
that you flushed all your medications.  
You smile reminiscing how the pills swirled  
like a penny vortex swallowing your comfort,  
and joke about how extra-strength, pick your brand,  
are just tic-tacs slowing eating away our stomachs.

Then you became angry at me for letting you,  
at yourself for blaming me,  
at God even though you are agnostic,  
at the increasing weight of the sheets,  
at our friends for not visiting,  
at the humidifier for mimicking you.

## Part III

### The Middle Border

1998

I'm holding a hot air balloon,  
face cold like the mid-January weather, unsmiling.  
You snap a Polaroid capturing my discomfort,  
your frustration vocalized in Kickapoo,  
but you never taught me the language  
so the words are wasted.  
Years later I will wonder  
*is it because my mom is white.*

Kids don't think in colors.  
I didn't always know the difference  
between drunk and sober.  
You wore sobriety like Velcro  
while I learned to recycle glass  
unable to receive messages via your bottles.

Blood quantum blessed me with unequal lines,  
native fractions of Kickapoo and Otoe,  
but I struggle to embrace either just as I struggled with you.  
We gourd danced, our closeness dictated by song length.  
Then you collapsed, your body and brain worn,  
and bedside I was silent despite the nurse's suggestion.  
I would have spoken but you never taught me how.

## Grand Entry

The singers' native voices draw out the dancers  
and our ancestors stomp their feet in the afterlife.

My disconnect intensifies as the emcee speaks,  
his Kickapoo monologue overpowers the pounding,

the language unfamiliar despite my blood quantum.  
Fancy dancers carry the colors— the Kickapoo Nation flag,

Oklahoma state flag and the flag of the United States.  
Traditional dancers wear eagle feather bustles,

carry shields, honor staffs, medicine wheel.  
Alongside the drum their movements are animal-like.

The fancy dancers colored bustles shimmer,  
their erratic movements highlighted by anklet bells.

Women in knee length dresses, their shawls writhing,  
spin on beaded moccasins, the shifting colors hypnotic.

The ground pulses as drum and dancers converge—  
men, women, and children wearing handmade regalia.

I gourd dance, my Adidas moccasins double knotted,  
but am unsure how to move in hand me downs.

Grandpa stomps his way to my side and I mimic him  
certain my movements look anything but natural.

As the dancers converge I grow claustrophobic  
because the blood in my veins is polluted.

N-D-N

Cellular gourd in hand I stomp my Adidas moccasins,  
the gymnasium floor conducts the drum like hooves.  
The singers' voices slip through wood planks—  
music for the dead while the living eat fried bread.

Oblong skylights fracture afternoon sunlight  
creating sporadic spotlights for us modern Indians.  
Vendors create a bazaar along the walls,  
arrowheads sold alongside turquoise jewelry.

My vest, rattle, and sash belong to my grandfather,  
each piece imbued with his scent or craftsmanship.  
I feel like a Native American Frankenstein,  
awkward and uncoordinated, dressed in hand-me-downs.

I steal souls 41 megapixels at a time— straight dancers,  
fancy shawl dancers, feather dancers, and grass dancers.  
In the background white folks spectate, my other half,  
among them my ginger-haired mother lost in translation.

Wah Ki Ki Ta: *blackberry tree bending but not breaking*

Cedar embers accompany my grandfather's voice,  
Kickapoo words raised by flame and smoke.  
He is of the Blackberry Clan and tradition  
grants him the honor of choosing our Indian names.

My father taps a disjointed code on my arm—  
he's trying not to wake my younger brother—  
to signal when he's not lost in translation  
because his father never taught him Kickapoo.

My older brother, the former Fancy dancer,  
breathes deep each time a handful burns,  
the scent exiting through an octagonal hole  
at the teepee's crown where the supports converge.

Later I will have plenty of reasons not to envy him,  
but now I want his faithfulness, to feel present  
not distant, here inside these faux bison walls,  
tracking time by my father's touch to ignore the strangers.

## Blood Quantum

What better way to define tribal membership  
than to reduce ancestral claims to a fraction.  
For those of us with rights to multiple tribes  
there is no dual citizenship between nations;  
apparently blood is not always thicker.

My identity is an exercise in toeing the multicultural line—  
3/8 Kickapoo, 1/8 Otoe, and half Caucasian.  
At my parents instruction I mark American Native.  
There is no confusion, no second guessing,  
just the ignorance of half my genetic makeup.

No amount of blood letting will cure my DNA,  
and yet my tribal allegiance lies in the veins.  
My CDIB card honors the Kickapoo  
but I could file papers to join the Otoe,  
a clerical form of defection.

For a peoples who struggle with preservation  
it seems odd for tribes to set membership limits.  
Then again, I've done nothing to reverse the trend.  
I'm a Native Caucasian who chooses Other  
because the blood in my veins is polluted.

Pretend-ian

My father's shadow swallowed me.  
I was Jonah tracing its edges,  
anchored to his silhouette— at home.

He was all Otoe and Kickapoo,  
unable to speak either fluently,  
and tried to teach me the difference

between Native and foreign language.  
I attempted to learn Muskogee Greek  
but English always served me best.

He embodied the stereotype: *drunk Indian*.  
I wanted to sing

the way I'd heard at powwows  
where I pretended to Gourd Dance—  
my endless game of Cowboys and Indians.

I felt like Tonto following his lead  
but unable to assimilate the culture  
because doing so was not in my DNA.



## Stereotype

The yellow surface collects rain drops like an offering  
and birds bathe in the muddy pool swallowing the plastic.  
I watch the gray roil from damp porch steps.  
I hear you, speech slurred, yelling at Mom—  
the bottled chaos beginning to numb your vocal chords.

The refrigerator opening, a peculiar peeling sound,  
sneaks out the back door and into my ears,  
an audible cue I have grown to hate,  
and the spring groans when you open the screen door,  
as if calling out a warning, and you stumble into the grass.

You walk the fence line, drag your fingers through the links  
like a baseball card thumping against bicycle spokes.  
The bottle becomes more transparent as you walk,  
and is at your side when you lean on the fence to stare  
not at me but the yellow slide killing your grass.

You slip mid sip and move your hands to catch yourself.  
I hear the bottle break and know you've cut your hand;  
mom rushes out of the house and helps you to your feet.  
Being a man you brush her off, staining her shirt,  
and head back to the fridge for more Kickapoo joy juice.

## Resonant Frequency

I finger your urn's rim clockwise and counter,  
attempt to coax a tune like a glass player  
searching for a frequency capable of resurrection.

A June bug's carcass is preserved inside a mason jar  
because I forgot to puncture the lid for ventilation;  
the bluish glass is a nice contrast to the brass holding you.

I'm imitating you in an attempt to be more Native  
but my ceremony is inauthentic— I lack peyote, tobacco,  
a water drum— because it's courtesy of Google.

I know this is the Fourth world and your people,  
the Hopi, ascended here via bamboo shoot;  
two years later I'm no closer to my people, the Kickapoo.

I attend powwows once a month but feel out of place  
dressed in jeans, t-shirt, and Adidas wandering listlessly.  
The singers' voices always remind me of you

climbing inside an oak gutted by lightning,  
how you read the grain like a palm— a Hopi priest  
claiming Spider Grandmother left it for you

to collect bark beneath your fingernails  
as you descended to the Third world.  
I envied your voice, the song rising out of you

and muttered a prayer in English:  
*I'm three-eighths Kickapoo with no tongue  
trying to assimilate your history as my own.*

Overhead leaves clattered on brittle stems,  
a few shook loose heavy with your prayer  
and fed Mother Earth as they rotted.

Somehow you made that place sacred.  
Maybe it was a difference of blood quantum.

Doubting Thomas

He prays, half sings a blessing,  
eagle feather in hand, claw bound to the quill,  
and fans smoke from an urn over my body.  
I try to absorb the vapors like communion.

He speaks Kickapoo, the language of *my* people,  
invokes the creator, his words bathed in cedar.  
Each time he leans close I breathe deep  
a mix of sweat and woods,

and my feather-chilled skin kindles.  
He leaves trailing vapors, still chanting  
as he moves around the house  
reciting the same prayer North, East, South, West.

I feel like calling out— *Polo*—so he will come back  
before the fever makes me combust.

I imagine my remains swept up  
and by ceremony scattered in all directions  
to reseed the earth with my doubt.

## Fancy Dance

My brother, dressed in full regalia—  
    headdress, bustle, moccasins—  
        carries a Sony tape deck down the hall.

He's wearing green for Mother Earth,  
    streaks of black and white face paint  
        for the living and the dead.

I'm underdressed in blue jeans,  
    a Beatles shirt and my Adidas;  
        he shakes his head like our grandfather.

Our conversation consists of gestures:  
    me giving him the finger  
        because mom and dad aren't home,

him spreading his arms ruffling feathers.  
    I'm the one forced to gourd dance  
        after grandfather dresses me—

red and blue vest, handmade aluminum rattle.  
    I feel out of place at powwows,  
        but they are church for my brother.

I say something about John Lennon  
    and he spins, anklets jangling like Claus,  
        our brotherly moment concluded.

The screen door cackles his exit,  
    its spring blesses him with rust,  
        and I offer one of my own.

Drums pound busted speakers,  
    his footwork stirs dust devils,  
        and leaves clatter like gourds.

## The Middle Border

Your Kickapoo/Otoe skin is darker  
face.

I'm trying to tell our origin stories,

You played the villain once,  
and when you drank the liquid

At times it's easier to rely on memory  
but the prejudice you faced was real .

simply going through the motions  
To me you were/are beautiful

a man proud to have chosen family.  
without the benefit of addiction.

mimicked grandfather's technique  
With sober hands you built houses,

turquoise ring vivid on your finger.  
you or the Sunday school God;  
Indian.

than the soil I use to sketch your

to blend our blood quantum's.

alcohol slurred your hands,  
sloshed like a water drum.

than accept someone else's history,  
I've always been more comfortable

rather than embrace the culture.  
black hair braided down your back,

As the pauper I felt right at home  
At powwows I shook a gourd

and counted the minutes until dinner.  
tried to teach me to use a bow,

I was too afraid to question  
I made sure to check: American

## Population Control

The original formula,  
calls for a bow,  
a Kickapoo long bow  
made by my grandfather,  
carved from river birch  
and an arrow loosed skyward,  
wood shaft replaced  
by aluminum  
for smoother flight,  
a thin hiss of air  
on slick surface.  
Without looking,  
my friends and I  
dodged the bolt.

Safety is measured  
in near misses,  
as in once, an arrow  
pierced the ground  
near my foot.  
I stood motionless,  
shaft buried four inches  
in churlish earth,  
and imagine the metal tip  
impacting bone.

The leap to fireworks  
felt organic to me,  
less dangerous somehow  
like smoking pot  
instead of cigarettes.  
Eliminating sunlight  
gave the sparks  
an ethereal quality,  
a spiritual weight  
similar to the Sundance.  
An ashen moon shimmers  
like a bulb's filament  
ready to burn out  
leaving only pin holes  
of light in darkness.

The odor of spent fireworks

burns as I press punk to fuse.  
A small tail of embers  
trails the projectile  
until a sharp crack slips  
through chain link,  
and the resonance pinballs  
from house to house.

The concussion echoes  
across plowed fields  
of heat ravaged crops;  
a coyote's melodious  
howl calls back  
the only presence of life  
sensed there for days.  
Come fall helicopters  
will circle the same field  
for population control.  
Certain things are inevitable  
like the smell of sewage  
that permeates the city limits  
with a stout East wind.

A jet of embers erupts  
from the blackness,  
fiery seeds propelling the rocket,  
but a porch light  
smothers the spray.  
I feel the Zippo  
slip from my hand,  
its polished silver body  
lost in thirsty grass.  
I pretend to throw nothing  
at the dog and manage one step  
on the brittle flora  
before the explosion  
flares brilliant white  
and shatters my ear drum  
muting the night.

## Cross-road

I played the part of Indian as best I could  
but favored the cowboy's heroism.  
Sticks were always guns not tomahawks.

I'd been to powwows and gourd danced  
and walked away feeling like Costner  
trying to assimilate through imitation.

*You can do it. It's in your blood.*  
Attending dances does not an Indian make,  
nor does hanging a headdress over my bed.

At least I spurned Jesus as easily.  
I couldn't bear the weight of two ideals;  
blending beliefs seemed too revolutionary.

I never felt unburdened sitting in a pew  
because the preacher's pitch fell flat.



## Savage

Hearing the charges denial stirs  
but when a man caresses a child,

true or not, the damage is permanent;  
after all, there is some truth in all lies.

An accusation triggers a response  
based on our proximity to the "truth."

Doubt moves ghostlike through bone,  
blackens the heart like frostbite;

Love can be reason enough to fear the dark  
just as a touch can be mistaken for love.

Nobility is not tied to ethnicity  
just as savagery is colorblind;

history labeled Natives as both,  
but until now I was sure about you.

## VITA

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Thesis: BLOOD QUANTUM

Major Field: Creative Writing

Biographical:

Rion Douglas Wahpekeche was born and raised in Stillwater, Oklahoma and graduated from Stillwater High School in 1998. After graduating high school, he initially only completed one semester at Oklahoma State University before taking a break to start a family. However, he never lost his desire for a college degree. In 2005, he returned to OSU determined to finish what he started years earlier. Both his undergraduate and graduate work revolved around his passion for writing; however, along the way his emphasis shifted from writing fiction to focusing solely on poetry.

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in December, 2014.

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