I am the bin for cast-offs and the weary.
I wear my veil.
I have no children,
but you have many.
You dream of heaven and they all run up to meet you.

Inez Petersen

QUINAULT

Questions of identity as an Indian woman writer are as brambled and sweet as the blackberries that inch past fences and property lines where I grew up in western Washington. Hacking the tendriling vines seems only to make them more vigorous while a direct assault of tearing out root and branch eradicates even the strongest—but it is difficult to take away everything.

I am from a generation where children were taken away, placed in foster care, and, in many cases, never lived with their mothers again. For me the very act of removal prompted an intense desire to remember, and later record. This act of writing gathers for me my family, gives me back a history, and places me within my tribe, the Quinault Indian Nation.

Missing You

This is no confession for I have not sinned.
I invent stories.

Once there was a family. It was an ordinary one with the usual cast of characters: one mother, five sons, six daughters, and eight or nine fathers. This was, or this was not, a family. I am the fourth child, the first daughter.

Our mother's beauty was legendary. One man steamshipped halfway around the world to find her. He left the makings of a son in her fifteen-year-old body. So began the end of her life. She died for a very long time.

Already at fifteen, it was too late to remember the ways of her tribe, for she was born Indian. Nowadays she is called a woman of color, or a Native American; on the reservation the people say Quinault.

Only one tradition came easily to this beautiful Quinault, the tradition of running away from Indian boarding school. Her mother had run away, and so had her mother's mother before her. Way back then, dances were danced and songs were sung in a language that was not English. This language was spoken to the children who ran away, back home to Taholah.

One day, the grandmothers who had run away remembered carrying rocks in their mouths when they attended Chemawa Indian Boarding School. They pretended not to remember the other punishments for speaking their own tongue; they did not remember the welts, puffed tender on their own arms when they had run back to their mothers.

These women loved their children and wanted a better life for them, as mothers do. They imagined all the trouble their children would be facing once they left the village. Before that could happen, the mothers decided to speak only English.

It was hard. Love names cried to escape. Mother lips pulled firm. Nowadays only the very old trees in Taholah remember Quinault names and Quinault verbs.

It happened: the beautiful Quinault ran back home to Taholah from Chemawa to a mother who spoke English. She returned and learned a new modern tradition, drinking alcohol. Maybe in biology or chemistry class she might have learned of the genetic predisposition waiting in her red blood.

There was one good thing about having no education—she could pretend not to understand the sign placed in the entrance of

all the bars in town: *No dogs, or Indians.* It was fun to spend time with people who had such a good sense of humor and she let them buy her drinks.

A flurry of children gusted behind, like the changeling leaves of autumn, in the wake of her stormy relations.

I remember a quiet knock-knocking on the door. William.

It was William asking to come into the hotel room. He took turns calling our names; my older brothers sat tense, unmoving. He called my name out, soft. Gently, he asked me to let him in.

"Open the door, Inez, it's me, William." I ran to obey.

Mama caught me by the shoulder, pulled me to her, begged me to stop. She told me to lie down on the floor, then dragged a mattress over me. Since I was about two years old, she must have been pregnant with William's son. Information unknown to me. All I knew was the hissed warning in my ear: William had a gun.

It seems I used to tell my playmates that he shot through the door and we found the bullets lodged in the wall over where we lay, protected by the mattress. Now I believe it was a girl's wish to make her mother's actions heroine worthy, instead of life endangering. Or maybe I'd just seen Hollywood shoot-'em-ups too many times and wanted to make my life seem more amazing to my peers. I hated it when they pitied me, poor foster child whose mother didn't care. I wanted to prove them wrong.

Mama gave me a family name, after her mother's sister: Inez.

It seems I've told myself so many times that I am the fourth child, the first girl, that it must be so. If that is true, there is an unaccounted boy between Frank and Bobby. One story I remember telling is that when Mama was in the hospital having Bobby, some church people offered to take care of her second son, the brother I don't remember. She said yes, signed some papers, and the church people moved out of Taholah, off the reservation, out of our lives. There are enough years between Frank and Bobby for this to be true.

Maybe I just mixed up which brother it was I never met. One day, about a year ago, I visited my mother. A man I'd never seen before walked into the house without knocking, sat on a couch, smoked a cigarette, and watched TV without saying a word.

Like it was no big deal, Mama said, "That's your brother Willie."

I almost fell into the act-like-nothing-just-happened mode our family does so well. Even as I refused the code of silence, I realized I had no common ground with this lean, nervous man. Tightrope time, no net. I inhaled, leaned forward, and asked, "So who is *your* father?"

Mama answered for him. "It was William." Tatters of information I collect for my crazy-quilt family.

I never knew Willie, so it hardly counts when I say I don't care for him. Who could fault me lack of feeling for a stranger? But Bobby is my only full-blooded sibling, named after our father: Robert Henry Petersen. Bobby is the only one of us that I don't love. This is difficult to admit, even to myself. Perhaps my salvation is in remembering pieces of history and honoring the loyalties that remain. I believe that as long as we live we are given the opportunity to love.

"There goes my brother," I said to a co-worker in the restaurant.

"Who? That bum crossing the street?"

"Yeah. I haven't seen him in probably two years."

"Two years! If that were my brother, I'd chase after him."

No, you wouldn't, is what I thought, but I didn't say anything. What would this kid understand? Bobby has always been lost. Frank says Bobby is the smartest one of all of us; I believe him out of habit.

What I've always said is that Bobby got damaged more than me from being taken away from Mama. He never adjusted. Kids teased him. Once I was in the town where he lived, in a grocery store called Swanson's with my friend Barbie Vincent. I saw Bobby a few checkstands over, bagging groceries.

"That's my brother," I said.

"No, it isn't," Barbie argued.

"Yes it is. Come on. I'll show you."

I marched her over to Bobby's work station and demanded, "You're my brother, aren't you?" I waited with arms crossed for him to answer.

Bobby looked disgusted. " 'Course," he said.

"See, I told you." Smug, I turned on my heel, not waiting for Barbie to catch up.

Years later, he visited me in Sacramento. Bobby stole some paltry doodads from my place: a neck chain, a book, a pillow, other stuff. I zoomed around in my then-boyfriend's VW, me riding shotgun. We raced to different on-ramps, looking for Bobby hitching north on K-5. We found him standing with his thumb out, my pillowcase bulging at his feet.

"Give it back, Bobby." Imperious as ever, I hauled my stuff back through the passenger window. I wanted to say to him, *Quit sniveling, quit drinking, quit blaming. You can change. Look at me, I did.*

What arrogant surety we hold as eighteen-year-olds. What I now know is this: Bobby is a man who will not die, will not conform, will not trust. He's been seen on the streets for almost two decades. His pain must fill the earth.

I would like very much to be the sister who loves her brothers without reserve, without question, without doubt. I seem the biggest fraud sitting here, warm, clean, stomach full. My apartment is beautiful, I work two jobs, enjoy friendships. Bobby is probably outside tonight, a bitterly cold November. Maybe, if he's lucky, he will have been arrested for some misdemeanor, get to sleep indoors on a bed, eat some meals, and shower before he is released. I wonder if it is my duty to offer the comforts of my home to him and wonder again if this is my way of hiding indifference. We didn't begin like this. We used to care.

When the world turned upside down my big brothers, Snookums and Bobby, were dropped off by our caseworker in South Aberdeen. They were to live with the Hayes family. In my world, our sudden disappearances had begun. That left me, aged five, the oldest one left in the car, a 1960 Dodge Dart, robin's-egg blue. I sat in the back seat with my arms full of little sisters. Violet was three and Tina almost two. They snuggled in close. All I could see was the back of Miss Wendell's bouffant hairdo. Miss Wendell was the caseworker. In the front seat, three-month-old Pierre Jon lay next to her. I'd always called her Miss Window.

She drove to another place. We stopped and Miss Wendell took Tina out of the car. Tina whimpered, so I had to be stern with her. *Go on. Don't make trouble.* Her chubby hands clung to my arm. I willed her to let go. Miss Wendell came back to the car alone.

We drove for what seemed like a very long time to Westport. It was getting dark. The intricate stitching of the seat covers faded as the light diminished around us. When Miss Wendell finally braked to a stop, I kneeled on the seat and peeked out the side window.

The house was one story with a flat roof, the color a wash of charcoals that blurred together as colors along the ocean do on a cloudy day. All around me each surface seemed gray whether it belonged to a bush, a tree, or a wall. In the carport ahead of us all I remember is shadows moving.

"Do you want to live here or over there?" Miss Wendell asked. I wasn't going one step further.

"Here," I answered, not knowing the consequences of my choice. Just like that, my sister and I parted. Violet had to cross the pasture to the other house, a two-story frame silhouetted against a darkening sky.

There wasn't any reason to hang around Miss Wendell's car, but I dragged my feet anyway. The worn toes of my favorite pair of Keds pulled through the sandy soil you find in seaport towns. As we approached, an outside light came on and the door opened.

A tall woman greeted us. Charlene Hubbard was not beautiful and there was a lot of her. She carried herself carefully, as if her feet hurt, or maybe so she wouldn't scare kids.

"Hi! Come on in; we were just sitting down for supper."

"This will only take a minute," said Miss Wendell. "This is Inez, and this is Pierre Jon." She spoke rapidly while handing over my sleeping brother.

Sure enough, about one minute later Miss Window left us. All at once the blue car was backing out of the driveway, crunching over gravel. The headlights came on and swept over the patchy front lawn. We were caught momentarily in the brightness: Charlene holding Pear-pear, and me alongside her. I could see the goosebumps on her fleshy arms. The cotton shift she wore hung to mid-calf, not much protection from the cold.

She looked down. I saw dark circles under gray eyes.

"Come on in, honey," she said.

"You are not my mama. Only my mama can call me that." I held my head high, resisted her kindness.

"I know. You can call me Mom. Come inside and have some fried trout."

That was a smart thing to say. I loved fried fish even more than candy. Fish would taste like home, like the reservation.

The light inside glowed warm against the wood paneling in the living room. A worn couch and an easy chair were turned toward a console TV. Beyond, in the dining area, sat Richard Hubbard, Jr.

"C-c-c-come on, d-d-dinner's guh-getting c-c-cold." His florid complexion contrasted with the tight curls of his cropped hair. His eyes were nearly black and they sparkled from deep inside. He wore jeans and a white T-shirt with a pack of Marlboros rolled in the right sleeve. He looked like a cross between Elvis Presley and Fred Flintstone. A father at the dinner table—a new thing in the world.

Then it happened. Richard Hubbard reached over one of the three children already at the table—little Hubbards I supposed; he grabbed a bottle of Heinz ketchup, unscrewed the cap, and chugged sauce out. As he held it over his plate, great blotches of red smothered the beautiful fried trout.

It was too much for one day.

"You don't *do* that," I whispered and started weeping.

I had to protect us now that Frank and Bobby were gone. And now we lived with aliens.

The second batch of kids came after the first were made wards of the court, placed in foster care forever. Mama gave birth to three more: Almeta, Jule, and Edna.

Jule is between the two girls in age, the last son. His daddy appears to have been white, or maybe a light-skinned Quinault. Almeta and Edna were fathered by black men. I used to say they were half black until I realized how stupid that notion is. I don't know if they share the same father. When I introduce Edna as my baby sister, both of us tilt our jaws, daring anyone to point out the obvious.

I look for similarity in my brothers and sisters and me. We all have soft voices, soft gestures. We all carried my father's last name, until Edna chose her adopted parents. We all carry our mother's genetic makeup. Eventually, we all grew up alone.

For a time, I was allowed one brother to live with, to love. Jonny and I lived with Don and Ruth Tuttle. These people *loved.* They loved each other and they loved us.

We lived outside Malone, a wide spot in the road some miles outside of Elma, Washington. The Moxie Chehalis River ran the property line behind Granpa and Granma's house. We called Don and Ruth that because our previous home had been with their daughter. We lived on seven acres: enough for pastureland, an orchard, a berry patch, a flower garden, an herb and vegetable garden.

The first two rows in the vegetable garden were for green onions and it was the kids' job to keep that section weeded. Our other main garden job was to salt slugs. Every night in the summer we'd stalk the slime-makers, protecting our garden perimeter. We watched as clear liquid oozed out of them when salted. By morning, the slugs resembled petrified dog turds and we would poke at their shriveled bodies with long sticks.

I remember once when I tricked my little brother into eating half a slug. He'd done something to bug me and his punishment was to eat one whole slug. His chin trembled and so I pretended to relent. *Okay, you only have to eat half of it,* I told him—as if that were a lot better. He didn't realize that what I really wanted

was for him to *bite* the creature. His water-dark eyes looked into mine, full of thanks.

I wonder what he'll remember.

In the rows after the green onions, Granpa's discerning hands weeded out feathery look-alikes in the carrots, radishes, dill weed, and all the rest. He, of course, did all the rototilling. Mostly Granma picked things when they were ready to cook or can. Neighbors throughout the valley would find themselves in our living room snapping beans or husking corn. Later, gathered with us around the table at dinnertime, they'd dig in to another Ruth Tuttle meal. Her bluelake green beans won prizes at the county fair; her generosity gathered souls wanting to be fed.

With so much love around Jonny and me, I released Violet the unknown, unafraid. With supreme assurance, I'd always thought Violet and I would meet again. She was my sister and I loved her. What more does it take?

We even looked like sisters: same brown hair, same light skin, same hazel eyes. When Violet visited me one last time before she was to be adopted, I tried to bribe her into remembering me. In my Cecil & Beanie ceramic bank lay a couple of one-dollar bills, softened from rolling between my fingers. I unplugged the rubber stopper and snagged them with a crooked pinky. I wished I had more to offer. I saw a dopey stuffed chicken left over from Easter on my bed and I snatched it up. She held the chicken and two dollars. I wrapped my hands over hers. *Promise me you'll never forget.* I said it in my I'm-the-big-sister-and-you'd-better-do-what-I-say voice. She nodded and I let go.

I didn't know better. Violet died in a car wreck.

You'd think I could love all my brothers and sisters equally, having lost each one equally, but I don't. From the first batch, I love Frank, Violet, and Jonny. Fiercely and without regard to absence, I love these three beyond death, beyond reason.

Kimberly Blaeser

ANISHNABE

We travel to our place in the world by the grace of others' words. The shape of every experience known only by its nestling in among the soft folds of our history. And so we write with an ink formed of our Auntie's laugh, that old plum tree's fruit.

No matter what subject we turn to, the past is there within us. I try each time I write to listen honestly to those voices that inhabit me. Sometimes one echo rises up and gives shape to a whole poem. Sometimes the memories softly shade the background like a painter's wash. But prominent or invisible, the stories I carry, the past I remember, provide the relational depth and balance that I hope ground my work in a truth larger than my own small vision.

For me a compulsion and an ecstasy, writing seems like the finest Trickster invention. It allows me the satisfaction of working to serve and honor my community all the while doing exactly what pleases me most. And as if that weren't enough, the very process of seeking appropriate words and forms rewards us by making us focus and fine-tune our understanding. Whatever mystery we are exploring, we tell our way, and in the telling find our way. That search called writing leads us home.

In my own seeking as a writer I am drawn to represent the power and integrity of the natural world, and to claim and protect the beauty of native people's lives. I picture the simple small motions of life in my work because I believe they bear with great force upon the fate of our spirits. Giving myself over to them in writing is a profoundest blessing.