

OUR STORIES

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I. Wade in the Water

Wade in the water, children

Wade in the water

God's gonna trouble the water

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I wade my way up the stream outside our Ohio home, a few miles north of what had been the river that divided the region's slave states. As I reach for what looks like black obsidian and lift a sedentary rock that crumbles between my fingers, I think of all that has been lost. I realize that I have been humming that old song, when, from across the muddy plain, my mama shouts, "There's nothing here. It's all just stories."

We were looking for arrowheads in the freshly leveled field after the rain. Each time the growl of a pickup truck on gravel threatens to discover us, I sound out my excuse for trespassing on this farmer's property: "We're looking for arrowheads; we are Indians. I am Kickapoo. I am Azteca. This was our land. This is our land." But I have second thoughts because we wouldn't want them knowing who we are. Our neighbors have big dogs and guns, and they all go to the same church.

Wade in the water. Wade in the water. I jump back onto the field thinking that I can somehow channel the spirits of my ancestors, and my eyes will then be led to an arrowhead. I feel that I deserve to find one. I imagine giving the arrowhead to the son of our dear friend who recently got out of prison and is

living on the reservation again. I'm on the verge of participating in a tiny bit of divine justice. Then I remember the line *God's gonna trouble the water*, and I frown at my fantasy of divine intervention, at the state of things. I think of all that has been lost, and, inside my head, I respond to mama, "Yeah, they are all stories, but they are our stories."

II. Around Our House

There is a border around our house where skirmishes spark up daily. Little pumps of blood, fast into the heart as that same pickup truck drives by real slow, or those shots in the distance bounce off the hills and keep our heads spinning. The anger and tears mix with a little bit of real fear that comes when we think of what they would and wouldn't dare. Our outstanding visibility, our invisibility here. We sit like ducks, counting days, imagining the realms of possibility in the land of forgotten histories. They have been here for centuries, but work on instinct. Their families pushed the line; they live in the legacy, but don't know as much as we know. Their violence is default. They are sneaky because it's a family tradition. Their grandpa's grandpa stole this land, and that's how they do things. They know they are right because it rhymes with their color. They are finders and thus they are keepers, 'cause that's the song the school children have been singing here for the last two hundred years. There is a border around our house where we stand back and see that everything is like pages out of an unbelievable nineteenth-century novel.

III. Coatlicue

The day we moved into our trailer, a little grey cat came to visit, slipping between our ankles in the grass. At night, she cried outside our window. From our bed on the floor, we could hear her climbing the side of the house. The growing chorus of birds woke us in the morning, and we let her in. I was more than seven months pregnant, and kitty's tiny frame was also sagging under the

weight of her swelling belly. We could not turn her away. She paced back and forth between the milk bowl and me, settling from time to time on my lap, where I could feel her babies wiggle around inside her.

By evening waves rushed across her body, and she stared up at me, asking me to prepare a birthing place for her. She held my gaze while she breathed through the contractions that washed over her. She came and sat at my feet, pushing out the first little sack with a kitten inside. When I went to get a washcloth to lift the baby into the bedding, she ran after me, dragging her little one by the cord. She did not want to be alone. She was a kitten herself, and we worried that she would not know how to mother. I put them both on the couch. She delivered the placenta and ate it along with the baby's transparent sack. As the baby latched on to her nipple, she began to deliver the second. By the time she finished eating the second placenta, two were nursing and the third was on the way. My husband poured water into her mouth. She took it gratefully.

Kitty gave her kittens food and cleaned their little bottoms. She was Coatlicue, the giver of life and the filth eater. Like our earth, the whole unfragmented mother. No one had to tell her how or what to do. All she needed was someone to trust and a safe place to bring her children into the world.

As humans, we do not have the knowledge that the animals have. We need traditions and a culture to teach them to us in order to survive. As modernized people, we have lost community too and are forced to rely on professionals that we pay: hospitals, pharmaceutical companies, and lactation consultants. We have let them take our knowledge away. We have let them break up the generational continuum. We have let ourselves become doubly removed from our natural ability to live our life cycles. We used to live beside our mothers and grandmothers, who patiently instructed us in the sacred touch of bringing

life into the world. Now we must pay strangers for services. Living far away from any mother or grandmother of mine who once might have known these things, I look to the little grey cat, celebrate her knowledge, mourn my loss, and try to reclaim what has been taken away.