

Every year, just before the season of autumn breaks into a harsh winter, mother and I make the journey to visit our family just outside of Austin, Texas. The leaves are all golden then, almost messily crayoned over, before they spill and create a slippery but solemn path across the roads. They remind me of deer trapped along the pavement; the shadows create hooves and antlers, fawns and their slender mothers. Our headlights illuminate these figures, and then our tires destroy them.

By the time we arrive, the darkness from the hidden sun is already revealed, tipping out like a cup from the sky. My Great-Aunt's comely home is almost entirely wood. Her husband is a carpenter. His work fills the home as though it were a certain taste or smell, for so unique were his own intricate constructions.

There is a far wall, in the den, where many pictures reside. You can see the generations there, from one slice of time to the next. Here my history starts forward, though it is not supposed to, it could run into the present. These people, trapped behind their glass, now remain forever silent. There is one photograph which draws my attention. Within its four sides of frames sprout two people, growing like austere trees, their branches intertwined. My Great-Grandfather's dark eyes stretch out from a harsh, ruddy face, tight and worn like canvas. His skin contrasts against his wife's, which is white, her eyes bloom also, creating what looks like a small vine of shadow down and across her lips. My Great-Grandfather was $\frac{1}{2}$ Chickasaw and Choctaw Indian. Now his title is given faintly to me, what little remains of it. I am $\frac{1}{32}$ Chickasaw and Choctaw Indian.

One problem for my tribal community is an unfortunate side affect of the dwindling blood quantum: how to be Native American when your genes almost deny it. Though the majority of the Chickasaw's are located in Oklahoma, we are thinned out to

Texas, and even have our own Texas Chickasaw Council near my home. Mother and I attend the meetings in odd intervals, sometimes missing years or only months or weeks. The meetings are all the same, in a room where the lights flicker, singing harmonious songs artificially to one another, while the stagnant air drips in through the open windows. Our leader tells us of some developments, someone publishing a new book about our culture, and then someone takes over next: an old man who seems alive in only his mind until he brings to life his wondrous stories. My ancestors told these stories, he repeats them, and the lights follow in a parallel chorus overhead. Once the meeting is over, the children gather, like joyous flies to a web. I did not notice it then as I do now: I stand out, bleakly.

There was a girl there, whose name I do not recall, but we were talking about the meeting, and which story we favored most. Her eyes were round and painted dark, like shadowed moons with dark irises. Her skin is a gentle bronze, her hair black. She then asks me whether I am Native American. I smile at this, "Of course," I say, "why else would I be here?" She stops and seems slightly troubled; her moons of eyes are creased over by her narrowing eyelids. "Well then," she counters, "how much?"

Mirrors are fickle objects, though they do not lie, nor have any preconceptions, they seem withdrawn from some important details which could be presented in their reflection. Mainly, what these mirrors are lacking to me are the hints of my heritage. I am pale, with my father's hazel eyes and my mother's brown hair.

It is not only my tribe that faces this issue. Jaime Barrientoz, a member of the Ottawa and Chippewa Indian tribe, writes:

"It's obvious there are more non-Native Americans than there are Native Americans, and it's evident that our children are going to someday marry a non-

Native American and that diminishes the blood quantum. Underneath the IRA constitutions we have set a bar—you have to be a quarter blood in our tribe to be an Indian. We don't agree with that, I don't personally agree with that because I think it's in, it's in a person's heart and in a person's values. I'm at odds with tribal members who want to keep it low. It means less for their children, and I can see their point of view, but I also see in the future that if we don't end that type of mentality we are going to diminish ourselves. We're going to lose ourselves because the quarter bloods are getting drawn out. That's the truth. So, it's a very difficult process, a tough and sensitive situation, and I want to learn from other Indian nations that are possibly going through the same thing." (Lemont, 173)

My Chickasaw tribe has no blood quantum requirements now—at least, not yet.

However, to this problem of being nearly genetically cut away from your ancestors, I have located one solution: knowledge of your culture. Knowledge grants us so many personal connections to those who are deceased. This knowledge can make us whoever we wish to be like, with the characteristics of a lost relative looking for the rest of his family. We can learn about ourselves through this process, and who we can aspire to be.

The picture still hangs in my Great-Aunt's home, gathering layers of dust from the years. However, my Great-Grandfather remains undisturbed, still content beneath the frame. I can count the years and generations which separate us, I think we could be similar, even though two different times create two different people. We are still Native American, at least. Although the Indian blood quantum in my family lessens with time, I have the choice to decide whether or not to be Native American, and I know what choice I will make.

Works Cited:

Lemont, Eric. *American Indian constitutional reform and the rebuilding of Native nations*. Univ of Texas Pr, 2006. Print.