I am supposed to acquaint you with the Indian experience. I will apologize right now. There is no Indian experience with which to acquaint you. This is my experience and I happen to be Creek Indian. The two things are not interchangeable and not equal. The best I can hope for is to give you an experience that is slightly off the beaten track.

I am from Oklahoma. It is not at all the part of the country that you probably think of when the "Sooner State" crosses your mind, if it ever does. You are, no doubt, thinking of west Texas. My Oklahoma is a land of softly rolling hills and rich farmland. In my backyard, I have grown tomatoes as big as your cantaloupes
and sweetcorn that bursts in your mouth. I have eaten as many as twenty ears at a sitting. We have peach trees and apple trees, mulberries and persimmons. But most remarkable, perhaps, is that we have locust trees.

These trees are part of the odd family of temporarily glorious trees. For most of the year, they look like a pile of overgrown shrapnel: dark and thorny with small oblong leaves, the size of a dime, growing in clusters. But in the spring, they bloom. Millions of tiny white flowers with a fragrance that would kill a rose with envy. Locust trees surrounded our house, bringing shade and protecting us from the brutal northern wind and the searing Oklahoma sun. And Mama hated them.

My mother hated many things for many reasons, but her hate of the locust trees was one of the most strange. She hated them for their beauty. She hated the blossoms and said that the flowers were cheap and small, but most of all, she hated the fragrance. “It makes me sick,” she used to say. Mama had a problem with cheap things, my father included. Mama fought a war against the locust trees. It was a war that she was destined to lose for one very important reason: I was a subversive firmly in the camp of the locust trees.

Locust trees were a good ally for me to choose. They are vibrantly alive and reproduce in rapid secrecy. They send runners underground and can spring up in clusters in a week. Mama bought a heavy lawnmower and would send me out to mow them down. I would mow some of them, but I would always manage to leave three or four under the fence line or next to rocks. I could always claim that I couldn’t get close enough. In a month, they would grow enough so that no mower would be able to chop them down.

I realize that I may have made my mother sound harsh and brutal, but that is only occasionally true. That is a one-dimensional view of her, and if anything can be said about my mother, it is that she is multifaceted. Mama has been married three times to three different men. Now this is an important distinction to be made, because in my part of Oklahoma people like to get married and will often marry and divorce the same person over and over just to alleviate boredom. In a good year, I have known the same couple to get divorced and remarried three or four times. My step-mother once pondered the idea of giving everyone gift certificates for a free divorce for Christmas. But, I was talking about Mama—
my stepmother, Billye, is too complex a person to be taken on in passing.

Mama's first marriage was to my father. It was not a wonderful thing, although it did have its moments. In its most rudimentary form, this marriage was created out of a bit of bad luck. The first time my father and mother slept together she got knocked up. Due to the barbaric society of the time, wedding bells of course began to ring. My mother says, "When I first found out I was pregnant, I seriously considered jumping off a building. But then I thought that with my luck I would be pregnant with two broken legs. And few things could possibly be worse than being pregnant, crippled, and living with your grandfather." So much for the "Gidget Gets Married" scenario.

In spite of this, my mother and father did not marry at an exceptionally young age. She was seventeen and he was nineteen. That is still about the average where I am from. There is an old saying that goes something like, "A bride is not a bride without a little bulge." I could mention that my wife was bulging a little, too, but that would be jumping ahead in the story and might make you overly anxious.

My father is generally a very self-contained man with a great sense of propriety. My mother used to say, "your father is the most civilized man I know." To her, "civilized" was an epithet. I must agree that he is civilized sometimes, but his exterior can fool you. When my mother divorced him, he drove his truck into the community center through the front door, executed a right-hand turn that people say must have been almost impossible, and then drove out through the side door. Now I think that we were all fortunate that he did this at ten at night when there was no one in the center. All he had to do was pay for new doors for the center and get his truck repainted. He was a very passionate man, but he did not know how to express it properly. My father was (and still partially is) crippled; he does not really know how to express love. This was the reason that I hated him for many, many years; this and the fact that after her divorce, my mother's bitterness toward him grew exponentially for years until she had no concept of him as a person. Instead, he became for her a stereotype of cold brutality. One of the verbal clubs she used to beat me with was, "You're just like your father." I heard this constantly for five years. This was a club
that I was finally to take away from her; no one can beat you with a club that you do not provide yourself. I wish I had known that earlier.

My father is a prejudiced man. He is prejudiced in an old-time southern way. He is also a counterexample to the idea that prejudiced people are not intelligent. My father’s family has always had an axe to grind against Indians. It is little wonder, then, that all of his Indian ancestors over the years suffered a profound racial and historical transformation, until finally I was no longer even permitted to ask about the dark-skinned people in our family pictures.

When I was a child, my mother worked in a sewing factory. At the time, I had a variety of baby-sitters, all of whom I didn’t like. However, fate finally threw me a bone, as it is wont to do, and I finally did get one that I liked. Her name was Levina, but I called her Mama Harjo. She was a Creek woman who lived in a small company house that had three rooms. It was an old house, as there had been no companies located in Wetumka to build houses in over forty years. And it was a house that I loved almost as much as I loved Mama Harjo. Mama Harjo and I had a wonderful life together in her house. She kept other children, but I was her favorite. She said so. She even began to teach me Creek. I remember that I loved the way the words tasted and would walk around saying them constantly. This was my undoing.

My speaking Creek brought about the end of my being kept by Mama Harjo, because one day, my father said to my mother, “You get someone else. She’s turning him into a little Indian.” So that was the end of Mama Harjo. But I have heard it said that if the Catholic Church has you ’til you’re five, you’re theirs for life. I think that the same thing must be true of being Creek. And if my father could keep me away from Mama Harjo, he could not keep me away from my family, half of which was Indian, and he could not dictate the people I associated with in school, most of whom turned out to be Indian.

He also could not change where I lived. Oklahoma is an Indian state, the state of Sequoyah, both rabidly multicultural and zealously monocultural. Oklahoma recently celebrated the year of the Indian, in 1992, and in 1989, it observed the one hundredth anniversary of the “land run.” To celebrate, Indian children were asked to dress as pioneers and reenact the taking of their ancestral land. Paradoxically, white children in Oklahoma now wish to dress in
Indian regalia and dance in Indian ceremonies, some of which celebrate Indian victories over white people. In scholarly terms, we are caught in what’s called a narrative conflict. We move in the silent interstitial spaces left for a people displaced and finding a home in their displacement.

This is where my family and I are from, and as the Chickasaw author Linda Hogan has said, we are in a process of “always coming home.” It is probably appropriate to think of my story as a travel narrative—one of those strange little stories that explorers used to tell about exotic people and strange locations and how they survived only through wits and cunning. It is impossible for me to separate my own adventures from those of my family. We are all tightly connected, and what might be considered distant anecdotes by others are actual parts of me. When I talk about my family, I am always talking about myself as well.

As a very young girl, my grandmother was taken to Catholic schools and given to the nuns. Her family was too poor to support her. They could not buy her food and shoes. The Catholics took her, even though she was not Catholic, because at that time they were still in the business of converting Indians “by any means necessary.” When my grandmother would not kneel to pray, the nuns locked her in a broom closet. Aside from the fright of leaving home and being locked in a closet, my grandmother—like many Indians—was prone to serious ear infections and developed one in the days she spent in the broom closet. Her infection became so serious, and the pressure so intense, that her eardrums exploded and ran blood. When the nuns finally came to let her out of the closet, it was only to force her to clean the blood out of her own ears. The nuns did not help. No one has ever said if grandma knelt to pray after that. She will not talk about it. Knowing her, I assume she didn’t. This is where formal Western-style education begins in my family. Where it stands now is with myself, a graduate of Dartmouth College and one dissertation away from a Ph.D. from Stanford University. I have spent most of my education like my grandmother, refusing to kneel. Kneeling in Ivy League institutions is a different matter than kneeling was for my grandmother. So that is what this history of personal education is going to be about: it is going to be about how not to kneel. It is also about the price you pay when you refuse. My grandmother paid with her ears; I paid with something quite different.
My grandfather had an experience different from either my own or my grandmother's. He went to the country school near town and was judged gifted (though that wasn't the term they used back then). He was treated well throughout school, and by the time he graduated, he had a love of words, a love of language. New ideas were rare fruit to him. He lived for his ideas and not from them. He was a strong man and worked construction. He ran a bulldozer and a motor grader, and to take the sting out of the work, at night he would travel the world in his mind. When I was a child, he had a paper globe with the oceans in deep black and continents and states in color. He would have me spin the globe and place my finger on a country. I never hit on a country that he did not know something about. There were times when I would picture myself small enough to slip inside the globe. Sitting in the center, I would look out through all of the countries of the world. I would imagine the sun shining through the translucent pastel countries and playing across me until my skin was a map of the world. This was the sort of education I had from my grandfather; landscapes and languages were his domain. He spoke Muscogee, English, and Spanish, and he taught me about the country around Wetumka. My grandfather taught me geology and archaeology by showing me places to find fossilized tree roots and ocean shells. He took me out to the old cemetery outside of town and showed me where my relatives lived. He taught me about soil by taking me to dig potatoes with him. He also gifted me with a love of words, beginning, as he had done with my mother and aunt, with the word "metempsychosis."

Now literally, metempsychosis has to do with the transmigration of souls, but for me it had to do with something quite different. It was a ticket that my grandfather granted me into the world of language and its power. It all has to do with his reasoning. Papa Lloyd taught me to understand metempsychosis as a way to protect me from schooling. He said, "Your teachers don't know this word. Now you know something that your teachers don't. You know a lot of things that your teachers don't. They aren't any smarter'n you. Don't ever believe that your teachers are any smarter'n you are. They're older so they know some things that you don't, but you know some things that they don't." I suppose any long and obscure word would have done, but metempsychosis is the word that I remember starting me on my collection of words.

I came to love words the way my grandfather did. I loved the
way they tasted, the way they felt. I learned to read at about age four and read insatiably. I was starved to read. I recall stealing books from the classroom in first grade and taking them home because you could not check books out of the school library in the first grade. I would put them under my coat and smuggle them out. I remember vividly the lump I would get in my throat, because I was raised in a family where stealing was not tolerated, but I also remember just having to have those books. In the second half of first grade, they granted me library privileges after I proved that I could read the books, and a library card brought an end to my criminal career.

It was only in the second grade that I learned that Indians don’t read. The person who taught me this was Zelda Morris. Even with my vast storehouse of words, I can think of no words sufficiently venomous to describe her. Let it suffice to say that she was cold and brutal enough to beat a second grader for reading “too fast.”

The rest of my grade-school career was hit or miss. Some teachers I bonded with immediately, some I did not. Mrs. Osborn was a teacher whom I loved as only a fourth grader can love a teacher. Mrs. Osborn was that rare Oklahoma teacher who prized and valued Indians even though she was not one herself. Her music class was the only place that Creek culture was allowed to intrude into our school. She and Mrs. Yahola taught the music class to sing Creek hymns, and they took us out to the Indian churches to sing them. I recall getting ready to get on the bus to go out to Thlopthlocco, edging up to Mrs. Osborn in a shy fourth-grade way, and giving her a necklace that my mother had beaded. She kissed me on the cheek in front of the whole class, a major embarrassment for a nine-year-old, but a memory I hold very dear.

As a small child, both in and out of school, mostly I tried to be unobtrusive and collect information. I would always listen, believing somehow that if I had enough information, I would be safe. I would listen around the corners of doors or sit quietly until the adults became too drunk to notice and would absorb everything and store it away. I don’t know why I came to associate knowledge with safety. I only know this fused into and pervaded my education. Abetting this was a drive to understand the way things work and to collect knowledge. I have always loved things that were curious and new and beautiful.

This is how my grade-school education proceeded. It was good
and bad, but by high school, it had become simply bad. I honestly
don’t know when my adolescence began. I understand that some
people can provide you with the exact hour and day. I am not one
of them. My life runs along a continuum. I hope it is one of
constant development; at least I like to think it is. Not a smooth
continuum, but more punctuated equilibrium. I basically went
along steadily on one tangent until a crisis or event caused me to
change course. I don’t know of a pivotal event that signaled ado-
lescence. I can only paint you a picture of how I remember it.

Sitting in your room alone, you have covered the windows with
aluminum foil in order to block out all of the light. You do not
like light in your bedroom, because it creates a web of shadows in
the middle of the night. You have already figured out that it was
not the dark you were afraid of in your childhood; it was the
shadows in the woods outside your bedroom window. You have
carried this fear into your adolescence. Only total darkness can
alleviate it, so that is what you have created. You are waiting for
sleep to come and it does not. It often does not. You usually sleep
during the day or afternoon. You feel exhausted all of the time but
not in early night. Instead your thoughts race, but not in the usual
way. They are in a slow race. They are weighted and plod through
your mind unstoppable, unwilling to give you peace, yet uselessly
slow. Spiraling and painful, they continue on.

To escape the isolation, your ears seek out noise. They hear
fighting in the kitchen. Your father is pounding on the kitchen
counter, slurring his words already. Your stepmother’s voice is ris-
ing, until you finally hear her yell that you are not hers. Your pain
peaks although you know that this is merely drunk-speak. You
sneak into the hallway and turn on the air conditioner. Its hum
almost drowns out the sound. Back in bed, you put the pillow over
your head. You squeeze it tighter and tighter until you are unable
to breathe. Only after you have no more breath to give up do you
lay the pillow aside and hope that the screaming has stopped.

Now you have the tone for my adolescence. I don’t feel that I
need to go into it any further. My adolescence was pain. My escape
from this was reading. I read everything that I could get my hands
on, and in every spare moment. I would read during lunchtime
instead of eating. In every school, I searched until I found a hiding
place where I could read undisturbed. This was not always easy,
because after my parents’ divorce, my mother got an itchy foot; I
moved and changed schools six times between sixth grade and high school graduation. My life was in constant flux, and this was not a simple thing to deal with. As I changed schools, I began to attend less and less. I would cut school and go to the library or go to the movies.

My mother saw no value in attending school more than the minimum time necessary to make good grades. She said that grades were like money: they bought you things. Based on this philosophy, we struck a deal. I was required to attend school for no longer than it would take me to make A's. It was my mother's contention that all other time invested was wasted. I discovered that I could make A's by attending school two to three days per week. The remainder of my time I spent researching or watching television. On the research end of things, I would pick a topic and go to the library. I picked topics like cryogenics, black holes, the Cree Indians, riboflavin, and Australia, just things that caught my interest. I would then set about learning everything available on the subject. I had a craving for knowledge that was not being met in schools. My schools were more war zones than educational institutions. Like my grandmother in Catholic school, I would not kneel, and so I was left to fight.

My fights at school were very physical. It seemed as though I had to fight all the time. The other Indian kids were the only kids that I never fought with at school. They were my friends. I spent a lot of my time fighting with the whites; the black kids I only fought with once—then we established a mutual respect. The white kids I fought with perpetually, year after year. Strangely, I didn't notice that they were all white until later; I just noticed that they were brutal. I always won, but that is not surprising. That is what I was raised to do.

I also believe that I have a fighting nature because I am a mixed blood. I have read various authors who say that it is in the dynamic. Now being a mixed blood is not an unusual condition in Oklahoma, nor is it particularly interesting. It is only when you have it slapped into you that the peculiar nature of the arrangement comes to the forefront. For me, this came in class one afternoon in the fall of my junior year of high school.

I was sitting at my desk staring out the window as many of us often did (school being the challenging thing that it is in rural Oklahoma), when I began to pick up on a conversation between two
of my friends. They were bitching about the benefits that Indians received. Their complaints ranged from “free health care” to the pencils and notebooks that were delivered to the Indian kids by the government. I had just received mine two weeks before. Finally, they centered their complaints on Indian houses. They complained endlessly about the fact that Indians got their houses free and about the fact that it was their tax money that paid for the houses. I found this interesting, since I knew that neither of them had ever paid a tax in his life; you generally don’t as a junior in high school.

After listening to their tirade for a while, I felt compelled to barge in. After all, I come from a long line of “fools who rush in.” I reminded them that I was Indian and that my family lived in one of those houses. I had also intended to tell them that the houses were paid for out of tribal money and that nobody’s taxes had anything to do with it, but I didn’t get the chance. Instead I was told, “We weren’t talking about you. After all, you have some human blood, too.”

These were casual friends, and it was readily apparent in the way that they phrased their response that they were actually trying to show solidarity with me. Lift me up a bit as it were. My reaction was to give them what my brother terms my “go to hell look” and turn around in my desk. Their conversation drifted on to who they wanted to take out and who they thought would win the upcoming football game—leaving me to my own partially human thoughts.

The one place I did enjoy spending time when attending school was the library. The librarian and I became good friends. When walking past the library one day, I was asked if I was going to take the PSAT, a test for high school juniors to gauge their chances for getting into college. I told her probably not, because I didn’t have the two dollars. She told me she would give me the two dollars if I would take the test. I agreed because I liked taking tests. They were games to me and I loved games. It is still amazing to me that two dollars properly spent can change the entire course of your life. I did very well on the test and started receiving information and scholarship offers from universities across the country. This was something that was outside of my experience. I come from a world that is very small and very old. To me, New York and Mars were approximately the same. They were places that you see on TV and places where no real people live—infinite expansive but with no more depth and reality than the TV screen itself.
I always tell people that my admission to college was happenstance: I just happened to be in school the day they were administering the PSATs; a librarian just happened to remind me and loan me the money to take the test; I just happened to do well, which made me a National Merit Scholar, which brought me letters from expensive colleges. I then tossed my letters in the air and the one from Dartmouth just happened to come out on top. This is how I picked my college. I only applied to one. I had never heard of it. I was sure, though, that being a small college in the backwoods, it would be desperate for students, so I did not apply anywhere else. I only realized after I got to Dartmouth that other people had worked and planned for years to go there. Some had hired coaches for the standardized admissions tests and had had their parents fly them in to look at the place. Others had applied to seven or eight different places. I recall thinking what a pain that would be and wondering why they had bothered. Many of these questions were answered upon my arrival.

My first impression of Dartmouth was that it was beautiful and cold. I was picked up at the airport by a junior who was Ojibway. He was friendly and I was freezing. Coming from Oklahoma in September, I didn’t expect the chill and had packed my coat in my suitcase. My suitcases were lost at the airport in St. Louis, leaving me in a new place, a thousand miles from home, with only the shirt on my back. After walking around some and getting to know the place, I went to my room. I remember lying on a military-style bed with no sheets in a freezing room wondering just what I was doing there.

That was my first impression of Dartmouth and I guess that is what Dartmouth is to me: a random assortment of impressions with no specific chronological order. In a sense it is personal event and spectacle. I suppose this is true for everyone. Pervasive among my impressions is a strong sense of alienation from Dartmouth. This began the day after I arrived, when I received a notice from the Deans’ office that I was to meet with a dean at 12:00 the next day. I could not believe how rude that was; back home, you never simply told somebody to show up one day in advance, and seldom was a week enough warning. We just didn’t do things that way. I felt my sense of correctness assaulted, as a city person might feel if all stoplights were to start changing colors at random. It was one of those things that was so unconscious that I could not have told...
you why it struck me as rude if asked; it's one of those subtle cultural/regional "differences" that are so deeply ingrained that you have to trip over them to bring them to light. This happened to me quite often at Dartmouth. On a regular basis, I felt as if I and the other students, as well as the professors, were existing on very different planes of reality.

I should say before I go on that writing about my time at Dartmouth is difficult for several reasons. The primary one is that after my graduation, I made a decision to remodel Dartmouth in my house of memory. It seems that many of us did that; when I meet with other Indian alumni, we remember the place fondly. Much like all alums, we have sealed up certain rooms, shifted a few doorways, and recast our experiences in a more pleasant hue. We remember our friends, and even our memories of our competitors grow fonder. Contradictions that once loomed enormous may not have been resolved, but they have been lived through. I think that Indians have a gift for this. There is so much pain in our histories that even the worst a small college has to inflict pales in comparison.

The "Indian symbol" provides a good example of this process of not forgetting specific events, but rather refocusing attention only on certain aspects of them. I think of it little these days, but at one time it commanded much of my attention and energy. The Indian symbol—a degrading, stupid-looking caricature of an Indian that was usually found drunk near a rum barrel—was the unofficial college mascot for many years, looked upon with pride by many old alumni. When I looked at it, though, I saw too much of home to find anything funny or heroic about it. Let me give you an example of what it feels like, since so much of its effect is in what some elders call the unseen world.

Imagine your grandfather. He has raised you with love and respect and given a great part of himself to you. He stands very straight, and the dignity of his presence is almost palpable. Grandfather once lived very vitally, and it still shows in his humor and stories. He has a gentle wit and cares about his family and the world. His spiritual strength brings forth light. This is grandfather.

Now people have come to visit grandfather. He invites them in and offers them food. They do not accept, but instead, begin to jeer. They say taunting things that are aimed to hurt and destroy. But this is not enough; they grab grandfather and shave his head.
They paint his face with stripes and draw a scowl from the corners of his mouth. Still not enough, they take him and push him into the mud outside. You look at grandfather and realize that they have not diminished him. They did not have the power, but the world itself is now a smaller, darker place. This is how the Indian symbol made some of us feel.

Now I realize that the symbol was not and is not the most pressing issue facing Indian society, but seeing it is like walking past a stinging nettle; you chop it out of your path only to have it return from the roots. Its persistence only serves to underscore a contradiction that every Indian who has ever attended Dartmouth has felt to some degree. Dartmouth College, since its founding, has alternately used, courted, tossed aside, enticed, mocked, ignored, and, occasionally, educated Native Americans. In some ways, it is almost a mini-America.

The Indian symbol was a general challenge to the Native American community at Dartmouth, but there were many personal challenges as well. I recall being out dancing one night with a friend of mine, a beautiful Indian woman from Denver. My roommate (a student from New Jersey whose informal motto was "Yeah, I'm an asshole. So what?") was at the party as well. After a few minutes of dancing near my roommate, my friend Jo asked if we could move away from him. I asked her why. She said that he was pinching her and feeling her up. Well, where I'm from, you don't do things like that. But as a freshman, I didn't know clearly what to do. I thought about it a while and then looked him up and down and told him he should apologize to her. He said he didn't have to and that it was none of my business, so I hit him a couple of times to emphasize the point. Then I was really confused, because at Dartmouth, you just don't hit people. Mental cruelty of all kinds is protected and tolerated by established rules of conduct, but physical violence, no matter to what end, is deplored. At home, the reverse is true; decent treatment of people is encouraged and, if the situation requires, justifiably demanded through physical coercion. Unsure, I called home and spoke to my grandfather. He said that I had done "just right and if they were decent people they'd understand." How could I tell my grandfather that I was in a place where by many of the values I was raised with, people were not only not decent, but not even sane? Fortunately, it never came up.

But I also took to parts of Dartmouth like a duck to water. It
was all about learning and things that were new and beautiful. The first class that I took was "Folklore," an anthropology course. Anthropologists delight in the unique, and the professor who taught this course was really the first non-Indian I had ever met who valued Indian culture. At that time I hadn't spent much time thinking about culture. It was just a given. I recall, though, being very excited at the age of eighteen to meet someone who was Jewish. I had seen some Jewish people on TV and was certain that there couldn't be very many of them, since I had never met one. At that time, for me, all the world was Indian; it was only later that I was to realize the rare and beautiful wealth that we hold onto.

One of my friends described Dartmouth as a fantasy land. In my freshman year, this was how it seemed to me. The work was stimulating but not especially burdensome. I have always loved the stars, and in my first term, I found a perfect combination of courses: "Folklore" and "Stars." But it should be clear by now that what I loved was not the physics and astronomy, but the poetry of the stars. Black holes are places where time itself stops and things become infinitely smaller and no older, an eventual horizon past which there is no force in the universe that could allow one to escape. The romance of these astrological concepts was incredible and fit in so wonderfully with the folk stories of the people who came out of the earth and the ancient spiders hanging fire in the sky. But as far as the math went, I was in way over my head. My math education had stopped after Algebra I in the tenth grade. Sadly, they expected more at Dartmouth. Upon making a D on my first exam, I was determined to leave the college. Fortunately, the Native American Program director took me in hand and reassured me that "Stars" was neither the last nor the most important course I would take in college. I got an A in "Folklore" and a C in "Stars"; not terribly unique.

What was unique about my freshman year in college was Val. Years later, I find it hard to write about her, but Val was an important part of the lives of many of us who attended Dartmouth at that time and her story is very much a part of my own. When I first saw Val on my second day at the college, she was so beautiful she literally stole my breath away. She was wearing a green army surplus coat that she had decorated herself with streaks of spray paint and red handprints. When she asked me if I was going to
the NAD House for a picnic to welcome new students, I, of course, said yes.

Val was Yup'ik from Alaska. When she entered Dartmouth, she was a poet, a singer, and a person with the most boundless raw energy I have ever known. By the time she left the college, a couple of years later, she was addicted to alcohol and cocaine and physically and emotionally battered. By the age of twenty-seven, she was dead from drinking antifreeze. Much is said about walking in two worlds, about being “bicultural.” These discussions are little more than mouthings of academic platitudes. Val, like myself, thought about the world in a way that I can only superficially describe. I was not raised with talk of career paths and planning ahead. When I thought of the future, it was only a matter of days or weeks. I did not plan to finish college or go to graduate school or get married or have a son. I was raised thinking that things happen, and people adapt if they can. No one exercises much control over the world, and it is only those who are gullible who delude themselves into thinking that they do. My main concern was and is what happens to my family and community. My education, more than anything else, helped me to redefine and expand whom I include in my circle of concern.

All in all, my education has been a rather selfish thing. It took me away from my family and tribe and I did it just to satisfy my curiosity. I was a poet inseparable from momentary tribal dreams when I left, and I am a better poet now. Being away led me to understand the incredible wealth I was raised with. I recently went to the wedding ceremony of a Native friend of mine from Dartmouth. He began the ceremony by saying, “My family and I would like to welcome you. We’ve lived in this neighborhood for about thirty-five thousand years.” That statement alone causes you to think in ways that are difficult to reconcile with Western education. This, I think, is the paradox that killed Val because she could not reconcile it. I try with greater or lesser success.

I would like you to understand that my experience at the college was not universally bad. On the contrary, Dartmouth provided me with gifts too numerous to count. The foremost among these are my ex-wife and my son. My ex-wife is mixed blood like myself. She is Slovakian, Irish, English, Italian, and some nameless Massachusetts Indian tribe. What all these things add up to is a strik-
ingly beautiful woman. She has flowing brown hair with red highlights, eyes the color of polished amber, and a body that won't quit. In addition to all of the aforementioned things, she speaks four languages, graduated at the top of her class, was a state champion athlete, and upon giving birth, immediately got up and walked back to her hospital room.

Diane and I might have been considered star-crossed lovers. It was almost a storybook formulation. She was a near-white girl from a wealthy family who had all the money in the world to give her, but very little love; they insisted on the best from her and usually got it, one way or another. They had great plans for her: to follow in the finest tradition and become a powerful, self-concerned doctor whose only loves were money and control. And her family must always take a distant second place, so as not to interfere with her work. I was a poor Indian from Oklahoma whose family seldom had enough money, but always had enough love. My family aspired that I stay out of prison, but beyond that I was free to make my own way. Now as it happened, I loved Diane the near-white girl and she loved me and that was how things stood until one night I loved her too much and she became pregnant. When she told me this, it did not surprise me in the least, because that is how things work in the real world. Since her pregnancy was a fact, Diane had some decisions to make. I say "Diane" and not "we" because I believe that while a baby is inside a woman's body, all choices should be hers. I did tell her though, that if she wanted to have the baby, then I would have a say; the baby would not go up for adoption. If she wanted no part of it, I would take it back to Oklahoma and raise it myself with the help of my family. I had the benefit of knowing that my family loves children and that a new baby would be greeted with joy. This gave me a security that many white people, including Diane, unfortunately lack. Well, to make a long story short, Diane decided to have the baby. I was happy and hesitant and unsure and proud and a million other things all stirred together in one big pot. I think Diane was the same way. I was also feeling very good in a way that only living up to a difficult conviction can make you feel. The upshot of it all was that we went ahead with our plans for her to have the baby. We also decided to get married. Our fraternity provided the scene.

Diane and I belonged to the same co-ed fraternity, and our wedding was the event of the season. Our nuptials were paid for
out of the social budget, and it seemed like half of the campus turned up. It was a mighty fine time. Diane was beautiful in green velvet, and I have to say that I made quite a striking figure in my mismatched jacket and beaded bolo tie. My brother the preacher came all the way from Oklahoma to New Hampshire to perform the ceremony, and all of Diane’s family showed up. We had decided to let her parents attend on the condition that my brother and I could cripple them if they acted ugly (they didn’t). It was a grand affair and seven months later, my son Scot was born. He is the finest thing Diane and I have ever done together, and between us and my family he is one loved chebonni. Since then, Diane and I have divorced, but that seems like a happy place to stop.

A Kiowa elder once told me that the victories to be won today are educational. Most of the time now, we fight with words. Dartmouth College taught me to use words as arrows, a skill which led me to Stanford. But I was not comfortable or happy in this academic environment, and it took me a while to figure out why.

For myself as an Indian academic, the problem of locating “home” within the academic structure was serious. More than any people in North America, Indians can point to a piece of the world where home lies, and they can often even trace it back to specific rocks, trees, and bodies of water. The university is not where we point. We cannot adopt academia in the way Euro-Americans can. Having no concept of links that cannot be broken, Euro-Americans can pull themselves up by the bootstraps and plant themselves firmly in the academic community, a community historically conceived to take care of them. Aside from a few minor scrapes and disharmonies, they fit academia like a hand sliding into a glove. What, however, can an Indian do? What can Indians do when the glove is tailored to the white hand, and the white hand is already happily inside it?

One of the things that an Indian can do is leave, and we do so in droves. Indians have the highest university dropout rate of any group in the United States, on the undergraduate, graduate, and faculty levels. This is not surprising to either the academic world or the Indian world. I’ll attempt to explain why this is so.

As a constant and enthusiastic user of computers, I have occasionally come across programs that have serious bugs. These are programs in which you attempt to do something that the program is purportedly capable of doing, yet actually is not. The commands
are there, and the computer should be able to perform the task. In fact, the computer will insist that it is able. On the Macintosh, this results in a system error. The system error is the bane of the Mac user's existence, because it offers only one solution: turn off your computer, lose everything you have recently put into it, and start again from the beginning.

This is the situation of the Indian who stays within academia: the academic structure insists that it can accommodate you, and even gives explicit instructions on how this can be accomplished. You enter the system, begin to give input, and then out of the blue, you get a system error, incapable of correcting itself. As the user, you learn merely to avoid using that particular function. Unfortunately, the only way to discover a system error is to stumble across it and be sent back to the beginning.

Indians come from a place where the primary program is different and has been running for an incredibly long time. Most of the bugs are worked out. Indians enter academia expecting a fundamentally functional program. They press keys labeled "voice," "expression," "meaning," "creativity," and "use," and expect to find that something extraordinary happens. Instead, the machine stops. So Indians go home, a place that Euro-American academics have often forgotten exists, or they stay in a world they never made and don't fully understand.

After leaving Stanford partway through my Ph.D. program in education, I was hired as executive director of The Native American Preparatory School (NAPS). I took the job in order to protect our children from the type of Western education my family and I have endured. I refuse to believe that education must be painful and cruel.

The Native American Prep School took me many places, and my "education" continued. I flew across the country from New York to L.A., had meetings at private clubs and on yachts where no one looked like me, and asked people to donate money to Indian education, because Indians are the people of the future. And then I would go home and cleanse myself and vomit, because that is what you do if you are Creek and believe in our traditional ways and find yourself living in a world that is increasingly strange. Then I would return to work and laugh myself through another day, clinging to thirty-five thousand years of dances and stories and philosophy and thought and the comfort, joy, pain, and work that its survival implies.
The chairman of the NAPS board, like many wealthy older people in Santa Fe, lives in a security-controlled condo. As executive director of the school, I often went to visit him. In the beginning, I was consistently stopped at the gate by a series of white men, and each time I told them my business. When I told them that their tenant and I worked together, they would ask exactly what I did. They would ask where I lived. They would ask how long I expected to be there. I told the same people the same things for two months. I got to know them well by sight, and I would have thought that as I came and went twice a day, they would have gotten to know me, but such was not the case. Each time, they said, “We’ll have to call and get confirmation.”

One day, about two months into this process, I arrived late for my appointment, and as is so often the case, desperation became the mother of invention. I was stopped and they asked who I was. Out of irritation, I sarcastically responded, “I’m the gardener. Who do you think?” This changed our relationship in a way that I could not have anticipated. The guard at the gate thrust a pass at me. “Here,” he said, “remember to bring this with you.” He stepped back into the guardhouse before I could explain. But I now had a pass that would allow me to go anywhere in the complex. Sometimes, with all the education and degrees in the world, you’re still just the gardener. A gardener is a respectable thing to be. My grandfather was a gardener. He raised potatoes, and I raise money. So maybe the guards had me pegged after all.

I once read a story in which one of the characters refused to let reality take shape. Through the sheer power of his denial, things would begin to realign themselves and reality would re-shuffle itself. He was not an Indian, but he might have been. I should not be here. We should not be here. I read that we were all supposed to be gone by 1910 or 1940 or 1970. It seems that for people who have outlived the end of several worlds, it is only denial and laughter that keeps us going.

I have been told that there are ceremonies going on in Native America to call people home. There is an in-gathering and those who walked, crawled, or were carried away will be brought back. I had to go away to know that my education was my grandfather and grandmother and aunts and uncles and cousins, and that the land and the turtles who live on it were my education, too. I was schooled in the cold mountains of New Hampshire, and in Cali-
Bill Bray

Bill Bray's given name is Fus Hutke Chupco, which translates to "Great White Bird," referring to the crane which originated the Stompdance. Creek and Chocaw, he is also an adopted member of Arbeka Talledega, one of the four mother towns of the Muskoke Confederacy.

Bill is a published poet and 1989 graduate of Dartmouth College, where he double-majored in English and anthropology modified with minority studies in education. He also earned a certificate in Native American studies. He has a master's degree in education from Oklahoma City University and has completed his doctoral coursework at Stanford University. In addition, he holds a Ph.D. in Cultural Resource Management.

Bill was the founding director of a school for gifted Native American students in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and he is currently the CEO of Este Muskoke Momen Hopoetckve, a tribal corporation that assists traditional communities in achieving cultural and economic sovereignty. He is often to be found on his porch in Okemah, Oklahoma, reading a good book, beading, or watching his son, Eco Lyvne-ee, who is a delight to his eyes.