Indian Cartography

My father opens a map of California--
traces mountain ranges, rivers, county borders
like family bloodlines. Tuolomne,
Salinas, Los Angeles, Paso Robles,
Ventura, Santa Barbara, Saticoy,
Tehachapi. Places he was happy,
or where tragedy greeted him
like an old unpleasant relative.

A small blue spot marks
Lake Cachuma, created when they
dammed the Santa Ynez, flooded
a valley, divided
my father's boyhood: days
he learned to swim the hard way,
and days he walked across the silver scales,
swollen bellies of salmon coming back
to a river that wasn't there.
*The government paid those Indians to move away,
he says; I don't know where they went.*

In my father's dreams
after the solace of a six-pack,
he follows a longing, a deepness.
When he comes to the valley
drowned by a displaced river
he swims out, floats on his face
with eyes open, looks down into lands not drawn
on any map. Maybe he sees shadows
of a people who are fluid,
fluent in dark water, bodies
long and glinting with sharp-edged jewelry,
and mouths still opening, closing
on the stories of our home.

From *Indian Cartography*, Greenfield Review Press, 1998.
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Tear

It was the time before

I was born.

I was thin.

I was hungry. I was

only a restlessness inside a woman’s body.

Above us, lightning split open the sky.

Below us, wagon wheels cut land in two.

Around us were the soldiers,

young and afraid,

who did not trust us

with scissors or knives

but with needles.

Tear dresses they were called

because settler cotton was torn

in straight lines

like the roads we had to follow

to Oklahoma.

But when the cloth was torn,

it was like tears,

impossible to hold back,

and so they were called

by this other name,

for our weeping.

I remember the women.

Tonight they walk

out from the shadows

with black dogs,

children, the dark heavy horses,

and worn-out men.

They walk inside me. This blood

is a map of the road between us.

I am why they survived.

The world behind them did not close.

The world before them is still open.

All around me are my ancestors,

my unborn children.

I am the tear between them

and both sides live.

FOOTNOTES: *Tear dresses are traditional Chickasaw women’s clothing.*

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