

# *Out of the Crazywoods*

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AMERICAN INDIAN LIVES

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*it is what we call them  
those places grown back  
after the forest was cut down  
crazywoods and we walk  
crazy among them . . .*

## About This Book

Everything in this book was most likely written while I was in a hypomanic state. Of course, because if I wasn't manic, I wouldn't be writing, I'd be sleeping, or staring at the shower curtain trying to remember why I should take a shower anyway, or staring at the unfinished paintings in my studio and thinking if I want to paint I'll have to clear the table, and get some water, and take my paints and brushes out of the tote bag I used when I went to class. But I'm writing, so there's mania there. But not so much that I'm thinking too fast for my fingers, or knitting twenty-seven hats, or flying around somewhere doing I don't know what the hell trying to get away from all those people walking around in slow motion just to fucking irritate me. And I'm not in one of those mixed states where all the shades are down, and I feel like shit, but I can't stand still, and I can't tell whether it's me trembling, or the car vibrating, and everything feels like an assault and I'm so fucking agitated you don't want to hear about it anyway. But you probably will.

## Bagw and Tekw

We are studying language together. We've made flash cards with pictures on them and words on the reverse, so we can quiz each other. We will never be fluent, never really be able to speak. But it is something, this learning. Nebi, water. Nebizon, medicine water. Also, those streams of experience that flow through us and make up our own personal power. I am amazed. I wrote a whole poem to express this concept that is contained in one word in our language.

Tekw is moving. Bagw is stillness. River is tekw. Lake is bagw. Stream is tekw. Pond is bagw. Ocean is bagw. Waves are tekw.

All life is water, and water in a shifting balance, from tekw to bagw and back again. The trees know about water—their blood runs up the maple every spring carrying sugar stored from the year before, sustenance to grow the new leaves, and enough for us to share. The sap is tekw. The leaves are bagw. Wanabagwa.

You wouldn't think leaves and stillness, just looking at a tree, how the leaves move in the slightest breeze, how they rustle against each other in the wind. But a deeper look into the tree, into the movement within the tree, and you see the tree as part of the circle of water, and the leaves as places of stillness. The sap, the blood of the tree, runs in rivers up to the branches and twigs, then finds a resting place in the leaves, as brooks flow into a pond. The leaf is the place that holds water and sunshine

and air for the great transformation to occur. Where water and carbon dioxide become sweet food and oxygen.

Bagw and tekw, stillness and movement. I want to learn from this. I want to find the calm stillness of a pond, and the clear flow of running water. We, like the trees who are our ancestors, are beings of water. My rivers run high, with rapids and whirlpools the stories say were created by the impetuous twin. The ponds have stagnated, become places with no give and take. The sunlight hurts, there is no sweetness here. Nothing flows in or out, no breeze moves the surface.

## Under the Crib

I am under my crib with my ABC blocks and their little wagon with its red and white pulling rope. I tip the blocks over and the colors and lines change. I put one on top of the other. I throw them and watch them slide on the linoleum. I put them in the wagon, roll them back and forth, and take them back out again. I taste them, I bite them, I rub them on my face.

Now there is light streaming into the room. It is coming through the window, and there is dancing in the light. Something alive and magical is in the light. If only I could be in the light, could be the light, dance in the light. I am filled with love and awe and happiness.

But then the light dims, the dancing ones are gone. I am in shadow, alone under my crib. I look at my blocks. They are in shadow too. I don't want to play with them. I am waiting for the light to come back.

It is the artist's vision, this first memory. I bring up the memory at will, the magical dust motes dancing in the sun's rays, the numinous moment, the intake of breath, the widening of the eyes. The invitation. The mystery.

Then the shadow. The magic has turned dark, everything is grey. My cheek muscles go slack. I suck the inside of my lip.

## The Pivot Point

It was the autumn before my mother died, the fall my nerves broke—do people still say that? It is how it feels. The September after the rabies shots, before my son's marriage, after my husband and I got back together, the year it seemed my whole life turned.

Maybe it was the doctor telling me I had high blood pressure two weeks after my fiftieth birthday and the move to Nashua; or maybe before that to the fall on the ice at the house on the pond and my drunk brother taking me to the ER; or maybe it began with the quilts I made in the dining room of the working-class Victorian in Nashua's North End, where you could see down to the cellar where the boards of the rough wood flooring didn't meet, where a thin dust blew up between the cracks, and wallpaper from the thirties faded on the cracking plaster.

The clock began ticking loudly the night my heartbeat changed. My heart jumped around my chest like popcorn in a popper. Maybe it was too much caffeine, or maybe it was that my husband was keeping things from me again, or maybe it was the moment my mother began to die.

I feel it now as a pivot point, the before and after, the moment when everything changed. If nerves are trees with intertwined branches, then those branches in me are lightning-struck, torn and broken.

## Learning to Speak

My mother always told me that I sang before I could speak. Of course, she also told me that I was toilet trained at ten months. I think she was the one trained, not me, but I listen to her when she tells me about the singing.

This sense of music preceding speech has always intrigued me. What did I sing, Ma? Sure it would be a song still close to my heart, or maybe she meant I hummed some baby idea of melody. But no.

It was a song by Ray Charles, she says. And begins to sing to me. I am stunned. This was my first song? *Cry?* This song about heartache, about bad dreams and the blues? After all the trouble my mother went through to name me something that sounded like "cheerful," something she wished for me, even if it couldn't be pronounced in French. *Cry?*

You were speaking before you were a year, she says. A chatterbox by eighteen months. Even giving her leeway in terms of timing, I am stunned. How could I have latched on to this song as my first utterance? I try to hear my baby voice singing. I surprise myself by remembering all the words, though I have no memory of my infant self singing this. It is my mother's voice I hear. What part did I sing? What did my mother hear? And was this knowledge of the beautiful sadness of life something that I somehow already knew?

come back to nervous system + make real +

When my grandson first picked up a pencil, at just over a year, he held it correctly, as if he remembered from another life. Six months later, he'd forgotten how, grabbing the crayons in his fist like any two-year-old.

We have all been this way before. Who is this baby-self singing about heartache, and how did my mother stand it?

*Aspen*

## What It Is

They pretend to know. Sometimes you're up, sometimes you're down. Sometimes the blues just won't let go. The roller-coaster disease.

There are poles involved, like north and south, see this ice floe we're riding on? Watch out—the water's cold. You'll probably fall asleep. Bipolar. Can you say it? BiPolar Soda. The Penguin joins the Bear, we are all climbing the water tower together. If I said that in therapy it would be delusional. Out here on the ice floe it's just a joke.

There is something about transistors. The transistors in my brain are doing their own thing. How can I hear myself at night? The radio under my pillow, transistors working, Martha and the Vandellas singing *Love Is Like a Heat Wave*. Neurotransistors. Burning in my heart.

So these neurotransmitters are transmitting too much, or too little, and generally fucking with the chemistry of my brain. It's not that I'm see-sick, not Tigger at the top of the tree crying, *I see too much and I get sick*. Not like that at all.

Now it's about thermostats. Apparently, I don't have one. Funny, I always thought it was the laws of physics. *A body at rest tends to stay at rest; a body in motion tends to stay in motion*. I do that superbly.

But okay. If they want to talk about weather. It seems they all prefer warm, sunny days. A Southern California kind of day. I'm from the Northeast. I

prefer WEATHER. Storms. A little rain on the pond. A three-day blizzard. Wind blowing leaves down sidewalks. I dream of tornadoes.

But they are saying too many days of rain demands an ark. And I can't hang glide forever, I could get lost, and eventually the wind will fail.

Okay. But what if I never again get to stand naked in the rain? What if I never get to be a human bird, soaring on the thermals?

*That's the price you pay.* The price for what? The price for what?

## Age Three—The Witch in the Bag

It's Halloween. We are walking up the stairs to our apartment in Memere's house where we live with her. I'm carrying candy we bought for Trick-or-Treaters. I'm not too excited about going out in the dark, the cold air and scary people walking in the streets with white pillowcases and grocery bags. I know they are costumes, but I also know what I see: bones walking down the street, sheets billowing as the ghosts run to meet their friends, hair growing on people's knuckles.

Last year I went as a bunny, my mother said. I don't think the bunny will be safe outside. I remember when we got the kittens and they ran into the poison ivy and my father had to rescue them before the dogs got them. Everyone tells me I was so cute in the bunny costume, but when my mother takes it out it is dingy grey and I don't want to wear it.

My mother tells me how nice it is, and tries to make the floppy ears stand up a little straighter. My cousins wore this costume before I did and what might once have been pink is faded and sad. The white tail looks like a puppy chewed on it. This is not an Easter Bunny, or a Peter Rabbit Bunny, it is a Sad Bunny and I know I will be the Sad Bunny if my mother wants me to.

As Memere and I get to the top of the stairs, I see something in front of the door. It is a fancy shopping bag, with handles, the kind only my Gramma Delia uses when she goes to fancy stores. What's that? I ask. I am a little afraid to approach it. Open it and see, Memere says.



She wants to help me, but she doesn't know how. Neither of us does. She hasn't seen me when I can't get out of bed, can't shower or wash my hair. She doesn't know that just getting those things done is a victory. And I can't tell her. I can't will myself out of this depression.

## The Tarot

There are over twenty decks in the maple chest. The Rider Waite deck is the first deck I owned, the learning deck, the Mother of all twentieth century decks. The second deck, the round Motherpeace deck with its childlike and women-centered images, is the feminist deck. I am the woman bathing in moonlight.

There's the New World Tarot, with wood carvings painted in jewel colors, and the Morgan Greer, one of my favorite reading decks, the one I go to for unadorned answers. The Fey Tarot, with powerful Fairies you've never imagined, the quiet Hudes deck, and the Tarot of Prague, where the first golem was made and, some say, still sleeps.

There is the Fairytale Tarot, which makes me smile, but tells the truth, and the Animal Lords who have the bodies of humans, the heads of beasts. The Goddess Tarot is luminous, each card a Goddess-Yemanji, Kwan Yin-I become them all. And the Buddha Tarot where I build meditations and visit four mountains.

I have spent a lot of time choosing the right homes for these decks. Some are wrapped in silk scarves. Some are in embroidered and beaded bags. One deck is in a round black box, painted with lilies. A few are still in their original boxes, waiting.

These are the journeys I take now, far from the witchcraft in the outside world, journeys through the cards, through dimensions where the figures

in the cards talk to me, tempt me to stay longer than I should, give me gifts. I remember that when in the land of Faerie, you mustn't eat or drink or you may be caught there, an evening twenty years, a lifetime in an afternoon. I spend entire days lost in the cards, laying out one spread after another, changing decks and comparing results, and time passes without my knowing.

I am trying to find my life in these cards.

In this card, the young man sits cross-legged on the lotus flower and plays flute for me. I breathe the music in like incense. The tall woman in purple looms over me. I look up into her distant face, but she does not speak. I join the three women dancing, dancing. We are sisters, we are young, we are dancing, holding hands in the sun, in the moonlight.

Beware the swords, they are all sorrow. Here is the one I fear, the nightmare card. It is the Bosch painting over the lovers' bed. The heart pierced three times.

A woman is walking toward me across a plain of swaying grass, her hand in the mane of a lion. She is all red and gold fire. She knows I want her.

I spread the cards in crosses, in rows, circles, and pyramids. I am riding on the rim of a giant wheel—where it stops nobody knows.

The dog is barking at the top of the stairs, the woman is floating out of her body, the man is hanging by one foot.

I am the woman dancing drunk on the roof, too close to the edge.

## Tiger Butter

Our bathroom was not a big one. There was the narrow space in front of the sink with its big round mirror borrowed from a bedroom dresser. There was a built-in medicine chest in the corner that held Band-Aids and Mercurochrome, and some weird gadget for earaches that I wasn't allowed to play with. The toilet was on the right, at the end of the room, across from the tub, which had a bluish curtain that was often left open so people could sit on the edge while waiting their turn.

There was a small window at the end of the room, and my father had managed to fit a bookcase under it that was a fixture throughout my childhood and until after his death, when I was in my thirties. In fact, the disappearance of the bookcase signaled to me that my father was really gone, that my mother was making the house her own, moving my father's things out.

My mother had never liked the bookcase in the bathroom, but she tolerated it and tried to keep it neat. It was filled with books we were reading, or had read, or would read. An ever-changing library for all ages. There were the *All About* books—a series of science books that came from a book club my mother, ironically, enrolled me in as a Christmas present in third grade. Every month a book came—*All About Birds*, *All About Volcanoes*, *All About Dinosaurs*, *All About the Atom*, *All About Mammals*, *All About Amphibians*—a couple of dozen in all, and all my siblings got their turns reading them.

My dad had mystery magazines, including Alfred Hitchcock's, whose stories I read along with Poe, Stevenson, Daphne du Maurier, Louisa

May Alcott, and Hawthorne. Shakespeare's sonnets that I felt rather than understood, and Eliot's "Preludes," where I discovered a poetry with everyday images from the poet known for his obscure references. Bradbury, Sturgeon, Asimov, *Jane Eyre*, which I read at least once a year. *Myths of the World*. *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. Biographies of Einstein, Beethoven, Madame Curie, and Jim Thorpe. *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Alice in Wonderland*. *How to Play Bridge*.

All of this and more moved through the bathroom library. From the *Conquests of Tamerlaine* I learned the euphemism "his throbbing manhood," and from *Catch-22*, the word "prophylactic," which the dictionary was vague about, and my father said was something that prevented disease the way brushing your teeth prevented cavities. And of course the Little Golden Books, the ones we all started with.

The Little Golden Books were the ones that my mother read to me while I sat on the toilet, she on the edge of the tub, holding the book so I could see the pictures. One book is *Little Black Sambo*—a book rightly vilified for its racism until the story was rescued years later by Julius Lester. My mother is reading, and I am crying.

The story began as many stories do, a Mother, a Father, a Child. I am four years old, and like the child in the story, I have no sisters or brothers yet. The child goes out into the woods, not like our woods, but jungle woods with palm trees and vines, and yes, Tigers.

The Tigers chase Sambo. I am not afraid for him. Sambo is quick and safe in the tree he's climbed, and the Tigers, the beautiful Tigers, run round and round the tree. Sambo and I look down at the Tigers running around the tree. They run so fast they almost catch each other's tails. They are a blur of orange, white, and black, and big yellow Tiger eyes. They run and run until they turn into butter.

At this point, I cry. Tears run into my mouth and down my chin. I cannot be comforted. The poor, beautiful Tigers. Even now it makes me want to cry. How could all that beauty and grace and terrifying strength become the crazy, but still beautiful, Tiger whirlwind that *turned them into butter?!!*

It was no comfort to me that Sambo collected the butter and brought it home. No comfort that it tasted so good on the pancakes his mother made. No comfort that his parents were proud of him.

Every day I asked for the story. Every day I cried. "What book do you want today?" my mother asked. "*Little Black Sambo*," I'd say. "That book always makes you cry. Wouldn't you like a different book?" But I was adamant. "*Little Black Sambo*," I insisted. And so she read the story, and I sobbed my grief. It was the fierce beauty of the Tigers, the circle of yellow around the tree, the mandala of Tigers spinning, spinning, intoxicating, magical, and then their sad demise, that drew me in.

I wanted the Tigers to stop running around the tree, for Sambo just to go home, and they back into the dark of the forest. But at the same time I was mesmerized. It was the heart of the story—the confrontation with mystery, the tragic, with passion, art, and the power of transformation.

I think I could love Tiger butter now, even though I am still filled with grief when I retell or recall the story. But with so much I counted on in my life now ripped away, with the Tigers chasing me, the whirlwind overwhelming me, I would welcome some Tiger butter that I could spread over good bread and savor and be saved.

## I Am in Love with Rita Moreno

We go to see *West Side Story*, my best friend and I. We are twelve and this is our first grown-up movie. It opens with a shot of New York City and a sharp whistle. This is real. This is a neighborhood. I am swept away by the music, the jazzy beat, the dancing down streets, under the highway, in parking garages. I will tell my parents the soundtrack is all I want for Christmas. For years, my sister and I will sing the songs, dance in the kitchen while washing dishes.

On the way home, my friend tells me she is in love with Bernardo, who do I love? I don't know, I am still dancing with the women on the roof. Our hands meet over our heads, and now my arm is around her waist. We lock eyes and walk in a circle around each other. Now we are swishing our skirts high, stamping our feet, doo doo Dah dit dah, Dah dit dah, DUM DUM DUM, Dah dit dit Dah dit dit Dum d'Daaaaah.

I will be her skirt, I will be her shoes, I will be the flower she wears in her hair, the shawl she wraps around her shoulders. I am in love with Rita Moreno.

## Crazy Talk II

There is no such thing as a nervous breakdown, he says. I have been crying for weeks and I can't stop. He leans back in his chair, pushing slightly away from his desk. This is the extent of his intake examination before he assigns me to a therapist, who happens to be his wife.

I meet her at their house. The stairs to her basement office are next to the kitchen, which is several times the size of mine, with granite countertops, overhead racks with hanging copper pans, an island big enough to live on with a sink, two ovens that I can see, and a window with herbs growing that extends out behind another, bigger sink. When I compliment her on her kitchen, she says that I could have one like that. When I say, I don't think so, she asks why I think I don't deserve one.

Apparently she's unfamiliar with class analysis, it's all a matter of choice for her. Yes, I'm poor by choice, I want to say, but can't. I hate her and everyone like her.

She tells me my animosity towards her is about my mother. I admit, she does have curly red hair, but that is where the similarity ends. Still, it's true that I have dreams that I am driving to therapy with my mother in the back seat.

She tells me that my relationships with women are too intense. I don't know what to say, I am silenced. How can I come out to her? She doesn't

even ask about my sexual preferences. I want to say, You're wrong, they're not intense enough, but I have no energy, no sense of humor.

We are always playing Alice in here—sometimes I am small and she is huge, other times she is tiny and receding into the distance. Rarely are we the same size.

We have been discussing a chronic illness that has had me in pain, with restricted movement for the past several years. We've talked about it before. One day I mention it and she says, Well, everyone gets sick sometimes, with a broken leg, or surgery. How long, exactly, were you ill?

## Beautiful Doll

I was my mother's first child, full of promise, pretty with my hair done in Shirley Temple curls. My mother dressed me like a doll, in clothes she chose or made, and made me sit still while she set my hair in rags. I would suffer under her ungentle hands tugging the ends. My tears had no effect on this process. You have to suffer to be beautiful, she would tell me. The rags hurt to sleep on, pulled all night at my hair, and the lumps gave me a headache.

*Oh, you beautiful doll, you great big beautiful doll, my mother sang to me, rocking me in her lap. I can't say I didn't like those times, my mother's arms around me, her warm body, the energy with which she rocked the chair. But I worried, did she not know I was a real girl, not a doll like Pinocchio? I liked to hear the other song, the one that went, Put your arms around me, honey, hold me tight, huddle up and cuddle up with all your might. I loved to cuddle, to be the real live girl. I long to hold you but I'm afraid you'd break. Oh, Oh, Oh, Oh, Oh, Oh, you beautiful doll.*

## Alnôbawôgan

We learn another word ending. Wôgan. The “ô” sounds like the French “on”-nasal, from the back of the throat. It indicates a process, a continuing. It is an ending we use with many words. It is the world in the constant process of becoming.

Awikhigan, a book. Awikhigawôgan, becoming a book. There is the writing of the book—that is the obvious meaning. The book continually becoming, as it goes out into the world, as it is read, as it becomes and becomes again for each reader, that is wôgan.

Alnôba, human being. Alnôbawôgan, becoming human. It is our word for birth. Alnôbawôgan. It also means human nature—the continual process of becoming human that we are all part of.

Alnôbawôgan. Becoming Human. It is a word of inclusion. It is the opposite of stigma. It tells me I am not so different after all. Alnôbawôgan. A word big enough to hold all of us.

*it is a slow  
process  
becoming human  
this pulling  
back  
this trimming  
of nails  
she will  
roar  
softly use  
words  
instead of  
paws  
she will keep  
her lumbering ways  
eat salmon  
and blueberries  
whenever  
she can get them  
sleep  
when she pleases  
wail  
sometimes  
sing*