Roofwalker

SUSAN POWER
First Fruits

John Harvard, who as it turns out is not really John Harvard, contemplates his bronze-tasseled shoes and will not look me in the eye. He sits comfortably atop his pedestal, limbs remarkably relaxed for a statue. His left hand rests easily on the arm of his straight-backed chair, but there is something about its position that makes me think at any moment he may reach down to adjust his knickers. No, he remains static, for we have caught him between breaths of his great iron lungs.

I glance sideways at my father—the musician, Melvin Shoestring—and wonder if he knows how like him I am becoming. I have imagined this statue alive, just as I know my father has.

“This sculpture is popularly known as the statue of three lies,” says Jean, our Harvard Student Agencies tour guide. I admired her from the first, for she is still in school but already a professional. Her crimson blazer and gray pleated skirt are perfectly pressed, her golden hair is French-braided in one near plait, and her complexion is flawless.
“Three lies.” My father echoes Jean.

“Lie number one,” she continues. “It isn’t clear who the actual model for this statue was, since no likeness of John Harvard exists. Lies two and three: you’ll notice at the base here it states that this college was founded by John Harvard in 1638. In fact, it was founded by a legislative body two years earlier. It was named after Harvard out of gratitude, since he bequeathed the college eight hundred pounds and his extensive library.”

I cannot actually see the words Jean is pointing to, for a dozen other people, including my father, have pushed eagerly forward to get a better view. Some of them look ready to climb into Harvard’s lap. One elderly gentleman who leans on his umbrella as if it were a cane, elbows his wife, whispering, “It’s Harvard. You’d think they’d get their facts straight.”

She hushes him as if he has spoken aloud in church.

My father emerges from the huddle of tourists. “Did you see it?” he asks, pointing at the statue with his lips, a gesture I have seen made only by Indians. I nod my head, because otherwise he will clear a path for me and trace the words with his finger as if I am still five years old and learning to read by sounding out the letters, one at a time.

Jean surges forward, moving purposefully down one of the narrow paths that crisscross Harvard Yard in a complicated design, like strings in a game of cat’s cradle. My father is right behind her, millimeters away from stepping on the backs of her heels. He doesn’t watch where he is going; he’s consulting the book he brought on this tour, his fingers like thick cigars thrust between its pages to mark pertinent passages. It is Alden T. Vaughan’s historical work titled New England Frontier: Puritans and Indians 1620–1675. My father winks at me and shakes the book. We must be approaching the site he has been so anxious to see.

I am a little behind and to the right of him, at the edge of the flock. I want to see him as a stranger would, sketch him carefully in my mind because he will be leaving soon, for the first time in all my seventeen years. My father is the darkest member of this group, his skin like stained walnut beside Jean, who is pale as silver birch. He wears his black hair in two braids, but he and I are the only ones who know how short and sparse they are. He has wrapped them in outer skins, which trail to his thighs and kick out with each step he takes. They are not so much tradition as vanity, these hair ties and his cowboy boots with two-inch heels. My father is full-blooded Sioux, or Dakota as we call ourselves, but he is short for one of our tribe, a good half-head shorter than me. I take after my mother, who was six feet tall. For the first time, I notice that my father’s jeans are too tight. But I don’t think it’s an attempt to appear sexy so much as a refusal to acknowledge that he has put on
weight. I look into his face, which is strong, balanced, and smooth. It could have been hewn from one unblemished trunk of wood. His eyes glimmer with some mischief, and I almost pity Jean. My father will not be silent much longer.

After Jean has shown us Matthews Hall, my father speaks up. “What do you know about the Indian College?” he asks.

“Excuse me?” A wispy hair has escaped from Jean’s braid, and she carefully tucks it behind her ear.

“We’re near the site of the Indian College,” my father continues. “It was located behind this building.” He cracks open Vaughan’s volume and holds it out as proof.


Good for you, Jean, I am thinking. You handled him just right.

My father leads us to the back of Matthews Hall and spreads his arms. “This is where it was. The Indian College, completed in 1655. It was the first brick building in Harvard Yard, two stories tall, and meant to house Indian students.”

I have to give my father credit; the group looks interested.

“The Puritans—and you better believe they haven’t been the only ones—felt that if you educated Indians, you could convert their souls.” My father stares at me for a long moment before continuing. “Harvard was founded in part to help accomplish that goal. Here, let me read you this.” He smiles, and balances the history book in his palm the way a minister wields his Bible.

“President Henry Dunster took seriously the statement in Harvard’s charter of 1630 that the purpose of the institution was the education of the English and Indian Youth of this Country. Dunster hoped to make Harvard the Indian Oxford as well as the New-English Cambridge.”

Jean has removed a small notebook from her blazer pocket and is taking notes. She and the others wait expectantly.

“We were even a fund-raiser selling point,” Dad tells them. “In 1643 a pamphlet called New England’s First Fruits was printed to promote Harvard’s cause. The first item on there was about the conversion and preparation of Indians.”

“Did any graduate back then?” Jean asks.

“Just one, though several attended for a time, and they all came to sad ends, too. Caleb Cheeshateaumuck, a Wampanoag from Martha’s Vineyard, graduated in 1665. His native language was Algonquin, but he mastered Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and, of course, English. He died a year after graduating, of consumption.”

There is a soft murmur of sympathy in the group, and the gentleman with the umbrella shakes his head.
Jean is a trooper. “I thank you,” she tells my father.
“This has certainly enlightened us all.”
She is not in the least sarcastic, and her gracious behavior catches my father a little off guard. He is so used to people who want to shut him down before he gets started, who want the past to remain there. I take the book from him and sling my arm around his shoulder, because this minor triumph has left him looking oddly defeated.

The tour has ended, and my father and I stroll through Harvard Yard, where I will be living for the next year.
“What do you think, George? Will it suit you?”
Melvin Shoestring, itinerant musician and sometime scholar, stops to face me. His hands weigh heavily on my shoulders.
“I belong here,” I tell him as confidently as I can. I don’t want him to leave feeling uneasy. I place my own hands on his shoulders and we are locked together, father and daughter. He nods his head sharply, satisfied.
“You’ll be okay,” he says to himself.
I think I am here because I sound exotic on paper. Even my name, Georgiana Lorraine Shoestring, makes me somewhat memorable. I have no transcripts to speak of since my father and I travel each year from Seattle, Washington, to Sarasota, Florida, and places in-between.

Unless my father is doing research for a new album, in which case we hole up in Chicago so he can study at The Newberry Library. He is a thoughtful, academic composer when it comes to his lyrics. The music is already on tape by the time he gets to the words, his steel guitar plucking the melody, tearing it out of his head. He chooses a different moment in Indian history for each album, his most recent being First Fruits, a collection of songs describing Puritan and Indian encounters in the seventeenth century.

Without meaning to, Dad put the idea of Harvard in my head. Until his talk of the college’s history I hadn’t made any future plans, content to read my books, help my father set up his sound equipment, and watch him perform from the rear of dark smoky rooms. I was intrigued to hear of an institution steeped in tradition. I thought it must be a place of stories, and I wanted to discover them. Unaware of the odds against my acceptance, I decided to apply.

I am self-educated, which means I have read everything I could lay hands on. The trunk of our taped-together midnight blue Buick is always full of used paperbacks and marked-up textbooks I have consumed like a locust. I was fearful of the college entrance exams, which even a heathen such as myself must endure, but I found them manageable and did quite well. After all, I had several discarded study guides to help prepare me.
Ironically, I don't think any other college would have accepted me; certainly we didn't have money for more than one application, and my father doesn't believe in fee waivers. I think Harvard admires the pathologically curious, the eccentric, unfettered mind enough to sometimes forego the formalities. So here I am in Cambridge, Massachusetts, towering above my father yet ready to curl within the cave of his chest. We have already smoked out my dormitory suite with prayer tobacco to banish whatever evil may linger there. My roommate hasn't arrived yet, which, I'm ashamed to say, is a bit of a relief.

My father and I are standing beside the wrought-iron bars of Johnston Gate. He is preparing to leave. The setting sun has striped the sky behind his head, and the blazing design of red to purple reminds me of a Pendleton blanket. What will he say? What should I tell him? We are Dakota and so are uncomfortable with physical affection. My father does what is most important. He takes my right hand between his callused palms and pumps it vigorously. He squeezes my hand and looks into my eyes.

"Don't you forget," he whispers.

I am slow to return to my room in Lionel Hall. I kick a square stone along the path, enjoying the skittering sound it makes. Harvard Yard is nearly deserted. I suppose my classmates are busy getting to know their roommates. As I approach Lionel, something stops me, a thickening of the atmosphere. I smell the tobacco my father and I burned in the small rooms. There is a taste in my mouth—something too sweet, like an overripe nectarine. There isn't much light in this part of the Yard. I am surrounded by dim shapes and shadows, but I can smell the grass and the trim hedges of arrowwood, and even the tangled ivy stitched to the brick facades of our dormitories. This place is abruptly alive.

I can't help but think that my father's presence—his prayers made of smoke sent directly to the eagles—has not expelled evil so much as invited a variety of spirits. The ones he taught me to recognize. From all my reading I know I am not supposed to believe in these specters, but I do. In our travels my father has pointed them out to me: shambling along the side of the road in a heavy coat, balancing on the rim of a rooftop like a tightrope performer, huddled behind the chair in a hotel room, or even hopping across the hood of our moving car, agile as a greyhound. Perhaps my father has turned Harvard Yard inside out, shaken its contents loose. I feel, rather than see, clouds collecting above this plot of land enclosed by a tall iron fence. Forces are gathering, whether they be atmospheric or spectral. I cannot ignore them. I believe and disbelieve in them because I am
Dakota, and to remain Indian in this world one must learn to accommodate contradictions.

I have just emerged from the shower, swathed in towels, when I stumble upon my roommate. She stands in the living room surrounded by a matched set of luggage. She is alone, and I notice that her hands are shaking as she tries to light a cigarette. When she sees me, she drops it on her desk and climbs free of the piled suitcases.

“You’re handsome,” she says. She hugs me fiercely. My arms are pinned to my damp sides, but I wouldn’t know what to do with them anyway. I’m not used to this sort of thing. She pulls back and thrusts out her hand. “Good to know you,” she says as our hands move up and down. And there is something about the way her strange indigo eyes whisk across my face that makes me think she does know me. She has discovered me at a glance.

Her name is Allegra Kushner-Wallace, and she is alone because her parents are embroiled in a three-day argument they were anxious to resume after dropping her off.

“What about?” I ask.

“Well, surface level is whether they should get a summer place in the Adirondacks. Honesty level is why my Dad can’t stand being around my mother. Frankly, I could use a vacation from both of them.”

Allegra realizes what she has said, and in a moment we are both hysterical, laughing until we are unable to breathe and must make our way—arm-in-arm and bent over double—to the narrow bunk bed.

“Just a four-year vacation,” she says, and we are howling, hiccupping. Allegra has curled herself into a ball, tight as a possum, her little feet kicking helplessly as tears leak onto my comforter. It is a relief to laugh this hard, until our muscles ache and we are drained of nerves, farewells, insecurities.

As we unpack our bags and straighten the small suite of rooms—bedroom, living room, and bathroom—I watch Allegra as closely as possible without actually staring. I’ve never really had a non-Indian friend, since my father and I hit mostly reservations and urban Indian enclaves in our travels. I imagine that I Know something of mainstream society. I have read so much about it, and studied the classics written by authors my father has dubbed The Great White Men and The Peculiar White Women.

Allegra will be my introduction to this new world, although she doesn’t realize it. I cannot presume to understand a culture on the basis of one person’s behavior, I tell myself. But I watch Allegra just the same. I observe that she wears wine-colored lipstick and heavy rice powder makeup. A branch of blue veins cuts beneath her paper-white skin, all of them delicate but for the one pulsing across her forehead. She is shorter than I am but taller
than my father, and her slight frame reminds me of the turquoise damselflies I have seen skimming elegantly above lake water.

We finish unpacking and tape the freshman orientation schedule on our bedroom door. Allegra perches on her desk, combing her auburn hair, which is short and fine on top, swinging like a full skirt when she turns her head.

“So tell me,” she says, “what’s the deal?”

I don’t know what she means. She points her pink comb at me. “I mean the story. What’s your story?”

I dream about the mares’ tails. I left them out of the story I told Allegra, skipped that part and moved on to the road adventures my father and I shared these past nine years. But the tails are there, twitching in my brain, reminding me—as if I need reminding—that they will always be part of the story. Upon waking I can still see them for just an instant, streaked across the ceiling, until darkness claims them.

I was eight years old, seated beside my father in the rocking car of a Ferris wheel, when I first saw the wispy formation of cirrus clouds he told me were mares’ tails. He showed me how the sky was crowded with horses, packed together with their flanks to the oncoming storm, so all we could see were their silver tails streaming behind them in the wind. My father and I never missed a carnival if we could help it, although my mother didn’t share this particular enthusiasm and waited for us at home.

We had a base of operations back then, on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in North Dakota: an old two-story farmhouse, stripped of its paint by the elements. Because my mother felt the ceilings were low, she moved uncomfortably through the rooms, hunched in the way of an older woman. She liked to sit on the back steps where she could admire her garden and stretch her limbs and her long spine.

The night of the mares’ tails, my father and I stopped along the floodplain on our way home, to pick bluebells for my mother. They stretched across the flat field like drooping nuns settled in pews. As my father filled my arms with flowers, our house was burning. By the time we drove into our yard, a sudden rain, predicted by the clouds, had doused most of the flames. But the house was already a skeleton—an artifact we’d uncovered on the prairie.

No one ever learned what started the fire. The best guess was a problem with the ancient electrical wiring. Our own people believed it was heyoka spirits, who can be malignant in their mischief. For several months after the fire I could see them in my dreams: small as children and squatting in a circle beside our house. They
rubbed their stiff little fingers together until sparks caught, glowing against their dark skin. They blew into cupped palms and their hands ignited, blazed vividly yet were not consumed, like the burning bush of Moses' vision. They patted the house then, stroked its splintered panels, traced the windowsills with their scorching fingers, each caress yielding a string of fire. And when my mother's spirit fled through the chimney, wafting above their upturned faces, they reached for her. One grabbed her by the hair but she pulled free, and he was left with a sable strand that quickly sizzled to ash.

“Wait up! Hey, wait for me!” I slow down so Allegra can catch up to me. “You've got to learn to pace yourself,” she says. She takes quick, shallow breaths, head averted so I will not hear her panting. Her royal blue running suit has been stained by perspiration; the pattern is a perfect V pointing from her collar to her chest, as neat as if it had been drawn.

Allegra is teaching me to jog and it is wearing her down. I am a difficult subject. I want to run flat out, my legs become pure speed until I feel the sharpness of the air, its planes and angles, cut into my flesh. I imagine that with enough velocity I will break through the barrier, shatter the air like a pane of glass or a bright mirror and emerge into light. A mystery. A new story. But Allegra's voice is like a hand on my arm, and it pulls me back. We are paused beside the Charles River, jogging in place so we don’t cramp our muscles or shock our systems.

"You can go farther if you go slowly," Allegra lectures. I feel my head moving up and down, cooperatively, but I know this is a fallacy. If I am quick I can get to the other side, is what I am thinking.

As we return to our room, Allegra scolds me like a mother. "You study the way you run, George. You're going to burn yourself out."

"But I want to know," I tell her.

Allegra chuckles deep in her throat, a warm sound. "There's something you ought to realize, mon amie," she says. "There isn't a soul alive who can know everything. Not a blessed soul." This last remark is spoken gravely, in the voice she uses to imitate her father.

"But a person can die trying," I answer, using that conjunction again—on the defensive. Allegra means well, she worries when she sees me attack a syllabus and tear through the reading assignments, getting far ahead of the schedule. I have never learned how to learn. I am not patient. I don't like my facts measured and tastefully arranged. I sit in class and take notes because it is expected, but I sometimes want to stand up and shout, "Yes, but what do you believe? What can you see?"
My father has always seen beyond the surface of things, what he calls the distracting reality. He has this telescopic, microscopic view—both large and small—peeling back layers and getting to the spirit of things. His presence has faded, however, just as the smoke of burnt sage dissipated, was replaced by Allegra’s cigarette smoke and the fragrance of her cologne.

As I head for class each morning, I find myself going out of my way, wandering behind Matthews Hall to that spot where the Indian College once stood. I must look like everyone else as I stand here, wearing jeans, a sweater, and a backpack over one shoulder, but I have uncommon expectations. I am looking for Caleb Cheeshateaumuck. If my father were here, we would have spotted him by now, perhaps seated high in the air toward the crown of the sycamore tree, or stretched on his side in the dense grass, his suit sparkling with dewdrops.

I am haunted by this young man who has been dead for over three hundred years, or, more accurately, I wish to be haunted by him. I have developed a plan to flush him out that consists of tempting him with a small package of Grandma’s Old-Fashioned Molasses Cookies, which are a special favorite of my father’s. I open the bag to release the spicy aroma and place it in a cradle of branches near the base of a thick bush.

“An offering,” I say.

I was taught to believe that time is not a linear stream, but a hoop spinning forward like a wheel, where everything is connected and everything is eternal. In this cosmology, I am here because Caleb came before me, and he was here in anticipation of me. We are bonded together across time, and I will recognize him when I see him. Will he recognize me?

Allegra has made me over with the assistance of her friend, Adrienne, a fellow New Yorker who lives in the suite directly above ours. They cut my hair so that it is short in back and longer in front; the sides sweep below my cheeks like black wings. They have recommended bronze berry lip gloss for my mouth, and drawn pearl pink eyeshadow across my eyelids so that they look opalescent as abalone shells. Allegra even coated my eyelashes with Vaseline, using a tiny brush I find difficult to handle.

I take one last look before leaving for class.

“Kokepe sni ye,” I tell the empty air. Don’t be afraid. And then I whisper, “It’s me, your Dakota friend,” just in case Caleb Cheeshateaumuck has been fooled by Allegra’s handiwork into thinking I am a wasicun—a white girl, leaving cookies for the squirrels.

Allegra charges into our room, slamming the door shut behind her. I barely look up from my notebook. Allegra
always bangs the door. She tosses her coat on the fossilized rocking chair we rescued from an alley Dumpster—it had looked alive to us, moved by the wind to rock unsteadily on the Dumpster’s metal lid.

“There’s something to this,” she says, dragging her chair beside mine and folding into it, legs drawn up so her knees frame the point of her chin.

“Something to what?” I ask, but I already know and I don’t want to hear it.

“This assignment. I keep seeing things that a few days ago would not have even registered. Things that would’ve seemed completely insignificant. But now I can’t stop noticing them.” Allegra’s pale skin shimmers in our dim room, she seems lit from within, a sheath of parchment wrapping pure light.

“Like what?” Stop asking questions, I tell myself, but perhaps she can provide some insight, help me understand why I am blocked by this exercise.

“I was studying at Hilles,” she tells me, just a notch above whispering. “I started looking all around me, and I noticed this girl sitting a few feet away. She’d taken off her shoes and she wasn’t wearing any socks. She had friendship bracelets on both her ankles, and her ankles were crossed. They were so thin, just little white bones, like drumsticks laid down after a set. There was something exquisitely sad about them.”

Allegra sighs and sweeps her hair forward, then back. “I can’t put my finger on what it means to me yet. But it means something. All these moments add up to something.”

I can feel my head nodding. “Great material,” I tell my roommate. I don’t want her to see through me with those indigo eyes that look capable of perforating steel. I don’t want her to know that I just don’t get it.

Allegra and I share one class together: Expository Writing, which is mandatory for all freshmen. Our teacher, Stefan, is a graduate student who assured us on our first day of class that he has “happier things to do.” We have written three papers for him so far, analyzing short stories and poems. After returning the last batch of papers to us, he sat quietly at the head of our long table, massaging his temples.

“These were more than adequate,” he finally said, “but uninspired. You can all put together a perfectly competent composition—logical arguments, creditable technique. But where’s the heart?” His palms slapped down on the table, and he lunged forward so suddenly a few students pulled back. He looked a little like a figurehead jutting from the prow of a ship.

“Where—is—the—fire?” With each syllable he smacked the table, and when he lifted his hands, the palms were red. “I want you to go forth and look at the world,” he told us. “If you observe the usual closely enough, it begins to look unusual. Tell me what you see out there,
don’t worry about form. Keep a journal and describe what you have noticed.”

Tomorrow we are expected to hand in the first part of our journals. I should be prepared. I have gone for long walks, gazing dutifully into passing faces, and stared at buildings until I could probably sketch them from memory. I have ridden the “T” into Boston and eavesdropped on the conversations of fellow passengers. I even wandered along the Charles River early one morning, watching members of the crew team knife through the mist in their sleek racing shells. I’ve written down my observations, described them in detail, but I haven’t marveled at what I’ve seen. None of it strikes me as unusual.

What’s wrong with me? I wonder, and then I notice I have written the question in my journal. I’m beginning to feel that the remarkable has been banished—at least temporarily—from my life. The things that have significance for me, an extraordinary weight, are those that are missing. Their absence is tangible.

My father has made off with the ghosts. I imagine them thronging behind his car, a great army of figures uniformly cast in sepia tones. And he has taken the stories with him too, even Harvard’s stories. I can see them tied together like a bundle of pick-up-sticks, tossed in the Buick’s cluttered glove compartment.

Allegra nudges me with her toe. “Hel-lo-o. Anybody home?”

Why does she see what she sees? I want to know. So I ask my roommate: “How do you think of yourself?”

“I have the body of a boy,” she laments without pausing.

“No, I mean allegiance-wise, in terms of identity.”

“Oh, that. I’m a New Yorker. An American. As far as religion goes, it’s confused. I’m half Jewish and half Episcopalian. They cancel each other out so I guess you could say I believe in nothing.”

Allegra pulls on her toes, then shoots one eyebrow high above the other, a trick I have seen her practice in the mirror. “What’s this all about?” she asks.

“Just curious,” I lie. She probably realizes it too, but it doesn’t matter. Allegra’s confidence has pumped into the air like steam. I know who I am as surely as Allegra does. If I cannot write with passion about the things I see, I will record what I don’t see.

In writing about him, I have uncovered Caleb Cheeshateaumuck’s elusive spirit. It should have been plain to me earlier, where I would find him. For, of course, I will never catch him loitering behind Matthews Hall, tracing the outline of the Indian College’s buried foundation with his restless strides. Caleb Cheeshateaumuck has reverted to the culture he was born into, embraced it fervently in death.

“I am Wampanoag,” he tells me, and I can hear him
now that Allegra is sleeping and Harvard Yard is hushed.

He has returned to Martha's Vineyard, surrounded by thirty-seven gods who spin forth to greet him, animated as waterspouts. His relatives are all there, and his mother steps forward to help him remove the double-breasted woolen jacket buttoned to his throat. She has made him a full-length coat woven of turkey feathers. He slips it on and shrugs his shoulders.

“So light,” he tells her.

His father hands him a gut-strung bow fashioned of witch hazel, and arrows tipped with eagle claws. Even his little sister offers a present: a basket of bright red pearplums, their flesh taut with ripe juice. Caleb strikes out on his own to reclaim the island, collecting small stones and the sun-dried corpses of sea horses and sand dollars. He scratches birchbark with his thumbnail, drawing geometrical designs he has learned studying Euclid's theorems. But the sap transforms the lines, rounds them out until they resemble etchings of bats and spiders.

Caleb Cheeshateaumuck finds the cove he has favored since childhood. A tangle of sea lavender flows from the grassy ledge above his head. He settles in the sand and sleeps. A painted turtle with slick red-and-green carapace pushes up from the sand to serve as a footrest. Starfish, swept in by the tide, ring Caleb's body like a constellation fallen from the sky. A spotted salmon leaps into his lap, offering itself.

I am ready to put down the journal and leave Caleb, when he opens his eyes and sits up. He shakes his head. I watch him comb through the pockets of his woolen knickers, finally brandishing a sheaf of pulpy yellow paper and a lead pencil he sharpens with a knife. He marks down letters, words, writing feverishly. I immediately grasp what he's doing: letting go of the languages. He folds the sheets into paper birds, and then launches them into the sea. One after the other they soar to life, sprouting lacy white feathers. They have become snowy egrets, and I watch them with Caleb as they land behind him in the salt marsh, where they wade gracefully through tall reeds. Caleb Cheeshateaumuck calls to them in what must be Algonquin—it is the only language he remembers.

My gift to him, across time, is a necklace of jingle shells. The delicate valves shimmer with an iridescent sheen and lay against his chest like a string of silver planets. Their music is the ring of wind chimes.

Allegra and Adrienne are indulging in what they call "serious down time," taking a break from inorganic chemistry problem sets. They collect troll dolls with wild tufts of brightly colored hair and have spread them...
out on Allegra’s desk. There are enough of them to con-
stitute a small tribe. Adrienne is an expert with a needle
and has created a wardrobe for the dolls: bib overalls,
miniskirts, a tweed jacket, even striped pajamas. The
two have separated the boys from the girls.
“How can you tell them apart?” I ask.
“Oh, it’s easy,” Adrienne says. “You can tell just
by looking into their faces.” Adrienne has small white
hands and such sensitive skin she applies lotion three
or four times a day. She has what she calls “titian” hair,
cascading in waves down her back. My father would
envy that hair.
“Well, George. Do you want to play?” Allegra asks me.
“We’re going to hold a mass wedding, like the Reverend
Moon. Everyone gets hitched today.”
“Go ahead and start,” I tell them. “Call me when the
real festivities begin.”
I want to read Stefan’s comments in my journal. I
haven’t had the nerve to check them before now. I felt
sheepish and strange when I handed in the assignment,
worried about what Stefan would think. Needlessly, as
it turns out. Stefan used a red pen and has tracked the
pages with tiny Yes’s, which gradually become larger
and press into the paper more urgently. They seem to
be moving toward a crescendo. On the last page he
has written simply: It lives. He could be referring to the
text, or to the spirit of Caleb Cheeshateaumuck, my
compatriot. But I take it to mean my own soul, which
was hidden for a time.
I hear the mailman in the entryway, and when he
has gone I collect our mail. There is a postcard from
my father. I immediately recognize the ostentatious,
deeply chiseled features of the faces carved into Mount
Rushmore. My father must be doing his tour of the
South Dakota reservations. I know he didn’t actually
visit the Mount Rushmore Memorial. He hates it. “I’m
not going to pay money to see the desecration of our
place of worship,” he said whenever we passed the
Black Hills. His message comes to me when I most
need it. He could have read my mind. Or maybe it
was the hills, our hills rising against the sky like spiny
steeples, murmuring sacred messages to my father,
warning him that one was slipping away. He wrote a
single sentence on the card, in his fat script: Don’t let
them change you.
I slip a powwow tape into my tape player, one of
my favorite drum groups—the Wisconsin Dells Singers.
When they come to the traditional Wisconsin Dells Singers.
When they come to the traditional Wisconsin Dells Singers.
When they come to the traditional Wisconsin Dells Singers.
When they come to the traditional Wisconsin Dells Singers.
When they come to the traditional Wisconsin Dells Singers.
“What is that?” Adrienne asks. She is fluffing the chartreuse hair of her favorite doll.

“It’s Winnebago music. This is what they call the swan dance.”

“Have you ever seen it, you know, performed?” Allegra plucks the liner notes from the cassette case and squints at the tiny print.

“Sure. I’ve done it myself.”

She cocks her head to one side, looking surprised.

“Show me,” she says.

“It’s not the kind of dance you do alone,” I explain.

“Usually there’s a line of young girls, moving around the drum like swans swimming in the water.”

“Teach us then,” says Adrienne.

Allegra nods her head. “I’m game.”

We push back the chairs and kick a pile of newspapers under my desk. I move in front of them, executing the simple two-step. My arms are extended to my sides, rolling forward like oars dipping in water. They catch on quickly, Allegra behind me, and Adrienne behind her. We glide through the room, peeking back and forth to check our form.

“Again!” my friends cry out when we come to the end of the song. We reset the tape over and over.

A weight is lifting from my shoulders, dissolving in the air. I almost believe we could rise off the ground, propelled by the wings of our arms.

“I’ll show you,” I tell my friends. I shall carry them with me, coast above Harvard Yard high enough to see our shadows stretch across the buildings. I will their arms to follow mine, their every movement to match my own so that we can merge, the strings and needles flashing swiftly between us, stitching us together.

We have become one creature: a graceful, milk-pure swan with feathers soft as Chinese silk. We are a beautiful bird, lovely as the snowy egrets Caleb Cheeshteaumuck fashioned from pleated paper.