

# CHERYL SAVAGEAU (Abenaki)

Looking for Indians  
by Cheryl Savageau  
My head filled with tv images  
of cowboys, warbonnets and renegades,  
I ask my father  
what kind of Indian are we, anyway.  
I want to hear Cheyenne, Apache, Sioux  
words I know from television  
but he says instead  
Abenaki. I think he says Abernathy  
like the man in the comic strip  
and I know that's not Indian.  
I follow behind him  
in the garden  
trying to step in his exact footprints,  
stretching my stride to his.  
His back is brown in the sun  
and sweaty. My skin is brown  
too, today, deep in midsummer,  
but never as brown as his.

I follow behind him like this  
from May to September  
dropping seeds in the ground,  
watering the tender shoots  
tasting the first tomatoes,  
plunging my arm, as he does,  
deep into the mounded earth  
beneath the purple-flowered plants  
to feel for potatoes  
big enough to eat.

I sit inside the bean teepee  
and pick the smallest ones  
to munch on. He tests  
the corn for ripeness  
with a fingernail, its dried silk  
the color of my mother's hair.  
We watch the winter squash grow hips.  
This is what we do together  
in summer, besides the fishing  
that fills our plates unfailingly  
when money is short.

One night  
my father brings in a book.  
See, he says, Abenaki,  
and shows me the map  
here and here and here  
he says, all this  
is Abenaki country.

I remember asking him  
what did they do  
these grandparents  
and my disappointment  
when he said no buffalo  
roamed the thick new england forest  
they hunted deer in winter  
sometimes moose, but mostly  
they were farmers  
and fishermen.

I didn't want to talk about it.  
Each night my father  
came home from the factory  
to plant and gather,  
to cast the line out  
over the dark evening pond,  
with me, walking behind him,  
looking for Indians.

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Like the Trails of Ndakinna  
by Cheryl Savageau  
We're French and Indian like the war  
my father said  
they fought together  
against the English  
and although that's true enough  
it's still a lie  
French and Indian  
still fighting in my blood  
The Jesuit who traveled up the St. Lawrence  
found the people there uncivilized  
they will not beat their children  
he wrote in his diary by candlelight  
and the men listen too much  
to their wives

You who taught me to see no borders  
to know the northeast as one land  
never heard the word Ndakinna  
but translated without knowing it  
our country, Abenaki country

Grandmothers and grandfathers  
are roaming in my blood  
walking the land of my body  
like the trails of Ndakinna  
from shore to forest

They are walking restlessly  
chased by blue eyes and white skin  
surviving underground  
invisibility their best defense  
Grandmothers, grandfathers,  
your blood runs thin in me  
I catch sight of you  
sideways in a mirror  
the lines of nose and chin  
startle me, then sink  
behind the enemy's colors

You are walking the trails  
that declare this body  
Abenaki land  
and like the dream man  
you are speaking my true name  
Ndakinna

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Survival  
by Cheryl Savageau  
On Cape Cod  
the colonists bring their  
animals tied to the yoke  
and plow the mother's breast  
planting in long rows,  
separating one crop  
from the other  
the corn's feet grow cold  
the harvest small, and eaten  
by raccoons who raid nightly  
with no squash bristles  
to threaten their delicate feet

In winter, angry winds  
carry the earth  
someplace else  
til there is nothing left  
but this sand  
where white pine  
shrunk from grandfather forests  
to these survivors,  
hold hands across the dunes

I know that inside the white pine  
there is food to survive a winter  
that the wide plantain leaves

pushing up through the old driveway  
could make a salad, that the furry berries  
of the staghorn sumac will make  
a winter tea for me, and be first food  
to returning birds come spring

how much is forgotten?

the earth is cold now  
but when the dogwood blossoms  
it will be warm enough  
to hold the seed corn  
and coax it into growth

see how the hill catches the sun  
for the young roots of corn  
see how the corn stays the winter  
holding the earth safe  
through furious winds

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