Looking for Indians

byCheryl 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

byCheryl 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

byCheryl 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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