

3.

Chahta hattak sia, "I Am a Choctaw Man" Preston Wells

I am the son of a pecan-farmer cowboy and a mother who has a heart for the people. I am the grandson of preaching evangelists who found life in speaking in tongues and helping others. I am a descendent of Texas Rangers who defended the Republic. I come from Mississippi Choctaws who found a new home in Indian Territory. My identity is split in two: these sides have been fighting for centuries and have continued to battle inside of me. On one side stands a courageous group of immigrants trying to defend a land they stole from the native dwellers; on the other is a nation of people who have lost their way of life. My father always told me the two aren't that different because both were only trying to protect their families. I have been trying to see the common ground, the shared intentions, so that I can find peace within myself.

My skin tells the story of my father's fathers, the pride of building a nation in the New World and making something out of nothing, but my heart beats knowing that this land has never been a New World, and it pumps blood the color of our new homelands in Oklahoma. I have been searching for wholeness my entire life. Tired of the fighting, I have been trying to reach a place where all parts of my identity fit together like the states on a map, maintaining their boundaries but still existing as one. But my identity remains split. Moreover, I am a bisexual man of deep faith who, on attending Dartmouth College, has struggled to find peace while sitting in a church. This story contains many narratives told from different perspectives and identities. Yes, I am a Choctaw man, but I am also a Texan. I am a Christian man, but I am also bisexual. I tell this story from these angles and several others to show the obstacles I have faced in my life, but also how I overcame them. In these stories

I find triumph, hope, and love; with them I hope to build a better self in my life after Dartmouth.

"Just say it, Preston. You're white." My parents missed me so much when I was away at college that they didn't mind me staying up late and being loud with my friends when I came home. But this time, the television was the only thing in the room making a sound, as Patrick and Bryant waited for my answer. In southeast Oklahoma, skin color often is the loudest voice in a room; if you don't have dark skin, you're white. I explained, again: "I am Native and Texan, but I do not identify as a 'white boy.'" Patrick eased onto the edge of his seat, resting his arms on his knees and clenching his hands together. I felt the weight of his dark brown eyes and arched eyebrows as he stared at me. What he wanted so badly I could not give him, so I just sat there, sinking deeper into the couch, wondering when they would stop interrogating me. "Preston, just tell him you're white so he'll stop," Bryant said; but this was an identity I did not ascribe to.

"White boy" was what they used to call me in high school, on the basketball floor in particular, where everyone else on the team was "black." Not everyone was *just* black, though; Patrick is black, Mexican, Native, and white; Bryant is black, white, and Native; and several teammates shared a similar mixed heritage. But one thing remained certain: I was the only white boy. The three of us had grown up together, enrolled in the same classes at school, and wore the same uniforms on the ball fields. In high school, when Bryant showed me his Choctaw membership card and I saw the low blood quantum, I never once said he wasn't Choctaw. When Patrick said he didn't know much Spanish, I never denounced his Mexican identity. Therefore I didn't understand how they could use my skin color against me. I had overcome my white skin when I came to college, yet they just couldn't let it go. Eventually, I just said it: "OK, my father's white, so technically, I am white too. But I don't identify as white." I don't know why they wanted to hear it so badly. Maybe they wanted to use it against me and continue to call out my privilege, or to act like my family was ostracizing them because we were white and they were not.

When I started having friends over to our house in middle school, they always spoke of my family as the "white" family because we had a nice house in a good neighborhood; they even related my being white to my parents not allowing bad language and making sure I had my homework done each night. They knew my mother worked for the tribe; they knew her dark skin like they knew the name of our cat. I know my skin is not as dark as my mother's. I know my wavy brown hair forms a duck tail if

I grow it out too much. I know that opposing basketball teams scouted me as “the only white boy on the team.” But no one ever asked me how I see myself; nobody listened when I explained that I’ve never felt white or believed I was a “white boy.” All Patrick and Bryant saw in my living room that night was white skin and privilege; it mattered not that I was learning the Choctaw language, or that I was majoring in Native American studies, or that I had started a Native activist group at Dartmouth. It mattered not that the sole reason my family had lived in Choctaw County for over one hundred years was because my Mississippi Choctaw ancestors had immigrated there. What they couldn’t accept is that I am who I say I am—*Chahta hattak sia*. I am a Choctaw man.

I didn’t grow up speaking the Choctaw language or going to ceremonies; the closest thing to tribal regalia I had growing up was a “Re-Elect Chief Greg Pyle” T-shirt. When my mother took my sister and me to the many community events and dinners, the chief and tribal council did not wear traditional Choctaw shirts. I also can’t recall hearing any Choctaw spoken or eating any *banaba* or *tanchi labbona*.¹ When I was growing up, the most Indian I ever felt was when I went hunting with my father. He taught me how to shoot a gun and told me, “You’re the Indian, you track the deer.” But I didn’t know if Little People were hiding behind the trees or other secrets of the woods, and I was at a loss for words when I took a deer’s life. These things were not handed down to me. It’s not that I didn’t want to have these things; it’s just that not many of us Choctaws did have them, at least not in my family. My ancestors gave me only one secret to keep. It is not a family ritual, a ghost story, or ancient medicine. It is not the beautiful *Chahta Anumpa*—the Choctaw language—that I am now learning to speak or the stories behind the diamonds on my Choctaw shirt. They only taught me how to be proud of who I am and where I come from. Without this pride there would be no journey, no story to tell. Pride is what makes me Choctaw. Pride cannot be bred out or lost in language, and pride will make my children and my children’s children Choctaw.

No one has the right to tell your story for you. No one can dictate your identity so they will feel more comfortable. For the past 522 years, somebody has been trying to kill off my people’s ways, trying to take the very language from my lips. For the past 522 years, someone has been coming into my home and telling me I’m living the wrong way and that my stories aren’t true. For the past 522 years, I have been defending my existence. Others have been trying so hard to get me to conform, cut out my tongue, whitewash my heritage, and have called me a “white boy.”

The Potato Hills of Tvshka Homma tell a different story.² They stand under the Choctaw sun, just as they rise inside of me. The old waters that flow in the Tombigbee also run through the Muddy Boggy.³ The secrets have been hiding for generations in these hills and waters, just waiting for someone to pick them up.

I was born and raised in Hugo, Oklahoma, which sits in District 8 of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, about twelve miles from the Red River, which is the border with Texas. Although Hugo sits within the Choctaw Nation, it sometimes forgets that. Too often it is a place where only black and white exist. Too often Natives are marginalized as the people who get all the free stuff and are trying to destroy the local economy with the casinos. My family has a farm just off the highway, where my father takes care of cattle and a pecan orchard—a way of life he learned from his father and grandpa. There’s an old farmhouse and a couple of barns on the land, along with a house where my father’s help used to live—what he calls “the Mexican house.” My father has been a cowboy every day of his life—he wears a cowboy hat and boots, a bandana, and denim, speaks with a Texas drawl, and knows his way around a gun, tall tales, and dead truths.

Once he got to Oklahoma, my dad married the first Indian woman he danced with, my mother. She grew up not too far from Hugo, on the other side of Muddy Boggy River in a place called Unger. Her father was a carpenter during the day and an evangelist preacher at night. Her mother cleaned, cooked, and took care of their eight kids. She too was an evangelist, and she made sure the family went to all the revivals held throughout the countryside. My grandma was half Choctaw, and she passed her brown skin on to my mother, whose face is warm and dotted with freckles. My mother began working for the nation not long after graduating from high school, and she has been doing so for the past thirty years. She says she fell in love with my father “because he was a good lookin’ cowboy and he knew how to dance.” She was the shy and spiritual Indian woman; he was the “work-is-everything” dancing cowboy.

Although I don’t believe in blood quantum, that doesn’t mean that it hasn’t hurt me.⁴ In fact, for me it has been the worst thing about being Native. We are the only people in this country who are defined by and divided into fractions, as if we are animals being sold with papers. It dehumanizes us. When a tribe uses blood quantum to describe its members, it sets up a hierarchical caste system among its own people. Those with more Native blood are seen as more Native, as if they were blessed by the Creator to have been born “full blood.” Those of us with less Native

blood are often looked down on by our own people. Of course, not all tribes handle the blood issue this way, but the Choctaws did when I was growing up. Although to be a tribal member the amount of blood you have doesn't matter, to run for office in the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma one must be one-quarter Choctaw. I am embarrassed that we still abide by these laws in the twenty-first century, which means that, although I will earn an Ivy League degree in Native American studies, and likely a master's degree and a PhD, I will never be able to be a councilman or chief of my tribe.

In truth, I didn't want to come to Dartmouth. "I think you'll like it there," my mother said. I read through the application and noticed that there was no supplement, meaning I didn't have to provide any extraneous information or write any more essays. I even had a fee waiver for the application, so I figured I had nothing to lose. I'm still unsure why my mother was so adamant about me applying to Dartmouth; maybe she felt I would be safer there, or be more likely to stay true to my roots. Either way, she knew where I'd go to college before I did.

Dartmouth was the first school I heard back from, and that's probably what lured me in. I immediately began searching their website and reading articles to get a sense of the Hanover community and campus life. What interested me most were the many Native programs Dartmouth had to offer. I could learn how to dance in the powwows, I could take classes in Native American studies, and I could sing on a drum. I knew I wanted to strengthen my Native identity, and no other college I applied to offered such experiences. I wanted to feel confident about who I was as a Native man, I wanted my walk to match my talk. Dartmouth became my only choice. But I was concerned that, despite my desire to find my roots, I was not Native enough. Was I already too removed from my history? Was my white skin an impassable boundary?

Soon after I got into Dartmouth, I traveled to Hanover for my first visit. I didn't know what to expect: Would the Natives there only see me as a *nv hollo* (white person)? But from the moment I stepped off the Dartmouth Coach, I felt at home. The green trees and the white buildings with their dark shutters greeted me like a heartfelt handshake. The Native American House immediately became like a second home to me, as I was able to stay there during my visit. Shortly after I got off the bus I met a man I will never forget: Ryan Red Corn. My host had mentioned that we would attend a panel discussion featuring three Indigenous artists; two (one of whom was Red Corn) would become profoundly influential role models to me over the coming years.

If you're a Native attending Dartmouth, chances are you've crossed paths with Ryan, a frequent visitor and mentor. He's a short white guy with a big mole on his right cheek, and wavy dishwater-blond hair. He generally wears a baseball cap and graphic tees, appearing to be a heavy-metal guitarist or powwow junkie. But beneath his white skin is something I could never have imagined: he's an Osage through and through. His history, identity, language, and culture emerge as soon as you talk to him. The fact that Ryan was whiter than I am quelled my own fears. If a man could have skin as white as snow and still be fully comfortable in his Native identity, I wondered what was stopping me from doing the same thing. All my worries about not being Native enough were pushed aside, and I was ready to begin my new journey as a fully recognizable Choctaw man.

My great-grandpa, whom we called Granddad, was a full-blood Mississippi Choctaw. I am told he stood five feet ten inches tall when he was young, and had dark-brown skin and a beautiful face with dark-brown eyes. Granddad married a white woman, I'm sure for good reasons, perhaps because he didn't want his kids to be as dark as he was. I don't know how much racial inequality he experienced, but I do know he had to travel by cattle car to get to Indian Territory. Maybe he didn't want his kids to feel like chattel or animals, as he did, and maybe he didn't want white people to look down on him. Granddad also withheld Chahta Anumpa from his children. Whenever he spoke to his friends and cousins, my grandmother begged him to teach her the language, but he would not. "They'll look down upon you," he would say. My family members tell me that my ancestors hid in the woods when the government came to relocate the Choctaws to their new homelands. They feared for their lives, and they wished to stay in their ancestral lands and continue living the life they had known for thousands of years.

During my freshman fall, while trying to reclaim my Choctaw heritage, I kept coming back to my granddad and couldn't get him out of my mind. Why did he withhold the language? Why had he married a white woman? One night I dreamed the scariest dream of my life: I was hiding in a traditional Choctaw *chukka* (home) when I heard the voices of soldiers screaming at me to come out. I was all alone, so I shuffled up against the wall and got lower to the ground. The voices were getting closer, joined by dogs barking viciously. I knew they would surely find me if I didn't leave the *chukka*. I began running into the woods, looking for anything that would shelter me from the soldiers on my trail. I was constantly looking behind me as I ran for my life, and when I finally woke up I was in a cold sweat, crying. For the first time in my life, I knew the fear my ancestors had

felt almost two centuries before, and I finally understood why Granddad left me to teach myself the *Chahta aimmunga* (ways of life). He didn't want me ever to experience the kind of fear his family felt when running from white soldiers, or not knowing if they could make it in a new place. But in a way I could not escape these things: I decided to go to a college in New Hampshire, far away from my home and family, where few people would understand who I was as a Choctaw and would often judge me for being "too white." Like my ancestors fleeing into the woods to escape the white soldiers, I too found myself searching for shelter in a new place—shelter that would protect me from ignorant peers and ensure that I could return home safely. In a way, white patriarchy made my skin white and it made my CDIB read 7/64.⁵

Later in my freshman year, I got a text message from my cousin Curtis asking me to contact him right away. We hadn't spoken in over a year, and I called him immediately. Curtis had always been quick to anger, never shying away from fistfights and confrontations with authority figures, but when he answered his voice was trembling, not from anger but from fear. Once he realized whom he was talking to, he sobbed. I hopped on my bike, one hand holding the phone and the other gripping a handlebar. My cowboy boots pressed against the pedals. "I need you to come pray for me," he begged. He must have been too messed up on drugs or alcohol to realize that I was a thousand miles away from him. He confessed, "I haven't been doing good, Preston." I imagined him covering his crying eyes and suddenly felt older, although he's the older cousin. It was a Sunday morning, and several people passed me on the sidewalk on their way to church. "I miss you," he muttered. I had never heard these words come from his mouth, and they sunk into me like the rocks we used to throw into country ponds. But the alcohol and drugs Curtis abused always sank him lower, and now they'd made him hit rock bottom. "I don't want my kid to know me like this," he said, still crying. He was only twenty years old, but he had gotten a girl back home pregnant.

What should I do when a grown man cries? I felt like my mother, because in an instant I become a consoler. Curtis broke through the tough skin he himself had taught me to wear, and I was taken away by his lonely, trembling voice. Before leaving my room that morning to head to church, I had placed my Bible inside of my jacket, covering my heart. I laughed when I did this, because it made me feel it could stop a bullet, like in the movies. I knew now that it couldn't. I remembered fishing with Curtis; once he reeled one in, and it was barely hooked in the eye. He made sure it was high on the bank so it didn't hop back into the water. I now held on

to Curtis, like that fish on the bank, so he wouldn't slip away. "Just pray for me here," he said. I was taken back to the way our grandpa used to pray when Curtis and I sat together in the old wooden pews. Papa Odell wore a white button-up shirt, Wranglers, and cowboy boots. "Heavenly Father, Alpha and Omega, Beginning and End," he started out. We were just kids then, but his words were like dusty books on a shelf—I knew they had value so I kept them. Now I began pulling them out, putting them into a prayer that I hoped wasn't just words: *God keep him on the banks for good, he can't go back into the water.* With each word that passed through my lips, I prayed I would not lose him.

When I think about Curtis, I am at a loss for words, as I clearly could have been just like him, just like so many of the young men growing up in Choctaw County. If I hadn't gone to church camp during my seventh-grade summer, I would've started drinking and likely doing drugs. If my mom weren't as strong as she is, I probably would have grown up without a father, as Curtis had. All I feel for my cousin is love and empathy, because I know I once wasn't too far from where he was on that Sunday.

Curtis knew that I had been in a preacher phase before coming to Dartmouth. I believed that God was calling me to be a preacher, just like my grandfathers and uncles before me. I remember my mother once saying to me, "Preston, don't be mad." When my mother utters these words, which she does often, it always means she has signed me up for something without my permission. She continued: "Well, they were looking for someone to preach this Easter Sunday, and I know you want to be a preacher, so I told them you would do it." For the first time I wasn't upset that my mother had signed me up for something. I was locked deep into sharing the message and my testimony with others. This was what I wanted to do with my life; so I began preparing my message. I chose various Bible verses and other things my family had taught me, and mixed them in with some of my grandfather's wisdom to prepare something worth hearing. I walked into the old church house on Unger Road that Easter morning, not knowing what I was getting into. It was the same church where I had heard my Papa Odell and Granny Gleades preach; it was the place where I first felt the Holy Ghost; it was where my inner foundation was built. Now it was I standing at the front of the room with a Bible in hand, preaching. I walked up to the podium and started by asking everyone to forgive me: "This is my first time." I'll never forget preaching there that day; it was like the script was flipped. It was no longer the older generation giving the message, and the pews were no longer filled with screaming kids. Everyone had

aged; *I* had aged. I was no longer the young kid playing Pokémon in the back of the church or the skater with long curling hair; I was a preacher, dressed in a white button-up shirt, Levis, and cowboy boots—just like my grandfather. As I preached, I could hear my aunts saying “amen” and “hallelujah.” I saw my cousins sitting in the back of the room with tears in their eyes. Then, there were my mother and father . . . I was humbled, honored, and thankful.

A person can run from their identity only for so long before that identity catches up with them and demands that they confront it. From my grandparents, I learned about the Holy Spirit, the most important thing in my faith. It never abandoned you, you could always call on it to guide you, and it was always praying for you. When I remember my church experiences in my younger years, I primarily think about love and family, and about the Resurrection and the life it gives. My cousin used to say, “Jesus not only died for me, He died as me.” When my grandparents passed away, we began attending a Southern Baptist church. This is where the love was silenced. The preacher was much more concerned with preaching about sin and how other religions were tools of the devil. This is when homosexuality became a topic of concern for me.

I knew from a young age that I wasn’t straight. I remember going to my best friend’s birthday party when I was twelve. Only a few boys went to the party, two of whom were twins and a year older than Conner and me. As the dusk began to settle in, we walked along the rocks and shoreline looking for arrowheads and empty beer cans. We talked and laughed while skipping rocks across the water. Somehow, one of the twins got his shorts wet and needed to change. We walked back to the cabin and I was in the room as he took his shorts off. I had never seen anyone wear boxer briefs, but I liked what I saw. They were tighter than the boxers I generally wore and made everything look bigger. I walked out of the cabin to hide my excitement.

I didn’t think much of the incident, other than that I was sexually aroused; it would not be the last time a boy would turn me on. For a time I was interested in wrestling, and I would go to my friend David’s house to practice the moves. He was into wrestling too, so we’d wrestle and play around on the bed in his dad’s room. While it may have looked like wrestling, in my mind it was more sexual than that. We also were boys going through puberty, and wrestling was one way we explored the changes our bodies were going through. It wasn’t uncommon for us to act out sexual positions we had seen watching porn. At this time I also had a girlfriend, and I’d call her while at David’s house. I guess it was becoming pretty clear that I was bisexual.

During my seventh-grade year, I went on a hunting trip with my dad, David, and his dad. We traveled to San Saba, Texas, a family place that sits next to the Colorado River. It was a six-hour drive, although the way my dad drives it seemed like eight. David and I were sitting in the backseat of my dad’s four-door white Chevrolet pickup. We made a stop in Hico, Texas, to get gas and snacks. I recall that David got a doughnut with sprinkles on it. As we began driving the last eighty miles, David kept trying to get my attention. I knew what he wanted, but I felt I was at a crossroad. I started thinking about my Christianity and what God would want me to do, and I felt He was telling me, “If you can resist this now, you won’t ever have to worry about homosexuality again. Your life will be perfect.” David moved closer and closer to me. As much as I wanted to resist, I began petting him heavily underneath his shorts. He did the same to me for the remainder of our drive.

The next day, something was different. I don’t know what happened to David, but any time I tried to touch or play with him after that, he rejected my advances. He began calling me “fag” and “gay boy.” I was confused; hadn’t he taken part in the same things I did? How could I be a fag while he was not? That was the last time I messed around with a guy before I got to college. I had thought David was the only person I could be open with about my sexuality, but it turned out I couldn’t be with him either.

Growing up in the church, I had always been taught that masturbation and homosexuality were sins, so I felt guilty every time I pleased myself and became depressed. However, it was also how I discovered poetry. It became a routine for me: I’d go to my bedroom at night, masturbate to porn or my own imagination, and then I’d pull out a purple notebook and write poetry. It was the only way I could cope with the feelings of guilt. I wrote about feeling guilty, but I also wrote about seeking forgiveness for my sins. Even though writing poetry was brought on by my sins, I felt most spiritual after finishing a poem. In less than three years I had written over sixty poems.

As time went by, my preferences didn’t change. I still liked boys, but I didn’t try to make a move on anyone. For one thing, I was always afraid that if I outed myself with another guy, there was the danger he would not reciprocate and would tell everyone I was gay. Also, in Oklahoma, being anything other than straight is not acceptable. Still, throughout my middle- and high-school years I was called a “fag” on a daily basis. This made me run even farther away from my sexual identity. It was demeaning when people used the word to describe me; it made me feel I was a lesser being.

All of my questions about my Native identity, my whiteness, and my sexuality intensified when I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder during the winter term of my junior year at Dartmouth. Students starting college are taught how to make the transition into their new home by watching others and imitating their behavior, and by simply spending more time there. What is not taught, however, is how to go back home. After church one Sunday morning in my hometown, a lady came up to me and asked how I liked Dartmouth. After telling her how much I enjoyed it, she simply said, "I bet it's a culture shock coming back here." I didn't know what to say. Before leaving for college, I told everyone that I'd be back: "I'm getting my education so I can use it back here." But the more time I spent at Dartmouth, the more I felt that Dartmouth was educating me out of this idea. Dartmouth taught me how to produce—to produce a lot and at a fast rate. There isn't time to express emotions; one must dam up their feelings if they are to survive. I became so good at hiding that it was almost a game for me. The only problem is that no one ever wins this game.

I had been on campus at Dartmouth for a year straight before spending my off term in Oklahoma in the winter of my junior year. I had secured an internship with Ryan Red Corn in Pawhuska in the Osage Nation. Despite the important work I would be doing, I wasn't ready to be back in a slow-paced environment. In addition, the girl I had been dating for two years wasn't very supportive during this time. I had always been the comforter in the relationship, and when I started having bad days, she wasn't able to help me. I can remember her saying, "Preston doesn't have bad days." The biggest difference between us was the fact that she came from a very wealthy family. She was Native but did not identify strongly with her roots. A white family had adopted her mother before the ICWA (Indian Child Welfare Act) was passed, and the only thing her mother had told her about her heritage was that people living on the reservation were apathetic and had addictive personalities.⁶ Because of this, she wasn't comfortable with my Native identity; I often felt she wanted me to be a white boy. Because of her influence on me, and Dartmouth's, I felt pressured to be white, find a big important job in the city, and make lots of money. Enter depression and bad days.

I made it through the week in Pawhuska, and on the weekend I could either go home or visit my sister. I wasn't producing and therefore felt useless. I wasn't leading or interacting, I couldn't contribute to the graphic-design work that went on at the company, and I had nowhere else to go. Toward the end of February, I traveled to California to visit graduate schools and see my girlfriend. It was the last time I saw her while we were still together. When I got back to Oklahoma, I couldn't make myself return to Pawhuska. I felt my life was now at a crossroad.

The night I arrived in Tulsa, where my sister lived, the Freedom Budget dropped at Dartmouth. It was a document with over ninety demands to the administration on issues such as race, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, and ableism. I was enthralled; finally there was something demanding equal rights for so many of my identities. I didn't sleep that night, or the next night, or the one after that. In fact, I stayed awake for four straight days. I didn't know it yet, but I was soon to be diagnosed with bipolar disorder, and I was in a manic phase. I thought I was a prophet; I began seeing things, having visions, and prophesying to my mother about what was going to happen to our family. The mania drove me to a point where I did not care what others thought of me. It brought down all my barriers, and I became unashamed and even blunt about who I was. I had hidden my sexuality for too long and it was finally coming out, whether I liked it or not. When I came out to my girlfriend, she first cried uncontrollably, then broke up with me on the spot. I guess she thought I could no longer be trusted, that I would cheat on her.

I was too manic to be upset. After staying up for two nights, though, I decided that I needed to get some rest. On a late weekday night, my sister sent me to a local Walgreens for a sleep agent, something to calm my stomach, and gummy bears. I drove to the pharmacy, but when I got there it was closed. I found another one nearby; on the way there I started believing I could read the street signs with a newfound knowledge of the cardinal directions. I saw a homeless person walking down the street; it was at that moment that I began to think about picking someone up that night. I entered the Walgreens with one purpose: to get my medicine so I could go to sleep. As I walked into the store, I noticed a man sitting in a wheelchair. His head was cocked back, spit surrounded his lips, and there was a wet spot near his groin. I walked past him to the pharmacy, found the medicines I wanted, and asked the pharmacist if there would be any problem taking them together. She said no, and I went to the candy aisle for the gummy bears. As I picked them up, the man in the wheelchair turned toward me and asked something I couldn't understand. After asking him to repeat himself twice, I heard him ask, "Are you good with directions?" I responded, "I didn't use to be, but I think I'm learning now." Each time he spoke, he had to repeat himself so I could understand. He said, "I need to get to Fifteenth and Pine." My sister had lived in Tulsa only for a couple of months, and I didn't know much about the neighborhood. I later learned that Fifteenth and Pine wasn't a great place to be at night. It was probably ten o'clock, and this man needed a ride home, so I told him I had a free ride from a taxi service and would call them to pick him up. I called the service to ask for a pickup, and they said it would be

at least twenty minutes. I told the man I would wait with him until they arrived. "It would be faster if you just took me," he said. If I hadn't been sleep deprived and on a manic streak, I doubt I would have responded to the man. Instead I pushed him to my car and the journey began.

As we were driving, he kept telling me over and over again: "Go back the way you came." I stopped to get him something at McDonald's, and then he started telling me about his neighborhood. "A lot of people say there's bad people who live there, but I know the people there, they're good people." I told him, "There are good and bad people in every neighborhood." I had been away from my sister's house for about thirty minutes by now, and she called, sounding worried.

I dropped him off at the first house on the left in a gated community. I reached out my hand to shake his. "What's your name?" I asked. "I'm William." I told him my name and said how nice it was to meet him. The last thing he told me was—again—to go back the way I came, but I tried to exit the gated community a different way. I soon realized I couldn't get out that way, so I drove back by his house and turned right. I decided to use my GPS to get back to my sister's house. Well, I didn't go back the way I came; in fact, I went in the opposite direction. That night I slept for six hours, but I stayed awake the next night. The following day I was checked into a mental hospital.

I had strayed so far away from who I was that it finally caught up with me. For some reason I kept on thinking about William; what did he mean when he told me to go back the way I came? I now believe that he meant I should return to my roots, that my home was my foundation and where I could make myself whole again. My grandparents had always told me that God works in mysterious ways and that you never know when He might visit you. I believe that William was some sort of messenger. In the following months I had countless anxiety attacks and depressing days, and I woke up crying many times. I thought about not returning to Dartmouth, that Dartmouth didn't understand or know me.

After taking medication for several months, I began to consider stopping it. I just wanted to feel like "me" again. But then I came to realize that I have been living without medication for my entire life; not the medical kind, but the spiritual medicine that transcends time and space. Even though I don't know my Native language, I have been talking through broken syllables in a sequence that only I can understand. I haven't had ceremony in my life since the moment I was born, yet I always pray when my eyes-open in the morning, seeking a better day. I have stitched together the stories of my ancestors to make myself whole. I have discovered

a new awakening in the patterned planting of pecan trees in my father's orchard. Behind the shadows of trees, I see myself walking into a new light. Strength and courage come with the four-step war dance that I move to and am disciplined to honor. A smile stretches across my face as I slap the mosquito off my mother's shoulder while we dance together in a line. As I smoke the tobacco harvested by my ancestors, I send up prayers with the smoke so that my gods will continue to bless me.

I now realize that blood cannot be changed. It enters into a family and cannot escape. I am Choctaw, Texan, white, and Oklahoman; I am tied to a land, sold and uprooted. My tongue is strained from trying to speak a language that has been dying for the past two centuries, but I still call these syllables home. History still flows when creeks and rivers run dry, like my bloodlines. Stories are the sun rising each morning to cast shadows of promise on every word spoken. I keep coming back to these stories: the story of how my grandfather was hauled in cattle cars to Indian Territory, or the story of the old country church, where hands became medicine and prayers became conversations with the Holy Ghost. The riverbanks of the Colorado, where the Republic of Texas still floats on the water, the beer cans and fishing lines that tie me down, and the mesquite smoke that carries the night. I remember the most beautiful woman I have ever met, who spoke in English but laughed in Choctaw, who wished to learn the ancient but handed me prayers instead. She made a woman just like her, my mother—the freckles that dot her brown face shine on our history like membership cards. Her hands clap to the old hymns and return to the old ways. If only you could see, hear, touch, and feel these stories I have given you. But you do. Hear and feel. You do touch. You laugh and see—because my voice is a story that spreads like fire in the valleys. Catch on.

Preston Wells graduated from Dartmouth College with a bachelor of arts in Native American studies in 2015. During his time at Dartmouth, he founded a Native activist media group called Savage Media, whose work can be found on YouTube. His junior fall, he helped start a chapter of a Native American fraternity on campus called Phi Sigma Nu. He also spent time in Dakota Wells, a folk band that included his best friend. At Dartmouth, Preston devoted much of his time to finding a space for Native voices to express their feelings, opinions, and beliefs. After Dartmouth, Preston plans to become fluent in the Choctaw language, embark on adventures, and get a dog. He is interested in both higher education and counseling, and may pursue these fields in the future. Since writing this story, Preston was given a Choctaw name, and now goes by Wakaya.