

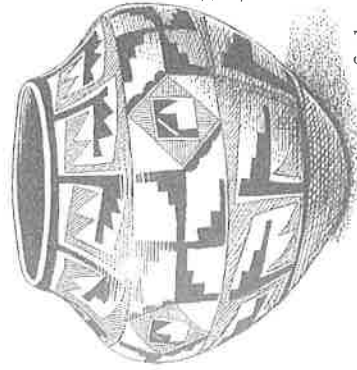
"Indians," I clarified. "You know who Indians are, right?"  
 "Sure," she said. "People that lived a long time ago."

I felt between my shoulder blades the weight of this familiar frustration. We were driving past fields being tended this very morning, presumably, by Maricopa and Pima Indians. My daughter played routinely with children from other nations including the Tohono O'odham and Yaqui. She had been a guest at their dances and passed almost daily through the Yaqui village that lies between our house and town. But five-year-olds will hear what you tell them, and merrily go right on believing what they see. Movies and storybooks say that Indians lived long ago, period, and there's so little else for a modern child to go on.

As a woman with some Cherokee ancestors on my father's side and a blonde, blue-eyed daughter, I find it impossible to pin down the meaning of ethnicity. It's an especially delicate business here in the Southwest, where so many of us boil in one pot without much melting. We're never allowed to forget we are foreign bodies in the eyes of our neighbors. The annual Winter Holiday Concert at Camille's school features a bright patchwork of languages and rituals, each of which must be learned by a different subset of kids, the others having known it since they could talk. It sounds idyllic, but then spend half an hour on the playground and you're also likely to come away with a whole new vocabulary of racial slurs. On the playground no one's counting the strengths of your character, nor the woman your great-grandfather married, unless her genes have dyed your hair and fixed your features. It's the face on your passport that gets you in. Faces that set us apart, in separate houses.

When I pack up my child and head off to a place like the Heard Museum, it's not to claim some piece of our own lost heritage. I have only an inkling of my forebears, and they represent

## THE SPACES BETWEEN



The drive from Tucson to Phoenix is a trip through merciless desert, where tall saguaros throw up their arms in apparent surrender to the encroaching cotton fields. Some of the land belongs to farmers holding tight to a parched midwestern dream; some belongs to the state of Arizona, mainly because nobody in particular ever bothered to want it. And a big chunk of what we were passing through belongs to the Gila River Reserve, the state's oldest Indian reservation, though nothing I could see from the highway set those particular cacti and irrigated farmlands apart from the rest, as Indian country.

Because Camille was five, and liked to know what to expect at all times, I reminded her that we were on our way to visit the Heard Museum, which was all about Native Americans.

more worlds than I could claim: Scottish stonemasons; Portuguese sailors; farmers from the Eastern Band of Cherokee; planters and sharecroppers and hapless conscripts to both sides of the Civil War. They died without passing on to me the secrets of constructing a limestone chimney flue, navigating by the stars, or planting by the moon. Half the living souls in the southeastern U.S., it seems, claim to be descended from Sacajawea, and that is their business, but I'm not so interested in bloodlines as motivation for multicultural appreciation. I appreciate because I'm interested, just as I can admire tropical fish without being part fish. (And if I *am* part fish, that is *my* business.) We go to the Heard out of love for the great elaborate world, and also to feel more at home in our own neighborhood. I want my child to be so completely familiar with differences that she'll ignore *difference* per se and really see what she's looking at. When she looks at an Acoma water jar, I don't want her to think less of it because it was made by hand in a nonelectrified village high on a mesa. Neither do I want her to think it is the rarefied relic of saints. It seems odd to have to add the latter, but lately we've been besieged with a new, bizarre form of racism that sets apart all things Native American as object of either worship or commerce, depending on your proclivities. It's scary enough to see Kokopelli on a keychain—God for sale, under five dollars—but I'm not much more comfortable with the other angle, the sweat-lodge suburbanites who borrow the material trappings of native ceremonies as a spiritual quickie to offset the stresses of corporate life. What began as anthropology has escalated to fad, and it strikes me that assigning magical power to a culture's every belief and by-product is simply another way of setting those people apart. It's more benign than burning crosses on lawns, for sure, but ultimately not much more humane.



An equal in our time and place is someone with an address and friends, who works and plays and buys groceries in packages with brand names, who is capable of both nobility and mistakes. People who are picture perfect, magical, untouchable, or worse yet, only historic, do not need equal opportunity or educational grants.

An Acoma water jar is just a useful thing, really. Like a soda-pop can, only beautiful.



The Heard Museum stands today because of a hobby that grew out of hand. Dwight and Maie Bartlett Heard settled in the pioneer town of Phoenix in 1895, and long before it was fashionable or provident, they found an absorbing interest in the culture of Arizona's Native peoples. By the 1920s, their collection of artifacts had grown too large and valuable as a community resource to keep on the parlor shelves. Steadily and gently, over more than half a century, the Heard has grown to be one of the world's great centers of Native American heritage.

The entry courtyard welcomed us with the grace of white-washed arches, orange trees, and weathered *metates*—corn-grinding stones—hunched on the basket-weave brick floor. Mary Brennan, communications coordinator for the museum, met us there, and explained the museum's mission of appreciation for Native people and their culture, especially those of the Southwest. This is not a museum only of artifacts, she pointed out, but of modern Native American life, expressed through both traditional and fine arts. Museum programs bring Native American artists and dancers into schools, for example. Later today there would be a dance performance in the museum auditorium.

I was glad the museum's directors undertook this as part of



their mission: to counter the prevailing notion that Indians made nice pots and shot buffalo and now are dead. I silently wished them luck.

Camille and I were immediately drawn to the wing called “Old Ways, New Ways,” a permanent interactive exhibit where kids (and adults, if they’re game) can learn to play a drum under the videotaped tutelage of a Kiowa elder, and use a computer to design a Navajo rug, and find enough other adventures to fill an afternoon, easily. I stood with a crew of teenagers at a display showing how the ancient Anasazi fashioned little willow-twig animals that archaeologists frequently find tucked into high crevices in the Grand Canyon. Earnestly we all followed instructions, wrapping and looping our twigs to make horses. Mine looked like a giraffe. I stuffed it deep down in my pocket, wondering if maybe the Anasazi stuck *their* failures into those out-of-the-way crevices for the same reason, and kept the good ones around for the kids to play with.

Camille had better luck fitting wooden forms together to make a Tlingit mural. I stood behind her, watching how two simple shapes—a blunt oval and a curly U-shape—repeat over and over in all the familiar totem-pole aggregations of owl and raven and whale, adding up to that instantly recognizable gestalt of the art of Inuit and other northern tribes. If I hadn’t seen it taken apart and reassembled, I would never have understood this amazing principle.

I’ve always felt half-blind in places where I couldn’t touch anything. I find I need to assess textures, and pick things up to see how they’re put together; I am far more likely than my child to get in trouble for doing so. Camille has escorted me out of many a china shop. Once, in a Japanese park, I reached out and touched a palace wall because I couldn’t identify its material by sight, and



wanted to know whether it was stucco or stone; my finger set off great honking alarms and brought a police car up the gravel path. (The lovely signs in Japanese, which I’d taken for part of the decor, apparently said TOUCH THIS AND DIE, HUMBLE TOURIST!) It’s true we’re a sight-biased species, but still it seems odd that museums that aim to instruct us about a multisensory world tend to convey their information entirely through sight, and maybe a little sound. In such places I generally feel like a child, not quite worthy of the material I’m meant to admire; in the children’s wing of the Heard, oddly enough, I felt more respected.

Every part of the museum begged for our attention. The main gallery’s permanent collection of ancient and modern Native arts are displayed as a living continuum. The entry is a spare, dark auditorium; in a continuous audiovisual loop, Hopi and Tohono O’odham and Dine people talk directly to the camera about their children and grandparents, their villages, their history, their funerals and blessing ceremonies. Their verbal portraits fall against shifting images of their lives’ dramatic backgrounds: the Grand Canyon, Taos Pueblo, saguaros with their arms in the air.

The words of an unidentified Taos Pueblo man are inscribed on the wall of the gallery’s entrance: “We have lived upon this land from days beyond history’s record, far past any living memory, deep into the time of legend. The story of my people and the story of this place are one single story.”

Who else could make this claim? In North America, no one. All American tribes other than the Pueblo have been forced off their home ground, and everyone else migrated here from another hemisphere. The gallery is designed, I think, to stop in our tracks those of us who take transience for granted. It tells an extraordinary tale of human landscapes cradled and shaped by physical ones. Tall photographic murals show the lay of the land,



and the exhibits explain life, history, and survival in these beautiful, severe places. The objects of art in the collection are exquisite, but that is not the point, for all of us have surely seen disembodied pots and baskets in a glass case. Here, those objects lie together with the matrix of their origins: the colors of Colorado mud and stone, the need for transporting water, the human passion for both survival and beauty. Baskets that celebrate the whispering colors of grass and the designs of the human heart. Wool blankets, woven from a pastoral life supported by sheep and a reverence for Spider Woman, the mother of weaving. Blankets so beautiful they are coveted by people a world away, who can hardly imagine the sound of bleating sheep in a bone-dry canyon.

The spaghetti-western caricature of "Indian" had been slipping away from us all day, but it was erased once and for all for Camille, I think, by the houses. We got to walk into fastidious replicas of a Zuni pueblo adobe, a Northwest Coast long house, and a Dine hogan. I've driven many times through the Navajo reservation in northeastern Arizona and looked longingly at these low, eight-sided, cozy-looking log hogans, whose chimneys poke through the center of the roofs to trail thin, blue-gray signals into the desert sky. I have even stopped by these homes to ask directions, but was never invited in. And now I found one here, dismantled and reassembled in the middle of a gallery. Camille and I went in and sat on a plank bench with our backs to the hewn logs, letting our eyes adjust to dimmer light, admiring the way the home's roundness accommodates both function and the human need to feel hugged. On the woodstove in the center sat an iron kettle, waiting (a long time) to cook the next mutton stew. Camille poked through the assortment of bare necessities arranged in an open shelf, and touched the traditional velvet



shirts and gathered skirts on coat hangers hung from nails in the wall. She talked as she went, and I was surprised to hear her talking up her own hogan fantasy. "If I meet a Navajo girl in school, maybe she'll invite me home with her and we can sleep on the floor on sheepskins like these."

I got it: my daughter is beginning to believe, truly, that Navajos are people who still walk the earth. They are potential school pals.

Just then, a woman in a sequined sweatshirt ducked in through the doorway, glanced up at the low roof, and remarked before ducking out again, "Boy, they must have been *short* back then."



To write novels, to design a museum, to teach fourth-graders about history—all these enterprises require the interpretation of other lives. And all of them, historically, have been corrupted by privileges of race, class, and gender. The Heard, and places like it, are paddling upstream from the get-go simply by calling themselves "museum." We go there expecting dead things, explained in flat, condescending voices.

"Books," as a category of papery things with the scent of mildew, are paddling up the same stream. I spent plenty of my young womanhood resenting the fact that nearly all the fictional women I'd ever read about were the inventions of men (and that I'd learned about female sexuality from D. H. Lawrence!). But I'm old enough now to stand in the shadow of my former brilliance and face incertitude: would the world really be a better place if Mr. Tolstoy had not invented Anna Karenina, or Mr. Flaubert his Emma Bovary?

More to the point: who, exactly, is entitled to write about the



*relationships* between women and men? Hermaphrodites? This is the dilemma upon whose horns I've built my house: I want to know, and to write, about the places where disparate points of view rub together—the spaces between. Not just between man and woman but also North and South; white and not-white; communal and individual; spiritual and carnal. I can think of no genetic or cultural credentials that could entitle a writer to do this—only a keen ear, empathy, caution, willingness to be criticized, and a passionate attraction to the subject.

Of these I can claim in adequate measure only the last; I'm drawn like a kid to mud into the sticky terrain of cultural difference. How wondrous, it seems to me, that someone else can live on the same round egg of a world that I do but explain it differently—how it got here, and what's to be done with it. How remarkable that other people's stories often sound more true to me than my own.

I've been advised from all quarters about my obligations as a writer in the multicultural domain. I have been told explicitly, in fact, both that I should write *more* and *less* (or even *not at all*) about nearly every category of persons imaginable, including men, women, people with disabilities, Asians, Armenians, Native Americans. Fortunately I'm not a short-order cook, because whenever I get lobbed rapid-fire with commands my tendency is to go find a quieter place.

What seems right to me from my quieter place is to represent the world I can see and touch as honestly as I know how, and when writing fiction, to use that variegated world as a matrix for the characters and conflicts I need to fathom. I can't speak in tongues I don't understand, and so there are a thousand tales I'll never tell: the waging of war; coming of age as a man; childhood on an Indian reservation. But when the wounded veteran, the



masculine disposition, and the reservation child come into the place where I live, they enter my story. I will watch closely and report on the conversation. A magnificent literary tool is the dramatic point of view; one of its great virtuosos was John Steinbeck. Without ever pretending to know “female” or “Mexican laborer” or “mentally retarded” from the inside, he rendered those characters perfectly from the outside. Through reading Steinbeck I first realized this precious truth: bearing witness is not the same as possession.

Godspeed the right of each of us to speak for ourselves and not be spoken for, but I cannot suffer a possessiveness of stories. When I was nine years old, our town librarian wore broad black picture hats and deeply disliked the idea of children rummaging through her books. I drove her to palsy by checking out every book and dusty pamphlet she had on Cherokee lore, even those she felt God had intended for the Boy Scouts. She told me I would ruin my eyes with so much reading, and hinted my character was headed down the tubes as well. Too late; long before I discovered Cherokee lore, I felt in a certain light that animals could talk. I believed in trees, and that heaven had something to do with how dead trees gentle themselves into long, mossy columns of bright-smelling, crumbling earth, lively inside with sprouting seeds and black beetles. I could not make myself believe in a loud-voiced, bearded God on his throne in the clouds, but I was moved to tears by the compost pile.

No wonder I perturbed the librarian. But her fearful assessment of my soul was inexact. I wasn't studying up to be Cherokee; this would hardly have occurred to me. I loved stories about Wild Boy and the waterbug who discovered the world, not because I wanted to become a different kind of person, but because these stories delighted the heart of the person I already



was. And they do still. For my particular brand of pantheism I don't need to affect beads and feathers. I can go to the woods in my jeans and sweatshirt and find grace, without a sweat lodge. I can also fling myself on the floor and spend whole afternoons with my volumes of Joseph Campbell, by accident, when I only meant to be passing by the bookshelf on my way to something productive. I'm not studying up to be Neolithic, I just need those cave paintings and creation stories. I could live without electricity if I had to, but not without stories.

*Other people's stories*—those are the ones I crave. Not Adam and Eve, designated owners of the garden who get to plunder it and spit it out as they please. Not Noah with his precarious ark, who has set upon us the wrongheaded notion that preserving two specimens of something in a zoo somewhere is all we need of biodiversity. Not the stories I already know, but the ones I haven't heard yet: the ones that will show me a way out of here. The point is not to emulate other lives, or usurp their wardrobes. The point is to find sense. How is a child to find the way to her own beliefs, unless she can stuff her pockets with all the truths she can find—whether she finds them on a library shelf or in a friend's warm, strange-smelling kitchen. The point is for play-ground slurs to fall dead on her ears, meaningless as locks on an open door. I want to imagine those doors not just open but gone, lying in the dirt, thrown off their hinges by the force of accord in a house of open passage.



Eddie Swimmer stood before us in the auditorium, dressed in moccasins and beaded clothes and a porcupine-hair headdress, explaining the songs and dances. "These songs might all sound to you like 'Hey-ya, hey-ya,' but they're not. Listen. These are words



in our languages." Camille and I sat licking our fingers, which were sticky with honey from the Indian fry bread we bought from the concession table at the back. We listened to the singers and watched Eddie do a grass dance, which, in the old days on the plains, had the polite function of stomping down the tall grass before a powwow. Then we watched Derek Davis do the fancy-dance—a fast, difficult type of dancing popular on the modern powwow circuit. Derek's elaborate costume had a beaded breastplate and headdress and showy feather bustles, all put together by members of his family. He pointed out the modern additions: metal bells instead of deer hooves; breechcloths made bright with commercial dyes instead of berries and roots. He was pleased with these improvements, unconcerned about a collector's notion of authenticity. He is a living dancer, a young man in wire-rim glasses and a lot of muscles, definitely not a museum piece. The kids selling fry bread and soft drinks hooted their approval as he began to dance, and when he finished we were all out of breath.



On the way home I asked Camille again, "So, okay, tell me. Who are the Native Americans?"

We'd stayed until closing time, seven hours, a possible world record for museum-going five-year-olds. She spoke sleepily from a horizontal position in the backseat. "They're people who love the earth, and like to sing and dance, and make a lot of pretty stuff to use."

She was quiet for a while, then added, "And I think they like soda pop. Those guys selling the fry bread were drinking a lot of Cokes."

Heaven and earth rejoice. Good enough for now.

