

American Indian Carter Revard discussed his poems with students in Berlin

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(Words that could not be identified are marked “???”)

I grew up in Oklahoma on the Osage Indian reservation. My blood father was a French-and-Indian. His ancestors came from France, Normandy, to Canada about 1630 or 40. And then Josef Revard came from Canada to United States. Which was then only East of the Mississippi. He came to Louisiana and to the town that is now St. Louis, Missouri, on the Mississippi river, where the Missouri joins the Mississippi. And he married an Osage Indian woman there. He became a fur-trader and trapper. With beaver and deer and other skins. And at his Osage son, Josef was sent to Oklahoma - what is now Oklahoma - to run the first trading post there. And he was killed by Charity Indians in 1821. But luckily he and his wife - luckily for me - he and his wife had seven children, so his wife and the seven children and their pet elk fled from Oklahoma back to the safety of Missouri. And actually also they went on over to Kansas. I'm going to begin then by reading you a sentence from my grandmother and aunt on the Osage side in Osage, alright, and then I'll tell you what it says. [Text in Osage]. What it says is: When I had done well in my literary studies, grandmother, Iko, grandmother was pleased. So the name Nom-Peh-Wah-The she gave to me. That's how the Osage language sounded, and some of us know a little of it, and a lot of us don't know very much. I'll read it to you. It's in the form of a sonnet, though it's not rhymed. Eight lines octave. Six lines sextet. Okay? And this is Coyote speaking.

There was a little rill of water,near the den,
That showed a trickle,all the dry summer when I was born
One night in late August,it rained
The Thunder waked us. Drops came crashing down
In dust, on stiff blackjack leaves, on lichened rocks,
And the rain came in a pelting rush down over the hill,
Wind blew wet into our cave as I heard the sounds
Of leaf-drip, rustling of soggy branches in gusts of wind.

And then the rill's tune changed. I heard a rock drop
That set new ripples gurgling, in a lower key.
Where the new ripples were, I drank next morning,
Fresh muddy water that set my teeth on edge.
I thought how delicate that rocks poise was and how

The storm made music, when it changed my world.

This is about how all your life you hear sounds maybe, and if you're lucky, if only a few years of life, you hear sounds, you hear sounds, and then suddenly they become music. You realize that the sounds can be music. Now I think that life does not continue without song, alright? If you're a bird, you know this already. If you are human beings, you have rock stars to teach you that unless you sing, you don't couple, I suppose. The singing is part of the mating. The birds require it. It's not always the males who sing. Sometimes it's the females, too.

Now I'm going to do another, this next poem Over by Fairfax, Leaving Tracks.

Fairfax is a little town in on the reservation where there is one band of Osages. We have three weeks in June, when Osages dance, our dances, I'lon'ska. I'lon'ska. And, um, one of our bands lives over near Fairfax at a place called Greyhorse. And they dance there. About the second week in June. The third week in June another band dances in a town called Harmony. So I was visiting my Ponca folks who lived over near Fairfax at the time and this is about a storm again there. I told you I'm of the Thunder Clan, so a lot of my poems have to do with rain and storm and so on. I was in Hamburg and there was a hailstorm there, and they said, maybe you better go on down to Berlin. So yes.

Over by Fairfax, Leaving Tracks

The storm has left its fresh blue sky

Over Salt Creek running brown and quick,

And a huge tiger swallowtail tasting the brilliant orange flowers beside our trail.

Lightning and thunder've spread a clean sheet of water over

These last-night possum tracks straight-walking like a dinosaur in soft mud,

And next to these we've left stippled tracks from soles made in

Hong Kong, maybe, with Osage oil.

Lawrence and Wesley pick blue-speckled flints along our path,

One Ponca boy in braids, one Osage in cowboy hat.

Over the blue Pacific, green Atlantic

We have come together here -

possum's the oldest furred being in this New World,

we're newest in his Old World.

Far older, though, and younger too

the tiger swallowtail

has gone sailing from those orange flowers to sky-blue nectar.
The wild morning glories will spring up where she's touched down,
marking her next year's trail.

Makes me wonder,
if archaeologists should ever dig these prints with Possum's here,
whether they'll see the winged beings who moved in brightness near us,
leaving no tracks except in flowers and these winged words.

Maybe I should talk just a little about the-- Leaving tracks, you want to leave traces of yourself. You don't want to disappear. You want people to find that you were there. You want to be a real star like Lucy. You remember, you remember the million and a half year old, who left the tracks in the volcanic ash in Africa and now we can see how they walked and so on. That's one way of leaving tracks. And Indians, for Indian people this is a meaningful phrase therefore, but—I-I found it interesting that morning after the storm to think, the track that the storm left was a very fresh, beautiful blue sky, and the Creek river running faster. That is a sign that the storm has been there, and now it's a beautiful day. So what the storm left was a beautiful day. It's like the Coyote hearing music and then he had to sing. Because after you learn that there can be music, and there's the next full moon as there was a couple of nights ago, if you are a Coyote, you go out and sing. If you're a human being, you go to a rock concert.

If you speak Osage, you can understand after a little while, Ponca. If you speak Ponca, you can hear Osage. My Aunt Jewel, who married my white uncle Woody, and she and he had six Ponca children. My first cousins. We all grew up together and so I got to know them. Last time I wore this ribbon shirt it was dancing at one of her- at one of the dances for her. I was carrying the fan, and I was a gourd dancer for that, I didn't bring my gourd, but the drum that she has in the picture, I'll pass this around for you to look at. The drum that she has in front of her, she and the three women, is the Ponca scalp dance drum. It's a women's dance. Only women dance the scalp dance. They used to trail the scalps. They don't do that anymore, which the men had taken. It is a dance that says we are Ponca people and our men are warriors. They defend us. They do not let people kill us and take us out of existence in the world, and we're going to dance and celebrate this strength and this courage. And we are supporting those warriors. They defend., they do not attack another nation. They make sure we live, alright. But that drum is hereditary. You know this drum was made in 1882 i think. A hundred and what? 30 years ago, something like that. And it's passed down from woman to woman, aunt jewel kept it, now her daughters keep it, and at least once a year they're dancing the scalp dance. They will dance it again November 25th down at White Eagle, Oklahoma. I'll be back in St

Louis November 22nd. I hope I'll be able to go down and dance. Not in the scalp dance, but in the Powwow that we will have, and it's, it will be a dance for a lot of Ponca people, and the Scalp dancing will be a part of that, so maybe I'll be there for that.