Sign Language

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Abstract

WHO—CHIEF? Naw, he just sets in that there rocker and stares at the street. Come out of the hills about two years back and got a job as a tourist attraction setting in front of Riley’s here. Don’t haf ta do nuttin’—ain’t never heard him talk—prob’ly don’t know English.’
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Soc., Senior

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They say I am old. But I not too old to remember. Before the white man stretched his hand to the Ojibwa, before mountains were ripped open and gutted, before forests were thrown down and raped. When, in the quiet of morning, my eyes opened to the strong scent of cedar from fresh cut kindling. Moccasins hushed across pine needles, canoe slipped out from shore. The faint whisper of birch leaves while we paddled into the stillness on an apron of fog. Young naked muscles tense under the chill of an early Spring; a sudden last shiver to greet the coming dawn. The tug on my line, the leap of my heart as fins lined with orange and brown sparks ripple the surface and I roll my fingers around the soft belly, trimmed in silver and gray.

Manitou was kind to the Ojibwa. He filled the lakes with fish, the forests with black bear, deer, and beaver. The Ojibwa did not go hungry. Many songs were on the lips of our people. These things I remember—before they came to buy the land with a handshake and a grin.

"Don't rightly know. Chippewa I guess. City boys bought their land a while back and moved most of 'em out
west a piece. Chief here stayed behind. High-tailed it up into the hills. Never seen the Chief in town b'fore, 'til he come in fer good. It was old Riley's lucky day when he seen that long hair and them eyes, black as a witch's ear. Dressed him up in buckskin and feathers, set him in front of the store, and been drawin' customers ever since. What I don't understand is, they had some of the richest timber and iron lands in these here parts and they didn't do a thing with it."

Before the skin stretched tight against my forehead and my song was cool upon my wrinkled lips, the white man came to take our tribe to different lands in the West. The tribal council told our people we must move. But that night I prayed to Manitou and called to the Grandfathers to give me courage and in the morning I ran. Deep into the hills I ran, to where the eagle soared high over a forgotten lake. To where the hunter's moon danced yellow across the waters.

Companion to those of the earth and brother to the wings of the air. Together watching the sumac turn red on the bush and mix into shades of green and gold. Bent low to hear Her stories and wait while arrows of sunlight streaked white between the branches. 'Til teeth bit into bark and I was too old to run.

Too old to run from green waters licking the stones of the shore or gray gulls asleep on their island rock fading into shades of blue. Too old to lift up my words. Grandfather, keeper of all things, lean to hear my broken voice. Wash the sky with quiet colors, slip the day down softly under gentle shadows of tall pines standing, still the silence behind these eyes.

"Hardly ever moves off of that chair. 'Times it's hard to tell what's a-squeakin'—that there rocker or his bones. Both could use a new coat-a-paint. What? Oh sure. Well, not azacly with money, you understand, but the Chief here gets room and board free. Besides, the gov'ment don't let nobody starve."