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PREFACE

Designs of the Night Sky is a search for the meaning of written language in a Native American culture based on a history of oral tradition. In other words, how can writing take on the significance that the spoken language has had?

In *Designs of the Night Sky*, Ada Ronner and her husband are a librarian and a physics professor at Northeastern State University in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. Next to her husband, her two daughters, her large family, and her job in Manuscripts and Rare Books, Ada loves roller skating. Sometimes she loves it more than the library. Maybe because she hears the old stories in the sound of the skates. She hears the spoken word telling her the written word has to be. *Things change. Get used to it.*

Designs of the Night Sky takes place in the shape of small, titled chapters. Or named spaces. In *Artistry of Native American Myths* (University of Nebraska Press, 1998, page 154), Karl Kroeber says, “Indian myths are often constituted of distinct narrative units that may be told separately or in differing combinations.” This “modular form,” or “narrative modularity,” as Kroeber calls it, became evident in the writing of *Designs of the Night Sky*.

The novel is a weaving of contemporary voices with several old texts, such as the historical journal of the Cherokee Removal from the South-

east to Indian Territory (present Oklahoma) (the Removal trail by river, not land).

The story is a mix of events moving between the turbulent history of a tribe and the survivors of that history still caught in turmoil. The reason, in Ada Ronner's voice, in the section called *The Sky Blowing with Stars: I believe in truth, which would become possible truth, which would become the possibilities of truth, which would become the truth of possibilities. Anything to shift the truth from what it is. The history of loss and silence about the loss. I want to open the shiftings, driftings. I want to fragment the solid block of it.*

THE LIBRARY

The books have voices. I hear them in the library. In Manuscripts and Rare Books where I work. I know the voices are from the books. Yet I know the old stories do not like books. Do not like the written words. Do not like libraries. The old stories carry all the voices of those who have told them. When a story is spoken, all those voices are in the voice of the narrator. But writing the words of a story kills the voices that gather in the sound of the storytelling. The story is singular then. Only one voice travels in the written words. One voice is not enough to tell a story. Yet I can hear a voice telling its story in the archives of the university library. I hear the books. Not with my ears, but in my imagination. Maybe the voices camp in the library because the written words hold them there. Maybe they are captives with no place else to go.

GREASY GRAVY

Where are the old days? Not the old days of the Removal, but the old days I remember. What was there? My grandmother's greasy gravy. A barn. My grandfather. The stock. My mother's family name, Adair, from which my name, Ada, was taken.

My father's '48 Ford looked black, but in the sun, it was the blackgreen of a bottlefly. The upholstery scratched as I sat between my three brothers. I was glad to get to my grandparents' house. In their yard, a night storm flashed lightning and wind that felled a tree, sweeping the roof with its leaves. I felt lost somewhere in the branches with the little people in the woods. When I looked from the window, I could see the blackgreen night greased with rain. In flashes of lightning, I saw my father's car underneath one of the large limbs that had fallen. In another flash I saw my father in the drive holding a jacket over his head. Sometimes I feel I was in that car when the tree hit. In the years of trouble that followed, I felt my brothers were in the car too.

My family took the bus back from Sallisaw to Tahlequah (Oklahoma). I remember thinking of the two trails of our people during Removal. Had my grandfather talked about them again? Overland and by water.

But then, on that trip, it had been by bus.

The farm, the barn, the animals. All had seemed small. A tree could fall

across them, hide them underneath its limbs. Smaller. Smallest. Like the voices stuffed into a story. Like the history of a nation in a book.

The flashes of lightning were a camera taking pictures. The images of the storm, the tree, are an album in my head. My brothers, Robert, Wayne, and Raymond, crowding the window. I still can see their faces as if I'd been outside with my father looking up at them.

Maybe written words are a photograph of the voice. Maybe there always will be dissatisfaction. Didn't my mother complain of the photographs of herself in the family album? Wasn't I dissatisfied with mine also?

PARAGRAPHS

You won't like them, but you will get used to them. You will come to recognize the way they work. The squares of writing called paragraphs. The squares as houses in a neighborhood (which a book is).

Once, the words were going everywhere. The words didn't know how to be written. Imagine them rolling all over the pages.

Imagine writing without paragraphs.

The paragraphs are a place for the words to stay. One thought after another kept on track.

Words are the furniture of the paragraph.

Reading opens the windows.

A paragraph is a box written in. On.

A field.

A nest.

(A paragraph is seen on the page, but is it an object?)

Once, the voice got tired of being sound. It wanted to be seen. It didn't know writing was the Removal trail of the voice.

At one time, the voice was a tall tree. But there was a storm.

Words open like an umbrella. You read and there is a (roof) covering you.

I talk to Riley as we walk through the leaves. My oldest brother, Robert, drops Riley, his daughter, at my house. He doesn't want her riding with the boy she likes. I walk her to school on my way to the library at Northeastern State. I tell her about words as we walk. Sometimes we hear the past in our feet through the leaves.

THERE WERE THE OLD DAYS OF THE INDIAN REMOVAL

EMIGRATING TO THE WEST BY BOAT

*(Original in the National Archives Office of Indian Affairs, Washington DC,
"Cherokee Emigration" C-553 "Special File 249.")*

IN THE ROUTE OF EMMIGRATION OF A PARTY OF CHEROKEE INDIANS,
KEPT BY LIEUT. EDWD DEAS, U.S. ARMY, CONDUCTOR OF THE PARTY,
FROM WATERLOO, ALABAMA TO THE NEW COUNTRY WEST OF THE
MISSISSIPPI RIVER.

6th April 1838

Yesterday a Party of Cherokee Indians, in number Two hundred & fifty, together with some other emigrants of the same tribe who are removing on their own resources, arrived near Waterloo, Ala. by water, under charge of the Superintendent of the Cherokee Emigration. The S. Boat *Smelter*, provided under the contract for Transportation, had been waiting the arrival of the Party, and today the Indians were established on board of this boat, one large Keel with double cabins, made & furnished in the manner mentioned in the contract.

The Present Party having been previously Enrolled, were today turned over to me as Conductor and immediately afterwards (about 10 O'Clock

A.M.) the boat was got under weigh and continued to run until after sunset, having come more than 100 miles and laid by on account of the darkening of night.

The *Smelter* appears to be a very good boat, over 150 Tuns Burthen, a fast vessel, and well adapted to the business of removal of Indians. The Keel in tow is commodious and appears convenient for the Indians. Temporary cooking-hearths are constructed on the top of it, and there is a cooking stove in the after part of the Steam Boat.

A CALL

A library is a place for keeping words in their books. At one time, stories were kept in memory. The invisible library from which libraries come. A storyteller had stories that sometimes lasted seven days (or seven years), using beads or stones for reminders where the voice went during a story.

Barrels of cheap pork.

Boats over water (stopping once to wood).

The party is to have the entire use of the keel boat, and all parts of the steamboat but the cabins.

A neighborhood of houses on wheels. A skating rink.

When the story lives, the paragraphs seem to move as skaters on the roller rink.

A paragraph is a state of grace.

A story is a subdivision in the suburbs.

A written composition that consists of one or more sentences, deals with one point or gives the words of one speaker, and begins on a new indented line.

Some read in the boats called books. Reading is *oaring*. Is moving the story upriver.

My brother Wayne calls me at work and says to feed his kids. *He was*, he said, what was it?

ENCAMPMENT

Outside the library, the leaves are falling. I think they sound like pages turning as I walk through them. It is sound that carries the story, not the particular words. No. It *was* sound that carried the story.

Inside the library, a young man climbs the stairs to Manuscripts and Rare Books. He is looking for a master's thesis on Cherokee ceremony.

YOUNG MAN: "I wanted to know if I was doing the stomp dance the way it'd been done. I asked an elder, he said, oh, it's written down in that library over there."

I take the young man to the theses section.

Are the books content in their encampment in the library? They are cataloged and in their place, yet they circulate. I like to think of them as camps lined up on the hills. One camp can hear others on the shelves. But why are they murmuring, more now than before?

I think of my brothers and their families in their disrupted lives. But Cherokee history is turbulent. There's always been rumblings and uprisings and disagreements. When I open the *Cherokee Observer*, I'm afraid I'll see my brothers' names. Robert Nonoter arrested after a fistfight at the Dust Bowl over tribal politics. Wayne Nonoter arrested, assaulting his wife. Raymond is the only one who usually escapes notice. But he is full of his own hostilities, griefs, and angers. He just doesn't release them. It probably has

been two years since he was arrested for brawling. But Robert is taking up the slack. His children following. Who knows how far they will go?

I'm preoccupied as I walk through the leaves to the house where my daughters, Noel and Nolie, are cooking supper. Wes Stand, Noel's boyfriend, sits with Wayne's children as they watch television. My husband is in his chair reading the newspaper. I sit on his lap, crumpling the paper beneath me. I would stay longer, but Nolie calls me from the kitchen.

NOLIE: "Uncle Wayne left Clare, Stu, and Grace and told us not to tell Aunt Cora where they were."

ADA: "She'll know where they are. Where else do they leave their children? Has Cora called?"

NOLIE: "No."

ADA: "Where're the girls?"

NOEL: "In our room."

ADA: "Your old dolls don't get a rest."

NOLIE: "Clare and Grace just like to be in our room."

I think of Wayne with Cora, his wife, after him. At least they'll have a night to fight without the children hearing them.

At least my mother won't call saying the spirits that guard the children are keeping her awake.

But more than Wayne, it's Robert. My oldest brother, Robert.