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Alice Saunsoci in the backyard
of her home in Macy

Háwate at the Umóⁿhoⁿ Nation Public School

A signpost on a road near Macy

One of the roads around Macy

Macy countryside

An old gravestone marker in the Macy cemetery

Old gravestone markers, Macy cemetery

The Missouri River near Macy

Big Elk Park, Macy

Big Elk Park, Macy

The countryside near Macy

Umó'hoⁿ Nation Public School

McCauley School

Eleanor Baxter's home and
playground as a child, Macy

West side of Eleanor Baxter's home, Macy

UNL Omaha language class

UNL Omaha language class posing
with the shawls they made

Emmaline Sanchez and
Mark Awakuni-Swetland

Clan markers, Omaha tribal
council building, Macy

Clan marker, Omaha tribal
council building, Macy

Alice Saunsoci's clan marker

Close-up of Alice Saunsoci's clan marker

Clan marker, Omaha tribal council building,
Macy

Map

Nebraska, showing the Omaha
Indian Reservation in southeast
Thurston County

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1. Finding the Sacred

In the spring of 2005, Omaha tribal member Eleanor Baxter and I got into her car and headed north from the tribal council building in Macy, Nebraska. The day was warm. Spring grasses grew along the banks and high hills surrounding the reservation. Earlier, Eleanor had talked about taking me on a tour of the Macy Reservation. That morning seemed like the right time. “I’m going to take you to our cemetery,” she said. I had passed this cemetery many times heading toward the town of Macy from the north. It was on my left as I headed downhill to the main area of the reservation. But this was only a part of the reservation, which was surrounded by rolling hills and verdant with new crop growth, raspberry bushes, and giant cottonwoods hugging the Missouri River. Not far from Macy was Big Elk Park, marked by lush wooded hills and a rich canopy of trees. Houses dotted the landscape in all directions, set on the land in circular patterns that led back to the town. The cemetery always caught my eye. It was placed on a hilltop overlooking the council building, the C-Store, the rows of houses, and the senior center. It was a marker against

time. Eleanor had spent her early childhood in Macy before moving to Lincoln as a young girl, and as she talked I heard in her voice the tug of emotion and connection to land and place that now informed her life.

That morning, before we left the council building for the “tour,” Eleanor told me the story of a young woman whose car had careened off the highway heading east from Walthill earlier in the week, killing her. The woman left a grandmother, a husband, and small children. There was to be a funeral later that morning. “I’ve got time to show you around before everything starts,” she said. She took me over to the community center where the funeral was to be held. I met the grandmother, stoic in her grief. She had lost a son earlier that year. The deaths seemed too many to endure. So it seemed ironic to begin at the cemetery where there was so much sorrow. Yet starting where ancestors and family were buried seemed appropriate when it came to returning to one’s roots and the place of one’s birth, paying homage to those who went before. It was sacred landscape.

Eleanor pointed to a fresh mound outside the car window. “That’s where the girl will be buried and that’s where Timothy Saunsoci is buried. He was a young man of twenty-three—came home from Lincoln at seventeen, and then my parents raised him. He had three kids and was killed. There’s not a day that goes by that I don’t think of him because he was . . . he hurt us all so badly because of the love we had for him.” The word “home” resonated. Lincoln was not home, even though he had lived there. Macy was.

Caretakers could no longer take care of the graves because of money shortages. Eleanor said they did have people who cared for them, however. “Years ago they had old timers.

When there was a death, there was a group of men that used to just automatically go. Everything was done. They just went and did it out of the goodness of their heart. These are all my family here—my mother, Mae Blackbird Saunsoci.” She asked me to look carefully at the gravestones. They had tipis on them. She pointed to where her father, Oliver, was buried. “He was what they call a road man—a minister in the Native American Church. He officiated at all the birthdays and dinners and burials.”

The car wove along the roads that marked the circles of mounds. Eleanor said that mounds were a part of their culture, that it seemed strange to have everything flat. She took me to an old part of the cemetery where her grandparents were buried. I took pictures of some of the old stones, which dated back to the early 1800s. Uphill from these old markers was Military Circle, profuse with graves. Eleanor told me about the time she was a speaker on a panel and was asked by a “young lady” what her people had contributed to the United States. “I could’ve went off on a tangent because . . . I just told them in a way that we contributed to the government, gave them our land. We didn’t give them our land. It was taken from us. We served in all the wars. All the wars! And this Military Circle is where our veterans are.” There were fresh mounds among the old. “See all the mounds? Those are the ones that died.”

This is sacred land, she said.

She was a wise woman

Who was very old.

Maybe Grandmother Spider.

*I saw her in my dreams, when she came to me
with eyes round and hard*

*Cold and dark.
The voices of the land were everywhere,
In trees, in grass blades, in houses.
They were everywhere, these voices.
Hushed into sacred places, in roots of trees,
in soil and wind.*

*Water.
When the government took the land
They took the blood and bones of ancestors
lying deep in the earth.
Took them without thinking of the consequences.
She stopped to look at me with eyes gone black
Raven eyes,
Turned inward
Into the blue-tipped wings,
Seeing into orbs of silence
Where blood runs in rivers
And cries are still heard echoing in canyons,
Secret places.
Ancient sorrows run deep.
I heard the blackbirds rise from the branches,
circle the land.
Once the sacredness is stolen, she said
It is over.*

Eleanor and I left the cemetery and drove downhill toward what she called HUD housing, an urban development federal program. “Here is Tower Hill. This is where we begin to get street names. We’re doing that because we have to have physical addresses now instead of using post office boxes. It used to be called ADC, Aid to Dependent Children Hill. That’s just how Indian humor is,” she said. “They can pick on each

other the worst. And these are some of the housing circles. Some of the housing units here were just remodeled so they look pretty good.”

One housing circle was called Thunder Circle. I asked who picked the names. She told me her daughter, Shannon, had been one of those who helped pick names and that two or three people get to decide. “These are all the Fanny Mae and HUD housing units. Eighteen more units are going to be built.” We left the housing area and headed into the rural countryside. “There’s people buried all over the reservation,” Eleanor said. “That’s the way it was done back in the days of the prairie.” The land stretched to the horizon, open and undulating. The bones of the people that lay on this land anchored it as a kind of talisman against land losses and future deprivations—well known to the Omaha. “This is our land here,” Eleanor said as we drove. “I can truly say that this is our reservation because we weren’t removed. This is our land here. When I came back, I had to know. I knew I was Indian and I knew where I came from, but to go back to history I had to relearn again and know dates and time.”

We circled around from a more rural area to the southeast, past more houses to what was termed the “horse project.” Eleanor said it was for the kids, to help them with emotional problems. She explained that the kids take care of the horses and learn to ride them. We turned and drove north, uphill to a brick building. “This is our local college, NICC,” she said. “Nebraska Indian Community College. It’s accredited now. Alice [Saunsoci] teaches language there.” Downhill from NICC were more houses, what Eleanor called the West Projects. I asked her if she felt reconnected with Omaha tradition and culture since she had moved back from Lincoln much later in

her life. “I was always in it anyway. It was one thing I never lost was the customs, the traditions, the way we live. I never lost that thought.” We turned west and headed out from Yellow Smoke Road to the Bureau roads.

The car tires stirred up dust, which lingered on the edges of the glass and in the cracks of the doors. I wished for rain. But now, the hills were beginning to show green and the ditches were full of raspberry bushes. We were north of Yellow Smoke Road. “There’s all kinds of shortcuts to get to Highway 77,” she said. “Any road you take west is going to lead you. When we were kids, this whole creek here, Blackbird Creek, it widens. And this is where I grew up, around this area before we moved to Lincoln. Back then, we didn’t have bicycles—anything. Everything we did was walk. Walk, walk, walk. And our food was squirrels, rabbits, and even raccoons.” She said her brothers were the hunters. The trees, which they cut for their wood stoves, kept them warm in the winter. “Everybody had a wood stove. We didn’t have gas—electricity. We had lamps. These creeks here, we used to pick gooseberries. Raspberries. And look for morel mushrooms—and you can dry those. They’re found all over. All over. Sometimes I can remember there were so many mushrooms. I can remember filling baths and tubs and everything up with mushrooms. Then we’d dry them. They’d shrivel up to marble size. This was our play area when we were small.”

Raspberry and gooseberry bushes grew thick along Blackbird Creek. Eleanor cautioned me about poison ivy. Houses were scattered at different points on the hillsides. She pointed out where some once stood that were now gone and others that remained solidly on the land. “This was my stomping grounds,” she reminisced. I heard the longing in her voice.

We stopped at the place where she was born, a two-story wood frame house on the corner of the Bureau roads. Some of her family relations came out to see who had pulled in the driveway. We visited briefly while two dogs, eager for attention, circled around me. Conversation died away. Eleanor got back in the car and I jumped in beside her. This time we headed west, toward Black Elk Park, toward the old Mission School. "I would take you up there but it looks pretty rough. If you go right over the trees there, there are some old gravestones and there's a foundation where the school was and the first time I . . ." Her voice trailed off. "When I moved back, I told my husband, 'Take me up there.' When I got up there I felt the most peaceful feeling of serenity. And I'd read Francis La Flesche's book *The Middle Five* [about boarding schools to "civilize" Indians] and I wanted to go up there. I envisioned all the little kids just running around up there and I thought, boy, you could get lost in a time capsule up here. I felt peaceful. Other people have told me they felt real uncomfortable and had to get out of there."

*The Old Mission School has long since disappeared,
The woman told me,
The one with the hard black eyes
that had seen every-thing.
She showed me around in my dreams.
There is only this old stone foundation,
this line of stones.
She pointed. But there is where the fireplace stood.
Maybe that's where it was.
I don't remember. I was only a girl then.
They cut your hair at boarding schools and
put you in strange clothes*

*And said you could never speak your
native language again.
They stole that from us—the language
along with the land.
They beat it out of us.
They watched as our skin lay in shreds on the ground,
And then they kicked it into dust.
Then when it was all said and done,
We went home to the reservation and didn't know
what it was like to be Indian.
Now we are trying to catch up, trying to
resurrect those things
That were so important to us.
You know,
When they take your soul, what's left?*

Eleanor showed me where an old house used to be, downhill and to the west of the mission site, in a grove of trees and bushes. She pointed ahead to a winding dirt road, deeply rutted. “This led up to the Holy Fire Place. The Holy Fire Place is where our people used to go and fast. And we were told not to go up there because it was sacred ground. It's all fenced off.” She said that people still go there to look off the bluff that looks down into the Hole in the Rock.

The Holy Fire Place is located along the Missouri Bluffs not far from Council Point and is considered a sacred spot where the forefathers handed down Omaha ceremonies. Stabler discussed Omaha legend connected to this spot. The people were old and poor and wished to gain strength through prayers to Wakóⁿda. They took their young boys (about twelve or thirteen years old) to a hill to pray for four days without eating or drinking. On the fourth day, at the height of weakness, a