

Skin Deep (A Poem for Maya)

Erin Leigh Clemens

when I was smaller and necessarily curious I would
take the books with me into the closed bathroom
leaning close to the mirror I would
look in my face for my unknown fathers then
look in the book and back to the mirror
trying to match cheekbones and nose to
Lakota or Cherokee or Seminole or Pueblo
none really seemed to match
though

nobody ever asks
I was once told that
my dark blood must run underneath my light blood
like they would be separate even in my veins

I usually say
Irish/Welsh/Belgian/German
sometimes though
I do say Native to which
I am always asked
"What tribe?" to which
I never have a satisfactory answer

what do I say, then?

I didn't grow up on the rez
my mother didn't teach me to make
frybread (my recipe came from a cookbook)
I've never met him but
nonetheless
there it is all the same

sometimes a stranger will get real close and
declare while their breath closes up my pores
"You do not look Indian" like
they are revoking my existence with their words
these casual ethnographers
who somehow feel more able to read my
skin and bones than
I have been thus far with
twenty odd years of practice

and here I am
unable to answer the simple question
who was he? or
where did he come from?

I am not exoticizing or romanticizing this
I realize how these bloodlines came down
to me (adopted daughter of an adopted son)
most likely someone
unwilling someone
unhappy someone
stolen so
in the end if there is one thing I share with my
father it isn't my face but the legacy
of being left behind