

# We the People

Fiction

Morgan Talty

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The memory begins here: we're young, us skicins, and we're somewhere on the reservation, the island. We could have been anywhere, but when we look back on it, we're in the woods alongside the dirt road that runs against the Penobscot River down to the graveyard, a dead end (unless you count the path at the end wide enough for a car to shoulder through, in which case it is not a dead end, but just a continuation to another part of this place). Again, we could have been anywhere, but we remember the sound of water crashing in the distance, the tumultuous noise as the brown river rose, crescendoed, smashed against rock, water spilling onto the shore like a bowl filled too high and set not gently on a table. It must have been spring, when the ice on the river thawed, the bowl of our world filled too high.

This is before we smoked, before we stole cigarettes, before we went down to the tribal offices and dug through the ashtrays, plucking salvageable butts and purifying the filters with flame, calling each other on house phones to whisper, "Found three, let's meet up." And this is before we hid out in the woods late at night, past curfew, around a fire while we drank first one beer, stolen from an older brother or sister or mother or father, given by an older brother or sister or mother or father, and then a second and a third and a fourth, a twelve pack, a twenty-four, a thirty. And this too is before some of us went too deep, before some of us died from suicides, before some of us died from overdoses (alone in that back room, a slant of light), before some of us would keep on living, before some of us had children, who one day will remember this, all of this, this memory, like it was them who had lived it in The Before, down there in the woods along that dirt road that runs with—against—the river on down to the graveyard.

Out there in the woods, we are talking about being Indian.

"I'm more than you," one of us says. "And you and you and you. Not you, though, I don't think. How much you got?"

This is before we know better, before we know that some will never know better. This is before we—or some of us—know how vast the government's plan ran, how much it festered. This is before we know these men, the so-called white Fathers, had plans masked as survival but were intended for us to eat each other's spirit piece by piece. This is before colonial construct is in our vocabulary.

"Eighty-five percent?" one of us repeats. "Five more than me."

Nobody says anything else about it, but it's there, an itch we can't scratch, or an itch that doesn't yet need a scratch.

But at home later, we feel it, that itch. And so we each go through the book. We all have one. Or our parents do. It's a small book, held together with a black binding comb, the cover showing a traditional double curve, a drawing denoting the union of tribes, the Wabanaki, the People of the Dawn. The pages, some dirty like the color of grease on a white cloth, are filled with a list of names organized alphabetically by family last name. Next to each name is a number, a percentage. We see ourselves, our union: \_\_ percent, \_\_ percent, \_\_ percent, \_\_ percent, and \_\_ percent.

The next day in the woods, one of us says, "Shit, \_\_\_\_\_ is a hundred percent?"

“Holy.”

“Pfff.”

“And \_\_\_\_\_ doesn’t even live here. Lives over town.”

“I don’t even know who that is.”

“His family’s been on council forever.”

“Something’s not right.”

The river is still loud, another day of spillage, of draining.

One of us comes back to it. How could we not? “I did the math. How’d you get 85 percent? I want to know.”

“They just did,” one of us responds.

“Who?”

“The census committee.”

We say nothing.

“Your mom was on that, wasn’t she?”

We don’t know. It’s suspect, more than one of us thinks. Not all of us, though. But all of us know that something has fractured. Or maybe it’s just our memory of the river crashing on those slick rocks. No. Because we can feel it, this breakage. Each of us. A rupture. This is before we know how fractures work, that for one to occur a force stronger than the object has to be applied. And while this is before we know what that force is, we’ve always known how to feel. We were born with that skill. That is our union.

But do we know what was fractured? Do we know from which part the pain originated? Was it our memories? Our egos? Our sense of of *panawáhpseki*? Our knowing if we exist? Above all, is it this fracture that has unsettled us, that pushed us on our paths into The After?

This is where we split, move apart: that day in the woods each of us off in our own directions home, again, the crashing of the river fading behind but forever there in our memory, in the way back, an inner ear pressed to a shell, hearing. This is where some of us will learn to hate ourselves; this is where some of us will learn to love ourselves.

But I wonder—me, I, a piece splintered from that whole who remembers that day, that talk, that sound of the river’s violent thrashing—will I ever know, ever figure out, if to belong here is to not belong? Or if to not belong here is to belong?

Morgan Talty is a citizen of the Penobscot Indian Nation in Maine. He received his BA in Native American Studies from Dartmouth College and his MFA in fiction from Stonecoast’s low-residency program. Named one of Narrative’s “30 Below 30,” his work has appeared in *Shenandoah*, *TriQuarterly*, *Narrative Magazine*, *LitHub*, and elsewhere. He lives in Levant. This piece first appeared in the Spring 2020 issue of *The Georgia Review*.

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