

Shelby Lisk
Invisible indian

It's strange to me how people always want me to be an "authentic indian" when I say I'm kanyen'keha:ka.

They want me to look a certain way, act a certain way. They're disappointed when what they get is... just me. White faced, light haired. They spent hundreds of years trying to assimilate my ancestors, trying to create indians like me, who could blend in, but now they don't want me either. They can't make up their minds.

They want buckskin and face paint, drumming, songs in languages they can't understand recorded for them but with English subtitles, of course. They want educated, well spoken, but not too smart. Christian, well behaved, never question. They want to learn the history of the people, but not the ones that are here now, waving signs in their faces,

asking them for clean drinking water,

asking them why their women are going missing,

asking them why their land is being ruined.

They want fantastical stories of Indians that *used* to roam this land. They want my culture behind glass in a museum.

But they don't want me.

I'm not indian *enough*.

They say I'm fake, but they don't realize that every time I have to write and speak to them in English, the language of the colonizer, I am *painfully* aware of what I've lost.

So I sneak around quietly, gathering pieces – beads here, a word there, a dance, a song, until I'm strong enough to stand tall and tell them who I am.

They tried to make Indians like me, who could blend in.

My great grandmother moved her children out of their community into the big city of Toronto to try to hide in plain sight.

Keep it.
Hush.
Hush.

I will break the silence.

I am clinging to every piece of my mom, my grandma, my great grandma that I have. I am clinging to any bit of tradition that found its way through the cracks, like a plant growing towards the light.

I have always been in love with these small pieces of resistance.

My great grandmother told my dad to bury my umbilical cord in the dirt behind my home. Now a tree grows from that piece of me.

I am connected.

When my aunties gather around tea, I will absorb every story they tell.

I will stare at photos of my tota until they speak to me.

I will scavenge all the bits of knowledge from here and there and pull them together.

Close to my heart.
Cover them.
Protect them.
Bundle.

I will knit with my grandma's needles. The only piece of her I have.

I will knit until I know her.

I will forgive. Forgive my mom, her mom, her mom, for what they couldn't teach me. They always did the very best they could.

I will hold on for dear life.
I will dig my hands into the dirt.
I will let them drag
and pull on me
until the earth is embedded under my fingernails.

But, I won't let go.