STORIES DON'T HAVE ENDINGS

In the early 1980s, Mary TallMountain published a book of poems called “There Is No Word for Goodbye,” and later in that decade LeAnne Howe published a short story called “Indians Never Say Goodbye.” Ending this storytelling session with Misha Gallagher’s “Stories Don’t Have Endings” reminds us that our stories, like our relationships, and like the traditions they nest within, go on and on.

Primarily a poet, Gallagher gives evidence in “Stories Don’t Have Endings” of her poet’s relationship to language. Its tone of loss and haunting sense of loneliness intensify her feeling that she’s in an unfinished dialogue with her mother and with the past, and move us beyond the particular details of a lesbian Indian’s relationship with her own mother to a recognition that the story is about human women’s relationship to their Mother Earth.

Stories don’t have endings. That’s the problem for me. When I look on my life, the things that have happened, I can’t find any way to wrap things up. I was too lonely. I lived in an absence of relationship. When I got tired of a place I moved on. And I brought everything with me, all my hope and despair, packed neatly into my guitar case and sung out again through the strings. Songs I refuse to sing anymore.

Even my mom’s death, there’s no ending there. I’m waiting to resume something with her, an unfinished dialogue. Things weren’t always so good in the past as they might be one day out among the new stars of our universe. I want to see my mom again, sitting on some big flat granite slab in a meadow, warm sun, blue of the noon sky, and my sisters there too. And a cold, clear river running by, shallow enough to wade in, yellow sandy bottom. It might be that way.

And where will my dad be? I don’t know. I leave him in his pink negligee and blond wig, standing in the kitchen warming his coffee. Even if I knew I wanted to, I can’t bring him into our circle. He is too complicated and I still have a child’s fear of the abnormal.

Don’t tell me I can’t use that word! I know all about it.

I can accept him for the ways he came through for my mom at the end. It sounds mean for me to say, but it must have taken him a load of courage to lie down with my mother after she received Extreme Unction, and hold her hand. How many years had it been since he lay with her on the same bed? My mom held her own for a day and a half after that. We bathed her, my older sister and I, turning her gently, and water streamed away from the hot mass of tumor that had erupted beneath her skin. Maidu skin, creamy brown, soft as velvet.

Like I say, things weren’t always good between my mom and me. There were years of intense struggle. Struggle for what? For control on my mom’s part, for autonomy on mine. I suppose autonomy. I never achieved it. I gave in to her always. I was alert to her, even I guess when I imagined I wasn’t. These days, I find myself hoping mama isn’t watching from on high. But then I figure, well, it’s time she knew the truth. So I strut around in my Levis and black T-shirt, wearing my leather jacket. I don’t turn her photo to the wall when I take my woman to bed and make love to her until she’s crying out.

My mom knew she had a butch daughter. But it is a fine balance, a fine balance I had to maintain. When I slipped off into the butch side, boy, my mom would be mad. “Why are you carrying that girl’s suitcases?” she’d ask indignantly. “She’s big enough to carry her own. What are you trying to do, be the man? It looks ridiculous!”

Probably it did look ridiculous. There’s a little door beneath my heart that opens on the word shame, and every shameful moment of my life crawls over that doorway and down into that dark place.
She didn't want me to be my dad. I mean what I say. She didn't want me to be like him, dressing up in clothes of the opposite sex and pretending to be that sex, that gender. "It looks ridiculous!"

But when I wasn't trying to look like a boy I still looked like a boy in my brown cords and white shirt and cook's apron. That woman who came in the deli where I worked, she was after me, flirting. She thought I was a teenage boy, a Greek. My friends laugh when I tell that story. "An Adonis," they say. And I laugh too. But that woman saw what she wanted to see. She bought baklava from me, no wonder she thought I was Greek. And in those days I'd say to Rachel, "Come here and dance with me!" and we'd practice some steps to a hora, or some Greek dance, around the tables, me humming the melody. And Rachel was a beautiful girl with long thick black hair. That woman admired what a pretty couple we were.

"What is that boy's name?" she asked my boss, Mrs. Goldstein.

"Which boy?"
"That Greek boy."
"What Greek boy? We have no Greek boy."

The woman was looking confused. And I was standing behind them, realizing, "Yeah, that lady thinks I'm a boy."

And was she ever ashamed when Mrs. Goldstein looked at her in astonishment and said, "She's no boy!" That woman never came back in the deli after that.

But hell, maybe she was only disappointed because she couldn't introduce me to her sixteen-year-old niece, Susie. Who knows?

Which reminds me that I did "rob the cradle" once with a sixteen-year-old married girl. And she knew I was a woman. But that's another story. I stole her heart, her husband stole money from me. So everything is equal.

But those aren't the stories I was planning to tell. I was thinking about Hood River, the farm, the factories where I worked. I was remembering the long days in the fields, baling hay. That was the summer. And autumn, there were rain showers in September clearing off to puffy clouds above the river, in a turquoise

sky, autumn planting before supper, before the moon rose, full as a pumpkin.

I was anorexic in those days, slip-sliding on the factory floor in my proud boots, me on the second-to-last peeler on row six, the fast row where they put the youngest or the hardest-working women.

Hell, we all worked hard. Seven and a half hours a day, loading the peeler with six pears every ten seconds. Speed up, slow down, breaktime, lunch time, off work. In hairnets and plastic aprons. I never once looked at myself in the mirror in the ladies' room. A matter of principle with me, a matter of superstition. The lunch buckets on shelves, last names printed on adhesive tape: Gray, Turner, Rideout, Springer. And my last name, Gallagher.

We'd go into the company cafeteria. Chili stew. And rain coming down hard outside, sound of wet gravel being crushed by truck tires, and truck engines churning, the hydraulic whirring of forklifts. Men's voices, hollering. After lunch I'd always go outside and walk around, rain or sun.

And as Fall time came on, more rain, cold winds, and finally snow. Lights coming on around four in the afternoon as we were driving home from the cannery.

Sometimes on Friday nights I'd go down to Stevenson with my friend Sharon. She was a half-breed like myself, but a Yakima. I was in love with her. She had five kids, was about ten years older than me.

And I had it bad for that woman. I guess everybody did. Still, her husband was always going off to the bar, or going out hunting on the weekends. I seldom saw him.

It's not much of a story. In short, a lot of time getting drunk, a lot of time talking with her, a lot of time singing. The kids would get tired and put blankets and pillows down on the living room floor and go to sleep. I guess they wanted to be near their mom, in the dark snowlit living room, that one yellow kitchen light over the sink, the coffee pot making an occasional blip.

Finish off a six-pack of beer, drink a pot of coffee, go pee every half hour, sober drunks. Two, three o'clock in the morning, me, my clitoris pounding against the tight crotch of my jeans and Sharon saying, "You should always do whatever you want to
do.” Lady, if you only knew what I want to do. And I reach out to touch her long, Indian hair, just brushed.

She doesn’t say a word, just looks at me.

But another time she says, “If you aren’t comfortable sleeping on that settee, you can sleep with me. Jim won’t be home tonight.”

She is wearing nothing but a long yellow T-shirt. It must be near one in the morning. There is cold light on the snow, blue shadows of spruce and douglas fir, a black, glistening night of stars and half moon. I go to her room.

She is lying on her side, but her black hair is spread up over her pillow. I get in under the covers with my jeans and shirt on. I’m shivering. She is only a few inches from me.

And I lie there frozen, feeling her body heat, wanting to touch her, to take her in my arms, to put my lips to her lips, to feel her legs wrap around my legs. I want to hear her say my name. I want to tell her I love her.

I imagine how she’ll recoil from me. “You queer! Get out of my bed!” And then that iciness, that look of disgust or amusement on her face whenever she looks at me and sees me looking at her.

“What are you, one of those lesbians? I better never catch you with my daughter.”

So I lie there hating myself for feeling as I do, too much a coward to touch her, too much a coward to go away. Lonely. My hand nearly touching her hair.

“Sharon.” My voice is less than a whisper. “Sharon!”

“Hmm?”

I don’t say anything. I wait.

“Mom? Mommy?” It’s her youngest daughter.

“What is it, baby?”

“Can I get in bed with you?”

“Sure, honey.” She moves over toward me and lifts the sheets. Emily crawls in and curls up next to her.

“Hello, sweet lamb,” whispers Sharon. “Were you scared?”

She goes on talking to Emily in a soft, warm voice. “Nothing’s gonna hurt you. I love you. Do you know that?”

I hear her breathing into Emily’s hair. I know her arm is around her small body, closing Emily into her heart and belly warmth.

Later I was ashamed of how jealous I felt, how I inched my body away from the two of them and cried.

But at 4:30 A.M. Sharon was up. “I’ll make some breakfast for you.” And she made me a sandwich of Elk meat and a thermos of coffee for me to take to work.

And after that? I guess I never did go back. I quit my job at the cannery and got another job at a factory making fishing lures and “Li’l Chief Smokers.” You know, for smoking salmon, elk, deer, wild burros. Whatever.

And I didn’t see her again, though once I heard she was working, selling Christmas trees at The Dalles. I drove up there in a snowstorm, like a fool. Drove everywhere, looking for Christmas tree lots. She and the kids were probably holed up in a motel room with one double bed and a kitchenette. I can imagine the kids watching TV, and her smoking, looking out the window with a far-off look on her face.

Stories. No endings. I dream of the river canyon, the Columbia River, riding our horses out by the bluffs, the northwest wind. In Spring, misty rain, dogwood blossoming in a narrow cut of the canyon cliffs. And the smell of wet asphalt, two-lane highway. Smell of pine and oak.

The day I came home, back to California, it was so cold I got the sleeping bag out of my car and curled up in it on the front porch, waiting for my mom to come home. I didn’t have a key to the house.

They were surprised to see me, my mom and my younger sister. I don’t think I even hugged them. Probably not. I never gave anything with my body in those days. I was always stiff with people who tried to hug me.

We made coffee. We sat at the table, as always. Somehow I knew my mom was mad at me.

“So, what do you plan to do now,” asked my mom, “now that you’re home?” She looked impatient. She had fourteen years left.
I lied and told her my plans. School, job, a way to support myself, my own apartment, eventually. But I really didn’t know. I didn’t know.

I didn’t know until those fourteen years were finished, and she had moved on to the next phase, wherever, whatever that is. I keep feeling that I want to phone home and talk to her. That unfinished dialogue. A way to explain those things I hope she now knows.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. One thinks of such American mythic figures as Paul Bunyan, Captain Ahab, Sergeant York, the Lone Ranger, Horatio Alger, Luke Skywalker, Mike Hammer, Conan the Barbarian, Superman, and Rambo.

2. By contact I mean the point when a given Native community came in contact with Anglo-European civilization. The time of contact differs for various regions and groups within regions, ranging from 1492 to the mid nineteenth century. The Caribbean, Mexico, Central America, parts of South America, the Atlantic coast of North America, and the American Southwest came into contact the earliest, having been exploited and victimized by Anglo-Europeans at least since the end of the eighteenth century. Large parts of the Pacific coast, especially its northern regions, along with Alaska, the West, and the Great Plains, were largely untouched, at least directly, by Anglo-European conquest and colonization until well into the nineteenth century, though many tribes had experienced indirect effects of European presence for some time.

3. Ella Cara Deloria, Speaking of Indians (1944), quoted in the “Publisher’s Preface” to her novel Water Lily (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), x.

4. As all the bands of that nation were referred to by ethnographers in her day. The Dakotas were located geographically between the more easterly Santee Sioux and the Teton Dakota (Lakota) who lived in the westernmost areas of the Sioux territory.

5. See Braulio Muñoz, Sons of the Wind: The Search for Identity in Spanish American Indian Literature (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1982) for an intriguing discussion of contemporary revolutionary movements in Central America. Muñoz argues that they are led and “manned” by well-educated young
people who aspire to ruling-class status but are prevented from attaining it by any other means than the overthrow of the existing power structure. To this end they enlist *los pobres*, and use the plight of the impoverished and oppressed as their main line of appeal in their recruitment effort. His analysis seems horrifyingly familiar.


7. Nor does it differ notably from Han policy with respect to non-Han peoples in the People’s Republic of China.
SPIDER WOMAN'S GRANDDAUGHTERS

Traditional Tales and Contemporary Writing by Native American Women

Edited and with an Introduction by PAULA GUNN ALLEN

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