

# **Duffy**

Glad, or Grateful in Cherokee  
Nina O'Leary

## **The Beginning**

It began with a portrait of my mom on the back steps, wrapped in a blanket and heavy with grief. Grandma Berg, my mom's mom, had been moved to hospice after a few weeks of limbo following her second stroke. I had planned to make photos that day, but following the news, it obviously wasn't the time. My mom insisted I do what needed to be done for school. I photographed her for two minutes, just as she was, and then sat down next to her. It was a chilly late-October day, and it had been cloudy all day. We talked about Grandma. Her second stroke had been hard on me, and I shared that with my mom. She said in a broken voice she hadn't even thought of us kids dealing with grief - she was so wrapped up in her own. As we talked, beams of sunlight broke through the clouds and streamed across the backyard with brilliance. Whether it was chance or something more divine, it felt like a hug.

In the weeks that followed, I kept making candid photos of my parents in their home, shot with amateur-esque spontaneity. My grandma's death cast a new light on everything my parents touched, and I felt compelled to preserve anything that I could. Still lifes of items placed absentmindedly on the nightstand, the books they were reading, the pile of dirty clothes left on the bathroom floor - nothing was too small or unimportant.

When we drove to Illinois for Grandma Berg's funeral, we stayed at her home. I photographed bookshelves, half-written notes, the home phone with a missed call, the bed she'd had her second stroke in. After the funeral, on a sunny day in my parents' living room, I found a leather-bound black journal and inadvertently read it back to

front. It was a collection of sermon notes mixed with personal scrawlings “did not attend church for 2 wks, was in hosp.” and “this sermon is very boring, I do not want to take notes.” When I reached the front of the journal, I realized it was my late grandma’s. I photographed pages and phrases that stuck out to me, which now intermingle with the photos of my parents and their home, Grandma Berg’s empty home, and the homes and lives of my three brothers and their families. When confronting the overwhelming mass of small photographs in critiques and studio visits, people's first comments were often about how the photographs felt like they had something to do with loss. They were right.

What was loss in October, loss in journals, loss in conversation, turned to quiet contentment in December and joy on Easter. My mom called occasionally. “I would normally call and tell my mom this, but she isn’t here so I’m telling you,” she said. We learned a new way to be there for each other.

In the documents my grandma left behind, I found echoes (or, maybe, precursors) of the desire to find community and uncover identity. There was her name tag, “Emma Berg, future DAR member.” And, always, piles of documents from the Bureau of Indian Affairs; letters regarding our “blood quantum,” books with our relatives’ names and occupations underlined; notes my aunt had written in her quest to locate herself within the Cherokee Nation before getting officially enrolled; a book about the Trail of Tears. My grandma showed a desire to reclaim what was once ours: in our thoughts and our ways of life as Cherokee people. The generations of women

before me roamed through the same identity crisis that I had when making my book *"Native Enough."*<sup>1</sup>

## Stories

"Clyde, wife beater, skinny, dirty," etc. were among the characteristically curt descriptions Grandma Berg relayed aloud to her daughter Leann. A small, soft-pink notepad with Aunt Leann's casual notes is all we have now of Grandpa Berg's ancestry, beyond our research into public documentation. Grandma Berg certainly didn't remember her in-laws through rose-colored glasses. Our family mythology never included us romanticizing our ancestors or living relations - Grandma Berg and mom's cousin Marianne were embarrassed by our relative Wonza Williams in Indian Territory when they visited years ago. They said she lived in a flea-infested trailer, and they wanted to leave as soon as they arrived. Grandma and Grandpa Berg fought all the time and passed that into my parents' early marriage relationship. On my dad's side, Grandpa Downer is rarely mentioned. He committed suicide when my mom was pregnant with me, so I never knew him. To this day I'm still trying to clarify the circumstances around his death.

It's easy to glance at the photos made after my Grandma's passing and write them off as overly sentimental, but I don't see them that way. As I work, I wonder, can I remember the sweetness of small hands clutching Papa's shirt and the anger I felt at my

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<sup>1</sup> *Native Enough* is a book of 109 portraits and interviews of Native American college students who were recipients of a specific college tuition waiver. The book covers themes of identity, blood quantum, tribal issues, education and more from the first-hand perspectives of Native college students. I completed the work in 2016 and the book was published by Michigan State University Press in December 2018.

brother Brian for leaving his family, again, to serve the country? How do I deal with the phrase “serving our country?” I want to put it in quotations because it’s no service to his family to leave, ever, but he’s done concrete things to eliminate evil and unnecessary suffering in the world. Nothing about family is simple, but as I discuss these interweaving storylines with my siblings and parents, I sense that day-to-day family life for most of us is filled with such fulfilling, small moments that we could burst.

The best times lately are when we mill about in the backyard watching the dog and the kids fly around - all itching for attention from literally anyone (sometimes good or bad. The dog is the worst culprit, but might have the least understanding about his antics.) It used to just be my three brothers and I zooming around out there, and now there’s us, our spouses, and nine kids among us all.

We haven’t been all together since my wedding, five years ago. Brian met my husband Matt for the first time the day before we got married. I hadn’t seen Brian in five years and the pressure to be beautiful and graceful and focused on my new husband along with somehow showing my brother and his family I cared deeply that they came was too much. I cried all the way to the wedding rehearsal.

Katie was there, my bridesmaid, but not yet married to Mike. Their romance would begin a few days later. Evelyn wasn’t there; Noelle, Piper, Noah, Isla weren’t there. I remembered halfway through a prayer for our future children during the ceremony that I’d forgotten to take my birth control.

We visited Mike and Katie this summer to spend time together and to take some photos for my thesis. Matt and I slept on an air mattress the size of their living room,

filling up their one-bedroom apartment to the brim. Piper screamed for a few hours one night, in pain from her first two teeth fighting through her gums. I said "I'm glad I'm not dealing with that quite yet." I lied.

We celebrated my dad's 62nd birthday in September. I will never forgive myself if my children don't know my mom and dad. I have a kind of desperate need for my children to understand them, and to know them so maybe they get an ounce of the beauty from them that I have. It's too much to think about, but I know when I make certain photographs I will be looking at them when they die. I know because of this inevitable loss I can never stop. I've already wasted too many years.

### **Indian Territory**

This summer, my mom and I flew to North Carolina and traced one route of the Trail of Tears to Oklahoma. For 1,000+ miles, I drove and my mom read aloud to me as if I were a kid again. She's a remedial reading teacher at an elementary school, helping kids sound out words and letters all day. She stumbled over the Cherokee words interspersed throughout the stories we worked through and I had to be the one to tell her she can't give up on a word just because she couldn't get it the first time. We cried laughing over the story of the possum who kept getting run over on his journey from town to town in search of a wife. We made mental notes to change our perceptions of how kids are meant to learn. We wondered at how life would be different if we'd always known these stories. At the end of the long days, I'd read to her as we tucked

ourselves into bed. Our posture was similar - humbled and open - soaking in the cultural knowledge we found together.

Once we were in Indian Territory, we were shocked at how beautiful it was. Isn't that crazy? The idea that all reservations are ghost towns with ramshackle houses, dirt floors, wild dogs and tumbleweeds is so pervasive that my mom and I just assumed we'd find it in Oklahoma. We wove through the hilly terrain marveling at the beauty and imagined our relatives, the Alberty family, coming upon this land and trying to decide where to settle after their long journey on the Trail of Tears. We passed some massive houses that we would never be able to afford. We bought snacks at Keys Grocery, which was only about half stocked with food. It smelled like cigarettes. Every single day our expectations were met and exceeded in every way, good and bad.

After an afternoon in the historical library at the Cherokee Cultural Center, I marched my mom to the tribal government office to get her officially enrolled in the Cherokee Nation. Entering an administrative building hoping for your identity to be validated is something, let me tell you. Even more telling is the fact that I didn't bring my official birth certificate to enroll myself - deep down I thought if I didn't have my documents then I wouldn't have to deal with rejection. Well, there was no rejection. My mom filled out the paperwork and took her I.D. photo within ten minutes. She now joins her late mom, her siblings and cousins as official members of the Nation. I'll join her this year, along with my brothers if they wish.

We walked out of that building feeling like neither of us ever had. Mom felt like she was honoring her mom by going through with the official process. I felt like a piece

of my own tendency to doubt or downplay this piece of our identity fell away. We celebrated at Chili's, the nicest restaurant in the capital city of Tahlequah.

The next morning, we drove to Westville. We had been putting it off. This town is where the Alberty family chose to settle, and we knew it was one of the more run-down areas of Indian Territory. We followed Apple Maps to Alberty Cemetery, where we supposed our relatives had been buried for centuries. As we drove down a dirt road outside of town, we passed Alberty Farm, a well kept small home on farmland. As we came to the end of the road, we saw the sign for Alberty Cemetery. A bright red gate blocked the entrance to the cemetery. It was just as overgrown inside as it was in the ditches alongside the road - you wouldn't know there were graves inside. We didn't climb the fence. Two small women scaling a gate and tracking through overgrown grasses on who-knows-whose land wasn't in the cards for us. After ten anticlimactic minutes or so, we left for Tulsa to fly home.

### **The Officer**

On November 17, all but two members of my immediate family huddled together on frozen bleachers to watch my brother Brian graduate from Marine Officer Candidate School in Quantico, Virginia. His military career has been impressive from the start - he graduated from the first class of the United States Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC) in 2009 as a "historic breed of Marine." MARSOC operators are the best of the best, comparable to a Navy Seal or Green Beret. They are highly skilled in "direct action, close-quarters battle, special reconnaissance,



foreign internal defense, fire support, tactical casualty care, irregular warfare, survival evasion resistance and escape, and infantry weapons and tactics.”<sup>2</sup> I remember one Christmas he left the dinner table to answer a phone call, which he completed in what I now know was fluent Indonesian. I knew that he was a special forces operator, but hearing my small-town brother speaking a language I’d never heard before was a stark reminder of the extreme contrast of our realities.

Graduating from OCS is an important step in Brian’s career. Since an enlisted man is always subservient to an officer (a Marine who is only eligible to complete OCS after obtaining a four year college degree,) his long list of accomplishments are now coupled with a commensurate hierarchical position as an officer. As he stood out in front of Delta company as Commanding Officer and the highest overall performer in the entire battalion, I couldn’t help but notice how many more medals and commendations Brian bore on his lapel than the newly minted officers. Their military careers were just beginning. For Brian - another accolade and another step up.

Hauling 8 children under the age of nine around for graduation weekend was a task. My parents and Paul, Kayla, their four kids, and Matt and I all boarded a plane, a tram, a bus, and two minivans en route to Quantico, VA. There we met Brian's wife, Bre, who'd driven up with four children from Camp Lejeune, about five hours away. She was looking forward to the end of a lengthy stint of single-parenting after Brian’s ten week training. Mike flew in from Colorado Friday night, just in time to wake up at 4:45 with Matt, Paul and I to save seats for the 9 AM graduation the next day. I had

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<sup>2</sup> Blumenstein 1

asked Paul and Mike to come to the graduation as a surprise for Brian sometime in October. I thought it would be a major feat to get the four siblings and our parents in one place, especially when that place was across the country. Paul took it one step further and brought his whole family - it was their first family trip and the kid's first plane ride. Mike's wife Katie and their daughter stayed behind - Katie is in nursing school and had a clinical to complete that weekend. They were the only two missing - so we moved together as a mass of 17, nine adults and eight children, overwhelming any space we entered and caravanning through Quantico with three full minivans.

The first day of family weekend on base, after cheering on the battalion in a miles-long run, families gathered on a large blacktop across from their Marines. The soon-to-be officers stood in formation, in their civilian clothes, ready to reunite. After a few barked commands, they fell loosely out of rank and children and family members ran across the large space into the arms of their loved ones. This was Brian and Bre's kid's first time seeing Dad in two and a half months. Bre watched happily as they dominated their dad's physical capacity for affection, and quietly hugged him for a few minutes when the kids had fallen back a bit.

Brian had Facetimed my parents, Matt and I on Easter to tell us his plan to go to OCS. I was so upset - I just couldn't understand making a decision to leave your family when you didn't have to. Deployments are difficult enough: why add to the time spent apart by choosing to go to another training? As I watched Brian and Bre reunite on graduation day, I was reminded that Brian is not a single actor in opposition to his wife and family's desires. Bre has been his partner in every deployment and distance

throughout his career. I know that the two of them carefully made this decision together - a temporary sacrifice for a better future. How silly of me to have thought that I knew better than they what is best for their family. Brian is the bravest person I know, and incredibly thoughtful. No decision is made lightly.

Brian's family will move to Quantico from Camp Lejeune, North Carolina for six months beginning in May. From there, Brian could be stationed as far away as Okinawa, Japan, or in someplace as familiar as Camp Lejeune. He won't know where until November of 2019.

### **Family Photos**

Photographing family is hardly anything new. Well-known photographers do it, and everyday people do it. Figureheads like Sally Mann and Larry Sultan shared the impulse, Richard Billingham and LaToya Ruby Frazier expanded it. This is how photographs of families have entered into the fine art world and have been celebrated: by showing loss, estrangement, decline and distance. Though not all the photographers mentioned above explicitly include each of these things, I argue that their family photography deals with some of them. Richard Billingham (image 1) and LaToya Ruby Frazier (image 3) share intimate and sometimes gritty images of family life that don't feel distant, but do exist in the context of familial, moral, or systemic decline. Sally Mann's intimate portraits of her children (image 4) sparked outrage because of their perceived sexuality. What's most often written about her work focuses on this aspect before discussing any positives of the work - the perception of darkness has been

expounded on more than the celebration of life . Larry Sultan, (image 2) though making images of his parents out of a desire to keep them alive forever, still keeps his visual distance.

As I progress, I feel more strongly than ever that sharing photographs of my relatively happy family, without including pervasive darkness, is right for the project. The common critique thus far calls for a more palpable sense of pain, of shadow, confusion, or damage. I wonder at the discomfort with joy and contentedness. These are my most urgent questions for the viewer wanting to see more sadness: Are you uncomfortable with the idea that a family marked through its history by genocide and relocation can thrive? Does the story feel incomplete without indulging your need for a damage-centered narrative? My family is certainly unrepresentative of the perceived plight of the modern American Indian, which is where I see pushback happening. Though pain can serve as a uniting force when people interact with it, I reject using it as a strategy to make people feel impacted by the work. I think it's easy to make work about injustice and have it affect people deeply - it's harder to make work that's centered on joy that still leaves its mark.

In Jane Blocker's "Seeing Witness: Visuality and the Ethics of Testimony", she thinks around the usefulness of damage-centered narratives. She introduces Ben Okri, a Nigerian writer discussing the "joint U.S.-U.N. intervention in Somalia in 1993" and the Rwandan genocide. He writes in his book, *A Prayer for the Living*: "They expect to see us weeping. Instead they see us staring at them, without begging, and with a bulging placidity in our eyes." Blocker expounds on Okri's thoughts further: "Okri explains that

the white ones cannot understand what they were sent to witness, because, first of all, it does not conform to preexisting pictures of weeping and starving Africans..."<sup>3</sup> Okri's idea resonates when fielding some critiques of my work. Though the situations are not the same, viewers desires are: let us in to the trauma, show us the darkness that we may make judgements based on all of the facts.

Eve Tuck, in her 2009 "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities," calls for narratives surrounding historically disenfranchised peoples, specifically indigenous ones, to move past the damage-centered. "It is certainly not a call for another "d" word: denial. It is not a call to paint everything as peachy, as fine, as over."<sup>4</sup>

Instead, in Avery Gordon's words, an invitation to presume "that life and people's lives are simultaneously straightforward and full of enormously subtle meaning."<sup>5</sup> If the stories told about us are always framed by our pain, we do not move forward.

Audra Simpson, in *Mohawk Interruptus*, agrees. "Within indigenous contexts, when the people we speak of speak for themselves, their sovereignty interrupts anthropological portraits of timelessness, procedure, and function that dominate representations of their past and sometimes, their present."<sup>6</sup>

Traditional and contemporary Cherokee stories - the ones we tell about ourselves - are distinctly marked by humor, by admiration for the world, and by tales cautioning against the pitfalls of humanity. We acknowledge pain and loss, but we do not dwell on

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<sup>3</sup> Blocker 56

<sup>4</sup> Tuck 419

<sup>5</sup> Gordon 5

<sup>6</sup> Simpson 97

them. That's been done, and overdone, by artists and authors outside of our communities.

Allowing people to exist as they actually are without imposed narratives is crucial to me when I shoot. If I spent time with family and they were miserable and resentful, I would show that. But that's not who my family is. My parents are a deeply contented people, hard working and devoted to their faith and to each other. They are relentless in prayer, in quiet humor, in service. Good things happen. Bad things too. But early in their marriage, they banished that insidious snake of cynicism, hatred and bitterness until they broke through cycles of negativity and formed new habits of generosity and gratitude. They are not perfect. Yet, there is no darkness unchallenged. For this reason, I reject the proposal that my photographs must show a viewer my family's pain. It is not the viewer's to fetishize, to view flippantly and to file under the category of indigenous people's perpetual suffering, or suffering in general. The work will not contrive fresh pain where it has been healed. I will not open old wounds for anyone's curiosity or expectation.

At times, I have felt like I needed to apologize for how many photos in the project are of my nieces and nephews just being kids. This is another concept I have to remind myself of - this isn't just another white, suburban, middle class family being portrayed in photos. There are through lines of indigeneity that connect everything, and they can't be unlinked. The existence of our family, consisting of my parents, three brothers, their wives and children, my husband and I is a direct resistance to the "kill the Indian, save the man" policies that existed to weed out and kill off our Cherokee

ancestors. In many ways, their goal was successful. My brothers and I grew up knowing that we were Cherokee amongst other things, but not knowing how that could have changed our thought processes. But the genocidal wish of the colonizer, imposed on us through the Trail of Tears, residential schools, and blood quantum, did not come true. We are still here.

### **Around the Table**

I always install this project the same way. One large dining room-esque table covered with small photographs, with the table so full that you can't see them all clearly without sitting down and sifting through them. Chairs surround the table as if ready for a meal. Or, in my mom's side of the family's case, a lively discussion of the very things you ought not discuss at a holiday: politics and religion. When Grandma and Grandpa Berg would come from Illinois to visit, we'd spend most of our time around the table talking or playing cards. That's where my memories of them are richest, and that's where I want to lead others when they look through the photos. To my amusement, viewers often end up discussing those two things Minnesotans are taught to avoid: politics and religion.

In the Nash installation, the very same table that I grew up with in my parent's home will be the one to carry the photos. Since viewers can get so many different impressions of the work based on where (and if) they sit and sift, eight to ten large prints will hang around the table to guide viewers and introduce them to some key

themes throughout the work: indigeneity, faith, love of the land, service to country, and family.

By placing most of the work on the table, I give viewers the option to dig in or to pass by. The work is best appreciated when seated, when sifting, and in conversation with others who are doing the same. I don't need everyone to spend time with the photos and parse through what might be true for the subjects, but those who feel drawn to the themes introduced by the larger prints will be given more than enough glimpses at my family dynamic to come to their own conclusions about who we are, what we think, and how we live.

I didn't shoot these photos with a political agenda in mind - I just documented what was in front of me. For one viewer the work could be disturbing, for another it could be encouraging. There's room for both. I have a confidence that is unshaken in the face of false accusations that finds its roots in the absolute knowledge of who one is. I feel this about my family with all the gusto I have. Their identities are not swayed by art audience's opinions. Conjectures can't hurt. In fact, they're welcome. After all, what better place to talk about politics and religion than at the table.

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, in "Land as Pedagogy" asserts that meaning "is derived not through content or data, or even theory in a western context, which by nature is decontextualized knowledge, but through a compassionate web of interdependent relationships that are different and valuable because of that difference."

<sup>7</sup> It is this definition of meaning, one formed by focusing on faith and loving people

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<sup>7</sup> Simpson 11



well, no matter the situation, that is most relevant to this body of work. Indigenous resilience, in this case, is celebrated by photographs of truly joyful people.

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## Images



1. Richard Billingham, image from "*Ray's a Laugh*" 1996.



2. Larry Sultan, image from *"Pictures from Home"* 1992.



3. LaToya Ruby Frazier, image from *"The Notion of Family"* 2014.



4. Sally Mann, *"Jessie at Five"* 1987.