

## A Poem by MARIE ANNHARTE BAKER

### She Breaks Off

A collaboration of selves: I talk to the woman in '76 — the skinny nervous wreck — but I am the '91 self; it's too late to meld our beings. I am not enough to grasp that fragment of myself.

She wrote to me in '76 not knowing that it would only be me that would read her words and decipher the meanings. She had only three days to tell me. Many times, she'd try to start a journal and just make a beginning. Some of her writings, I found written on scraps of papers used as book markers.

Day 1 starts by her saying that bureaucrats have no color or race. The struggle would be for her individual person. Whoever that was. It was making a statement and a stand.

I like how she made the big statements but did not try to explain or chop the idea down into tiny bits for a reader to mentally digest. Whoever would read it would know she meant that Day 1 was that awesome moment that she figured out she was on her own. No political agenda would fit her changes.

Back then, she did not trust the elites because she was on her way out of a marriage and dropping out of college. She was not the quick rabbit losing victory to the turtle that plodded on in the fable. She had stopped to reassess her life. Life was not a race to be won or lost. Sure, she was taking a breather. She was giving up that one path that she got stuck on.

She got passed up, though. Many others got the degrees and she got out of work because she did not reach her academic goals. Not that big of a deal anyway, Indians didn't have goals. To look forward, plot life on a chart and proceed was not that much an Indian reality. Indians dreamed, though.

By '91, she had a dreamquest but in '71, she just wanted. Wanted to improve herself. Wanted to be educated. Isn't that the clever self con, when she herself agreed that she had to be educated because she didn't want to be taken for being a "stupid" Indian? Or, an "ignorant savage"? Or "uncivilized"? She didn't want to be the "stupid squaw" but she was trying too hard not to be. She overdid trying to be accepted by other standards. But she still had her own ideas deep inside.

One dream was an educational institute of her choice. She wanted to call it the Sacajawea Foundation. The contempt

on the persons like Sacajawea because they helped the white colonizers made her rescue the despised sister. By saving the name of Sacajawea, she would save her own name, face or future generations. It was a big dream that no one would even talk about today.

She kept her color and her race by dropping out. She did not get more stupid. It was a smart move. She had to pay the price, though. She had so little faith in herself. Maybe if she had continued her education, and had become a pit bull about hanging onto her academic career, she'd be the clichéd success.

By Day 2, she confessed that she needed counselling. She contented herself with housework because it eased depression. In her imagining, she had fun but the sick one inside made her stop. During her hangovers, the sick voice dominated every painful thought. Typical, she'd gone out the night before, got drunk and made an asshole of her self again.

She did not say that she had tried to reunite with her relatives. Back to the res didn't work out and just the memory of all the drinking parties and assorted romantic flings kept her scared off. She wanted to belong to someone again. She did not belong to a country, a university or a marriage.

She had no nation to fight about. She was only a fragment of who I am. I might have been the one that held her back, but I don't know why I did it. She wasn't that happy in that life. It's not like I broke up a good thing. If I was the one that she had to take care of... if I had split off from her... I'm trying to figure it out. She wasn't actually alone. She had me to remind her except when I did, I must have tortured her.

Day 3, she got busy with her self-help program. She's tried to dry out by going to an Indian AA group but it made her want to go to the "ave," the short for Avenue but the long of it was - in whatever shape she returned. She had to find out the pattern of abuse in her life. She was a split up person. She would analyze herself but not love any part about herself. Everything had to change for her. She was totalled in her estimation.

On her list of childhood incidents, she put first the alcoholism of her mother and the possible mental illness. The child molester had been second. She thought that being poor, urban and mixed-blood made her the doomed

figure she portrayed so well on the street and even during her classes at the university. She was a born victim. It was easy to list the chronology.

On the plus side, was the essential fact that her mother was Indian. Her family before settling in the city when she was seven, had lived in the bush. Her mother was smart. She thought that her mother knew five languages and had five husbands. She was the child out of two that survived. The only child that made her mother a grandmother. No, but she didn't see it that way, then. She was too down.

She had six items labelled "adolescence." She had found high school to be boring and regimented. She'd started trying to be an individual then and wanted to go to university. Her mother had left when she was nine and she had needed her mother when she was a teenager. She'd have avoided that rape. She'd have had her mother to tell her about what to watch out for. But, would her mother have been that kind? She'd had a factory job and survived the dating of men in the fifties. She was a "squaw" to them. She never mentioned the details of the date rape. Nor did she blame the minister who told her she'd been "seduced" and why cry about it? Why did she have the night feats? He didn't explain that reaction to her but would her mother have told her? It's like that the first time. Get used to it.

Her reformation attempts were to change high schools. She would get herself to college somehow. She would work and save money to pay tuition. She did get a scholarship but found university boring. She had an identity crisis and did not know much about her own background as a mixed blood Anishinabe. She tried to "be positive" and to "work to improve herself."

She had to be more Indian. Everyone told her she was "too white" or that she was a "monias." It hurt to be rejected because she thought she was trying to better herself. She did marry an Indian who was fullblood and was told repeatedly that all her problems had to do with her upbringing and her blood. That is why she didn't like the idea of her mother having married a white man. Her mother had to be a no good drunk. Her mother was the one that set her up. That was why she tried to get an education because it made her different from her mother.

The word "divorce" was the last entry. Divorce was the new road she was travelling. She had to go home as Indians say. Return and get some roots. I remember being on the inside trying to break through and help her. She knew I was hurting. Somehow we got turned around, inside out. Now she is on the inside. She is okay that way. Safe. It's better this way. She would have killed herself. I had to take over for her to live. She was just too fragile that woman. But she left me a note so that I don't forget

her misery. She was trying to find a way out of her mix-up. It's easy to say she had mixed-up thinking. But, only a person who was at her end would have known she was right to mark change in whatever way she tried.

Day 4 was never written. She set herself up neatly as a woman who needed intensive therapy because she had been beaten up in her marriage. She'd left an abusive partner but had found others to be the same. She knew it was something inside her.

She left off leaving only a faint track of what she had to do to make changes for herself. I find it difficult to communicate with her (That was me, Is Me). She leaves messages for me, the poet, to put into the proper words. She wants me to talk for her and have me accept her attempts to change her life.

I don't like the idea that she left university and got a series of underpaid and undervalued jobs. I would like to have seen her become the Woman of Color professor teaching about Aboriginal Feminism. I would like the idea of her having a pension that I might live on.

No, I hustle and hustle. Sometimes, I curse her for giving up. I know the new trail she took was hard. I've had to work hard to make up for her not becoming an "elite." A Black feminist told me the other day that we academics shouldn't try to dominate the women's community. After insulting me by this remark, she then approached me as if I was an instructor at a local university. I had to tell her, I wish, I wish... I would instruct them... the proper course... action. I know the other recourses to take. I took the other trail of downward mobility and find it hard to communicate with the super achievers I once wanted to be.

If by '92, I find myself free enough to become a feminist, I'll try it. Why not? I've tried every new age fad that grabbed me. I took every self-improvement course I had money for or got by wrangling scholarship assistance. Another couple of books, and I'll be a feminist for sure. I'll just have to explain how I got to be such a right-on politically correct feminist, won't I?

No, I'll say I'm an Anishinabe woman who struggled to be middleaged and to be overweight. I got to be whomever I was intended to become. I still don't know. I have to find out every day. She stares at me in the mirror. The woman who came to herself by not trying so hard to be acceptable to others.

Personal history and a record of change is crucial for me. I am almost 50 years old and I need to know more than what college will teach, I need their degree to have a job teaching. I must have credentials. In what world, would I be able to teach from my experience and life? I must find it. Maybe this is the place, I need to break off again.