This is an excerpt from *Not Native*, my memoir piece in Noisy Water. In this scene I have travelled to Lame Deer Reservation in Montana with my sister/friend Sheila Timentwa. The temperature dropped to minus 40 the night before.

The sky outside stayed crystal blue, but whenever someone opened the front door to stamp in from the frigid day, water vapor condensed out of the moist living room air, creating an instantaneous indoor snowstorm. In order to keep my car running, Sheila’s relatives put it in their garage with a lightbulb burning beside the ignition switch. I became the taxi for any necessary errands. Sheila’s mother, Elva Stands-in-Timber, chose to stay with us during the extreme weather. I drove Elva thirty miles out to her home so she could be certain her water was turned off. During the journey, she recounted stories of winters on the rez when she was a child. Everything had its season then, and cultural stories were passed on in the winter. Her dad gave each of his children traditional stories to learn. He’d tell a story four nights in a row, then the recipient would tell it for the next four, getting errors corrected each night. By the eighth night, the story would have been successfully passed to the next generation.

Elva told me, as we were passing a big field, that it had been the grounds for the Christmas pow-wows. The family would ride in a sleigh with their tee-pee and food for a week loaded onto a pile of hay in the back. The kids would burrow into the hay, sneaking out when their parents weren’t watching in order to ride on the back runners as they slid through the snow. Elva said she never remembered being cold. When they reached the pow-wow grounds, the children’s job was to shovel out a circle for the tee-pee, then fill it with hay, so that, once the tee-pee was set up, their feet and bedding never touched the frozen ground.

Elva looked over at me, then back outside the car window. “My grandmother told me a story of her childhood. She had a memory from when she was very little of her mother dragging her through a creek. They were running. She wondered why her mother was trying to drown her. She heard what she later realized were shots being fired.”

Elva looked down. I wondered if any of my ancestors, who had lived in the Midwest at that time, might have been firing those shots. I wondered at the poignant miracle of us being together in my car at that moment. All whites who spend time on a reservation must struggle past inevitable white guilt.

While we’d all been beading at Sheila’s sister’s house, Elva also had been teaching me how to sew Cheyenne moccasins. When we reached her home, she went to the basement to check on the water. Elva returned with an old cardboard suitcase. Opening it, she shook out a large, gray piece of buckskin with long, thin strips. “This was my grandmother’s wedding dress.” Picking up a pair of scissors, Elva snipped two slender pieces off the end. As she rubbed them with fine sandpaper, the strips changed from gray to snowy white. “You need laces for those moccasins. These will do.” Since that time, I have worn holes in the soles of those moccasins from dancing Intertribal dances at countless pow-wows. I have knotted and mended those frayed laces many times, but I will never replace them.