



DANSE D'AMOUR,
DANSE DE MORT

Л е а н и е Н о в е

As he climbed the burial scaffolding to the bony carcass, he thought of her sex and began growing an erection. He ached for her from the inside of his thighs to his testicles.

She was lying as her relatives had placed her on the burial mat. He raked the leaves that had blown over her remains and leaned down and touched the torn fragments of her hair. Shakbatina's small jawbone lay surrendering to the sun like gleaming pearls. Her skin had been turned inside out by some sharp-beaked, flesh-eating birds. What was left had dried to the bone and resembled snakeskin.

Over time, her exposed bones had taken on that stark, delicate beauty the Choctaws regard as chunk-ash ishi a-chuck-ma. The good bliss.

The Bone Picker examined his wife's decaying body. Some six months before, Imoshe Nitakechi had prepared her body in the

way of Choctaw People of the Eastern Sun; the preparation ceremony was as ritualized as the bone-picking ceremony.

Before being placed on her back upon the scaffold, the flesh directly above both thighs had been sliced away in half-moon shapes in order for the blood and body fluids to run out of the buttocks. Choctaws had long ago learned that the blood of a dead animal quickly gravitates to the lowest point of the body and if an exit is provided, the decomposing process is enhanced. They also pierced the stomach and bladder in order for the bloating gases to escape in the wind. This was to announce to the animal world the Bone Picker's woman was coming.

Shakbatina's head had been turned to face east so that she would greet the rising sun each morning while she too waited for the day of her rebirth. Her umbilical cord and medicine bag had been tied around her neck as part of the ceremonial incubation. A Choctaw's umbilical cord is their first toy; with them before birth, it accompanies them into death. Many of her possessions lay scattered around her body on the platform. The aging Bone Picker looked over his wife's things: a corn hamper made of swampcane; a smaller basket with a long lid that rolled doubly over itself was filled with earrings, bracelets, and her favorite embroidered sash made from the black-and-white skin of a porcupine that she had cut into thin threads and dyed different colors. The threads had been carefully sewn into designs that represented the People of the Eastern Sun—the coiled Snake, the Sunburst, and the Seven Grandmothers. For the most part, Shakbatina's things were intact, even after the scavenger birds had left her. After the bone-picking ceremony her relatives would retrieve the goods and give them away.

The Bone Picker had also prepared himself for this moment. Beginning with the cycle of the full moon, he started his ritual by stripping naked and jumping into the river. Then he swam up and down the shoreline until finally dragging himself onto the bank, allowing the wind to dry him, only to return to the water to repeat the exercise. It was a cold, dry November day and his purpose was sacrifice. On the first day he denied himself warmth,

food, clothing, and shelter. The first day of discipline was for denial.

The second day the Bone Picker entered his sweat cabin to begin to smoke the leaves and purify his spirit for his visions. He drank water and black tea, a concoction that was used both as a narcotic and emetic to purify his scent. He inhaled more of the dreaming tobacco and searched his memories of Shakbatina. He thought of the day of her death, and of her shrunken body pockmarked by the sickness she had endured. He thought of her resolve to stand in her first daughter's place. He thought of the tormented wailing of his daughters at the death of their mother, and of Shakbatina's final words:

This is the day when I will tear myself from your arms and follow my brother to the Nanih Waya. I have lived long enough with these scars. If I were to yield to your tears I would fail you and our iksa. I have done enough for you by bearing you inside my heart. Should you, who were formed of my blood and fed with my milk, be shedding tears? Heh-Hah-Heh! Rejoice because you are headwomen.

I wish that my daughters live to be as old as I am, so that they may deliver all my relations to the Nanih Waya. This is why I am going to take my first daughter's place in the blood revenge. It is a sacrifice that I am happy to make for Anoleta. Heh-Hah-Heh! Che pisa lauchi. I will see you.

When Shakbatina finished her speech, she sang her death song and walked over to the Chickasaws who were waiting politely outside her cabin. She offered her life in exchange for her daughter's life. This was to prevent the two families from engaging in a killing frenzy that would eventually spread to both tribes. The Chickasaws did not refuse Shakbatina's offer, because they had been told in advance that she was an Inholahita: the one who makes the peace.

In the presence of her husband, three daughters, twin brother, and extended family, she stretched out on a log and closed her eyes. As was the custom, a relative of the victim carried out the execution. The oldest brother of the murdered woman approached Shakbatina slowly. He said a long prayer aloud to the Choctaw and Chickasaw iksa members present, then with a swift callous motion, as if he were killing a gar fish coming up for air, he bashed in Shakbatina's head. Blood gurgled forth from Shakbatina's mouth.

Anoleta, in anguish, started to run toward her mother screaming "Alleh, alleh, alleh," an expression used by Choctaw children when they are in pain, but Nitakechi grabbed his niece and they both collapsed on the ground, sobbing.

As Shakbatina tried to raise her right hand to hold her head, she groaned loudly, and the Chickasaw clubbed her several times more. Now fragments of bloodied bone were strewn through her hair, and her body shook as all the remaining breath left her.

With her death, all iksa debts were paid. Everything was settled. After Shakbatina's body had been fastened to the frame, the Bone Picker returned to the place where his wife had stood to sing her death song. He looked across the oxbow river and heard the familiar whispering of the moody pines as they creaked in the wind. He watched a mated pair of fish crows scour the bank for sand crabs and carrion and tried to imagine the woman he loved. Exhausted by his suffering, he fell to the ground and tenderly traced her tiny footprints in the soft, black earth, and wept aloud.

The Bone Picker took another drag from his pipe and put away his memories. His ritual was not for endings but for beginnings. He continued to sing his personal songs until his throat was swollen sore. He gave himself sexual relief often, as the need in him arose. He prepared his clawlike nails with rose paint. His nails had grown purposefully long since Shakbatina's death. He smoked and refilled his pipe again. He was obsessive in his behavior and repeated the cycle until he was completely spent. Finally as his ritual peaked and he was fully in the grips of the black tea

and dreaming leaves, the thing he sought came to him and he rejoiced in its nothingness.

As an aging bone picker, he had seen the nothingness many times before. It is that which separates itself from the known and that which cannot be known. As always, when it first arrived, the Bone Picker was terrified by it, seduced by it, and assured by it. And through his terror, he knew he was participating in the life mystery. On the evening of the second day the Bone Picker slipped into unconsciousness knowing he would live to die and that, through his ritual, he became his people's sacrament. The purpose of the second day was for indulgence in the sublime.

On the third day, the husband of Shakbatina emerged from the sweat, much thinner, still refusing food, and greatly introverted. He spoke to no one. No one spoke to him. He covered himself in bear grease and rubbed sage. He felt invigorated knowing he had succeeded in his purification. While no two ceremonies are alike, no two purifications are alike. Only the knower knows when the experience is complete. After two days with the pipe, the Bone Picker had seen his future in the seductive hallucinations of the smoke and black tea. He was ready to be with Shakbatina. He was ready to face his future and his fears. The purpose of the third day was for rebirth.

The people had also prepared for the bone-picking ceremony. Four weeks before the Bone Picker began his ritual, runners had gone out to the surrounding towns such as Chickasawhay, Yowanis, Conchas, Couechittros, in the eastern district, and as far away as Naniaba, a small town along the Mobile River, calling Choctaws together. The runners were also told to bring back the French traders from Mobile who had intermarried with iksa headwomen. Headwomen, as they were called, collected and traded the goods between iksas. Choctaw men did not own anything of their wife's iksa, rather they preferred that the women make the home and keep it. When a warrior took a wife he moved to her iksa and into her home. If he left her or was asked to leave, he moved out taking only his hunting tools and personal effects. This did not mean Choctaw men were paupers.

Their personal effects included clothes, knives, flints, blow gun, pottery, everything needed to live the complete life, and, as was the custom, women of the iksas shared everything. That way everyone had everything.

Because Shakbatina and her brother were the leaders of the dominant iksa at Yan'abe, the runners were told to extend an invitation to Father Baudouin. The Jesuit then sent an express messenger to the curate of Mobile, Sieur Denys Delage, and asked him to bring other priests to Yan'abe for this special ceremony.

Father Baudouin had been living in Chickasawhay for only one year and was not sure what to expect. All he knew was that something important was happening, and he wanted to be sure that this was not the beginning of another war.

During the three days the Bone Picker sought purification, his relatives had been busy preparing food. They began by cooking hundreds of pounds of pashofa, a corn mush, and deer stew that was heavily seasoned with sage. Adolescent girls prepared the corn flour dough and baked loaves of bread in hot oak ashes. They roasted hickory nuts and sweet yams and covered them with honey. Young children pounded pecans into bahpo, a chunky nut pudding, while their mothers roasted turkey hens over open fires. These were the foods for the day of the dead.

Iksa men stood around their own fires grilling deer tongues and alligator meat that would be eaten after the ceremony. Then the handgames and toli, a physically dangerous game in which two opposing teams of ballplayers attempt to move a small ball toward the goal of the opposing team. Each ballplayer uses a pair of long racketlike sticks to hit or carry the ball back and forth on a large playing field. Choctaws played toli with a vengeance, sometimes against enemy tribes to settle land disputes, sometimes merely for sport among themselves. Men and women of the iksas would come to gamble on their favorite ballplayers. The stakes would be high, and men and women would bring their best trade goods to bet on the games. Choctaws were incessant gamblers and the games would last as long as the food held out.

On the evening of the third day fires were set at dusk beside the burial scaffolding. When the Bone Picker ascended the scaffold, the host drum beat their cadence. Shakbatina's tribesman stopped singing as her man addressed the four directions then looked upon his wife's body.

Dressed only in a string cloth, the Bone Picker bent over the remains. He believed as all Choctaws believed that the spirit is related to the body as perfume is to the rose. Shakbatina's smell was erotic.

Once atop the frame, the tribal drums and the drumming of the forest became deafening. Their purpose was to wake the dead. In the Bone Picker's realm, under the mystic influence of the black tea and dreaming leaves, he could hear the internal drumming of the plants and trees. He could hear the collective prayers of his tribesmen, and if he concentrated, he could hear the thoughts of a single person. The combined noise was maddening and yet all-consuming. This special hearing was not new to the Bone Picker. The People of the Eastern Sun had learned to hear the internal drumming of the plant world eons ago. No Anoli, or Teller, had the knowledge of when this special hearing began, only that it existed and the ancestors had always used it as a tool of survival. The humming and vibrations of the trees and tall corn plants were a soothing comfort to Choctaws. When the musical sounds of the plants changed to a frantic drumming during the dry season, Choctaws helped the plants drum down the rains by imitating the plant rhythm.

The Choctaw drums helped bring the rains and the plants gave themselves willingly to the people as a gift for helping to call the rain. Thus began the stories that the Tellers told the young children of how Green Corn Woman seduced the rain-maker, Umbachechi.

In the Bone Picker's heightened sexual state, hearing the manic drumming of his wife's kinsman and the constant humming of the forest put him in an absolute state of panic and he called to the woman named Shakbatina.

At that moment, kinsmen from the Bone Picker's iksa joined

the chanting. Together the people of both iksas began chanting a different song and dancing the dance of the dead. The Bone Picker called again to the spirit of Shakbatina and yet, as he chanted for her, a memory of great uncertainty flashed in his head.

Before bone pickers, the Choctaw people merely left their dead to rot alone in the ground. Women would grieve over their brothers and husbands begging to stay with the body. Men, too, cried over their wives and sisters and could not be comforted. But still, the people would leave their beloved ones in the ground, never marking the spot where their relatives were buried.

Then an old Teller from Bokchitto named Atuk Lan Tubbee told a story one night that explained what had happened.

Our ancestors were being punished because they left their beloved ones in the ground. One day a head-woman would not leave her brother. She told the people she would keep him with her and she cleaned his bones and put them in a box and Tchatak saw that this was good and they were happy again. A giant red-tailed hawk appeared to our people and told them to make their homes by the rivers. The rivers would be ours as long as we continued to honor our ancestors.

A son and daughter were born to the headwoman and she taught them the ceremony of the bone picking. From then on, the people of the Eastern Sun live by the rivers.

The Bone Picker was born in the tradition of all Choctaw bone pickers. He knew as long as bone pickers called to the ancestors, as long as the people kept their covenant with the red-tailed hawk, they could stay near the rivers and the Nanih Waya.

The husband of Shakbatina shook off the vision of the past. After all, the rules of bone picking would always be observed. There was no reason to be afraid. He would go on without fear.

Speaking his own name, which was held for special occasions, he began the ceremony.

"I am Koi Chitto, Foni Mingo of the People of the Eastern Sun, dancer of death, transformer of life, the one who brings sex, the one who brings rebirth. You must have death to have life. Tchatak people live by killing, by stripping the flesh from the animal corpse. Tchatak lives by dying. That which dies is reborn."

A shrill moan came from the belly of the Koi Chitto. He danced and rolled his eyes back in his head. He had again entered the center of the nothingness. The drums were vibrating his body and the platform shook as if it would break apart. Neshoba, the second daughter of Shakbatina, stopped dancing as the platform came to a standstill and Koi Chitto saw his wife coming toward him.

"Shakbatina is coming. She is here," he yelled.

She looked like the woman Koi Chitto had seen the first time he visited Yan'abe. She was beautiful and round. Slanting almond eyes explained the meaning of her name. Shakbatina: the wildcat. She was the headwoman of the Owl family, a daughter of the Inholakta, the Ones Who Make the Peace.

She came to her husband as a naked bride, her calf-length hair glistening in the evening moonlight. She put her hands on his penis and he put his hands around her hands and together they stroked him, facing one another on the platform, and he ejaculated on the body and screamed.

"Flesh of my flesh, I will be with you always. Flesh of my flesh, I will rest with you always. Until the nothingness becomes everything. Until everything becomes the nothingness. I am the Bone Picker, dancer of death, transformer of life, the one who brings sex, the one who brings rebirth."

Shakbatina continued to dance around the platform and Koi Chitto could hear her laughing and whispering to him as she had in life.

"Dance with me, the dance of death and rebirth. This is my body. You are my blood. Pull away my flesh, Koi Chitto, husband

of Shakbatina, bone picker of the People of the Eastern Sun. I charge you to get inside me. Release me. Unlock me from my past so I can rest with our ancestors in Nanih Ways. Release me. Dance the dance that releases me."

Shakbatina smiled at her man and entreated him to touch her corpse and tear the remaining flesh from her bones. "I will come for you when your time is my time. Of this you know. For now, release me and dance the dance of death with me. Che pisa lauchi."

Hearing her promise that she would see him, that she would come for him when the time was right, Koi Chitto gathered his courage and tore Shakbatina's skull and spinal column from the rest of her bones and held them in both his hands above his head and again saluted the four directions. The aging bone picker knew when he finished his dance and Shakbatina's bones were painted and placed in the box he would not see her again until he too was strapped on the frame and released to join her in the place of the Nanih Ways. Until then, he let her fading scent engulf him. He closed his eyes. Together for the last time they were one, dancing the dance of death, both knowing that this was the ecstasy of life and rebirth.

From a distance of twenty yards, Sieur Delage watched the naked savage claw and tear the skull and spinal column from the decaying corpse fastened to the frame. In that moment of feral exhaustion, he vomited on the ground beside his shelter of palmetto leaves built for him by the Swiss mercenary, Critches.

Since he arrived in the province of Louisiana in 1725, he had never witnessed any pagan rituals. Before the turn of the century the Choctaws of the Lower Mississippi Valley had never allowed anyone not of the blood to witness their ceremonies. Even the early Canadian voyagers who'd been coming to the homelands since the 1690s for deer skins and trumpeter swan bellies had been forbidden to attend the rituals of the children they made with Choctaw headwomen. But that was before the English and Chickasaw slave raiders in 1702 took two thousand Choctaw

warriors at gunpoint and marched them to the eastern sea for what the Choctaws called "the big die-up." That was before the French began exchanging muskets for scalps. That was before one of Delage's own predecessors, Catholic curate Henri Rouleaux de la Venter, tried to incite the Indians to make war on his French enemies.

Now after thirty-one winters of debate, whether to allow those on the outside to learn life from those on the inside, Hatak Holitopa, the Beloved Men, were trying something new. Because borderland wars, blood revenge, new diseases, and early death had come to be oke, or "as is," to all the people living in the eastern district, the leaders made a decision. Just as the people taught their children by example, they would teach Hashi's principles, Chunkash ishi fullo kachi, to the French. The Choctaw would adopt their puny, homeless Filanchi and teach them how to be ever-living, ever-dying, ever-alive in the universe.

Delage shifted his weight from one leg to another. He looked across the encampment. There were some fifteen temporary huts scattered across the cleared fields. Here and there greasy meat pots hung on poles outside of the huts. Iron vats of bear fat boiled over the open fires, which only added to the soured smell of burning hair, blood, and horse dung. The savages had at last set the scaffolds on fire. Some of the tribesmen started to dance. Others sat in circles and chewed on fried alligator meat and roasted sweet yams.

Delage wretched again. He grabbed his sides and sank to his knees. Someone would pay for this. Where is Critches? Why hadn't he brought the negress with him? He searched the encampment for Father Renoir. He looked down at his unwashed hands and bit a loose fingernail. His cassock was stained with grease and food. His body was covered in flea bites. He was not used to being degraded. As a curate, Delage was entitled to a cleric and ownership of slaves. Nothing in his early training, nothing he'd learned from his political manipulations in league with the Bishop of Quebec, had prepared him for what these savages called the dance of the dead.

Delage crawled inside his shelter and wretched again. Everyone had been vomiting for days after they drank kaf, the black drink of the savages. Now he reckoned that he had been poisoned by it. It was cold and dark inside his hut and his thoughts turned toward revenge. He would find a way to punish Father Baudouin for tricking him into taking this journey into the savage homelands. There were always threats of civil war between des Tchactas and des Chicachas. Violence is a constant between natural slaves. Everyone knows this. No one can prevent them from killing each other, just as no one can coerce them into killing each other. "The French are never practical," he said softly.

Delage closed his eyes. He wondered if Father Baudouin was always so uninhibited. A miserable year among des Tchactas was no doubt responsible for his rudeness. The curate smiled to himself when he thought of Father Le Pen whom the savages referred to as "Rabbit Lips."

Then, without thinking, Delage drew up his blanket around his head savage style and yawned. "They all hate me."

When Jean-Marie Critches found Father Renoir slumped over next to a small fire, he first thought the Jesuit was sleeping.

"Father, it is time for the service," he said. Looking closer, the Swiss guard realized Renoir was bent over writing feverishly with his feather pen, covering page after page in his journal.

"A moment please," answered Renoir, and he continued writing.

... We traveled long hours, savage style for eight days until reaching the place they call Yan'abe. Four nights ago hundreds of des Tchactas, from twenty other villages arrived and built fires and shelters close to the site where the ceremony was to take place so they could participate in the ritual singing for a head-woman, her brother the medal chief and the chief's ticho-mingo, the dead leaders of Yan'abe. Many other

savages were scaffolded here as well who had died of old age or disease. While not knowing their ways, I observed more than three bone pickers among the villagers.

Before sunrise three days ago des Tchactas assembled together in small circles of twenty or thirty mourners, kneeling around drums of hollowed-out cypress and stretched skins. The beaters used wooden rods to make the drums sound dichotic and the clatter of wood was sometimes earsplitting. Both men and women then placed blankets over their heads and cried and sang with ten or twelve voices tracking each other in diaphonic tones, sustaining a timbre, a hundred times more powerful than the choirs at Notre Dame cathedral. I was hypnotized. Such feelings of loneliness, I have never known before. It was terribly mournful almost romantic, like the intermittent howling of mated wolves. I think I've learned the specific cries for the dead. Seated within proximity of the singers were pipe-smoking savages, harping to one another, their strident voices ripping through your very soul. For no matter what Father Baudouin says, des Tchacta's language is incredibly foreign, spit out of the mouth one syllable at a time.

Then there are the camp noises; barking dogs and clanging pony-bells on the horses and the high-pitched glee of the savage children. Child's play is not what one thinks of when you watch their games. Their games imitate all aspects of savage life. Hunting. Killing. Making war. Gambling. Giving birth; the savage child's version of playing house. I observed a tiny girl perhaps four or five pretending to be in labor. She was lying on her back, propped up by two young companions who were softly encouraging her in the delivery. The girl's legs were spread apart and she moaned and grunted as if this thing was happening to

her. A truer imitation I have never seen. Another child was playing the role of a doctor waving a kind of feather fan over her. Two other small girls were helping pull the imaginary baby out from the child's legs. I watched in awe, thinking how at their young ages, they had probably all witnessed many such births. Extraordinary. All this childishness going on while in the background their parents sang for the dead.

Two more days and nights we waited. The wailing and hoarse quavering continuing, straining against our ears, ringing in unison with a thousand different sounds of the night forest.

Sieur Delage, Father Le Pen and Father Baudouin and I were huddled together for hours, sometimes roused at midnight by savages who shoved clay pots of food in our faces which we were forced to eat. Father Baudouin says it is considered a sin to refuse their food. Sometimes were overlooked entirely. Then this evening, 24th of November, when one of the bone pickers finally climbed the scaffold and began . . .

"Excuse me, Father, but the men are waiting and they will not be there long."

"They have not found the altar wine or brandy have they? They are expressly forbidden from giving it to the savages, do you understand, Critches?"

"No, Father. I have kept the brandy and the altar wine hidden."

"Good. I am almost finished writing in my journal. I will be with you shortly."

. . . Once the ritual was over many of des Tchactas carried fire in baskets to each other to signal the beginning of the feast which is continuing as I write. If I am correct, des Tchactas worship, among other

things, "Hashi," the sun, and "Micha Luak," the fire. They set pine fires and burn cedar incense all around us. Whiffs of burnt honey drift in the air and mix with the aroma of roasted nuts, herbs, cooked meats and their special tobacco.

I am convinced now that des Tchactas pay more respect to their dead than any other race in the colonies of Louisiana. To them the bones of their relatives are holy. Proof that they existed in the past as they will exist forever. To them everything is "oke," as is. Life just is. One Tchacta who calls himself a diviner, and who is helping me to learn their language, told me a story. He said that Hashi, and Micha Luak, the sun's mate, are of the people. He said the Nanih Waya is their home. He ended by saying "Night begins with the setting sun. Oke." I don't know what that means, but must stop for service. I am a Jesuit after all . . .

Renoir finished his writing and carefully rolled his book and pen in his blanket. Before he arrived at Mobile he had descended the Mississippi with two Canadians and Critches. They were attacked by a small band of Doustonis, members of the Caddoan confederacy, at the confluence of the Red River and Mississippi River. Renoir's pirogue with all his belongings was turned over. Before he could retrieve any of his things, the priest was shot in the arm and shoulder with three small arrows. He and the Canadians escaped the Doustonis, only after Critches killed two of the warriors, but they were forced to leave the pirogue with the trade goods behind. It had taken the priest over a month to recover from his wounds when Regis du Roulllet asked the priests and Sieur Delage to come to Yan'abe.

Each November the Choctaw celebrate the feast for the dead, and it was Regis du Roulllet's hope that the French could instigate war between the Choctaws and the English-supported

Chickasaws. The latter nation was accused by factions of the Choctaws of using bad medicine to bring more deaths to Iksa members.

As Renoir was about to stand and prepare himself for mass, a young woman walked up to him and smelled around his head and shoulders. She did not look into his eyes, but looked down at his feet. She walked around him three times, paying closest attention to his neck and ears.

Renoir had noticed her during the ceremonies. He had guessed she was directly related to the dead woman, whose body was the first to be prepared by one of the bone pickers. Father Baudouin explained that she was the old Bone Picker's daughter.

The woman stopped at his neck, breathed again deeply, and then walked away without looking back.

She was taller than many of the women, who were beginning to gather around the evening fire to dance. She had large, hooded brown eyes, full lips, and very dark skin. There was a two-inch, horizontal scar on her right cheek. Her dress was made of soft deerskin that hung loosely about her frame. She seemed to carry herself with an aloofness that other girls her age did not have. A strand of European glass beads hung down almost to her feet and tinkled softly as she walked. Such a great number of beads meant she was not without means. Her ears were cut and tiny bones and shells dangled from them. But when the priest looked into her face he realized she was still in youth. Still uncorrupted.

Renoir had not been contaminated with the closeness of the woman, white or savage, since he was fifteen. When she bent over to smell around his head and ears, her long black hair had fallen down around his face and smelled of sweet grass and cedar. The Choctaws never cut their hair and, for this reason, many other tribes in the region, especially the Alabimons, referred to them as "the Long Hairs." In turn the Choctaws called their cousins "the Bald Ones." Renoir thought their hair was extraordinary. Even though he was shocked at the woman's behavior, he

D A N S E D ' A M O N I T , D A N S E D E M O R T

felt his penis swell. He blushed, stood up, and walked away quickly with his back to Critches.

"Where did she come from?" asked the Swiss soldier.

"From God," answered Father Baudouin, who had the look of disgust as he approached the two men. "Let us not waste the evening. It is time for the service, is it not, Father?"

"Yes," answered Renoir. "I am ready."

The Choctaw woman walked straight from the Frenchmen to her relatives squatting by a rack of deer meat on a spit.

"He is well, Imoshe. He does not carry the illness."

She kept walking and did not stop until she reached her shelter. Neshoba glanced at the two Beloved Men who had begun to laugh, then she went inside.

"Heh-Hah-Heh! Pay up. You lose. I win," shouted Koi Chitro as he fingered a haunch a meat. "My daughter is never wrong about the sickness. She has the gift."

With a sweeping gesture, Nitakechi smacked his forehead with his palm and croaked, "This time you have fleshed this hen. Here! Take this knife. I am destitute and pitiful. And you, old man, can tell me nothing about my sister's daughter."

Koi Chitro shouted playfully at Nitakechi. "I told you Inki Sweets was not sick, just scratching to himself," he replied boldly. "But no, you said he was with the sickness. That we should take him out and kill him before he infected us. Heh-Hah-Heh! I told you. It is our Filanchi's way. They scratch because they cannot remember anything. They don't know where they are, so they scratch to remember where they've been."

"What for?" asked Nitakechi disapprovingly.

"For no reason at all," echoed Koi Chitro, gazing into the man's black eyes. "The Filanchi call it exire. They scratch everything we say, so they can remember to nag us later. It makes me sad, but I must say it, our Filanchi have a trace of the Natchez in them," he said, tapping his forefinger to his temple.

Nitakechi was highly amused by the comparison between the

Narchez and the Filanchi. A clean-featured man of middle height, he had long straight bones characteristic of his mother's relatives. His black eyes were set in a broad face that was showing signs of aging. His mouth was generous, with a kind of feminine expressiveness that he could not help. He was Shakbatina's twin. And, like her, he was a gift to the Inholaktas, something different they regarded.

As Nitakechi stood up, he winked at his sister's husband. "And so, I guess you are fortunate that you didn't marry a Female Sun of the Narchez, because when they die, the Narchez kill off the Female Sun's husband," Nitakechi laughed.

Koi Chitro was reduced to speechlessness. He reached for the knife, but Nitakechi put out his hand to make another speech, drawing out his words like a great Teller.

"Yes, the knife of Filanchi, the one I gave them fifty deer skins for. The man-killer that has ended the lives of twenty of my enemies . . . the Stone Poker . . . who can hold up the sky with his thing." Nitakechi paused solemnly, then laughed out loud. "Well, of course, no one will ever call you that again."

The Bone Picker thought for a moment. His eyes crinkled and he turned his head from Nitakechi. Finally he let out a whoop and laughed at himself.

"Yes, yes, Waya Talifoni, the Stone Poker, that is what Shakbatina called me. Hah! It has been so long, I had forgotten." Koi Chitro laughed.

Sighing, Nitakechi opened his eyes wide, and as he whispered, he gazed at the moon. "This night, Koi Chitro, you have sincerely fleshed this innocent hen."

Both men were laughing now. "I remember exactly how her voice sounded. It was fairly low and soft, and I always had the impression that when she wanted, she could make it echo," said Koi Chitro with a smile.

"At times, even I felt jealousy of her life mysteries," confessed Nitakechi.

"No," murmured Koi Chitro. "You, who sing with the locusts?"

Both men continued telling stories and remembering Shakbatina. Now that the ceremony was over they could think of her and sing the fire songs. She was at the Nanli Waya and her life was complete.

"Yes," said Nitakechi. "It is good to gamble again."

Koi Chitro looked at the knife a second time, but waited politely for Nitakechi to make his last speech.

"Hekano. I am fleshed," said Nitakechi, grabbing his chest as if his heart were breaking. "Please take this knife, my friend."

Koi Chitro picked up the knife of his wife's twin and threw it in a pile of things next to the fire.

The two men laughed again and began talking in old code, slinging insults at one another. Eventually Koi Chitro lost his black horse to Nitakechi who belly-laughed so hard he fell down. Then together, arm in arm, they walked to Koi Chitro's *iksa* where his sister was cooking more meat before she went to the big fire dance.

During the service, Jean-Marie Critches shuffled his feet and tried to keep from wincing in pain. Each time he knelt in prayer he thought he could not get up again. His feet were swollen and bleeding in his boots. At first only his toes itched, then blisters appeared, then hot fever came into his feet. Now, when he took a step, the open sores oozed blood. The condition began right after the Doustionis incident at the Mississippi, and the Swiss mercenary was positive the infection came as payment for the killings he committed. It wasn't the deaths of the two savages that bothered him. He was a soldier in the service of the company and the king. What bothered Jean-Marie was not the job, but that he enjoyed it, even the killing.

He had confessed to Father Le Pen before the service in order to partake of communion, but his mind wandered. He heard very few lines of the liturgies. The habits of twenty years served him when his concentration wavered. Heads bowed in unison. The chants. The crossings. Alter prayers and beads.

Hoc est corpus. Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus. He floated in and out

of the service. Jean-Marie was not only born Catholic, he was born into the Swiss Guard. His grandfather and father had been in Swiss regiments that served French kings Louis XIII and Louis XIV. For him Catholicism was his only experience. His faith and his father's Swiss Guard were his life. But now something new was bothering him. Devouring him.

Closing his eyes, he began, O Holy Mother of God, hear my cries. I ask for your help in my weakness that has affected my feet. I know I am here for a purpose and I will continue to believe that purpose is to march in the service of the King of France and for my faith, and to help the Jesuit Fathers. But unless the fever leaves my feet, I am afraid I will no longer be able to walk. I realize this is a lesson and I promise if . . .

Jean-Marie stopped in mid-sentence. Father Renoit's words broke his prayer.

"Remembering therefore his death and resurrection, we offer to Thee the loaf and the cup and give thanks to Thee that Thou has counted us worthy to stand before Thee and to do Thy priestly service. And we beseech Thee that Thou send down Thine Holy Spirit upon this offering of the church. Unite us and grant to all the saints who partake of it to their fulfilling with the Holy Spirit, to their strengthening of faith in truth, that we may praise and glorify Thee through Thy servant Jesus Christ, through whom to Thee be glory and honor in Thy holy church now and forever. Amen."

Renoit put the sliver of bread in Jean-Marie's mouth and tilted the cup. With him there were only three other Frenchmen and a Negro manservant whom Father Baudouin had instructed in the faith. As the priest was finishing the service, two young women standing in the shadows moved forward and stood next to Jean-Marie.

The priests were stunned. Renoit turned around and looked at Le Pen and Elage. No one moved. He looked back at the woman standing directly in front of him. She looked right through him, as if he wasn't there. Renoit stood silent waiting for something to happen.

Recognizing the women, Father Baudouin spoke up and tried to translate John's Gospel in her tongue.

"Anoleta, I tell you again most solemnly, that if you do not eat of the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood you will not have life in you. Anyone who does eat my flesh and drink my blood has eternal life and I shall raise him up on that day. For my flesh is real food, my blood is real drink. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I live in him."

When the girl did not move, Father Baudouin spoke again.

"Anoleta, if you let Father Renoit instruct you, you too will have life everlasting. Please let us continue to honor our God our way. We can teach you about the one true God. He is your God also, but you must first believe in life ever-lasting."

The woman continued to look straight ahead, ignoring Father Baudouin. Then she looked briefly at Renoit, but did not make eye contact. Finally she began speaking her language in a lilting, almost magical whisper.

"Did you not see the one who was raised up from the frame this day? Did you know her flesh was food? Her blood was drink? Tchatak, the consumer. The animal, the consumed. Tchatak, the consumed. The animal, the consumer."

Pointing to herself she said, "This one lives. Chunkash ishi fullo kachi. We will pick your bones." Then the woman repeated a phrase of Father Baudouin's.

"Life everlasting. Ataha iksho. The People of the Eastern Sun are forever. Heh-Hah-Heh!"

She turned abruptly, but her young companion grabbed the cup from Father Renoit's hands and greedily swallowed the last bit of wine, then darted quickly into the crowd of women, tossing the cup as she ran. Anoleta never changed her expression of quiet dominance, but walked through the crowd and into the maze of temporary shelters.

"Blasphemy," cried Sieur Delage loudly. "Father Renoit, you let that savage grab the altar cup and drink the wine."

"Why was she whispering?" asked Renoit.

"It is known as the power that whispers. When they are deadly

serious, they speak very softly. She is the first daughter of the headwoman, Shakbarina. The people of her *iksa* say she is a special kind of Teller, a Tachacta woman prophet, who is said to know the future. It was her mother who sacrificed herself as payment to avoid a blood feud when Anoleta was accused of murdering one of the Chicachas wives of Red Shoes. I was hoping that he alone would be caught in the middle and someone would murder him, but this was not to be."

Baudouin sighed.

"Since I arrived at Yan'abe, she has constantly spoken against me. Unfortunately she too has become a wife of Red Shoes. Since she has not met you formally, she addressed herself to you in this way. She hates all French, but she also hates the English. You will learn that des Tachacta women are different," said Baudouin. Then, exasperated, he began searching in the dark for the alzar cup. Eventually a young boy brought it to the priest but would only trade it for a present of cheese.

Neshoba, the second daughter of Shakbarina, pulled the flap of her shelter back and walked into the night. She yawned and watched a fragile star blister, then burst and fall silently through the air.

The night smelled sweet with burning cedar's breath. The sky shown full moon white.

By midnight, every fire in the temporary encampment had burned an offering for protection from what the Chocraws call *kon-wi anun-kasha*, That Which Moves at Night.

Neshoba breathed in the burning fragrance. It reminded her of Imoshe Atokotubbee, her grandmother's brother, who always carried the crumbled leaves in his medicine bag. When she was a little girl she used to close her eyes, smell the cedar, and imagine it was winter and she was again snuggled up against her uncle's comfortable chest. Neshoba could never remember Atokotubbee coming to stay at her mother's house, except when the cold walks with you.

Atokotubbee's visits were a reassuring thing. The odor of to-

bacco was strong on his breath when he walked in the door of their cabin bringing gifts: deer meat and lots of gossip. Neshoba's grandmother would grab the old man's tobacco pouch and squeal thanks in a high-pitched voice.

As Neshoba started toward the center of the encampment to join the others for the Starting Dance Song, she took two steps, another, then stopped. A faint movement in the air, something from the west, startled her. The trees murmured, not enough to stir up the breeze, but enough to chill the sweat on the back of her neck. She looked behind her. Nothing.

"Intek alha, Sisterhood," said Neshoba in a low voice as she bent over to pull out of the ground a small moist shell that gleamed like a silver lure in the moonlight. "I am growing stronger now." She looked back toward the woods with compassion.

Neshoba's world grew calm again. She glanced back toward the footsteps. There was nothing. The sound of the feet had vanished. She laughed, revealing her small white teeth, and said, "I am ready, Imoshe."

A group of Neshoba's relatives had been singing continuously since the bone-picking ceremony ended. When they stopped to eat, another *iksa* took their place and continued singing at the big fire in the center of the encampment.

Neshoba was glad she arrived in time to see her favorite uncle assemble everyone at the *ahilla*, a plot of ground about a hundred yards away from the big fire prepared for the purpose of dancing. She loved the sounds of Atokotubbee's striking sticks. Despite his age, there remained something youthful about his playing and dancing. His eyes always held a kind of sweet mocking; full of so deep a knowledge that all the children of the *iksa* obeyed him without question.

When Atokotubbee saw Neshoba, he said, "Alla tek, a-chuk-ma taha che. The girl will be well."

The oldest member of the *iksa* danced all through the night singing his family's most ancient songs. The next day he burned a special plant and blew the smoke up the child's nose.

On that green morning, Haya, Anoleta, Nitakechi, and the tenderhearted Koi Chitro stood in the doorway of the cabin waiting to see if the girl would remember anything. Shakbatina placed her hand on Neshoba's head and caressed her lightly, so that she would not frighten the girl further.

"Try to remember what happened," she urged. "This is sometimes the way we are given things. Fight hard to remember, so you will know the meaning of this."

Shakbatina stepped aside with respect and motioned for Atokotubbee to come next to the girl. He took Neshoba's hand and patted it, but did not speak. At that moment, a fat buck ran in front of the door of their cabin and headed toward the woods. He had shown himself and several Choctaw hunters went after him.

While Neshoba's legs quickly healed, it was another year before she could use her voice. The wound on her cheek also healed, but left a scar. Some said, Shatanni Ohoyo, the Tick Woman, had kidnapped Neshoba and marked her for some purpose. Tick Woman was known to play tricks on the Choctaw: sometimes bringing sickness to them, sometimes to their enemies. Tick Woman could also be a helper.

As for Neshoba, she had never known what had happened to her, except that over the years, she had become an excellent tracker of wild game. She had a highly developed sense of smell. She was able always to lead her uncles directly to the animals they wanted to hunt. So tonight, Atokotubbee asked his niece to choose the Naholla with the young face and graying hair. "Teach that one to dance, alla tek," he said, motioning her toward the four white men seated apart of the Choctaws next to the fire.

Walking up to Father Renoir again, she was reminded of his scent, and she understood why her uncle sent her. She would teach Inki Sweets how to dance in her fire.

MICHAEL DORRIS is a well-known author who has published several books and stories. In 1985 he received the Indian Achievement Award. His novel *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* (from which "Clara's Gift" is excerpted) was widely acclaimed, and his nonfiction work *The Broken Cord* won the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1989. He and his wife, Louise Erdrich, coauthored *The Crown of Columbus*. Dorris has recently finished his first children's book, *Morning Girl*, and a collection of his short stories, *Working Men*, is forthcoming. He is a Modoc Indian, living with his wife and children in New Hampshire.

A N N E H O W E is a Choctaw who has studied her tribe's traditional burial practices. She is currently working at the University of Iowa, where she is on a state commission that determines the repatriation of Native American remains. She has published two books, *Coyote Papers* and *A Stand Up Reader*. Her story "An American in New York" appeared in Paula Gunn Allen's award-winning *Spider Woman's Granddaughters*. Howe's work has been anthologized in *Reinventing the Enemy's Language*, edited by Joy Harjo; *American Indian Literature*, edited by Alan Velle; and *Looking Glass*, edited by Clifford E. Trafzer.