

# The Missouri Review



**A Man Between Nations: The Choctaw Removal Diary  
of Peter Pitchlynn**

**plus, Mary Lee Settle • Tim O'Brien • and more**



## TAMING MONSTERS/ *Tricia Tunstall*

**T**HERE IS A SIGN, hand-lettered on red construction paper, on her son's bedroom door. It says: NO MONSTERS CAN COME HERE. THAT'S THE LAW.

Her son dictated the words to her at bedtime one night. He watched, his wet lips parted, as she wrote the sign and taped it up. Later, getting into bed, he clung to her. "Mommy," he whispered, "can monsters read?"

She reads, these days, books on child development, combing the indexes for FEARS, NIGHTTIME or MONSTERS, FEAR OF. She knows from these books that four-year-olds are commonly afraid of imaginary beings. She understands that the fears are normal and will pass. "Yes," she tells her son, "monsters can read."

Her husband does not approve of this. He says that by going along with the fantasies she is reinforcing them. "Robbie," he says to his son, "there are no monsters. Right?"

"Right," says Robbie.

"Say it, Robbie. Say 'There are no monsters, not in New York, not anywhere.'"

"There's no monsters in New York," says Robbie, bored.

"Or anywhere."

"Anywhere."

They have this conversation at dinner one night. After dinner, Robbie will not put on his pajamas until she moves the sign lower on the door. "They can't see it so high up," he tells her. The monsters, it seems, are just about as tall as Robbie.

She reads the books on child development on the subway, on her way to work. She teaches English to private students, mostly Japanese businessmen who want to improve their knowledge of the vernacular. She visits their offices for one-hour sessions; they close their doors, offer her tea, ask her questions. "What does it mean, 'wiped out'?" they say. "What does it mean, 'get down'?" She feels tremendous next to them, these small spruce flat-haired gentlemen who smell of scents with woodland names. She feels puff-haired, fat-kneed; her hands look too large for her pen. But she likes the work. It gives her a sense of being useful, necessary to the world's comings and goings. The gentlemen pay her well, do their homework, correct their own grammar with beseeching

looks. They buy paperback novels in drugstores. "What does it mean, 'sugar daddy'?"

One of her students has a friend who wants lessons. "He wants a lot lessons," says the student.

"He wants lessons a lot," she corrects him.

He shakes his head. "He wants a lot lessons. He has a lot money."

It is a small but potent thrill, being recommended, being sought. With the student acting as intermediary, she makes an appointment with the friend. On the morning of the appointment her son bursts uncharacteristically into tears when she leaves him at nursery school. "Mommy, I have to pee," he wails, "stay till I pee!" The panic in his voice frightens her. She stands next to him at the little toilet, waiting. Now he is relaxed, conversational. "You have to *shake* it, see?" he tells her.

The address she has been given is north of the financial district, in Soho. As she goes up the subway steps the sun is white, polished, almost wet-looking. She wishes she knew some Japanese. She has asked several of the businessmen to teach her a few words, but they always smile and tell her, "It's very difficult, Japanese." They are the bilingual ones, not she; they want to keep it that way.

She arrives at a low cast-iron building, its facade blackened by decades of fumes, its windows covered with bars. A man lies on the stoop sleeping, clutching a single running shoe like a teddy bear. She steps around him and rings the bell.

There is silence for a long time. The man sleeping behind her stirs slightly, sings in his sleep. The night before her son had wakened over and over, sobbing. "I can't tell you," he had gasped when she asked what he had been dreaming. "I need some water. I'm cold. Just stay with me *one minute* and *that's it*," he promised, lying with desperate sincerity. She had finally fetched her pillow from the bed where her husband lay, and gone to sleep on her son's floor. In the morning she had wakened with circles on her cheek, the imprint of a stray Duplo block.

The door opens suddenly and she faces a large man, taller and darker-skinned than her other students, and probably younger. He holds out his hand and says what might be his name, then leads her down a long hall and up a flight of iron stairs. "My studio," he tells her as he opens a door into a large room, flooded with hard-boiled light from huge windows facing the street. His accent is faintly British, his tee shirt sleeveless. The muscles in his arms are outlined in black ink.

She looks around the loft. Canvases are everywhere, hung from the ceiling, on the walls, the supporting beams. They are meticulous reproductions of the kind of pictures of food that are displayed in Burger King or McDonald's: huge burgers coiffed with lettuce and tomatoes, tall glasses of sweating soda, fried fish cakes surrounded by curly french fries. The reproductions are perfect, the colors faithful; they differ from the real thing only in size, as the smallest of them is at least ten feet square. "You are an artist," she says, enunciating the words as if the lesson has already begun.

"Yes," he says. "You want tea?"

He wants to talk about food. As the tea water heats he walks around the loft, pointing. "Meat balls," she pronounces carefully. "Cole slaw." He repeats the words after her; their contours are blurred by his Japanese accent, resharpened with the British tinge in his speech. "Big Mac," she says.

He looks joyful. "Big Mac!" he cries, gazing at his picture, "Big Mac!"

Over a cup of black, leaf-strewn tea she attempts conversation. It becomes clear that his English is primitive, and she suggests they work on some grammar, learn a few verbs. "To what avail?" he asks politely. Where could he have learned that? He does not know the words for spoon, cup, sugar. "To what avail?"

"So you can be comfortable with the language," she tells him sternly. He smiles, looking skeptical, and stretches his arms above his head. Someone else must have done the etching along his muscles; he could not possibly have managed it himself. She wonders how seriously he takes it; she finds herself disapproving.

She structures an impromptu grammar lesson around his paintings. "The Big Mac *is* on the plate," he repeats. "The french fries *are* on the plate." As midday approaches the colors in the paintings flash with neon fervor. At noon she rises and puts on her coat. His smile is abrupt, tremendous. "Can you come every day?" he asks. She feels proud of his perfect sentence as she shakes her head.

"I have only one morning a week free," she tells him.

"But after mornings?"

"Afternoons," she says. She remembers that he has a lot of money, and wonders if his paintings sell for high prices. She tells him she will think about it, and will call him.

On the subway platform a reggae band is playing. The music reminds her of the Japanese man's paintings; it has the same



slick, sweet simplicity. He learned from her with unconditional ease; she feels almost dizzy with competence. But if she works with him in the afternoons she will have to hire someone to pick up Robbie from nursery school and stay with him until she gets home. The thought of this makes her teeth ache. Her romance with Robbie is intricate, passionate, a tightly braided skein of coded messages and solemn pleasures, fights and reconciliations. After several years devoted to learning how to make her angry he has recently acquired the gift of making her laugh: he tells her long soap opera plots about dinosaurs, makes up knock-knock jokes, pulls off her glasses and puts them on his own face upside down. They build Duplo structures together; he is patient with her mistakes. While she makes dinner or does the dishes he puts together puzzles on the kitchen floor and then colors in, with crayons, the spaces on the floor where pieces are missing. He knows she will be furious, and will laugh.

She places an ad in the newspaper for a babysitter, hoping no one will call. They call; dozens call, with accents from all over the hemisphere and some from other hemispheres. Eventually she turns on her answering machine and lets the accents flow as the tape runs. Late at night, when Robbie is asleep, she listens to them, replaying the ones with a lilt in the voice, an edge of humor or confidence. She writes down the phone numbers and calls them back for interviews.

They come, young girls, older women, some with babies in strollers, others with careful makeup. "What is your experience?" she asks them. They have experience; they have references. She doesn't believe a word they say, any of them. They are too slow-moving or too nervous; their English is too broken or their nails too long. She uses the monster sign as a test, and there are many ways to fail. "Isn't that cute!" some say, or, wide-eyed, "Ooo, where's the monster?" which is no better than "A big boy like you afraid of monsters?" She rules these out instantly, with a shiver of relief each time. Some of them simply ignore the sign. She is not sure if this disqualifies them or not. Her son spends the interviews with his face in her lap, making clear the enormity of his injury. If he would only give a sign, raise his head for one of them, she could choose. She sighs, laces her fingers through his hair. "I'll let you know," she says.

She wakes in the middle of the night, her heart beating as though she has been caught in a crime. She nudges her husband. "They're awful," she tells him, half-accusingly.

He rolls over. "Honey, what are you looking for? Mary Poppins? Katie Nana?"

"God forbid," she says. "Mary Poppins was a punitive bitch. Katie Nana let those kids get stolen."

"Nobody's good enough for you," he says. "All we need is a nice girl. Other people get nice girls. Just get somebody. If it doesn't work out you can fire her. You don't have to do this job, you know," he added. "Do what makes you happy." He is asleep.

The next day she calls the painter to tell him she will not be able to work with him. "You have dialed a non-working number," says a recording. She stares at her scrap of paper; the numbers are in his handwriting. They are elegant, assured. She can't guess which is likeliest to be wrong.

A girl comes that afternoon, a girl with a Brooklyn accent and recently pink hair. She says she is in night school, studying word processing. Her fingernails are bitten all the way down. She takes off her sunglasses and stares at the back of Robbie's buried head. "Are you gonna talk to me or what?" she says. Startled, Robbie lifts his face slightly and peeks at her. She puts her sunglasses back on upside down. Robbie laughs.

In the Soho loft she and the Japanese painter decide she will call him George. She is embarrassed at her inability to say, or even hear, his Japanese name, but he doesn't seem to mind. "George," he repeats, making it two syllables. He likes it. "You are easy. Anne."

She has brought a grammar book. "It is easy," she tells him, seizing on his word. They turn to the first dialogue in the book. "I am going for a walk." "May I come with you?" "If you like." "That is a pretty dress." Large line drawings depict the conversationalists, a teenaged girl and boy, she with schoolbooks pressed against her chest, he with a backwards baseball cap. "May I go with you?" muses George, gazing at the picture. "May I go with you?" He glances up suddenly. "More food, okay?" he says gently.

She closes the book, keeping her fingers in to mark the page. She loves the food, but isn't sure it is a serious way to teach English. He has gotten out more paintings, ones she didn't see the first time. These are from earlier strata of the American dining record: malted milkshakes, pepper steaks, banana splits. The colors are lurid. It takes George several tries to learn "banana split." When



he finally pronounces it he is elated. He throws open a window and yells it to the street below. "You want food?" he asks, and she understands that it is lunch he is talking about this time, and that he has experienced her words as a gift.

He makes cellophane noodles. Shitake mushrooms lie across the top like wilted orchids. She stares; it would make a spectacular painting. "George," she asks, "have you ever eaten the food you paint?"

He gazes at her as the words click in, one by one, then shakes his head silently; either he does not know the words to justify this or is aware he doesn't need to. The American foods, she thinks, are his monsters; painting, he tames them. They eat lunch; she asks him how to say "noodles" in Japanese. He teaches her the words for noodles, chopsticks, mushrooms, and paint. He teaches her to say, "May I go with you?"

Riding home on the subway, she reads: if your four-year-old develops acute and irrational fears, your best bet is not to introduce any changes in his life, and spend some extra time with him. She arrives home to find the apartment empty, Robbie's toys neat on the shelves. She takes off her coat and washes five carrots before she calls the police.

The door opens as she dials and Robbie wanders in, followed by the babysitter, whose name she cannot remember. He has a smear of chocolate on one cheek, a fistful of crushed leaves. "Hi, Mommy," he says, "I brought you some nature." He lays the leaves in her lap and then turns to his babysitter, who stands slouching, her hands in the back pockets of her jeans, behind him. "Let's go play, Sarah," he says to her, confident, casual.

"She's a nice girl," she tells her husband that night. "I think she'll be good for him."

"Maybe she'll manage to get rid of that monster sign," says her husband, only partly teasing.

That night she wakes up just before Robbie starts to cry. The silence feels like a crucial mistake, a clue. Then the wail rises, and she runs to him, her husband behind her this time because the cry is piercing, more a scream than a sob. She scoops up her son. "What is it?" she calls, her hands on his cheeks. "What is scary?"

"You say it, Mommy," he stammers, "I can't say it."

"Sweetie, is it Sarah?" she says, almost eagerly.

He blinks at her, his face drenched. "Who's Sarah?" he asks. A new cycle of sobs grips him. "The sign, the sign is down," he wails.

She goes to his doorway, turns on the hall light. "See, Robbie, the sign is still here," she says. He is crouched behind his father, who is sitting on the bed. She ignores the look on her husband's face as she reads the sign very slowly, as though she were reading it to the Japanese painter, aloud to her son. As she reads she understands that she herself is comforted by the sign.

In the course of the next few days she and George go out to lunch at a Burger King, a coffee shop, and two McDonald's. He eats, for the first time, the food he has painted; she sees that he doesn't like it much but seems to accept her theory that he will paint it better if he has tasted it. To the accoutrements she finds so offensive—the plastic, the styrofoam, the muzak—he is impervious. She begins ordering cheeseburgers instead of garden salads, remembers to ask for extra ketchup. By the end of the week George has linguistic command of the full menus of every fast food establishment in lower Manhattan. They begin to cook. They make sushi, lasagna, chicken in wine sauce. He can speak of vinaigrette, smoked oysters. One day's lunch often turns up the next day on canvas, the ingredients swollen, vivified. He tells her that since he speaks English with no one else he thinks of the language as one they have made up together, a private mode of communication impenetrable by others. The truth of this excites and troubles her; every detail they add to the sealed world they are making together, every crushed herb and possessive pronoun, is a sharp edge denting the contours of the rest of her life. When she cooks with him she goes barefoot, and the soles of her feet are prismatic with paint stains.

She tries to create leaks, to trail connections between the parts of her life. She tells the businessmen about George's paintings; she talks to the babysitter of the businessmen, to her husband of the babysitter. They listen, from a distance. To George she talks, slowly and carefully, about Robbie. George repeats the names of Robbie's toys; no question, he is a noun man; he needs very few verbs. His joy is in things, their creases, colors, grain. He is dazzled by specificity. "Ghost zapper," she tells him, "proton pak." He writes the words on napkins, in Japanese characters. She tells him finally about the fears. When she explains the word "monsters" he repeats it several times, nods; he seems to grasp the utter specificity of monsters.



When she arrives home in the late afternoons Robbie is always placid, somewhat distant but polite. She wonders if she is imagining that his eyes are slowly acquiring the neutral look of the babysitter's eyes. She wonders if they watch TV; she wonders, more painfully, if they don't, and are spending their time together developing intimate and exclusive rituals which are sillier, or less silly, than her own with him. She watches vigilantly for a sign that he is suffering in some way. But he brings her dirty popsicle sticks from the sidewalks, wrestles with his father before bed. Only at night do the terrors emerge, and more and more often now she awakens before he does and lies in bed waiting for his cry to spring the lock of her own fear.

On the day she sleeps with George she has a picture in her pocket that Robbie has made for her, a crayon drawing of, in his words, a bear in a nighttime cave. A morbid picture, she thought when he gave it to her, a huge bruise of purple and black slashes. His smile was radiant as he told her the title. When she arrives at George's loft she shows him the picture immediately, as if asking for a verdict. He lays it on the table, smoothing out the wrinkles. "Monsters," he says.

They open the grammar book; they have progressed past the courting teenagers and are occupied with a mommy, a daddy, a son and a daughter on a car trip. "We are going north on the highway," says the daddy. "See the fields of wheat," says the daughter. "Fields of wheat," repeats George, with a straight face. The inky lines are gone from his arms, but they have taught her the exact contours of his muscles. His sleeveless shirt is black; his feet beneath the frayed blue jean cuffs are bare. Side by side, they stare together at the drawing of the family seatbelted into their car. Near the open book lies Robbie's desperate picture. When George looks up at her he doesn't move; he is waiting for a word, a noun. "George," she says.

He kisses first one cheek, near her ear, then the other, and only then her mouth. When they stand she remembers how tall he is; they won't fit together unless they lie down, and so he turns away and leads her to the curtain strung up in a corner of the loft. He pulls the curtain aside and gestures to her formally, as though he is holding open a car door. She sits on the mattress and he draws the curtain shut before he lies beside her and pulls her down to him. She closes her eyes, then opens them again; the sparseness of their mutual vocabulary makes looking imperative. His hands on her body are paint-flecked, like her feet. Above his

bent head a cheeseburger shimmers in a tender spill of light.

On the way home, in the subway, she does not sit down. She grips the pole in one hand, her child development book in the other. The mattress behind the curtain had been white and wide, as wide as the fields of wheat that had, she thinks absurdly, been the proximate cause. What the actual cause had been she cannot begin to guess; she is amazed at the scale of what has happened and at the specificity, the level of detail of sunlight and skin, of which it was composed. She remembers she has promised Robbie a new set of Tinkertoys; he wants to build a laser gun to zap monsters. They have planned exactly how to construct it. She wonders if she has betrayed Robbie because of his new romance. Or did her betrayal come first; did Robbie understand it before she did? Her husband's name passes through her mind, and she lets it go; she cannot find a way to think about him just now.

At her door she finds a key in the lock; the babysitter has left it there by mistake. She turns the key and goes in. Robbie and Sarah are sitting on the kitchen floor; he has tied a complicated knot in the strings of his raincoat hood and Sarah is bent toward him, fussing with the knot. They look up wordlessly when she says hello.

She pulls Robbie's folded picture from her pocket, overwhelmed with the desire to confess. "I showed your picture to a friend of mine, a painter," she tells Robbie. His eyes narrow. "My friend liked it," she adds, and then she is on her knees with her face in Robbie's neck. He smells of rain and peanut butter. She is aware that Sarah is staring at her, but Sarah is implicated now, part of a geometry she has helped, however unwittingly, to create; she can see as much as she cares to. Robbie pulls away. "Mommy, can I have gum?" he says. "Sarah has gum."

"Yes," she says. He turns away from her, back to Sarah and lifts his small chin. She bends over him once more and the knot gives; the raincoat slides off, and he leaps, released, as he runs down the hall to his room.



Tricia Tunstall has published a number of short stories and freelance articles.

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