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Besmilr Brigham: A Sketch

Text by Thomas A. Linn, Drawing by Tass Henke

This sketch is an attempt to pack together enough facts to fill the can, and display the essence of the interviewed, on the shelf, like an honest measure of evaporated poet. But Besmilr Brigham does not come apart like a sandlot baseball pitcher. "What do you do for a living?" "Pitch." "And what is your best pitch?" "Poems." Instead, she talked of emotion, and feeling, and pointed with her hands.

A man once asked her, "A poet. You mean you write about the little birds and bees? She responded by reading him several of her poems. The man was so impressed he asked her to read at his coffee house. Mrs. Brigham accepted and spent the evening reading poems very much not about the little birds and bees, in what she described as a converted mortuary.

The signs on campus advertised her as a Choctaw poet. Her poetry does not mention bows and arrows, scalps, or treaties. I thought, "Where are the Indians?" a logical and "safe" first question.

"You don't know me," she answered.

My safe question had somehow taken me beyond the fort. I tried to qualify it, but could only stammer, "but . . . but in your poetry . . . what about . . ." Mrs. Brigham kept talking. She talked while I back paddled, tried to take notes, and think ahead for another question.

My notes: Great grandfather a Choctaw chief who appeared one day on the other side of the river with a thousand slaves. Married an Irish girl. The Indian blood line is inherited through the woman. That's why Mrs. Brigham is not recognized by the Indians as being a Choctaw.

My interview machine now lies busted in the barn. I fed in the facts, but the words "emotion" and "feeling" slipped over the cogs and jammed the gears. It left me the task of explaining that despite the Indian concept of inheritance, I believe Mrs. Brigham to be a full, red blooded, Choctaw, simply because she is one.

There are a few notes I was able to yank out of the gears. She often said these things without a question, but they seem to apply to the questions actually asked by students during her three days of lectures.

Question: Can a young person, without your experience, write poetry?

"Get yourself a big pile of paper."

"Go on writing, and then when you get older and change, your writing will change."

"Art is not something personal."

"It is not discovering yourself. You know yourself today. How are you going to know yourself tomorrow?"

"There will be a few (writers) who will give you so much."

"Read the 60's, 50's, the 40's, 30's, and the 20's." "Some won't give you much now, but will affect you later. I know that too."

Mrs. Brigham lives near Horatio, Arkansas with her husband Roy. They have a mailman named Pete. Mrs. Brigham mentioned that once after Pete told her she had won an award, and she opened the letter and saw the check herself; she cashed it and bought some strawberries from the woman up the road.

"It was just like eating poems," she said.

Question: When did you start to write?

"How long have I been writing? All my life. When I was a little girl churning butter, and I was finished, I'd go write a poem about churning butter."

When Mrs. Brigham started college, her adviser asked what she wanted to study. "He must have been a literal man," said Mrs. Brigham. "When I told him I wanted to write, he said one word, 'journalism.'"

Her husband operated a newspaper in Texas, which they sold. "We didn't want to live that way," said Mrs. Brigham. "We went back a few years ago and the lot was divided into four sections. They were asking twenty-five thousands dollars a section. Roy and I just sat down and laughed."

Question: Why do you write about Mexico?

"There are two places I love more than any others: Mexico and Mexico."

"We were down in Old Mexico, in route . . ."

"We slept where we found a place. Where we were."

"We often camped and made no more than twenty-five miles a day. If we saw a beautiful tree just up the road, we would often camp again."

Besmilr and Roy broke their last twenty dollar bill to go to Nicuragua. When they stopped to buy a coke, a man offered to trade one hundred and eleven raincoats for their car. The man only had one hundred and nine raincoats, but he made up the difference, and the Brighams traded their car. In Nicuragua they sold the raincoats in a port town that Mrs. Brigham's father had once visited.

A banana boat brought them from Nicuragua back to the United States.

"You smelled of bananas constantly."

"The ship goes like this," she tilts her hands, "and like that."

"Like a little riverboat, you just go to the back and hang over."

"For years I couldn't eat a banana."

Question: Where do you get your images?

"My work may sound imaginative sometimes, but its very very literal. 'Brief houses for the dead.' Not graves, but little houses with windows and decorations, because the ground was too hard to dig graves."

"I do not manufacture the symbol. If the body



holds a symbol, it is because I described the body.”

Question: Why do you write poetry?

Besmirl Brigham gave this question a slow double-take, and talked about poetry.

“I found it was a game.” Pause. “A very serious game.”

“Poetry is functional with sound.”

“We live inevitably in an abstract world.”

“Very much we only see in the remarkable, the exaggerated.”

“You do want it to mean something to someone else.”

Question: Did your style of writing change?

“Is there development? Well I don’t know. A

poem is a poem.”

Question: Where do you get your ideas?

“Mexican newspapers, the library, on the radio, everywhere.”

“It’s surprising what you can find that a Spanish instructor can’t tell you.

“We paid a boy to go to the circus if he would return and tell us what had happened. It’s good to get a different viewpoint.”

With all this information I was only able to kick one conclusion from my broken interview machine.

“You know,” said Mrs. Brigham taking off her glasses, “with these bi-focal glasses you don’t always see things straight.” She smiles, “they are new.”