

*Mary TallMountain's Writing:
Healing the Heart—
Going Home*

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My roots are here, I feel them deep in my memories, in the hidden spaces of my blood. It doesn't matter where I live; I will see the rounded cabins set together. I will see the hill where my mother lies clean and shining under the roots of this ground.

MARY TALLMOUNTAIN, "My Wild Birds Flying" (204)

IN HER WRITING as in her life, Mary TallMountain has faced the choice to ignore her birthright as an Athabascan and try to fit into the white world (a path her step-parents tried to force on her and one which nearly killed her) or to turn and face homeward, to reclaim her heritage even though it meant feeling the pain of having been removed from it. Longing for home informs TallMountain's writing at all levels. By "home" I do not mean only a particular place, much as Nulato in Alaska, in TallMountain's case, might be the template. I mean a state of being, a remembrance, the nurturance of a reality that forms TallMountain's (or anyone's) home in this sense.

In "My Wild Birds Flying," TallMountain admits that

[t]he flung velvet of the island can't outweigh the dirt that blows in the road. The spirits in the graveyard can't show me where my mother lies; and I will not let them persuade me to return here. But I know who I am. Marginal person, misfit, mutant; nevertheless I am of this country, these people. I have used their strengths. I have wrestled to the earth their weaknesses that have echoed in me. But I must find another home. This one is not what I sought. (179)

Paula Gunn Allen, poet, novelist, and Native American scholar, during a seminar I took with her in the mid-80s, asked us to think about the tears that sometimes come when we encounter something beautiful. We agreed that at such moments we are

moved by recognition of "home." The tears come for a state we recognize as ours but lost to us. Almost everyone has an idea of what a perfect world would be like and experiences these moments of recognition and longing for it. Some, like Mary TallMountain, have that vision strongly and concretely enough before them to work for its return. In her autobiographical essay, "You Can Go Home Again," TallMountain pictures herself and Allen, her mentor in the early 1970s, as they sat on the floor of Allen's apartment to read TallMountain's poetry:

It became clear to me that this ability hadn't been given solely for my pleasure, and that I had an obligation to myself and to my peers to use it constructively to rebuild, perhaps, some part of the world I live in. Paula and I never spoke these thoughts. They were conveyed to me in some subtle manner of our minds. In one of my quick clips of vision, Paula and I are caught changeless, sitting still and rapt, Indian women bound by the enduring thread of a common dream, a powerful purpose. (8)

In another aspect of home, in "Matmiya," TallMountain speaks to her Athabascan grandmother. The spirit within Matmiya (a word which means "tall mountain" in Athabascan) has sustained the child in her struggles. The memories of this woman who lived within the traditions of the Koyukon people before Mary TallMountain was born were part of the connection that enabled the poet to redefine and rebirth herself in a different cultural setting:

I see you sitting
 Implanted by roots
 Coiled deep from your thighs.
 Roots, flesh red, centuries pale.
 Hairsprings wound tight
 Through fertile earthscapes
 Where each layer feeds the next
 Into depths immutable.

Though you must rise, must
 Move large and slow
 When it is time, O my
 Gnarled mother-vine, ancient
 As vanished ages,
 Your spirit remains
 Nourished,
 Nourishing me.

I see your figure wrapped in skins
 Curved into a mound of earth
 Holding your rich dark roots.
 Matmiya,
 I see you sitting.
 (*The Light On the Tent Wall* 84)

TallMountain utters into being, into rebirth, the roots that nourished her mothers before her and continue to nourish her ("o my / Gnarled mother-vine"). In her bedroom in Petaluma, Northern California, is a large photograph of three generations of her mother's family: her grandmother, Matmiya; her mother, Mary Joe; her mother's sisters; and herself. She told Bill Moyers in his 1987 interview with her that she speaks to these matriarchal allies every morning. In this way, she continues to be nourished by their spirits directly. The roots that coil deep from her grandmother's thighs through "fertile earthscapes / Where each layer feeds the next / Into depths immutable" are also her own, the same roots rediscovered she had thought were dead for her. Birth, loss, destruction and healing weave their way through all her poetry and her stories, culminating in the novel she is presently finishing, *Doyon* or *Wolverine*.

The title poem from a recent volume of TallMountain's poetry and stories, *The Light on the Tent Wall*, maps the struggle from before birth to her discovery, after years of angry voicelessness, that she could recapture her dream of home:

There was light. Suffused
 onto canvas through mother's womb.
 Her round belly turned the
 tent wall pink. There was humming,
 soft talk about the baby coming.
 Women, mothers, warm by the
 Yukon stove, visiting Mary Joe
 and her child, I who lay unborn
 in her cradle of light.

Years came. I was taken
 where there were no tent walls,
 where I had to dream my own,
 and as time passed, often
 I saw the light on the wall.
 No longer pink, it was
 fire, its tongues licking

the tent wall.
 Fire of our life, flickering.
 Light returned where I was,
 moving through far places, years.
 Not suffused now. Gone
 the voices, singing. Useless,
 wind plucked with
 chill fingers at the wall.
 Often the sound was angry,
 hasty, wanted to speak
 but could not find the words.

I overtook it, brought back
 my dream. Light dyed the canvas
 the color of mother's blood
 gliding through her womb,
 through labored lungs,
 through death, and I
 remembered the color of her blood,
 light on the tent wall,
 painted by my infant dreams.

Sometimes I still hear
 angry winds plucking mutely
 at the wall. The light is there too,
 and thinking of the watching women
 I wonder whether they
 saw the light on the tent wall.
 I saw it plain before my birth
 and held it a half century.
 I will hold it forever (*Light* 18)

TallMountain was the first child in her village to be adopted Outside: "I was taken / where there were no tent walls, / where I had to dream my own." The light became fire. And the wind "Useless, / wind plucked at the wall. / Often the sound was angry, / hasty, wanted to speak / but could not find words." TallMountain speaks softly in this poem, without anger or bitterness, but the struggle and pain in her words are clear. So is the hope: "I overtook it, brought back / my dream." And the determination: "I wonder whether they / saw the light on the tent wall. / I saw it plain before my birth / and held it a half century. / I will hold it forever." Through her mother's death and her own brushes with death she brings back the embryonic dream of light "suffused / onto canvas through mother's womb." Though that light became

fire that burned and the wind chilled without a voice, she was able to remember the life in which her dream originated.

Another poem in the same volume, "Ripples" (from the triptych "Continuum II"), envisions the nourishment TallMountain was able to reclaim as available to everyone within the mystery, the filamentum of creation:

throughout the filamentum
 a river of mystery is flowing
 the river of nurture
 from which all creatures
 freshen in strange osmosis
 creating gentle ripples
 curving curving outward

 sounds to sunrise
 one clear voice in tongues
 of fifty friars wakened
 in the dark dawn
 for the new song
 afar the silken strands tremble
 someone is reborn
 the same eyes look out
 from all the crowds
 the same eyes for ages
 look out and will look
 and nothing ever after
 will be the same
 the filamentum flutter
 all is interlaid upon its selves
 the ripples run (*Light* 61)

"Ripples" is one of many ecstatic religious poems Mary TallMountain has written. When she became a Franciscan Catholic at the age of thirty, influenced by her musician friend Reuel Lynch, she only deepened the mixture of Catholicism and Athabaskan spirituality in which she and her mother were raised. Because she is deeply aware of the destruction of the filament of roots everywhere in our society, TallMountain describes a spiritual alternative: this "creation / itself a many-threaded mass / of free-weaving filamentum / fragile as waving sea fronds / tough as a woven web" as a universal source of nourishment (Continuum II, "The Womb" 1-5). "The river of nurture / from which all creatures / freshen" is marked by ripples at each node of being,

every ripple widening to nudge at every other: "All is interlaid upon its selves."

In an essay, TallMountain addresses the abandoned child she had been:

From us will come some wonderful things for people we might never know, but they'll hear us say something, and it might change life for them just a little bit, give them some new way to think. And that's because of you and me, and how we are. How we love each other and our folks and them, and that magic Spirit we can't see

("Dialogue With Lidwynne" 9).

TallMountain's writing is that of a healer, a re-remembering of self and others. Her self-healing has had two shapes which are distinguishable but not exclusive: western style therapy and the kind of remembering that Rayna Green discusses in her introduction to *That's What She Said*:

Before European writing, there were voices to sing and speak, dances to make real the stories that the People told or to honor the retelling anew. There were hands that talked and drew and shaped. . . . [T]he story got told, and it gets told now. The old ways of speaking aren't gone. They've changed of course. There has always been change; there are always new ways to remember. (2)

Mary TallMountain uses her writing as a voice for such stories. She sees to it that the story goes on, that a way of living is not forgotten. She has been a teacher, travelling through Alaska to small communities, to prisons to give writing workshops. And in 1987, TallMountain became a founding member of the San Francisco Tenderloin Women Writers Workshop, a support group where local women could share written expressions of their lives. The Tenderloin in San Francisco is home to street people, the elderly poor, immigrants who have not yet found their feet, hookers, and all those who cannot afford to live anywhere else. Mary TallMountain went there when she lost her job and her apartment during her first bout with cancer. She spent a total of 20 years in the Tenderloin before moving to her present home an hour north of San Francisco. Several of her poems and particularly her short stories are about the residents of the Tenderloin. Carol Heller, a member of The Tenderloin Women Writers Workshop for several years, describes TallMountain's part in it with great care and affection:

Mary TallMountain owns a red tee shirt inscribed with the words, "A Warrior is Geared to Struggle So Her People Will Continue." . . . In just the way that her tee shirt describes, Mary TallMountain and many members of the Tenderloin Women Writers Workshop were, in fact, warriors [who] . . . wrote so that their people would continue. Through her writing, Mary saw to it that her Athabaskan ancestors would continue. She also saw to it that her "street brothers and sisters" would be offered stature and places of distinction in her stories. They, too, would continue. (231)

Heller discusses TallMountain's stories of the homeless and alcoholic among the population of the San Francisco Tenderloin: "She wrote of how these men's elegance and stature seemed to diminish before her eyes as they remained in the Tenderloin and grew increasingly lost amidst big city life, displaced in their own sense of identity as Indians. She could as well be speaking of herself at an earlier time" (77-78). TallMountain's path of healing in writing hasn't been easy. Before she took up writing seriously in the 1960s, she was almost broken by pain. Paula Gunn Allen says in her Foreword to *The Light on the Tent Wall*,

Over the years I've known her, Mary has been close to death several times. She's always in the hospital, or just coming home. She's always breaking something, or repairing something. Her heart is always breaking. Her eyes are huge now, magnified into great almonds as her sight fades from looking into the misted distances for so long. She goes on and on. Like her poems, like her people, like her city, like her faith, like her earth, she continues, facing and beating unconscionable odds. She's always dying, and always keeping on. (2)

TallMountain attributes her many illnesses and recoveries to "[r]esentment, frustration, anger hidden for years [which] exploded first in one radical cancer and then years later in a second" ("You Can" 8). She has sustained a quadruple heart bypass and more recently two strokes that have left her with impaired memory and speech, able only with difficulty to pursue the writing "she was born to do" (Allen, Foreword 2).

In her interview with Bill Moyers, she told him that the self-directed anger never left until she could speak with her child self (named Lidwynne in her autobiographical novel, *Doyon*) who had been abandoned and exiled so many years before. In "Dialogue with Lidwynne," she writes,

I had buried Lidwynne beneath the rubble and cacophony of fifty years of life in an alien culture. . . . I began a series of monologues addressed to [her]. Gradually, I heard a little voice answering, interrupting, often singing. So began my discovery of Lidwynne. (8)

She asks the child for forgiveness, for, as well as fighting the illnesses that seemed to knock her down as soon as she began anew, TallMountain faced years of alcoholism that began with her working life in the city in the mid-1940s and ended only when she realized that she was walking the road of death:

I know you were grieved. You felt alone, so long. I saw you in the clay out of which I had shaped your likeness, and I wept for having rendered you unsightly, O beloved and loving child. I had made you frightened and unfree like a chastened animal instead of the exquisite being you were intended to become. . . . You are my ignored childSelf, and I see you are beautiful. The ignoring has haunted me like a lean hawk on my shoulder, so often has your shadow come rushing back, weeping. Receive my plea for forgiveness. (8)

In the poem "Schizophrenia," she places minute but pivotal scenes from her life—"staring / at a stranger's gun / and into eternity," "I wake at evening asking / why is morning so dim"—on one side of a hinged poem. Her life at that time balanced precariously between the suicidal despair and buried anger of "the gray / maudlin buzzing caverns" and the hope and healing in poems that "wander gossamer / through / shadows in my mind" and "the murdered mantras of life:"

	booming	
	foghorns	
	sad	
	behind my heart	
		where has the sly moon hidden
		trifling
		with her lover stars
so I burrow deeper		
into the gray		
maudlin buzzing caverns		
		poems wander gossamer
		through
		shadows in my mind
out of the mazes		
I wake at evening asking		
why is morning so dim		

dusk flows rich as canvas
 painted in oil
 by Rouault

staring
 at a stranger's gun
 and into eternity

while somewhere monks
 chant
 gregorian masses

knives flash
 blood drips in dust
 police sirens howl

and I hear the murmured
 mantras
 of life

(*The Light On the Tent Wall* 42)

Like an argument for and against survival, "Schizophrenia" graphically presents to us the moment at which TallMountain emerged from her "caverns" recognizing that she wished to live and what she wished to live for.

What are the foundations of the vision that Mary TallMountain has worked to redeem and sustain? She was born in 1918 in the tiny sub-arctic village of Nulato on the shores of the Alaskan Yukon. It was the end of World War I and the beginning of the Russian Revolution, an event closer to the Alaskan plateau than to the U.S. Her great-grandfather had been Russian, and her folk, the Koyukon of Nulato, knew more of Russian traders than they did of Americans. TallMountain says that the word "Gisakk" in the poem "Gisakk Come He Go" probably comes from "cossack":

We live a long time,
 We live on salmon, bear.
 We care for land.
Gisakk come, he go.

He freeze self. Lose dogs.
 He burn lungs. Lose legs.
 He waste everything. Meat, fish.
Gisakk come, he go.

Mosquito bite him.
 He wear wrong clothes.
 He drink, lose trail.

Gisakk come, he go.
 He don't talk right, don't
 Know when to sit down, get up.
 He make too much talk.
Gisakk come, he go.
 He spend too much *dinga*.
 He gamble away his house.
 He lose his wife.
 Sometimes *Gisakk* go.
 Maybe he go for good. (*Light* 21)

In Nulato, when TallMountain was born, the advance of the post-war white world had come only as far as the Catholic Mission, the white government doctor and his wife, and the U.S. Army, which brought Clem Stroupe, TallMountain's father, to Alaska. The Athabascan people acknowledged the Christian god in public and kept to their traditional ways in private. They used the white doctor for some things and their own healers for others. And they befriended those in the Army who would be befriended, like TallMountain's father who played his music for their dances.

TallMountain's mother, Mary Joe Demoski, and her father, Clem Stroupe, never married. The Catholic Church on one side and the U.S. Army on the other forbade it. Her mother had been married at 14 to an old man from another village. They had a son who went with the father when Mary Joe Demoski sent her husband away. After they met, despite being able to live together only sporadically, the young couple spent ten years together and had two children, Mary and her young brother Billy.

TallMountain's mother had already contracted TB before she met Clem Stroupe, and by the time TallMountain was six years old, Mary Joe Demoski found herself too weak to care for her children. Knowing that she would not live, she made the decision to give them up to the white government doctor and his wife, the Randles. She hoped that in this way they would receive education and advantages she had longed for but never had and, most important, that they would be saved from inevitably catching the disease themselves. The village council agreed to allow her to send away only her daughter.¹ Clem Stroupe found out that he was to be transferred to a station too far away for visits, and the family dissolved when TallMountain was sent Outside in 1924.

In "Brother Wolverine," TallMountain writes in the grief-stricken voice of her Mother:

girl child
 they took you so far away
 upriver I hear
 the mailboat whistle
 my heart jumps
 waiting for words from you
snaa',
 I miss you
 when the children shout
 down by the slough and
 when I see leaves of *k'eeey*
 dance in the white wind
 in pictures you sent
 you wear the fawnskin parka
 I sewed with little sinew stitches
 by the light of our coal-oil lamp
 around your face I see
 the gray ruff of Wolverine
 he has *yeega'* of power
 his ruff can stop
 the winter winds
 from freezing your breath
 into needles of ice—
 I give you his fur
 Wolverine, we call Doyon
 the Chief,
 snarled in my trap
 bared his teeth, bit the air
 it was his last battle
 he came home with me
 Brother Wolverine
 let your fur warm my girl child
 guard her in far strange places
 make her fearless like you
 do not let her forget us
 Brother Wolverine (*Light 24*)

TallMountain can remember wearing to school this fur anorak that her mother had lovingly made her after she had moved to Oregon with her stepparents. She was made to go up on stage in front of an assembly of white schoolchildren, an "educational

project," where TallMountain herself was the trembling show and tell. She says that between the pain of her isolation and humiliation at school, her stepparents' forbidding her to speak her own language, and the molestation by her stepfather that had already begun in Nulato, she took to sitting in a dark cupboard and biting her hands until the blood ran.

TallMountain herself muses over whether her mother would have regretted letting her daughter be taken Outside by strangers if she had known what would happen to her; or whether she would have done the same thing again knowing that staying, TallMountain might not have lived because of the tuberculosis which killed her mother when TallMountain was eight, and her brother, who stayed, when he was seventeen. If she had not been adopted out to the government doctor, had stayed to finish her growing in the village, perhaps we would never have seen the writing that haunts its way back to Nulato, back to the roots that came to hold so much charge because she was taken away so young. She might not have found in Nulato the circumstances that would impel her to write as she did Outside.

But the fact is that TallMountain has pulled into her writing those pieces of all the worlds she has lived in that will enable her to be a warrior, to create "home": "From each level in this alien culture, I reaped something to put into my bag of laughs and tears," she says (*Continuum* last page). Even from an early age this has been so. She learned reading and writing first with her mother, who had been educated at the Catholic Mission in Nulato, and continued learning with her stepmother Agnes Randle whenever she went to stay with her and after they left Nulato. In "You Can Go Home Again" she remembers that her stepmother introduced her to classical literature. Wordsworth was a particularly strong influence on her, and she told me that the "best writer" for her was Gerard Manley Hopkins, another ecstatic sacred poet of the natural world.

Ultimately feeling a stranger both within the white world that had taken her and the Indian world she had been taken from, in the early 1970s she began to untangle her roots as later she was to help and encourage others to untangle theirs. The editor of a Franciscan newsletter in San Francisco, *The Franciscan Way*, be-

gan regularly publishing her poetry, and TallMountain came out with her first chapbook, *Nine Poems* (1977). Long out of print, this small edition of crystalline early poems shows TallMountain already speaking to remembrance:

I Send You Dulcimers

I send you the last peregrine falcon
scent of bitter lemon
pale gold wine to sip
by the waters of the moon

I send you a flash of jimson weed
near a dusty desert road
a sheet of rain
the promise of spring

I send you dulcimers
clanging cymbals born in fire
and far sea flutes

with these my hope that
you shall have the kind of world
that remembers

These gifts that TallMountain sends us, “the last peregrine falcon,” the “scent of bitter lemon,” come to fruition in the last stanza. Her hope is what she is sending—“that / you shall have the kind of world / that remembers.” She sends things that hold dear in memory for her. All of them earthy, even “the promise of spring” and “far sea flutes,” they yet have an air about them of frailty and longing, perhaps given by that “last peregrine falcon.” In the last stanza, TallMountain weaves a continuous knot. Her hope is for a world that looks forward only with the kind of remembering which preserves.

It was when she was in the hospital fighting her first cancer, having lost her job, her home, and most of her money, that she first encountered the wolf spirit. This is the wolf she speaks of in her interview with Bill Moyers. It is the spirit who inspired her desire to write and who accompanies her and, in “The Last Wolf,” still speaks words of healing through her:

The last wolf hurried toward me
through the ruined city
and I heard his baying echoes
down the steep smashed warrens

of Montgomery Street and past
 the few ruby-crowned highrises
 left standing
 their lighted elevators useless
 Passing the flicking red and green
 of traffic signals
 baying his way eastward
 in the mystery of his wild loping gait
 closer the sounds in the deadly night
 through clutter and rubble of quiet blocks
 I heard his voice ascending the hill
 and at last his low whine as he came
 floor by empty floor to the room
 where I sat
 in my narrow bed looking west, waiting
 I heard him snuffle at the door and
 I watched
 He trotted across the floor
 he laid his long gray muzzle
 on the spare white spread
 and his eyes burned yellow
 his small dotted eyebrows quivered
 Yes, I said.
 I know what they have done. (*Light 80*)

Mary Hope Lee, a former community college teacher in Oakland who has been teaching TallMountain's poetry for some time, told me "The Last Wolf" would invariably bring tears to her student's eyes. Many of them had grown up in the "ruined city" and knew well its "steep smashed warrens." They could empathize with TallMountain's quiet words, "Yes, I said. / I know what they have done."

TallMountain's encounters with death and with destitution have brought her not to bitterness and despair but to that place where she "slipped as comfortably into my niche as a hand into a silk glove, realizing it as my vocation, my obligation, to observe and to write of any alienated people I encountered, chiefly of the Alaskan Natives" (*Continuum* back page). Eventually her illnesses forced her to live on a disability pension, but she has used the time given her to write, teach and write some more; to be a key participant in forming and guiding the Tenderloin Women Writers Workshop, and to involve herself politically in her community. It was ten years into her writing career that TallMountain

began going regularly to Alaska travelling by bush plane across the country, teaching in local schools and prisons, and organizing workshops and readings at local community centers.

Another strong contributor to TallMountain's vision of healing has been her involvement in the Franciscan Order of the Catholic Church. Her concern for the homeless and the city's lost spirits draws strength from her experience of Franciscan mysticism. And the ecstatic tone of some of her poetry comes from this source, as in "Bright Shining":

Companion to me in every place,
 You stretch your hand: I see
 Majesties of mountains
 Crowned with living light.
 Your arm flings wide: I see
 Wild little islands wrapt in fog
 Grey luminous; hidden folds
 Of emerald and ermine earth.
 I fly free clean through glowing
 Cat's eye aquamarine
 Filled with light air breath
 Swaddled in this cocoon
 This dense and lifeless mass
 Yet weightless I
 soaring with it shall be for you
 Light bright shining (*Light* 53)

"Bright Shining" offers a blend of TallMountain's Franciscan mysticism and the sacredness of earthly things in Koyukon tradition. Both Franciscan and Koyukon visions come together in TallMountain's writing. "In the Night Also" is another manifestation of her ability to give voice to an immanent mysticism:

You who inhabit the solitudes,
 who sing in the thrusting Yukon,
 who stir the breast of the snowy owl
 To think that you
 who paint the veils of northern light
 should linger here with me
 You who brood in the tundra; bud
 in the small wild rose; flame
 in the midnight sun—

Drift my gossamer thistledown
 home
 on your endless river (*Continuum* n.p.)

Catholic religion and Athabascan spirituality mingle with her father's Irish dance of words. No corrals here, but vast space of tundra seen through silk-thin petals of a wild rose. All the influences blend to show how supremely the resources of a cross-cultural experience can be used.

Speaking of Cornelia Jessey's work *The Prayer of Cosa*, TallMountain discusses the notion of "cosa" or "thing" as prayer: "It is a God-given concept, especially for these times. It seems possible to sanctify the things of earth by our very presence if we but summon God to walk with us on the earth he has made" (Rev. 42). She suggests that the things we are surrounded by can be offered up as "prayer-fragments . . . composing the song of a human and fragmented life . . . a song that connects with the Creator of all things" (36).

What I understand from conversations with Paula Gunn Allen is that this regard for rightness of action with respect to small everyday things strongly differentiates a traditional Native American way of living from the way most of us in the Anglo-American world are. We have hardly more than a cursory awareness of our physical surroundings. This is something that comes across very clearly in the presence of Mary TallMountain. She experiences life in a worshipful way. This is not to say that she is solemn or pious or even that she isn't about to rid her apartment of cockroaches! But she lives in a space that has time for a deep appreciation of everything in her life.

TallMountain's illnesses resulted in her inability to work and finally in her receiving a modest disability pension, which has enabled her to spend her later years writing, teaching, giving readings, and getting published. Again, circumstances which might have thrown a less focussed and self-knowing person into destitution offered TallMountain the opportunity to dedicate herself to what she saw as her life's work.

Because she had decided to face her past, she seized the chance to spend the last few years of her father's life caring for him. Through her reconnection with him she proceeded with

her remembering. "My Wild Birds" in TallMountain's most recent volume, *A Quick Brush of Wings*, grew out of the time she spent with her father:

When bayonet cactus thrusts its
Blossomy cap into desert sky,
A white cry announcing winter,
I remember my father.

Lost in my childhood, Clem
Perched forever, a wild bird
Fluttering in the cage of my head.
I could not set him free.

Years of search. I found him—
Old soldier, spiny as ocotillo.
A few years left for laughter.
Return to our Alaskan youth.

He thought I was Mary Joe
Stepping across the years,
Hair tossed in a scarlet band,
Dancing to his fiddle.

He was frail and ancient,
Flickered like fireflies of summer
In dreams he drove malamutes
Through the land with Mary Joe.

In a fleece-bright dawn
He cried out to her.
She came, bent into the light,
And took his hand.

Now in the silences of night
They come to me,

My wild birds flying.

(*A Quick Brush of Wings* 90)

At all of the choosing points in TallMountain's life, she has been consistent in taking the path that led home, whether that home was physically the path back to Nulato, her Koyukon birthplace, or within her heart and consciousness of the world no matter where. Mary TallMountain re-creates life in the image of home—what so many of us hunger for, whether we call it "The Garden" or "Peace on Earth" or "Utopia" or "love" or "the old days." She writes a living rosary and a beaded robe, each bead a memory, to make it real. I will leave the closing words of this piece to Paula Gunn Allen:

In telling her life and the life of her people, she tells all our stories; she tells our lives. And in so doing not only affirms life, but re-creates it. (*Light 2*)

NOTE

- ¹ TallMountain writes about this time in her life in the stories "The Disposal of Mary Joe's Children" and "Nahooluya."

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