

Heritage

X

The year my mother was born
in Fairfax, Oklahoma,
white men were marrying Osage
women and killing them
for their headrights.

My mother was born a year after
The Indian Citizenship Act was passed –
Indians tied to the U.S.
for or against their wills.

Three years before her birth, her half sister
Baby Ruth's grave was dynamited
with nitroglycerine by outlaws
scavenging for diamonds
and gold buried inside the casket.

In the Tallchief plot
I wander through family history –
the marble monuments,
angelic statues – measuring
each step on grass,
memorizing photographs.

This one of a striking
beauty, my great grandmother
Eliza Bigheart Tall Chief, 1870 -1962,
surviving her husband
by fifty years. The widow, the adored
grandmother of my mother. Eliza.
Only now do I see my name
a permutation of hers.

At home in Chicago
every day I pass
family photographs framed
on walls. My great grandfather's
oval sepia portrait
of his boyish face
replicated on the headstone.
Instead of the young bride,
here is Eliza, a tribal elder,
wrapped in a multi-colored
blanket, standing outside
her front porch, a photo
taken after all those years
she outlived him.

—Elise Paschen