JENNIFER SOULE
HIAWATHA ASYLUM FOR INSANE INDIANS

“The Indian wars never ended in this country.”
Joy Harjo

I.
FINDING HIWATHA

Highway 18 runs past the Canton grain elevators to Hiawatha Golf Club where the restrooms read: “Braves” and “Squaws.”
Mid-fairway lies a graveyard—fenced—sunken remains of 120 men and women who died at Hiawatha Asylum for Insane Indians.
The city bought the old Asylum grounds with stipulated “recreational use.” No mention of sacred ground on these soft Coteau des Prairies.

A faded prayer flag flutters in the wind.
Near the small burial plot a sign reads: “Please do not play balls from the rough.”
A monument lists names of the dead:
Blue Sky, Long Time Owl Woman,
Yells at Night, Red Crow,
James Crow Lightning, Edith Standing Bear.
The golfers play through without a glance.
II.
U.S. SENATE FLOOR PLEA OF RICHARD PETTIGREW (SD)
An effort to obtain Federal funds in 1899. A found poem.

It has been well established that the percentage of insanity is greater among half-breeds than among the full-blooded Indians. This is explained by the theory of cross-breeding, that has a tendency to weaken the race. For this reason it is confidently expected by those who have made a study of these conditions that the rate of insanity will greatly increase as our civilization develops. The peculiar mental afflictions of the Indians make it impractical to treat them in connection with whites. Association with their ancient enemy has, it is said, a harrowing effect upon them. Also it has been demonstrated by experience that the various state asylums for the treatment of the insane are not kindly disposed toward receiving Indian patients.

III.
HOW TO GET COMMITTED TO THE HIAWATHA ASYLUM FOR INSANE INDIANS

First, you must be Chippewa, Navajo, Pawnee, Lakota, Crow or Winnebago.

Dance the Ghost Dance to bring back the buffalo.
Have a seizure and fall down—
but the easiest way: anger an Indian agent.

Get in a loud argument with your wife’s
brother because he said she sounded like a crow.

Talk to your dead ancestors about
what troubles you. Pray for their wisdom.

Believe you are White Buffalo Woman—
hold pipe ceremonies for days with no sleep.

Carry a congenital deformity
or become senile.

Tell your teacher you don’t care
about Pilgrims and want to study Crazy Horse.

Refuse to let your children go
to the Carlisle Boarding School.

Conduct a healing ceremony
with special herbs for your mother.

Have a party with a group of cousins
and friends. Get rowdy, wake the Indian agent.

Reject Christianity,
refuse Western medicine.

Live on an Indian reservation
in the middle of nowhere.
Get drunk and lie down in fire.

IV.
AUGUSTANA ACADEMY STUDENT WRITES HER FAMILY
(SEPTEMBER 8, 1929)

I like the school, but I miss you.
Last week we went
to the Indian Insane Asylum
for a picnic. We shared lunches
with the patients. They seem sad—
like Grandpa was when Grandma died.
One older woman cried softly
the whole time. I think her name
is Blue Sky. I like the Indian names
because they sound like poems.
Blue Sky’s long black hair looks like
a wave of first-plowed dirt. She wants
to go home to her people. I understand.
I bet she’d rather cook her own meals
and eat with family. Our food
is pretty good. Last night
we had pot roast, corn on the cob,
and apple pie. I know you are busy
with the harvest. There is a grain elevator
across the street and the pink corn dust
settles all over town like a winter sunset.

V.
DR. SILK WRITES HOME (MARCH 20, 1929)

*Dr. Samuel Silk, a psychiatrist from St. Elizabeth’s Hospital in Washington, was dispatched to investigate problems at the Hiawatha Asylum for Insane Indians in Canton, SD.*
The trip was long, the Appalachians
giving way to a vast unknown
of land where towns spring full blown from fields.
March is winter here: few signs
of spring. No cherry blossoms. In this place
the wind wails constantly, competes
with angry gods of mud and melting snow.
The Chinese Canton strikes one odd
where so many speak Norwegian,
celebrating Scandinavian feasts.
The grasses once were taller than these Nords.
This sea of green swallowed up some whole.
Ghosts of a buried prairie shimmer,
haunting the flat horizon.

VI.
LONG TIME OWL WOMAN HAUNTS THE CANTON HOSPITAL

Last night I heard a clumsy bird
whirl in like a sick
stumbling buffalo. It coughed
and landed on the spit of cement.
A bad omen, this bird that swallows
the sick into its swollen belly,
flies straight up and leaves.
My people healed with help
from the natural world. Not machines
and surgery. I’ve seen strange things
while wandering the hospital halls: hurt
babies in plastic boxes crying and no one there.
I want to comfort them, but can’t.
I couldn’t comfort those little ones born
at the Asylum. I sang for them, but then
they were gone like the owl in the morning.
The night is my home. Sometimes now
I whistle to the dying.

VII.
DR. SILK WRITES HOME (MARCH 21, 1929)

The problems are enormous already.
My days are long. We went between
two buildings of the hospital—the wind
blew snow straight in my face. Your long wool scarf
was welcome. Thank you. Conditions
are dubious. Patient with a tumor
on the brain was locked in solitude
so others could not see him. Another
secluded in a room to prevent fights.
Not necessary, I shall request his release.
A straitjacketed boy on the cold floor,
retarded, chamber pot uncovered, full.
Another mute young man shut away. A place
of padlocks and chamber pots. There are so many.
I feel as though I’ve fallen into a darker decade.

VIII.
YELLS AT NIGHT

Nurse’s note

Last night his cries pierced my dreams.
I checked, but could not penetrate the pain.
Who bestowed this name
without a melody or meaning, blaming him?
Many patients lose their given names
to ignorance of native tongues. Many
committed for refusing to speak
our English language. The sounds last night
bore an ancient rhythm beating from the earth.
Perhaps he once performed the Ghost Dance
and dreams of buffalo and antelope
that return, the men who corralled him
disappearing like some summer storm
blowing winds of disaster, then leaving prairie sun.

IX.
DR. SILK WRITES HOME
MARCH 22, 1929

During my breakfast at the hotel
(which was pretty good with fresh eggs
and corn-fed bacon, crisp as October)
I noticed a cabinet with “souvenirs”
from the Asylum for sale. A customer
exclaimed over the fine detail on a painted plate
from “a crazy Indian.” I bristled as the clerk
laughed and rang up the sale. The city touts
the Asylum as an attraction, “a spectacular treat
to complete a shopping day in Canton.”
Patients string beads into necklaces, handbags,
and weave baskets of strong prairie grasses. Blue Sky
handed me one the other day, smiled. A gift that
would be rude to refuse. You will enjoy it.
Quill chokers quiver with colors of this lonely
landscape. I see therapeutic value in creative activity,
but they do not reap the profits. The citizens
are pleased to have a federal facility that brings
good income to town. But I don’t think
it will be here much longer. Findings
are not auspicious for continuation.
The patients do not receive half
the attention you give your African violets.

X.
AUGUSTANA ACADEMY STUDENT WRITES HER FAMILY
OCTOBER 4, 1929

Last night I heard five rings
on our dorm phone, signal
of an Asylum Indian escape.
I was studying late for a test
when it shrilled through
like a coyote’s call. I’d run, too.
When we last visited the place
to sing hymns for the patients
I saw a girl who made me cry,
hers hair matted. Dirty flowered dress
made for a woman, not a girl.
Only about ten, I think.
She didn’t talk, her eyes beamed fear.
Can kids be crazy? How would I know
if I were crazy? I’d flee like deer
to the woods if I were her. Farm wives
would hide her in their barns, feed her.
No one is afraid of the Indians.

XI.
DR. SILK WRITES HOME
MARCH 23, 1929

I talked with the laundress today.
I don’t blame her for the filthy bedclothes
on the wards; black as dirt. She is kept busy with curtains and notes; we have a good many, and they are hard to iron. The patients lie on bedspreads with shoes on, she laments; the wash is not as white as I’d like. The heat is coal, the water hard. She wants a permanent ironing board, electric iron. I spoke with her of allegations that Miss Fillious antagonizes the staff. She reported no difficulties of any kind with her. The problem here is not the head nurse. Or laundry. Deeper than dirt; lye soap will not wash it away.

XII.
HIAWATHA VOLUNTEER

It makes me sad to visit the Indians at the Insane Asylum. Last week I gave Long Time Owl Woman a bath and she just cried. She’s getting frail. Wants to go home to her people. I can’t blame her. I’d miss my family. That Dr. H is not so nice. Why send someone like him? He can’t even drive a tractor. I don’t know what he does. Never seen him in town. He’s always “having a bit to eat” at that nice home they built for him. Lives alone. No family. No wife. No kids. Who’d live with him? The Indians don’t like him. There is nothing wrong with them. Why Aunt Alma
has those spells during long winters
and her sister Ruth looks after her.
It's nothing bad. Just happens.
Like TB. People have broken parts.
You just live with it. Help out. No need
to throw them out or lock them away.
We’ve all got a few rusted, busted pieces.
We just patch them up the best we can
and go on. Bake a pie.

XIII.
DR. SILK WRITES HOME
MARCH 24, 1929

A trying day and I would welcome
your wise womanly counsel.
Dr. Hummer has a solid
streak of misogyny running
down the back of his white coat.
He dislikes nurses. I had no desire
to enter this fracas, as I considered it
an internal matter. However,
during my interviews with staff I was
drawn into their quarrel.
There’s raged a furious feud
between head nurse and Hummer
since she arrived. Miss F., a thirtyish woman
with a penchant for turquoise scarves,
exhibits neatness and professionalism.
Well qualified, with good training,
she is energetic and shows a sympathetic attitude
toward patients. I believe you would
get on well with her. She enjoys
reading poetry, especially Gerard Manley Hopkins. Dr. H. insists the kitchen and dining room staff, along with laborers, furnish affidavits on her. I suspect they may have thought this necessary in order to keep their jobs. You will appreciate one complaint by a young dining room girl that Miss F. carried on at the dinner table, telling stories and associated with women in town who drank. The girl did not think such was lady-like, nor was a previous employee, who smoked cigarettes. She huffed that she was not brought up that way! But this is a diversion, my dear. There is great sadness residing here under the cottonwoods. These cold, clear nights I miss you.

XIV.
DR. HUMMER DEFENDS HIMSELF
From 1908 to its closing in 1933, Dr. Hummer served as superintendent of the Hiawatha Asylum.

I did not choose this place. Dr. White recommended me. When young, I thought it would be an adventure to go West. But it was a mistake, this godforsaken field of wild Indians—43 different tribes. I can’t get any histories; their tongue is gibberish to me. Sure, many of the patients are asymptomatic. But they can’t go home since they are “below normal,” and must be sterilized first. I have no means to do this. The Asylum doesn’t meet
standards, but what can I do?
I was not trained to treat Indians.

XV.
NIGHT TRAIN

I recall when the Asylum closed. I was a girl.
We lived just east of Hiawatha then.
Perhaps it was November when the cold hunkers down to stay. Outside, that night,
geese honking through clouds, I heard the train whistle for the patients, their long ride beckoning to St. Elizabeth’s. They huddled in blankets, waiting by big iron gates, wind hurling around them. Empty building hulked behind, that long dark winter solstice shadowing all. Still, I thought, the city may frighten them more. Here on the prairie there’s a certain quiet of sky and space.

XVI.
DEATH AT HIAWATHA

The Lincoln County Courthouse recorded one-hundred-eighty-nine Asylum deaths,
a deadly beginning for seven children born there, on that list.

Average age at death was 42; most common cause: tuberculosis.
Typical contemporary
non-Indian death: an octogenarian

Norwegian farmer killed by lightning plowing.
Best way to catch TB:

crowd people into poorly ventilated space
like German death camps.

Patients were not screened. Sputum exams
or chest x-rays could have saved many.

In South Dakota’s surplus space,
fresh air they could not breathe.

XVII.
DR. SILK WRITES HOME
MARCH 25, 1929

Today I had them apply restraints to me.
Only briefly attached with wristlets,
but patients endure entire nights like this.
I saw iron rings in Baltimore
at City Hospital where they chained
patients to walls. In Canton, the restraints
are kept by the Financial Clerk.
A ward attendant with no medical credentials
decides if a patient is to be restrained
and the clerk hands him the apparatus.
The practice stems from old wars and fears,
not illness. These patients are not criminals.
I am ready to be released and return home.
XVIII.
ACANTON FARMER REMEMBERS

My dad and I worked at the old Asylum. Piggery, dairy, corn cribs, horse barn, fields. Just one farmer up there, no hands. We did thrashing with Crazy Charlie—a good worker. Hog butchered. Wasn’t a very sanitary operation, drainage bad. The women sat outside in summer. Smiled and waved. Seemed real nice. Big business in this corn and soybean county. The town didn’t want to lose that Fed money. They shut down when we needed them the most—Depression years. We don’t talk of that place. Kind of shameful. When they golf, they play around that little cemetery with no markers.

XIX.
LONG TIME OWL WOMAN HAUNTS HIAWATHA GOLF COURSE

I watch the locals chase their balls in carts around my burial ground. I want to laugh, lament: Hiawatha Indian Insane Asylum. Which we were not. I was sent here to die away from my people because the Indian agent said my dreams and visions were crazy. My grandmother had them, too. They help us see the unseen.
They are good. Not bad.
Fenced in death, in life
we could not be controlled.
My curse upon their scores!
Twisted be their swings!
Their balls, Gone! Laughing
I soar above the pines,
over these unmarked graves,
the broken doctors, bodies
left here by the fleeting
trickster on his path.