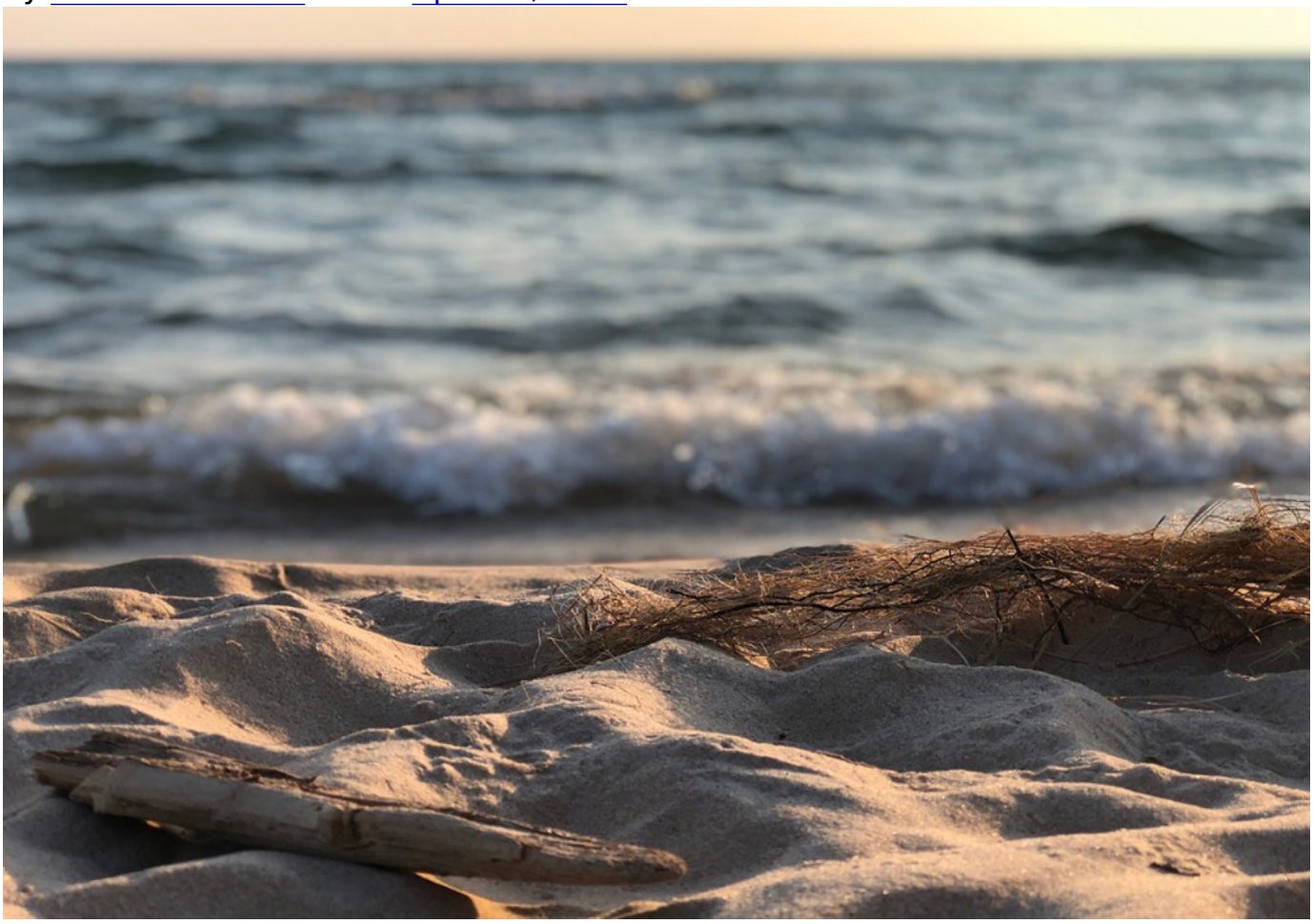
Potawatomi women are water protectors

I'm standing by Lake Michigan for the first time, but it already knows me.

by Kaitlin B. Curtice in the April 22, 2020 issue



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Indigenous bodies are bodies that remember. We carry stories inside us—not just stories of oppression but stories of liberation, of renewal, of survival. The sacred thing about being human is that no matter how hard we try to get rid of them, our stories are our stories. They are carried inside us; they hover over us; they are the tools we use to explain ourselves to one another, to connect.

I grew up being really afraid of water. When I was very small, I waded into a pool that was too deep for my tiny body, and I fell under. I watched as the glossy surface hovered above my eyes, and I saw the outline of my sister's body come in for me. I was lifted out in time, and I was fine, but a fear was instilled in me that I couldn't shake for many years. I didn't learn to swim until I was 13, and after I had children, my worst nightmares were of a child's death by drowning, by currents that are too strong for my little ones to fight against.

Water can be a dangerous thing, but water is also the lifeblood of us all. It is why flood stories are so powerful and so sacred; the earth gets destroyed by water, and it gets rebuilt by that same water as it gives life to everything again.

In Potawatomi culture, women are water protectors. To be women who are water protectors means that we know that the water that runs through our bodies is connected to the sacred waters that give sustenance to the lands around us. We lay tobacco down on the water's surface and pray. In the Great Lakes region of Turtle Island—the name we use for North America—Potawatomi women practice water ceremonies to protect the water from poison, from pollution, so that our children inherit something better.

The Potawatomi people originated in the Great Lakes region. We lived in community with the Ottawa and Ojibwe people, each tribe having its own role in the community, each speaking the Algonquian-based language that varied for each of us over time. The Potawatomi, or *Bodewadmi ndaw* as we call ourselves, are "the people of the place of fire," because we tended to the fires of the people.

Over time, through migration and forced removal with the threat of European and later American invasion, our culture changed, as did our language. Dialects shifted, and our stories passed from generation to generation.

In 1838, more than 850 Potawatomi people were forcefully removed from our home in Indiana, and we trekked some 660 miles to Kansas, led by US general John Tipton. In his letters to Indiana governor David Wallace, Tipton says:

> Everything seems to justify the belief that these unhappy people will yet learn to appreciate the interest which government has ever manifested in this affair, and teach themselves that a willing compliance to such interest, will but secure the comfort and enjoyment which for years they have failed

to experience in Indiana.

It seems that these men wanted to tell themselves that the Potawatomi people would be happier in a land that they had no idea how to cultivate than in the land on which their ancestors lived and thrived for centuries. It is the lie so many settlers tell: that for Indigenous peoples, forced removal, reservation, and oppression must be better than the primitive, backward ways of before.

When the Potawatomi arrived in Kansas, they worked hard to adapt to a new environment. They struggled. They were promised houses when they arrived, and there were none. Over the first years of living in Kansas, many more Potawatomi people died. In 1861, the federal government lured some Potawatomi to Oklahoma with the promise of US citizenship upon taking land allotments.

When Potawatomi people left Kansas for Oklahoma, they carried our origin stories with them to a land that did not know them. These stories—stories of strength and assimilation, stories of survival and removal—came to be a part of us. They shape our people, even today.

I carried these stories with me the day I went to Lake Michigan, the original home of my people, for the first time. It was a perfect, windy spring morning in April. My friend Amy drove us 40 minutes away from the city to a small town with tall trees, a town now inhabited by people of Dutch heritage. We drove up to an area with a playground and picnic tables, and we climbed a set of stairs to reach the water.

Growing up around tiny lakes in the Midwest, my imagination did not lend itself to what Lake Michigan might actually be. So when we took that last step of the uphill climb to look out at the beach before us, my breath caught in my chest.

White sand.

Waves.

Deadwood.

Teenagers huddled under towels and blankets.

Wind.

Memories.

I took off my shoes and walked as fast as I could, Amy trailing behind me with her camera. She said she'd capture this moment for me—photos that would keep me tethered to this place for years to come, photos to help me remember. The quiet presence of the water lapped in and out with every wave, and I watched. I listened.

I whispered, *Migwetch, Mamogosnan, Migwetch, Migwetch*, over and over again. *Thank you, Creator*. It was a prayer of gratitude for that moment that held me. The water has supplied life to us and nurtured us. We are simply recipients of gift upon gift.

While I prayed, while I laid tobacco over the water's crisp, iridescent skin, I was told to remember. The water told me to remember what I may not even consciously know.

I was asked to remember the before—before those stairs were built to bring us to the shore, before there were paved parking lots and playgrounds. When it was just the people and the land, there was no room for colonizer thinking or actions. When it was just the people and the land, we built fires and grew wild rice. When it was just the people and the land, white supremacy was never an option.

The land and the water tell stories we cannot conceive of, even when we listen. And so, we just trust. We watch the water and let it give whatever it needs to give, and we receive it with open arms. This is the way.

We stayed there for about an hour, collecting pebbles and shells to take home to my children, along with a piece of driftwood that sits in my home today and tells my own story back to me. I felt like a stranger to a land that knew me. I felt like the prodigal son returning to the father with open arms, only the thing that took me away was the gunpoint of forced removal.

For the world to survive, for justice to take place among us, decolonization must be a goal. Fighting against systems of colonial settler oppression—systems like toxic patriarchy and capitalist greed that give no care to land—is not just for the oppressed. It is a gift for everyone. Just as growing pains hurt before the actual growth takes place, so it hurts to decolonize.

For some, it hurts like hell. And then one day, we all appear on the other side of it, healed, our stories told in all their truth. Just like that, we all gather to bathe in the healing waters, and just like that, everyone is made clean.

This article is adapted from Kaitlin B. Curtice's forthcoming book Native: Identity, Belonging, and Rediscovering God, © May 2020 by Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group. Used by permission. A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Water that knows me."