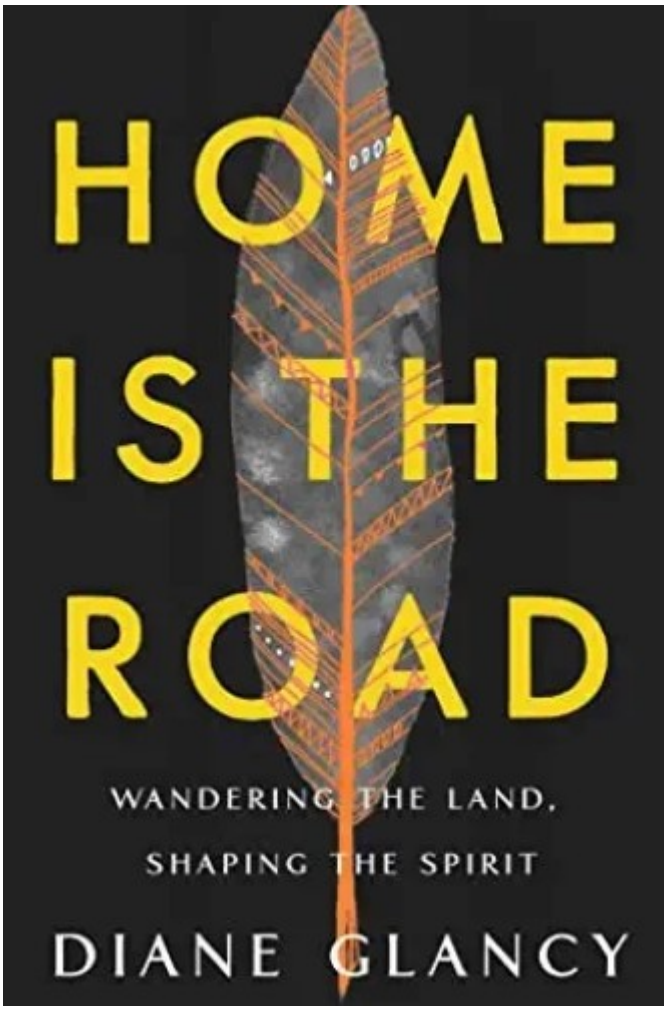
Diane Glancy’s search for home

Glancy’s spirit is shaped as much by her exile from her tribe as by her ties to it.

by Stephanie Perdew in the December 2022 issue

In Review



Home Is the Road

Wandering the Land, Shaping the Spirit

By Diane Glancy
Broadleaf Books
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In a 2019 interview in *Image,* Diane Glancy revealed that “Acts of Disobedience” was the working title for this collection of essays. She defined her three acts of disobedience as her “unorthodox way of writing,” her self-avowed fundamentalist Christian faith, and the miles of driving she logs each year. Glancy is an essayist, storyteller, poet, and playwright who articulates the pain of her Cherokee heritage and the solace of her faith in ways that press the edges of literary experimentation—and thwart the expectations of some readers. A *Publisher’s Weekly* reviewer once panned both her writing style (a “mishmash of words; unnecessarily obtuse”) and her “endless pontifications upon Jesus and the role of Christianity in her life.”

Home Is the Road is a better title for this book, which is structured by the ground Glancy covers while pondering the shape of her family legacy and her spirituality. Throughout the book, she weaves biblical references and imagery into Native creation and origin stories, spinning a nonlinear memoir that is part poetry and part prose.

Glancy speaks to us from the highways between her home state of Kansas and her destinations at writing conferences, residencies, film festivals, and a few family visits. She logs long hours in the car, stopping only briefly for food or fuel, grabbing a few hours’ sleep at rest stops in the night as she traverses the land and tells us stories that shape her spirit.

Her Cherokee father was also a traveler, and his work in stockyards moved the family throughout the Midwest and Great Plains. He told her little of their family history before he died. Glancy is left to piece it together herself on her drives: “I am starting late on the roads into my own life. Haunted by a herd of nightmares. My salvation has been this: travel. Travel and the Lord Jesus Christ.” She navigates these intersecting disobediences from the vantage point of her dashboard overlooking the road.

Elsewhere Glancy has discussed the particularity of her Cherokee ancestors’ own travel in their voluntary migration from their homelands in the Smoky Mountains to Indian Territory (now Northeastern Oklahoma). These “Old Settlers” were seen by

other Cherokees as betrayers because they didn't resist the Indian Removal Act which resulted in the Trail of Tears. Glancy's family then left Indian Territory before the Dawes Rolls, the final census of the Cherokee prior to the implementation of the Indian allotment act. Because they had no Dawes Roll numbers, which are the basis for Cherokee citizenship, Glancy is undocumented and unmoored from her tribe.

Moving from place to place, Glancy knows Jesus as a "wayfarer and transgressor" just like herself, like her parents, like her ancestors. She travels alone, "where the voices of the past are," as she reflects on the complications of her own identity: "I am not a full blood anything but a mixed blood in a car." Mixed blood is a contested description among Natives. Measurement of blood quantum was used by the federal government to determine when all the Indians had either been assimilated or killed off. The Bureau of Indian Affairs still assigns blood quantum today, although most tribes, including the Cherokee Nation, don't use it as the basis for citizenship.

Glancy speaks of herself in the terms laid out by those who sought her ancestors' extinction and seeks her solace in the faith taught and brought by the missionaries. Her spirit is shaped as much by her exile from her tribe as by her ties to it. On the road, she is overwhelmingly alone. Traveling alone begets a depression which Glancy says is "like a disruption of *settledness*—a general feeling of being made of parts that didn't fit with one another. I was born moving between two cultures." That disruption haunts her writing as she intertwines her biblical reflections with stories from various tribes.

In one of the book's most satisfying moments, Glancy describes an Edward Curtis photograph of a young Apache woman carrying a two-handled pottery water canteen. Curtis's photographs are romanticized gazes at what he presumed to be dying cultures. But Glancy's gaze is the gaze of a survivor with feet in two cultures. She leads readers from the photograph to a two-handled pottery water jug in her own collection and then to the gospel, which was "full of water, it kept us afloat. Jesus walked in it sometimes under the moon. In his travels, he made the gospel. My ears were shaped like handles when I heard."

A stream of water runs through the book, from Glancy's water jug to the deserts and plains she traverses, up to the Standing Rock Reservation where she meets the water protectors. Sometimes the streams of her stories are unsatisfying. They do not flow freely; they get jammed or dammed by Glancy herself. She notes that in one of her classes she juxtaposes an assignment on elliptical poetry (a dismantling of form)

with readings from Ezra and Nehemiah (a story of rebuilding form). That same method is at work here. At some points her juxtapositions are jarring reminders of her unsettled spirit. At others they are reminders of the hard work of weaving stories again after cultures and their oral traditions are frayed almost to extinction.

There are no romanticized or easily accessible reflections on Christian and Native spirituality here. What we find instead are the remainders and reminders of generational trauma—of uprootedness, removal from land, and alienation from a culture and its stories. Glancy is always on the move as she spins her own stories. In Glancy's life there is no apparent antidote to making a home on the road, but of other Natives she says, perhaps to spare themselves the same pain of uprootedness: "I tell them, stay on the land."