Before You Read

“The Warriors”
by Anna Lee Walters
1946 -

About Walters

Anna Lee Walters was born in Pawnee, Oklahoma, of Pawnee and Otoe-Missouria heritage. She grew up hearing the traditional stories of these peoples. The influence of these stories persisted after she left Oklahoma, first to study creative writing in New England and then, after she married Harry Walters, a Navajo museum curator, to settle in Arizona. Over nearly thirty years, Walters has worked in the Native American arts and education communities. She has taught at Diné College, developed publications for Navajo Community College Press, and lectured on American Indian issues. At the same time, Walters pursued her own writing, shaping stories and crafting nonfiction of her heritage. The Sun Is Not Merciful, the short story collection from which “The Warriors” comes, received two literary prizes.

Traditional Storytelling

The Native American tradition, with its emphasis on oral storytelling, deeply affected Walters’s approach to writing. For example, the narrator in “The Warriors” learns important lessons from an older relative who tells her stories. This oral tradition dates back to the earliest Native American literature, formulated as much as 28,000 years ago. These oral literatures expressed the themes a particular people held dear, themes such as how to live respectfully with nature and how to honor the rituals and traditions of the group. For the Pawnee, the people featured in this story, medicine men or priests traditionally performed ceremonies blending songs, poetry, and dance into stories explaining the Pawnee place in the universe.
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In our youth, we saw hobos come and go, sliding by our faced white house like wary cats who did not want us too close. Sister and I waved at the strange procession of passing men and women hobos. Just between ourselves, Sister and I talked of that hobo parade. We guessed at and imagined the places and towns we thought the hobos might have come from or had been. Mostly they were White or Black people. But there were Indian hobos, too. It never occurred to Sister and me that this would be Uncle Ralph’s end.

Sister and I were little, and Uncle Ralph came to visit us. He lifted us over his head and shook us around him like gourd rattles. He was Momma’s younger brother, and he could have disciplined us if he so desired. That was part of our custom. But he never did. Instead, he taught us Pawnee words. “Pari is Pawnee and pita is man,” he said. Between the words, he tapped out drumbeats with his fingers on the table top, ghost dance and round dance songs that he suddenly remembered and sang. His melodic voice lifted over us and hung around the corners of the house for days. His stories of life and death were fierce and gentle. Warriors dangled in delicate balance.

He told us his version of the story of Pahukatawa, a Skidi Pawnee warrior. He was killed by the Sioux, but the animals, feeling compassion for him, brought Pahukatawa to life again. “The Evening Star and the Morning Star bore children and some people say that these offspring are who we are,” he often said. At times he pointed to those stars and greeted them by their Pawnee names. He liked to pray for Sister and me, for everyone and everything in the world, but we never heard him ask for anything for himself from Atius, the Father.

“For beauty is why we live,” Uncle Ralph said when he talked of precious things only the Pawnees knew. “We die for it, too.” He called himself an ancient Pawnee warrior when he was quite young. He told us that warriors must brave all storms and odds and stand their ground. He knew intimate details of every battle the Pawnees ever fought since Pawnee time began, and Sister and I knew even then that Uncle Ralph had a great battlefield of his own.

As I child I thought that Uncle Ralph had been born into the wrong time. The Pawnees had been ravaged so often by then. The tribe of several thousand when it was at its peak over a century before were then a few hundred people who had been closely confined for more than a hundred hears. The warrior life was gone. Uncle Ralph was trapped in a transparent bubble of a new time. The bubble bound him tight as it blew around us.

Uncle Ralph talked obsessively of warriors, painted proud warriors who shrieked poignant battle cries at the top of their lungs and died with honor. Sister and I were little then, lost from him in the world of children who saw everything with children’s eyes. And though we saw with wide eyes the painted warriors he fantasized and heard their fierce and haunting battle cries, we did not hear his. Now that we are old and Uncle Ralph has been gone for a long time, Sister and I know that when he died he was tired and alone. But he was a warrior.

The hobos were always around in our youth. Sister and I were curious about them, and this curiosity claimed much of our time. They crept by the house at all hours of the day and night, dressed in rags and odd clothing. They wandered to us from the railroad tracks where they had leaped from slow-moving boxcars onto the flatland. They hid in high clumps of weeds and brush that ran along the fence near the tracks. The hobos usually traveled alone, but Sister and I saw them come together, like poor families, to share a can of beans or a tin of sardines that they ate with sticks or twigs. Uncle Ralph also watched them from a distance.
One early morning, Sister and I crossed the tracks on our way to school and collided with a tall, haggard white man. He wore a very old-fashioned pin-striped black jacket covered with lint and soot. There was fright in his eyes when he met ours. He scurried around us, quickening his pace. The pole over his shoulder where his possessions hung in a bundle at the end bounced as he nearly ran from us.

“Looks just like a scared jackrabbit,” Sister said, watching him dart away.

That evening we told Momma about the scared man. She warned us about the dangers of hobos as our father threw us a stern look. Uncle Ralph was visiting but he didn’t say anything. He stayed the night and Sister asked him, “Hey, Uncle Ralph, why do you suppose they’s hobos?”

Uncle Ralph was a large man. He took Sister and put her on one knee. “You see, Sister,” he said, “hobos are a different kind. They see things in a different way. Them hobos are kind of like us. We’re not like other people in some ways and yet we are. It has to do with what you see and feel when you look at this old world.”

His answer satisfied Sister for a while. He taught us some more Pawnee words that night.

Not long after Uncle Ralph’s explanation, Sister and I surprised a Black man with white whiskers and fuzzy hair. He wore faded blue overalls with pockets stuffed full of handkerchiefs. He wiped sweat from his face. When it dried, he looked up and saw us. I remembered what Uncle Ralph had said and wondered what the Black man saw when he looked at us standing there.

“We might scare him,” Sister said softly to me, remembering the whiteman who had scampered away.

Sister whispered, “Hi,” to the Black man. Her voice was barely audible.

“Boy, it’s sure hot,” he said. His voice was big and he smiled.

“Where are you going?” Sister asked.


“Then what are you going here?” Sister went on. She was bold for a seven-year-old kid. I was older but I was also quieter. “This here place is ours,” she said.

He looked around and saw our house with its flowering mimosa trees and rich green mowed lawn stretching out before him. Other houses sat around ours.

“I reckon I’m lost,” he said.

Sister pointed to the weeds and brush further up the road. “That’s where you want to go. That’s where they all go, the hobos.”

I tried to quiet Sister but she didn’t hush. “The hobos stay up there,” she said. “You a hobo?”

He ignored her question and asked his own. “Say, what is you all? You not Black, you not White. What is you all?”

Sister looked at me. She put one hand on her chest and the other hand on me. “We Indians!” Sister said.

He stared at us and smiled again. “Is that a fact?” he said.

“Know what kind of Indians we are?” Sister asked him.

He shook his fuzzy head. “Indians is Indians, I guess,” he said.

Sister wrinkled her forehead and retorted, “Not us! We not like others. We see things different. We’re Pawnees. We’re warriors!”

I pushed my elbow into Sister’s side. She quieted.

The man was looking down the road and he shuffled his feet. “I’d best go,” he said.
Sister pointed to the brush and weeds one more time. “That way,” she said.
He climbed back through the fence and brush as Sister yelled, “Bye now!” He waved a damp handkerchief.

Sister and I didn’t tell Momma and Dad about the Black man. But much later Sister told Uncle Ralph every word that had been exchanged with the Black man. Uncle Ralph listened and smiled.

Months later when the warm weather had cooled and Uncle Ralph came to stay with us for a couple of weeks, Sister and I went to the hobo place. We had planned it for a long time. That afternoon when we pushed away the weeds, not a hobo was in sight.

The ground was packed down tight in the clearing among the high weeds. We walked around the encircling brush and found folded cardboards stacked together. Burned cans in assorted sizes were stashed under the cardboards, and there were remains of old fires. Rags were tied to the brush, snapping in the hard wind.

Sister said, “Maybe they’re all in the boxcars now. It’s starting to get cold.”
She was right. The November wind had a bite to it and the cold stung our hands and froze our breaths as we spoke.

“You want to go over to them boxcars?” she asked. We looked at the Railroad Crossing sign where the boxcars stood.
I was prepared to answer when a voice roared from somewhere behind us.
“Now, you young ones, you git on home! Go on! Git!”
A man crawled out of the weeds and looked angrily at us. His eyes were red and his face was unshaven. He wore a red plaid shirt with striped gray and black pants too large for him. His face was swollen and bruised. An old woolen pink scarf hid some of the bruise marks around his neck, and his topcoat was splattered with mud.

Sister looked at him. She stood close to me and told him defiantly, “You can’t tell us what to do! You don’t know us!”

He didn’t answer Sister but tried to stand. He couldn’t. Sister ran to him and took his arm and pulled on it. “You need help?” she questioned.

He frowned at her but let us help him. He was tall. He seemed to be embarrassed by our help.

“You Indian, ain’t you?” I dared to ask him.
He didn’t answer me but looked at his feet as if they could talk so he wouldn’t have to. His feet were in big brown overshoes.

“Who’s your people?” Sister asked. He looked to be about Uncle Ralph’s age when he finally lifted his face and met mine. He didn’t respond for a minute. Then he sighed, “I ain’t got no people,” he told us as he tenderly stroked his swollen jaw.

“Sure you got people. Our folks says a man’s always got people,” I said softly. The wind blew our clothes and covered the words.
But he heard. He exploded like a firecracker. “Well, I don! I ain’t got no people! I ain’t got nobody!”

“What you doing out here anyway?” Sister asked. “You hurt? You want to come over to our house?”

“Naw,” he said. “Now you little ones, go on home. Don’t be walking round out here. Didn’t nobody tell you little girls ain’t supposed to be going round by themselves? You might git hurt.”

“We just wanted to talk to hobos,” Sister said.
“Naw, you don’t. Just go on home. Your folks is probably looking for you and worrying ‘bout you.”

I took Sister’s arm and told her we were going home. Then we said “Bye” to the man. But Sister couldn’t resist a few last words, “You Indian, ain’t you?”

He nodded his head like it was a painful thing to do. “Yeah, I’m Indian.”

“You ought to go on home yourself,” Sister said. “Your folks probably looking for you and worrying ‘bout you.”

His voice rose again as Sister and I walked away from him. “I told you kids, I don’t have no people!” There was exasperation in his voice.

Sister wouldn’t be outdone. She turned and yelled, “Oh yeah? You Indian, ain’t you? Ain’t you?” she screamed. “We your people!”

His topcoat and pink scarf flapped in the wind as we turned away from him.

We went home to Momma and Dad and Uncle Ralph then. Uncle Ralph met us at the front door. “Where you all been?” he asked looking toward the railroad tracks. Momma and Dad were talking in the kitchen.

“Just playing, Uncle,” Sister and I said simultaneously.

Uncle Ralph grabbed both Sister and me by our hands and yanked us out the door. “Awkuh!” he said, using the Pawnee expression to show his dissatisfaction.

Outside, we sat on the cement porch. Uncle Ralph was quiet for a long time, and neither Sister nor I knew what to expect.

“I want to tell you all a story,” he finally said. “Once, there were these two rats who ran around everywhere and got into everything all the time. Everything they were told not to do, well they went right out and did. They’d get into one mess and then another. It seems that they never could learn.”

“At that point Uncle Ralph cleared his throat. He looked at me and said, “Sister do you understand this story? Is it too hard for you? You’re older.”

I nodded my head up and down and said, “I understand.”

Then Uncle Ralph looked at Sister. He said to her, “Sister, do I need to go on with this story?”

Sister shook her head from side to side. “Naw, Uncle Ralph,” she said. “So you both know how this story ends?” he said gruffly. Sister and I bobbed our heads up and down again.

We followed at his heels the rest of the day. When he tightened the loose hid on top of his drum, we watched him and held it in place as he laced the wet hide down. He got his drumsticks down from the top shelf of the closet and began to pound the drum slowly.

“Where you going, Uncle Ralph?” I asked. Sister and I knew that when he took his drum out, he was always gone shortly after.

“I have to be a drummer at some doings tomorrow,” he said.

“You’re a good singer, Uncle Ralph,” Sister said. “You know all them old songs.”

“The young people nowadays, it seems that they don’t care ‘bout nothing that’s old. They just want to go to the Moon.” He was drumming low as he spoke.

“We care, Uncle Ralph,” Sister said.

“Why?” Uncle Ralph asked in a hard, challenging tone that he seldom used on us.

Sister thought for a moment and then said, “I guess because you care so much, Uncle Ralph.”

His eyes softened as he said, “I’ll sing you an Eruska song, a song for the warriors.”
The song he sang was a war dance song. At first Sister and I listened attentively, but then Sister began to dance the man’s dance. She had never danced before and tried to imitate what she had seen. Her chubby body whirled and jumped the way she’d seen the men dance. Her head tilted from side to side the way the men moved theirs. I laughed aloud at her clumsy effort, and Uncle Ralph laughed heartily, too.

Uncle Ralph went in and out of our lives after that. We heard that he sang at one place and then another, and people came to Momma to find him. They said that he was only one of a few who knew the old ways and the songs.

When he came to visit us, he always brought something to eat. The Pawnee custom was that the man, the warrior, should bring food, preferably meat. Then, whatever food was brought to the host was prepared and served to the man, the warrior, along with the host’s family. Many times Momma and I, or Sister and I, came home to an empty house to find a sack of food on the table. Momma or I cooked it for the next meal, and Uncle Ralph showed up to eat.

As sister and I grew older, our fascination with the hobos decreased. Other things took our time, and Uncle Ralph did not appear as frequently as he did before.

One while I was home alone, I picked up Momma’s old photo album. Inside was a gray photo of Uncle Ralph in an army uniform. Behind him were tents on a flat terrain. Other photos showed other poses but only in one picture did he smile. All the photos were written over in black ink in Momma’s handwriting. Ralphie in Korea, the writing said.

Other photos in the album showed our Pawnee relatives. Dad was from another tribe. Momma’s momma was in the album, a tiny gray-haired woman who no longer lived. And Momm’s momma’s dad was in the album; he wore Pawnee leggings and the long feathers of a dark bird sat upon his head. I closed the album when Momma, Dad, and Sister came home.

Momma went into the kitchen to cook. She called me and Sister to help. As she put on a bibbed apron, she said, “We just came from town, and we saw someone from home there.” She meant someone from her tribal community.

“This man told me that Ralphie’s been drinking hard,” she said sadly. “He used to do that quite a bit a long time ago, but we thought it had stopped. He seemed to be all right for a few years.” We cooked and then ate in silence.

Washing the dishes, I asked Momma, “How come Uncle Ralph never did marry?”

Momma looked up at me but was not surprised by my question. She answered, “I don’t know, Sister. It would have been better if he had. There was one woman who I thought he really loved. I think he still does. I think it had something to do with Mom. She wanted him to wait.”

“Wait for what?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Momma said, and sank into a chair.

After that we heard unsettling rumors of Uncle Ralph drinking here and there.

He finally came to the house once when only I happened to be home. He was haggard and tired. His appearance was much like that of the whiteman that Sister and I met on the railroad tracks years before.

I opened the door when he tapped on it. Uncle Ralph looked years older than his age. He brought food in his arms. “Nowa, Sister,” he said in greeting. “Where’s the other one?” He meant my sister.

“She’s gone now, Uncle Ralph. School in Kansas,” I answered. “Where you been, Uncle Ralph? We been worrying about you.”
He ignored my question and said, “I bring food. The warrior brings home food. To his family, to his people.” His face was lined and had not been cleaned for days. He smelled of cheap wine.

I asked again, “Where you been, Uncle Ralph?”
He forced himself to smile. “Pumpkin Flower,” he said, using the Pawnee name, “I’ve been out with my warriors all this time.”

He put one arm around me as we went to the kitchen table with the food. “That’s what your Pawnee name is. Now don’t forget it.”

“Did somebody bring you here, Uncle Ralph, or are you on foot?” I asked him.
“I’m on foot,” he answered. “Where’s your Momma?”

I told him that she and Dad would be back soon. I started to prepare the food he brought. Then I heard Uncle Ralph say, “Life is sure hard sometimes. Sometimes it seems I just can’t go on.”

“What’s wrong, Uncle Ralph?” I asked.
Uncle Ralph let out a bitter little laugh. “What’s wrong?” he repeated. “What’s wrong? All my life, I’ve tried to live what I’ve been taught, but Pumpkin Flower, some things are all wrong!”

He took a folded pack of Camel cigarettes from his coat pocket. His hand shook as he pulled one from the pack and lit the end. “Too much drink,” he said sadly. “That stuff is bad for us.”

“What are you trying to do, Uncle Ralph?” I asked him.
“Live,” he said.

He puffed on the shaking cigarette a while and said, “The old people said to live beautifully with prayers and songs. Some died for beauty, too.”

“How do we do that, Uncle Ralph, live for beauty?” I asked.
“It’s simple, Pumpkin Flower,” he said. “Believe!”

“Believe what?” I asked.
He looked at me hard. “Awkuh!” he said. “That’s one of the things that is wrong. Everyone questions. Everyone doubts. No one believes in the old ways anymore. They want to believe when it’s convenient, when it doesn’t cost them anything and they get something in return. There are no more believers. There are no more warriors. They are all gone. Those who are left only want to go to the Moon.”

A car drove up outside. It was Momma and Dad. Uncle Ralph heard it, too. He slumped in the chair, resigned to whatever Momma would say to him.

Momma came in first. Dad then greeted Uncle Ralph and disappeared into the back of the house. Custom and etiquette required that Dad, who was not a member of Momma’s tribe, allow Momma to handle her brother’s problems.

She hugged Uncle Ralph. Her eyes filled with tears when she saw how thin he was and how his hands shook.

“Howie,” she said, “you look awful, but I am glad to see you.”
She then spoke to him of everyday things, how the car failed to start and the latest gossip. He was silent, tolerant of the passing of time in this way. His eyes sent me a pleading look while his hand shook and he tried to hold them still.

When supper was ready, Uncle Ralph went to wash himself for the meal. When he returned to table, he was calm. His hands didn’t shake so much.
At first he ate without many words, but in the course of the meal he left the table twice. Each time he came back, he was more talkative than before, answering Momma’s questions in Pawnee. He left the table a third time and Dad rose.

Dad said to Momma, “He’s drinking again. Can’t you tell?” Dad left the table and went outside.

Momma frowned. A determined look grew on her face.

When Uncle Ralph sat down to the table once more, Momma told him, “Ralphie, you’re my brother but I want you to leave now. Come back when you’re sober.”

He held a tarnished spoon in mid-air and put it down slowly. He hadn’t finished eating, but he didn’t seem to mind leaving. He stood, looked at me with his red eyes, and went to the door. Momma followed him. In a low voice she said, “Ralphie, you’ve got to stop drinking and wandering – or don’t come to see us again.”

He pulled himself to his full height then. His frame filled the doorway. He leaned over Momma and yelled, “Who are you? Are you God that you will say what will be or will not be?”

Momma met his angry eyes. She stood firm and did not back down.

His eyes finally dropped from her face to the linoleum floor. A cough came from deep in his throat.

“I’ll leave here,” he said. “But I’ll get all my warriors and come back! I have thousands of warriors and they’ll ride with me. We’ll get out bows and arrows. Then we’ll come back!”

He staggered out the door.

In the years that followed, Uncle Ralph saw us only when he was sober. He visited less and less. When he did show up, he did a tapping ritual on our front door. We welcomed the rare visits. Occasionally he stayed at our house for a few days at a time when he was not drinking. He slept on the floor.

He did odd jobs for minimum pay but never complained about the work or money. He’d acquired a vacant look in his eyes. It was the same look that Sister and I had seen in the hobos when we were children. He wore a similar careless array of clothing and carried no property with him at all.

The last time he came to the house, he called me by my English name and asked if I remembered anything of all that he’d taught me. His hair had turned pure white. He looked older than anyone I knew. I marveled at his appearance and said, “I remember everything.”

That night I pointed out his stars for him and told him how Pahukatawa lived and died and lived again through another’s dreams. I’d grown, and Uncle Ralph could not hold me on his knee anymore. His arm circled my waist while we sat on the grass.

He was moved by my recitation and clutched my hand tightly. He said, “It’s more than this. It’s more than just repeating words. You know that, don’t you?”

I nodded my head. “Yes, I know. The recitation is the easiest part but it’s more than this, Uncle Ralph.”

He was quiet, but after a few minutes his hand touched my shoulder. He said, “I couldn’t make it work. I tried to fit the pieces.”

“I know,” I said.

“Now before I go,” he said, “do you know who you are?”

The question took me by surprise. I thought very hard. I cleared my throat and told him, “I know that I am fourteen. I know that it’s too young.”

“Do you know that you are a Pawnee?” he asked in a choked whisper.

“Yes, Uncle,” I said.
“Good,” he said with a long sigh that was swallowed by the night.
Then he stood and said, “Well, Sister, I have to go. Have to move on.”
“Where are you going?” I asked. “Where all the warriors go?” I teased.
He managed a smile and a soft laugh. “Yeah, wherever the warriors are, I’ll find them.”
I said to him, “Before you go, I want to ask you…Uncle Ralph, can women be warriors, too?”
He laughed again and hugged me merrily. “Don’t tell me you want to be one of the warriors, too?”
“No, Uncle,” I said, “Just one of yours.” I hated to let him go because I knew I would not see him again.
He pulled away. His last words were, “Don’t forget what I’ve told you all these years. It’s the only chance not to become what everyone else is. Do you understand?”
I nodded and he left.
I never saw him again.
The years passed quickly. I moved away from Momma and Dad and married. Sister left before I did.
Years later in another town, hundreds of miles away, I awoke in a terrible gloom, a sense that something was gone from the world the Pawnees knew. The despair filled days, though the reason for the sense of loss went unexplained. Finally, the telephone rang. Momma was on the line. She said, “Sister came home for a few days not too long ago. While she was here and alone, someone tapped on the door, like Ralphie always does. Sister yelled, ‘Is that you, Uncle Ralphie? Come on in.’ But no one entered.
Then I understood that Uncle Ralph was dead. Momma probably knew too. She wept softly into the phone.
Later Momma received an official call confirming Uncle Ralph’s death. He had died from exposure in a hobo shanty, near the railroad tracks outside a tiny Oklahoma town. He’d been dead for several days and nobody knew but Momma, Sister, and me.
Momma reported to me that the funeral was well attended by the Pawnee people. Uncle Ralph and I had said our farewells years earlier. Momma told me that someone there had spoken well of Uncle Ralph before they put him in the ground. It was said that “Ralphie came from a fine family, an old line of warriors.”
Ten years later, Sister and I visited briefly at Momma’s and Dad’s home. We had been separated by hundreds of miles for all that time. As we sat under Momma’s flowering mimosa trees, I made a confession to Sister. I said, “Sometimes I wish that Uncle Ralph were here. I’m a grown woman but I still miss him after all these years.”
Sister nodded her head in agreement. I continued. “He knew so many things. He knew why the sun pours its liquid all over us and why it must do just that. He knew why babes and insects crawl. He knew that we must live beautifully or not live at all.”
Sister’s eyes were thoughtful, but she waited to speak while I went on. “To live beautifully from day to day is a battle all the way. The things that he knew are so beautiful. And to feel and know that kind of beauty is the reason that we should live at all. Uncle Ralph said so. But now, there is no one who knows what that beauty is or any of the other things that he knew.”
Sister pushed back smokey gray wisps of her dark hair. “You do,” she pronounced.
“And I do, too.”
“Why do you suppose he left us like that?” I asked.
“It couldn’t be helped,” Sister said. “There was a battle on.”
“I wanted to be one of his warriors,” I said with an embarrassed half-smile.

She leaned over and patted my hand. “You are,” she said. Then she stood and placed one hand on her bosom and one hand on my arm. “We’ll carry on,” she said.

I touched her hand resting on my arm. I said, “Sister, tell me again. What is the battle for?”

She waved down toward the fence where a hobo was coming through. We waved at him. “Beauty,” she said to me. “Our battle is for beauty. It’s what Uncle Ralph fought for, too. He often said that everyone else just wanted to go to the Moon. But remember, Sister, you and I done been there. Don’t forget, after all, we’re children of the stars.”