



MUSEUM

INDIANS

Susan Power

She is so
tall, a true

**DAKOTA
WOMAN;**

she rises against
the sun like a
SKYSCRAPER,
and when I draw
her picture in my
notebook, she
takes up the
ENTIRE PAGE.

◀ **Critical Viewing**

How is the portrayal of the woman in this painting similar to and different from the author's description of her mother? **[Compare and Contrast]**

A snake coils in my mother's dresser drawer; it is thick and black, glossy as sequins. My mother cut her hair several years ago, before I was born, but she kept one heavy braid. It is the three-foot snake I lift from its nest and handle as if it were alive.

"Mom, why did you cut your hair?" I ask. I am a little girl lifting a sleek black river into the light that streams through the kitchen window. Mom turns to me.

"It gave me headaches. Now put that away and wash your hands for lunch."

"You won't cut my hair, will you?" I'm sure this is a whine.

"No, just a little trim now and then to even the ends."

I return the dark snake to its nest among my mother's slips, arranging it so that its thin tail hides beneath the wide mouth sheared by scissors. My mother keeps her promise and lets my hair grow long, but I am only half of her; my thin brown braids will reach the middle of my back, and in maturity will look like tiny garden snakes.

My mother tells me stories every day: while she cleans, while she cooks, on our way to the library, standing in the checkout line at the supermarket. I like to share her stories with other people, and chatter like a monkey when I am able to command adult attention.



Susan Power
Author's Insight

I compare my mother's braid to my own—hers is a "sleek black river," mine are "tiny garden snakes"—to underscore my childhood impression that I was so much smaller and weaker, a diluted version.

☐ **Reading Check**

What does the author's mother do every day?

Susan Power

Author's Insight

I describe my mother as a "skyscraper" so the reader will have a visual image of my child's-eye view of her as a towering force.

Vocabulary

integral (in' tə grəl)

adj. essential

petrified (pe' trə fīd') adj.

paralyzed as with fear

shrouded (shroud' əd)

v. wrapped

intrigues (in' trēgz')

n. secrets

"She left the reservation when she was sixteen years old," I tell my audience. Sixteen sounds very old to me, but I always state the number because it seems *integral* to my recitation. "She had never been on a train before, or used a telephone. She left Standing Rock to take a job in Chicago so she could help out the family during the war. She was *petrified* of all the strange people and new surroundings; she stayed in her seat all the way from McLaughlin, South Dakota, to Chicago, Illinois, and didn't move once."

I usually laugh after saying this, because I cannot imagine my mother being afraid of anything. She is so tall, a true Dakota woman; she rises against the sun like a skyscraper, and when I draw her picture in my notebook, she takes up the entire page. She talks politics and attends sit-ins, wrestles with the Chicago police and says what's on her mind.

I am her small shadow and witness. I am the timid daughter who can rage only on paper.

We don't have much money, but Mom takes me from one end of the city to the other on foot, on buses. I will grow up believing that Chicago belongs to me, because it was given to me by my mother. Nearly every week we tour the Historical Society, and Mom makes a point of complaining about the statue that depicts an Indian man about to kill a white woman and her children: "This is the only monument to the history of Indians in this area that you have on exhibit. It's a shame because it is completely one-sided. Children who see this will think this is what Indians are all about."

My mother lectures the guides and their bosses, until eventually that statue disappears.

Some days we haunt the Art Institute, and my mother pauses before a Picasso.

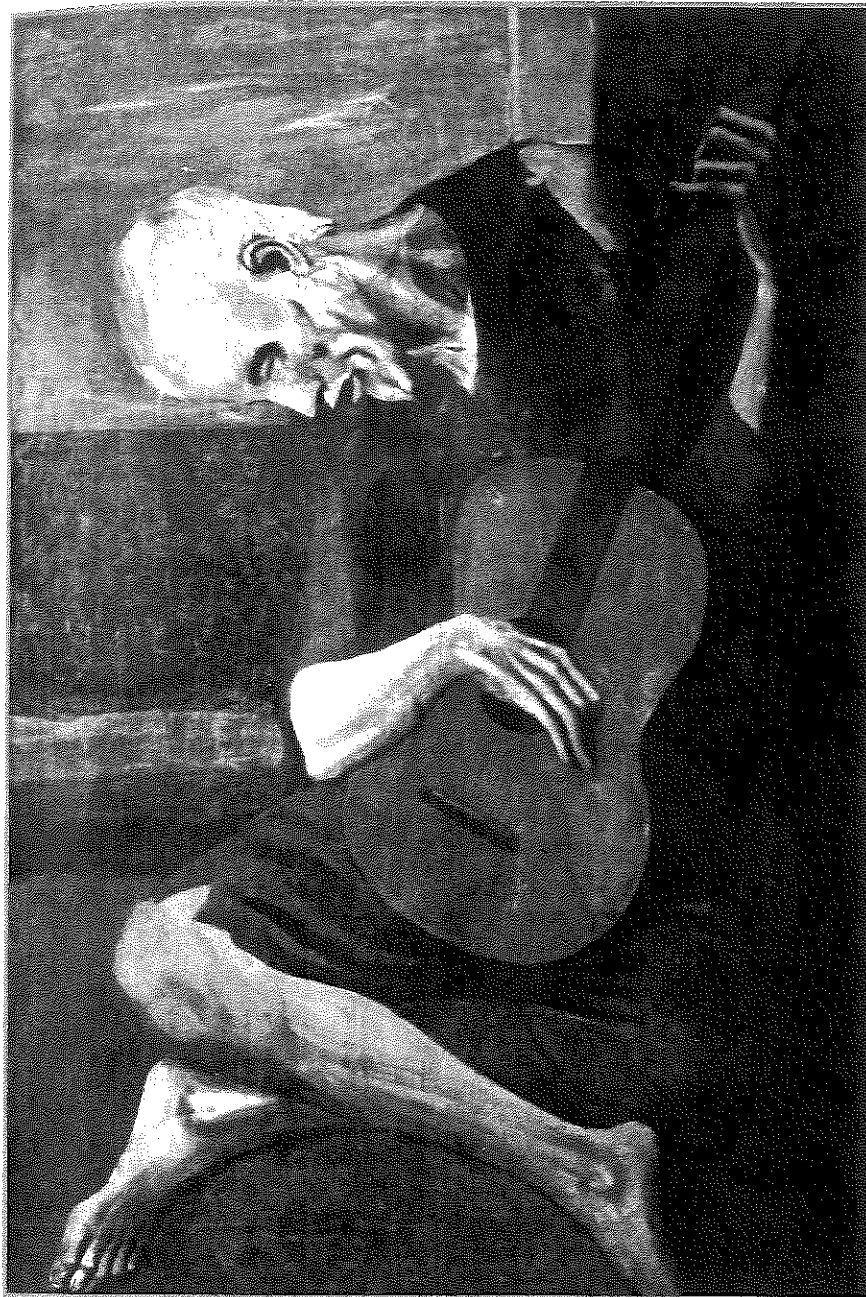
"He did this during his blue period," she tells me.

I squint at the blue man holding a blue guitar. "Was he very sad?" I ask.

"Yes, I think he was." My mother takes my hand and looks away from the painting. I can see a story developing behind her eyes, and I tug on her arm to release the words. She will tell me why Picasso was blue, what his thoughts were as he painted this canvas. She relates anecdotes I will never find in books, never see footnoted in a biography of the master artist. I don't even bother to check these references because I like my mother's version best.

When Mom is down, we go to see the mummies at the Field Museum of Natural History. The Egyptian dead sleep in the basement, most of them still *shrouded* in their wrappings.

"These were people like us," my mother whispers. She pulls me into her waist. "They had dreams and *intrigues* and problems with their teeth. They thought their one particular life was of the utmost significance. And now, just look at them." My mother never fails to brighten. "So what's the use of worrying too hard or too long? Might as well be cheerful."



The Old Guitarist, Pablo Picasso, 1903 (reproduction), The Art Institute of Chicago, ©2004 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

◀ Critical Viewing

Compare and contrast the effect of the color blue in this painting and in the dress on page 38.

[Compare and Contrast]

Before we leave this place, we always visit my great-grandmother's buckskin dress. We mount the stairs and walk through the museum's main hall—past the dinosaur bones all strung together, and the stuffed elephants lifting their trunks in a mute trumpet.

The clothed figures are *disconcerting* because they have no heads. I think of them as dead Indians. We reach the traditional outfits of the Sioux in the Plains Indian section, and there is the dress, as magnificent as I remembered. The yoke is completely beaded—I know the garment must be heavy to wear. My great-grandmother used blue

Vocabulary

disconcerting (dis' kən surt' in) *adj.* upsetting

☐ Reading Check

What do the author and her mother always do before leaving the museum?

Susan Power
Author's Insight

"Was this her blue period?" my character asks, to draw a connection between Picasso's art (one phase of Picasso's painting is called his "blue period") and the exquisite beadwork of Native American women.



beads as a background for the geometrical design, and I point to the azure¹ expanse.

"Was this her blue period?" I ask my mother. She hushes me unexpectedly, she will not play the game. I come to understand that this is a solemn call, and we stand before the glass case as we would before a grave.

"I don't know how this got out of the family," Mom murmurs. I feel helpless beside her, wishing I could reach through the glass to disrobe the headless mannequin. My mother belongs in a grand buckskin dress such as this, even though her hair is now too short to braid and has been trained to curl at the edges in a saucy flip.

We leave our fingerprints on the glass, two sets of hands at different heights pressing against the barrier. Mom is sad to leave.

"I hope she knows we visit her dress," my mother says.

There is a little buffalo across the hall, stuffed and staring. Mom

1. azure (azh' er) *adj.* sky blue.

doesn't always have the heart to greet him. Some days we slip out of the museum without finding his stall.

"You don't belong here," Mom tells him on those rare occasions when she feels she must pay her respects. "We honor you," she continues, "because you are a creature of great endurance and great generosity. You provided us with so many things that helped us to survive. It makes me angry to see you like this."

Few things can make my mother cry; the buffalo is one of them.

"I am just like you," she whispers. "I don't belong here either. We should be in the Dakotas, somewhere a little bit east of the Missouri River. This crazy city is not a fit home for buffalo or Dakotas."

I take my mother's hand to hold her in place. I am a city child, nervous around livestock and lonely on the plains.

I am afraid of a sky without light pollution—I never knew there could be so many stars. I lead my mother from the museum so she will forget the sense of loss. From the marble steps we can see Lake Shore Drive spill ahead of us, and I sweep my arm to the side as if I were responsible for this view. I introduce my mother to the city she gave me. I call her home.



"THIS CRAZY
CITY IS NOT A
FIT HOME FOR
BUFFALO OR
DAKOTAS."

Critical Reading



- © 1. **Key Ideas and Details** (a) What is the snake in Power's mother's dresser drawer? (b) **Interpret:** Why does she keep it there?
- © 2. **Key Ideas and Details** (a) What complaint does Power's mother make about the statue at the Historical Society? (b) **Analyze:** What is the effect of her complaints? (c) **Contrast:** How does the statue contrast with the exhibit at the Art Institute?
- © 3. **Craft and Structure** (a) What is unique about Power's relationship to the buckskin dress at the Art Institute? (b) **Interpret:** What is her mother's attitude toward seeing the dress there?
- © 4. **Integration of Knowledge and Ideas** (a) In what ways does her mother identify with the buffalo? (b) **Contrast:** How is Power different from her mother? (c) **Generalize:** What does the final paragraph tell you about the relationship between the writer and her mother and their relationship with the city? Explain.
- © 5. **Integration of Knowledge and Ideas** How do you think Power's mother influenced her as a writer? Base your answer on this essay.

Cite textual
evidence to
support your
responses.

Susan Power Introduces

MUSEUM INDIANS

Bringing the Spark of Your Own Imagination The origin myths of the Onondaga, Modoc, and Navajo tribes, recounted on pages 20–28 of this textbook, are examples of the oral tradition, stories repeated within a community, passed down from one generation to the next, keeping them alive. These spoken stories are meant to be performed, acted out with great drama before a circle of avid listeners of all ages. Each retelling of the story changes it a little, the performer emphasizing one episode over another, choosing slightly different words each time. These stories are meant to be flexible, interactive—modified according to the present audience's mood and tastes.

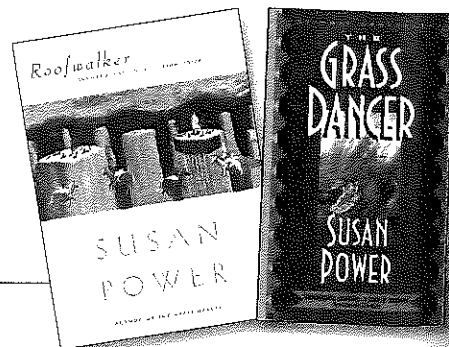
So as you read these tales, try to imagine them being acted out. Try to hear the storyteller's voice changing as different characters speak, rising with excitement, falling to a whisper. Your imaginative spark is needed to bring these stories fully to life.

Exposed to Two Cultures I am a grateful listener, eager to hear a gripping yarn, but I myself am not a traditional storyteller. I was very shy as a child and found it difficult to stand before people and speak aloud either a story or an idea. I was silent in my classes, unless called upon, and preferred committing my words to quiet paper rather than the storm of conversation. I was raised to be both Native (Yanktonnai Dakota) and American, and so I was exposed not only to traditional Native American stories, songs, ceremonies, and dances, but also to the culture of mainstream America and the wider world.



Meet the Author

Susan Power is a member of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe of Fort Yates, North Dakota. Her novel, *The Grass Dancer*, won the PEN/Hemingway Award for First Fiction. She has also written a book of stories and autobiographical essays entitled *Roofwalker*.



I loved reading and graduated from pop-up books and comics to the Nancy Drew mystery series and the *Chronicles of Narnia*. When I was about twelve, I began listening to recordings made of the plays of William Shakespeare and would memorize long passages that I delighted in performing privately, with no one but my mother and our cats to overhear. I didn't understand much of what was being spoken in the famous plays, but I was fascinated with the rhythmic poetry of the words, the dramatic plot lines, and thought to myself that Shakespeare would have felt at home in the Native world, dramatic as our oral literature can be.

Looking for My Own Experience I began writing my own poems, stories, essays, and political songs when I was very young—five or six years old. Perhaps I needed to write because, although I heard traditional stories of the people who came before me and inhabited this continent prior to European contact, and although I read dozens of books that taught me what it was like to live everywhere else in the world, I never found myself, my own experience, in either of these literatures: the oral tradition or the novels of the world. Where were the stories of little girls who attended church as well as a Native ceremony in the deep Wisconsin woods? Where were the books that told of a child who could perform a variety of traditional dances at an intertribal powwow and also excel in her ballet classes? I could not find myself on the literary map, and so I had to develop my own literature, plot my own place in this world.

But is my writing more Native than American? In my fiction and essays, Native American themes are emphasized—my characters believe, as I do, that everything is potentially alive, a creature of spirit, whether it be a person, an animal, a family car, a stone. But the language I use is English, the paintbrush of words I wield to draw you a picture of what I see with my eyes.

Oral Literature and Print The essay that follows, "Museum Indians," is a brief examination of my childhood in cultural terms—specifically, what it was like to be Native American in the city of Chicago. Notice that even though I have *written* several scenes describing adventures I shared with my mother, employing narrative strategies familiar to any reader of books, my mother is constantly *telling* me stories within the piece—instances of our own family oral tradition still in practice today. So I have captured the oral literature with my printed words.

Critical Reading



- © 1. **Key Ideas and Details (a)** What reason does Power give to explain why she is not a traditional storyteller?
(b) Connect: What life experiences do you think contributed to Power's decision to become a writer?
- © 2. **Key Ideas and Details (a)** How does Power solve the problem of not finding her own experience in the literature she read as a child?
(b) Interpret: According to Power, how do the dual influences of her childhood show up in her writing?

As You Read "Museum Indians" . . .

- © 3. **Integration of Knowledge and Ideas** Look for details in the essay that show the contrast between the "Native" and the "American" that Power describes here.
- © 4. **Integration of Knowledge and Ideas** Consider the ways in which Power is like her mother and the ways in which she is different.