home with my mother’s friend. The air was humid and night brought
a damp chill away from the fire. I grasped my arms, one in the other
as we walked. Running from behind, a girl caught up to us with the
biggest smile I had ever seen. She had long brown hair that was matted
at the top of her head. Her body was small and lean, but her feet
were big, and her sandals flopped in the dirt as she ran. She looked at
me as though she was happy to see me; I couldn’t see why. Who was
she?

Her mother introduced us, and she started telling me about
her family and how they danced every week at the Big House. She
grabbed my arm tightly and shook it; I could feel her fingernails
stick into my skin. “Where’s your jacket?” she insisted. I told her
I had nothing to wear because I was at St. Mary’s, and we wore
uniforms there. I was surprised when she told me she had attended
a residential school too, but it had been closed by the government
a few months back. She took off her jacket, a grey and white wool
sweater with an eagle woven into the back. “It’s yours now,” she said
grinning from ear to ear.

As I stepped carefully through the marsh of this wetland, I
heard every sound that made this moment. My wool jacket gripped
my body and rubbed my neck to make it itchy. I felt that this jacket
was my right of passage. It was a token of my proud Indian heritage,
which had come to be familiar to me little by little. The air was
warm and heavy in my lungs, and the sun came down on my face
cleansing my spirit.

Suddenly, geese flew up from the marsh. Straight into the air they
grew, darting together in every direction. They swooped back and forth,
and I was captured in their noise. My arms shot up into the air; I held
them there, feeling the spirit of the birds. I had felt this feeling before,
so powerful and beautiful; they were like the people of Quutuq.
That day I could not speak to the birds, but they spoke to me.

I learned that summer about the people I was meant to be with
all those years, and I was so proud. No one could ever take this away
from me now. I felt that I was a whole person in my heart, nothing
missing to wonder about. My mother told me that Quu’u’uusim, in our
language, means “land warmed by the sun,” but I know this land is
warm because of the people who live here.