

White Earth, June 2018

by Bruce Pemberton

A country road takes me through
a resort between two lakes, then
past a rustic convenience store
until we arrive at the rez and
the graves of my grandfather and
favorite cousin, buried blocks
apart in a small Ojibwe town.
A Great War veteran, he's dead
since 1936, buried in a Catholic
cemetery as the Jesuits insisted
on conversion.

My cousin practiced the ancient
faith. Her spirit house is close by,
with a dozen others in an overgrown
clearing, deep in the tick-rich woods
and tall grass. Dead ten years, buried
in a shroud and her leather jingle
dress, holding her pearl-colored
Stetson, her rib cage collapses and
the sunken earth accepts her bones.

My father and I then witness my
great-aunt's one-hundredth birthday
party. Wheel-chaired, she laughs,

asking, whose big cake is that?
They tell her. Oh, no, she says,
my birthday is Christmas, with
Baby Jesus! Eighty-five years ago,
at her boarding school, punished
if she spoke Ojibwe, she whispered
it at night, and kept her sacred
words alive.

There's a drum circle for her.
Standing outside it with the other
hard listeners, we soak in the
high cries and pounding as it
courses through skin and then,
skull, until finally recollected, it
flows through us into a clear sky.