Dear Ancestors & Descendants

a letter from Barbara Shangin (Anya)
illustrated by Lydia Dirks

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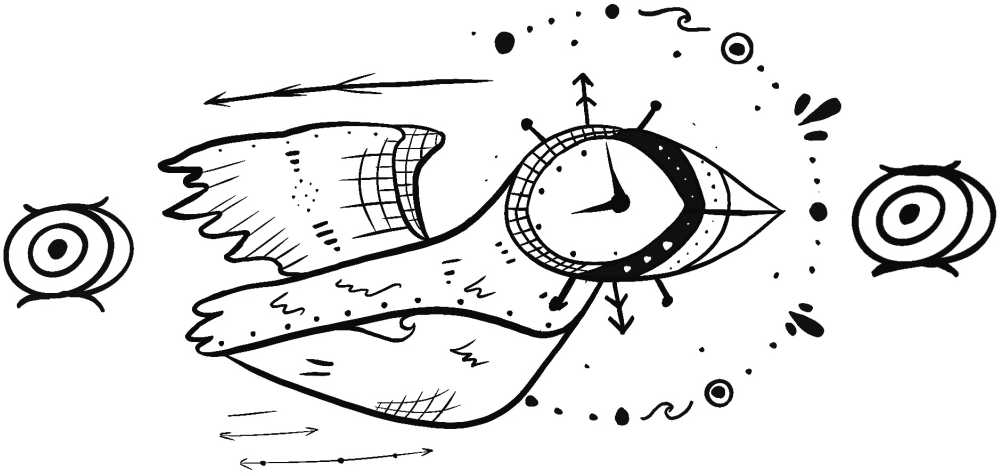

Dear Ancestors & Descendants,

I come to you as an Unangax̂ woman to confide in you and share the still, quiet, silent truth about the 1942 Evacuation and Internment of a whole community: my parents and the people of Atka. After learning of this dark historical experience that I grew up in the shadow of without knowing explicitly, I felt disturbed and hurt by this injustice. It aroused inside me the urgent desire to express to you the history that has been kept quiet. I found the willingness and courage to express and awaken the awareness of my parents' experience to you. I'm able to see and identify with them in their suffering. I became the voice to tell the story of the forced removal from our community in Atka by the US Military during WWII, which caused chaos and turmoil for generations. I realized I could not let my people's history be written by historians that belittle us. My parents' lives were abruptly interrupted by the

literal burning to the ground of their community & homes. This story sent me reeling back to growing up Unangax̂ in Atka in the shadow of this trauma, and my experience in school of how underrepresented in history we were and still are. I saw then and I see now how we have not been represented accurately.

Just imagine, my parents and the community of Atka fell asleep one night in 1942 during WWII and woke up to another lifestyle they were not accustomed to. Their refined harmony with nature and culture were disrupted. Like the depth of the deep vast ocean surrounding our island of Atka with so many unknowns, life itself became an unknown. They were uprooted and ordered to leave their familiar village and launched thousands of miles away on a journey of separation, distancing them from their safe and comfortable homes to an unknown and unsafe run-down, abandoned herring cannery.

In 1942, the US military anchored in Nazon Bay in front of Atka village, disorganized and reckless. The military ordered my parents and their community to evacuate the village and go to their fish camps, telling them it was for their protection from the invasion by the Japanese. Everyone felt like they were drowning in waves. They had no information to understand what was happening to them besides the limited and false information they received from the US Military, and so didn't understand the severity of what was taking place. They didn't realize that their village was going to be burnt down by the Military,

and the whole community was going to be interned thousands of miles away for the next three years.

There is a quiet humility about this story of the Unangaŷ, our people who have occupied the village of Atka for time immemorial. In the summer of 1942 before they were relocated, they saw the Japanese planes flying over the village ever so low so that they could even see the faces of the pilots, which caused them discomfort, anxiety and fear. Little did they know that just a few days later, the United States Military would impose themselves on the community. They were treated like they were prisoners of war, the same as the Unangaŷ taken by the Japanese from Attu Island at the tip of the Aleutian chain, and also the same as the Japanese Americans interned during WWII.

The Atkans started the day with fresh fried bread and dried salmon still on their plates and coffee cups still full of steaming coffee. From this normal morning they were suddenly uprooted, ordered abruptly by the military to evacuate immediately to their fish camps, with no rights as American citizens. Once they were settling into their fish camps for the night, they saw an orange glow over their village. The next day without food, hunger set in and the curious men went back to investigate what caused the light above the village and look for food, and they were shocked to find the village burned. They were taunted by the US military to retrieve food from the hot burning store, and then ordered to haul everyone from their fish camps in their dories at night.

My father, his father, and older brother owned a dory, and they were commanded by the military to use it for transporting people alongside anyone else with a boat. My father saw US military float planes landing carrying deceased and wounded soldiers. He also saw planes that were shot up landing and sinking in the bay. The sights and smells were so different from the smell of seaweed on the beach and the smell of the salty ocean. They were taken by the dark of night to an army transport boat called the Delaroff, loaded into a dirty cargo hold where they had to clean the hull. As they departed, they watched all of their dories with bowlines broken left drifting into the bay.

They were brought to the village on the next island, Nikolski, but when the Military sailors went ashore, the Nikolski residents didn't trust them. The military used my grandfather who knew the community, and he went ashore so that they would welcome the people from Atka. My parents and the community stayed a

couple nights in Nikolski with whoever had room; they were so hungry, and the Nikolski villagers fed them. Some of them had to sleep in barabaras as they waited. Their lives were swiftly shifting and they were left confounded and emotionally wounded. They couldn't process what was happening to them because it was all so fast, but their feelings of devastation were real. They had been taken from the original safety and love of their village home to a place of panic. They embarked on a journey they never imagined, the biggest storm, stronger even than the williwaw they regularly encountered in the Aleutian Chain. I never understood why my mom was so protective when I was growing up, not letting me out of her sight, until I started learning this story in my 20s from a documentary I watched.

As my family travelled on the boat to Angoon for days, the pain was chronic. Constant stress you can't tune out, a low hum of anxiety. Everyone was hushed with a sense of impending

doom, and they were aching to hear any good news. Their souls were heavy, speaking to them of their experience at that very moment. They didn't know what the next leg of their journey held or where they were going. They didn't know what they would face once they were taken to Southeast Alaska. They didn't know they were headed to Killisnoo, where they would be picked up from the boat by a stinking red scow to slowly make their way for hours reaching their destination at dusk to an abandoned cannery alongside Angoon and dumped on the beach like they were trash.

They were dumped on the beach called Kenes'u (Ken ness=Fort, house) on this island of Kilisnoo at dusk. With it getting dark the circumstances they were in became insurmountably challenging. The dark mood overwhelmed them as they felt abandoned, and the impact of Isolation and helplessness set in. They paid close attention to their surroundings as they felt the weight and discomfort of being alone. They looked up and saw the tall dark spruce after millenia of living without trees and felt like the spruce might fall right on top of them and push them back into the sea. Doom fell upon them as the children cuddled their mothers, husbands to their wives, single boys and girls, grandmas and grandpas, aunts and uncles to each other.

This was a different scene for them. The island of Atka had lush emerald green rolling hills and mountains in the background, and dotted little islands in front of the village in the Bay with rich cobalt

blues and the sun sparkling diamonds. This new island of Killisnoo was dark with trees reminding them of the dark moodiness of the ocean during a storm. They had to become courageous, deeply searching for answers after being put into a dreary and extreme environment. They defied limitations and survived like the fresh smell of a windy day on the beach. They hung on to their rich historical traditions and value of survival.

Unbeknownst to them as they struggled to figure out what to do in this abandoned cannery, a lone Tlingit hunter was headed back to his community of Angoon in his canoe and saw people on the beach. He got back to his village and reported to people there of what he saw. The chief of Angoon, Nelson, has a big house and organized with other people in the community to house the women and children overnight while the men repaired the run-down cannery housing. This began the three year relationship between two cultures, Tlingit and Unangax̂.

I had never heard or learned about any acknowledgment of what the Tlingit in Angoon experienced with my parents and their community, even after doing a lot of research. I decided to go to Angoon to interview the Elders and find more information about my village's experience, and spent two weeks there in the fall of 2022.

I was surprised to learn that they thought the people from Atka didn't exist anymore, which made sense to me because after the Atkans

left there was no more continued communication. Meeting me, the welcoming reception that I got from them was respectful, heartfelt, and I found I made an instant connection. The community not only was excited to meet me but they had also experienced their own tragedy with the US Military's bombardment and destruction of Angoon in 1882. Our connection was instant and lasting.

I learned so many different things talking to Elders. There was a language barrier back then between the two communities and they had to work with a few people who spoke English to communicate. They both had Russian Orthodox churches and were able to connect in that way. I heard that the Atkans had the most beautiful singing voices they'd ever heard, and the Tlingit couldn't believe how good-looking everyone from Atka was. It took time to build trust, but as trust was built the Atkans would travel by boat to Angoon to watch movies and go to dances. The people in Angoon were amazed by the rough seas the Atkans would travel in. The Tlingit respected the Atkan men, so they didn't just give them food, but taught them where to go to hunt and fish and took them out on their own boats. My family was able to gather fish, seal and halibut in Chatam Strait.

Without that support, I don't know what would have happened to my family. Even with this support, a quarter of the community perished, mainly the Elders and small children. It was a blessing for me to feel the hospitality in 2022 that my parents and their community felt in 1942. I was honored and deeply moved to be adopted into the community

and given the name “Anya” during the 140th commemoration ceremony of the bombardment of Angoon.

This story is still unfolding and I will forever be learning and exploring what came before me and what comes after me. What I want to say to you, descendants, is this: in honor of our Ancestors, we need to move away from being victims of the circumstances that happened in the past and find healing to become the essence of who they would’ve wanted us to be. I am going through this healing process myself, and have built a stronger character within me as I move through anger, grief, shock, and also inspiration at the resilience and survival of my people.

With love,
Barbara
(Anya)

Scan the QR code to hear Alice Qannik Glenn interview Barbara

about the author

Growing up surrounded by wind and waves on the island of Atka, Barbara Shangin has a deep connection to her land and Ancestors. Her mother and father taught her the Unangaŝ language and ways of strength and gratitude. Like her mom, Barbara lives with curiosity, courage and honesty. As a young mother she moved her family to Sitka to get her teaching degree. She has spent her life weaving together Unangaŝ ways of knowing with the public school system. She teaches children to read and shows them they are resilient and in charge of their learning.

During WWII her parents and the entire village of Atka was forcibly relocated to Southeast Alaska by the US military, where they struggled to survive outside Angoon for three years. In 2022 she was invited to Angoon to share her story, thank the community for helping her family survive, and learn more about her family's history. There she found community, belonging, and a shared history. The community of Angoon resonated with her family's story as their village had been bombed and destroyed by the US Navy in 1882. Barbara was adopted by the people of Angoon and given a Tlingit name, Anya. Her story is powerful and healing.

Barbara is a prolific reader and writer and can be found pening a new idea or gaining inspiration from another author. She is an expert basket weaver and generously shares her knowledge at culture camps and with others. Some of her favorite things to do are to sit quietly on her island gathering beach grass and listening to the sea and the gentle gusts of wind as well as spending time with her seven grandchildren.

about the artist

Since 2019, Lydia Dirks has been blazing a trail through the Alaskan landscape as a self-taught Unangaŝ artist as she meticulously pens out whimsical illustrations using her signature vibrant color palette. As a child in the early 2000's in Unalaska, Lydia got her start drawing with pencil, which ultimately led her to try other mediums, such as pen and ink, watercolor, color pencil, acrylic painting, digital art, beading, and woodworking.

With every creation she makes, Lydia continues to be influenced by her father, Mike Dirks Sr, a multimedia artist popularly known for his traditional mask carvings, as she holistically embraces her Unangaŝ roots by drawing inspiration from her culture, the land, and the sea.

Since 2022, Lydia has been doing contractual artwork and working at the Aleutian Pribilof Island Association's Cultural Heritage Department as the Special project's assistant.

Lydia maintains a catalog of her artwork on Instagram, @chagix.cheeks and she can also be reached by email: lydiadirks3@gmail.com for quotes on special projects or functions.

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