

Praise for *Cekpa: A Memoir in Beaded Essays*

"Altman refuses to sand down the jagged edges, instead holding them up to the light in this tremendous book, carefully setting piece after piece into place to tell her story of making and remaking family."

—Elissa Washuta, author of *White Magic*

"This memoir will remind you that—in spite of current evidence to the contrary—strong women continue to make the world."

—Pam Houston, author of *Deep Creek: Finding Hope in the High Country*

"Altman lets us in on a love letter to her two daughters, to her extended family, and to the land. We are endlessly fortunate to bear witness."

—Charlie J. Stephens, author of *A Wounded Deer Leaps Highest*

"Identity, family, genealogy, drug use, youth, belonging, culture, love, sex, growing up, and finding oneself fill this remarkable story of rediscovery, a story that so many Native people today experience in parallel paths."

—David G. Lewis, author of *Tribal Histories of the Willamette Valley*

"Altman's brave and beautiful memoir stakes its claim in the growing canon of lasting literature written by transracial adoptees."

—Erika Hayasaki, author of *Somewhere Sisters: A Story of Adoption, Identity and the Meaning of Family*

"We need more honest, complicated voices like this in order to more fully comprehend this largely unknown experience."

—Shannon Gibney, author of *The Girl I Am, Was, and Never Will Be*

"Raw, honest, and enlightening, *Cekpa: A Memoir in Beaded Essays* by Leah Altman is an emotionally charged collection of essays that transmutes childhood trauma and loss into enduring self-acceptance."

—Terra Trevor, author of *We Who Walk the Seven Ways: A Memoir*

"The generous intimacy of this memoir will make you feel that you've known Altman forever, rooting for her the whole way."

—Allison Larkin, author of *The People We Keep*

CEKPA

A MEMOIR IN BEADED ESSAYS

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Leah Altman

Ooligan Press - Portland, Oregon

Cekpa: A Memoir in Beaded Essays

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For my daughters.

Content Warning

The book you hold in your hands tells a story about my truth—the best and worst parts, the ugly and the beautiful—all mixed up in one narrative that makes me human. Telling it takes courage. There are discussions of child abuse and neglect, navigating abusive environments, self-harm, mental illness, and sexual assault. Please take care in your reading, and know when and how to engage and disengage as you see fit. Only you know your own battle wounds.

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Preface

When your great-grandmother is telling a good story, she makes creases in her napkin like an accordion. She's almost always at the dinner table, when she is most likely surrounded by family members on an occasion during which we are all gathered, like Christmas or a birthday, or just the general Friday night gathering. (A common phrase in our family: "Are we doing Friday night?")

In place of a napkin, any small bit of fabric will do. A piece of paper, even . . . a doily, one of the ones she tatted herself lifetimes ago and that cover every surface in her living room.

She pauses—a long, dramatic pause—until she has all of the attention in the room, looking down at her napkin or paper or doily humbly, and waits until every eye is on her, and then she begins.

Someone once told me they caught me doing the same thing in a work meeting and commented on how effective it was. They mistakenly thought it a cultural thing, because I'm Native American. More specifically, I am Lakota. Our family on my birth father's side is from Pine Ridge, South Dakota. Your great-grandmother—my grandma, your grandma Gigi's mom, my adoptive mom's mom—is not my blood relative.

That doesn't mean they aren't our family. It means that they chose us. In fact, they had to go out of their way to get us—they had to really, really want a baby. And that baby was me, your mama.



With the pin came a certain amount of responsibility; I knew to clear a large enough area around the fire and line it with large river rocks so any sparks that flew outside the circle would dissipate by the time they landed. Because my mother trusted me with my fires, she allowed me to create a small fire pit of my own in the front yard that I would sit at for hours on end, making little fires and staring into the flames before putting them out with dirt and water. Fire entranced me and made me feel calm.

That summer, when I would stare into the little flames, I thought about my birth brother. No one ever told me that I had one; I don't think they knew for sure anyway. But something inside me told me that I had another brother who needed me, too. I don't know how I knew, but gazing into that fire, I felt as if it opened a portal inside me, one that connected me to the sibling I knew was out there somewhere.



The need in me to find my birth brother, my whole birth family, grew over the years until it became a huge rock of depression and anger and confusion that threatened to chase me down and flatten me every chance it got. I felt like my past was a puzzle that I was only given a few of the pieces to; I was the picture, incomplete, without those missing pieces. When I turned sixteen, my parents hired a lawyer to get my adoption records from the local courthouse. Because it was a closed adoption, the records he found were redacted so that identifying details about my birth parents were blacked out; however, they missed a mention of my grandfather's name—Reza Beyk. From that name, I was able to find the names of my birth mother and birth father: June Beyk and Edwin Francis Blackfeather. From the adoption records, I knew that Edwin—Eddie—was an enrolled tribal member. June was half-Persian. There was very little that I knew about either of them from those papers, but it was all I had to start with.

When I turned twenty-one, I decided to transfer from my community college in the Pacific Northwest to a school in tiny Spearfish, South Dakota—Black Hills State University—to look for my birth family. I chose Black Hills State because it was the closest college to



Seven Phases

*in pictures of me and my sister
i forget where she ends and i begin, like twins
we mistake ourselves for each other.
in her presence, i either lose autonomy or take comfort in the fact
that there's someone out there just like me, oglala and persian, all
mixed up
in one nose
another girl who hears more than the beat of one drum, more than
one voice.*



I wake up to the sweetest little giggle, like bells tinkling.

A tiny face peeks out at me from behind a hallway wall in my birth mother's home, a house I do not, at first, recognize, as I blink my bleary eyes.

The face disappears again. The tinkling giggle does not.

I sit up on the gray, broken-in couch, looking around at the white, sparse walls and arched doorways. There is one large painting done in pastel watercolors, muted but colorful tones, on the wall directly across from me. It's a woman dancing, but there is something almost tragic about her dance, pensive. June painted it. Art runs in our blood.

The little cherub prances out from behind the doorway again, her straw-colored hair a wild puff of cotton candy crowning her

sensitivity, and she was missing half her smile because of what is commonly known as “meth mouth.”



According to the American Dental Association:

“Meth mouth” is characterized by severe tooth decay and gum disease, which often causes teeth to break or fall out. An examination of the mouths of 571 methamphetamine users showed:

- 96% had cavities
- 58% had untreated tooth decay
- 31% had six or more missing teeth

The teeth of people addicted to methamphetamines are characterized by being blackened, stained, rotting, crumbling and falling apart. Often, the teeth cannot be salvaged and must be removed. The extensive tooth decay is likely caused by a combination of drug-induced psychological and physiological changes resulting in dry mouth and long periods of poor oral hygiene. Methamphetamine itself is also acidic.



I’ve never actually seen the inside of Petra’s mouth, but she said most of her teeth were gone when we met. I was twenty-one. She was twenty-three. At one point, I think she got false teeth. I write “I think” because I still haven’t actually seen them. She pulls her lips over her teeth so you cannot see them, even when she laughs.



In my wedding photos, Petra wears a gigantic turquoise ballgown, competing with the bulk of my wedding dress. (The rest of my



Two Ones Coming Together

When I was fourteen, I liked cruising by a toy store in the mall called All Wound Up—the one with the cute older teenage boys standing at their post right outside the store, walking the dog with their yo-yos. One day, my cousin and I chatted up one of the boys at the front, who turned out to be the manager. I was too young to work retail in Oregon, but I wanted to make my own money so I could actually afford to buy the lipsticks and earrings and candy my cousins and I stole.

We liked the nice mall in the suburbs the best, the one with the upper-middle-class girls with their North Face hoodies and Coach purses. My cousin and I dressed like chola girls with the big hair and heavy makeup, old plaid shirts of our dads' tied around our torn-up jeans. Crystal taught me how to draw on liquid eyeliner real thick so I looked *at least* sixteen.

Danny wasn't that cute, actually, and he was at least nineteen, much too old for me. But he was an older boy, and he had a job—a manager job, no less—and he was the ticket to getting a real paycheck. So I flirted. He showed off, spinning the yo-yo around his head (Around the World), and zipping it towards my stomach, pulling back at the last second before it hit me. I asked if he had a job opening, and he took me to the back room to fill out the paperwork while Crystal browsed the shelves of toys.

He asked a lot of questions, wanting to know where I went to school and what I liked to do for fun. He was very chatty, standing too close and taking his time with the paperwork. Finally, he handed me an application, offering his desk so I could fill it out, leaning over

told myself firmly. *The last thing I need is another guy mucking up my mind again so quickly.*

"I'm sorry," I blushed. "I just can't figure out this old heater, and it's freezing in here." I clasped my hands in front of the jacket I was still wearing to emphasize the temperature of the room.

He went to the heater, flipped a couple of switches, and turned the knob down a little bit. He turned around as he stood back up and grinned, crossing his arms across his chest and squaring his feet and shoulders, like a cop. He seemed to be poking fun at me—still that teasing older boy underneath the years and uniform.

We chatted for a bit, and then I told him I needed to get some rest. Having a guy in my room the same night my ex had thrown me around my apartment was making me nervous. He said goodnight and told me to let him know if I needed anything else from him, in that same mischievous tone like some subtext I didn't understand.

When I woke up the next morning, late, there was a note slipped underneath my door.

*Hey, Leah,
It was good to catch up with you last night. It's been a long time!
It sounds like you've been through a lot. If you ever need some-
one to talk to, feel free to email me at...*

*Sincerely,
Logan*

I giggled to myself. I never had a guy give me his email address, but not his phone number. It seemed almost antiquated, like asking someone to write you letters.

In retrospect, if he had given me his phone number, I never would have called. I might have texted, but it was unlikely. Given what I had been through, email seemed less threatening. So I did email him that night.

We exchanged long emails for weeks before going out to lunch in person when I found out he was on-again in his on-again, off-again four-month relationship. A couple weeks later, we planned a double date. I was hanging out with another ex-boyfriend at the time, and Logan was still seeing his girlfriend, though the threads

placenta previa; my gestational diabetes doctors insisted I exercise more. I cried in frustration. Nothing worked and I was so hungry!

One doctor told me: “When you’re hungry, just eat a bunch of vegetables.” All I craved was carbs.

I had done this before. I knew what to do. I knew how to eat healthy; every lecture I got from the nutritionist defeated me. Finally, I gave in.

The insulin was a relief. I could finally eat again, and just a little insulin went a long way. I had to give myself shots twice a day, and we had to increase the insulin the longer the pregnancy went on. Logan winced every time I stuck a needle in my hip in front of him. I laughed. After a while, I didn’t even feel it anymore.

After my pregnancy, it went away, but six months later, I tested high on my A1C. Prediabetic.



My own experience with sisters is fraught with negativity. I don’t have a “real” sister . . . like one you were raised with your whole life and shares your DNA. But I have sisters.

1. Freya and Bernetta were my foster sisters when I was very young. I don’t have any memories of Bernetta from that time because she ran away shortly after she came to live with us. Freya stayed for a little bit before she ran off. My only memory of Freya when we were kids is when she took me out on a floaty to the middle of a lake when we were camping and shoved me off. I was too young to swim, and I remember seeing water and sky, water and sky, as my head bobbed while I tried to stay afloat. I remember my mom picking me up off the shore.

At my wedding, Freya was eight months pregnant and brought her stripper friend *and* her boyfriend as her plus one and got completely wasted while her friend gave my grandpa a lap dance and the boyfriend stole bottles of alcohol. My caterer tackled her and took her keys when she tried to get in the van and drive her children home drunk.

When I was pregnant with Aurora, I told Freya at a family gathering, and she yelled “No you’re not!” and flung a glass of water in my face.

2. Bethany was a year old when they brought her, moving her in the middle of the night while she slept. She was too young to have night terrors. There is a picture of me and Bethany and Ben on a slide at the park. My mom was trying to adopt her when her aunt came and claimed her for the government checks. They moved her in the middle of the night again. My mom cried, broken hearted, for years after. She still does.
3. When I found out I had a birth sister two years older than me, I couldn’t wait to meet her. We both had black widow tattoos we got before we knew about each other; we both forgot to fill in the poisonous red on the back and planned to do so together. We went by the same street name as teenagers: Pixie. My niece thought I was her doppelganger, and I confused photos of the two of us, thinking her photos were of me at first glance. Petra broke my heart and hers, repeatedly, choosing meth over us both. Now, she’s sober, and I still can’t bring myself to trust her. She’s been sober before.
4. Bernetta came back once. She stayed at Freya’s. I came over for dinner, and we talked and laughed. It felt like she could really be like an older sister. I’ve never seen her again.
5. When my adoptive mom’s birth daughter found her, my mom took me out on the porch and showed me the letter Paige sent. Her handwriting was just like my mom’s. I was truly happy for her. I had just found my birth mother and birth siblings, and I knew that was hard for my adoptive family. Now we were even.

When I met Paige, she told me she wasn’t trying to replace me. I felt like I had taken her spot. I tried to move over for her, make space for her. I was excited to have a sister.



Grandpa is in the Garden

My grandpa is in the hydrangea bush that grows in front of my grandma's house. He makes the flowers turn amazing colors—green to blue to purple to a pink-red, sometimes all at once—all seasons of the year. I have a bouquet of flowering branches from the bush that my aunt brought me over a month ago that are still going strong in my windowsill.

Before he died, the bush never flowered. Despite his green thumb, it resisted his prodding. No matter how much he watered or touched or talked to it, it would not produce. Every year—sometimes multiple times a year—I heard him declare that he was just going to cut it down, but he never did.

The year before he died, as he grew more frail and went outside less and less, he told us that if that bush flowered after he died, we should all know that it was him. He died in the early spring, and within weeks, it flowered. We all cried when we saw the first tender green petals. (I couldn't make this up if I tried.)

When he died, I felt him everywhere. I stayed up all night, sleeping in his favorite chair in the kitchen, using his lavender heating pad, reheating it in the microwave again and again, smelling his scent again every time the pad heated up. I got up early and went to the store to get the makings for stew. I made so much stew, way more than we could eat. I didn't want anyone to have to think about or worry about food or feeding anyone when they were mourning.

As I was picking the rosemary and thyme and basil from his garden to make the stew, I suddenly felt him all around me. I stopped picking and lifted my head, smelling the air. The fresh morning

“It’s Grandma’s last night at the house,” she spoke roughly, “And I just wanted you to know we are making one last fire in the backyard for her. I wouldn’t want you to miss it.”

Ben and I didn’t even think twice about going. We packed up the girls and kayaks, said our goodbyes, and dropped the girls and gear off with Logan back at the house on our way to Portland.

Remember that little tree that used to be at the side of the house, that Grandpa cut down when he realized we were all using it to climb over the fence to get to the pool to go skinny-dipping in the middle of the night? I used to sneak up there to read and listen in on people’s conversations in the driveway for hours.

Remember when they had a hot tub in the back room, and how it smelled like chlorine super strong, and how we would get out and jump into the pool and then go back and forth for hours, how your body froze up when you’d hit the cold water, and how much we loved that feeling?

Remember we used to float on our backs at night and look up at the stars?

Remember Levi kissed me under the water, how people acted like they didn’t know, but there used to be an underwater light, so you could actually see everything.

Remember there was a Ouija board that Freya used one time, and she was watching a scary movie, and Grandma said she saw the paper airplanes on the ceiling start spinning? She took away the Ouija board and locked it up in the newalls—an old word my grandma used for the storage space in a house’s walls—in the upstairs room where Abbie was staying, and it was there for years. Everyone who has stayed in that room has had bad dreams, except Abbie, because they found it and threw it away right before Grandpa passed, before Abbie moved in.

When we walk through the house to the backyard, Grandma is already a bottle deep, the wine buzz making her throat guttural. She squeezes us tight, telling us it made her night we came. Ben rarely shows for family events, as he is usually working or not in town, but he wanted to be there that night as much as I did. It was about saying goodbye to our youth, goodbye to Grandpa.

They ask us to approve the little paper funeral handouts, which feature an eagle in front of a 70s-style dreamcatcher on the cover, above script letters spelling out “In Loving Memory.” The inner verso page features a random Christian-inspired poem called “Safely Home” that I skim over. I don’t care for it, but how would I know what my birth father would have liked? I barely knew him. On the recto, it states:

In Loving Memory of
Edwin Francis Blackfeather

Date of birth Date of passing
October 18, 1950 – August 27, 2020
Pine Ridge, SD Lake Park, IA

Wake Services

3:00 P.M. Thursday, September 3, 2020
Trisha Wilds Residence
Pine Ridge, South Dakota

Funeral Services

10:00 A.M. Friday, September 4, 2020
Trisha Wilds Residence
Pine Ridge, SD

Officiating

Sister Nancy Schneider

Traditional Lakota Services

Mr. Yamni Clear Water

Pallbearers

Jadan Poor Bear Francis Poor Bear Daniel Poor Bear
Aaron Poor Bear Dakota Wilds Darien Hill

Honorary Pallbearers

All Friends & Relatives

Graveside Services

Our Lady of the Sioux Catholic Cemetery
Oglala, South Dakota

About the Author

Leah Altman (Oglala Lakota) is a Native American transracial adoptee and second-generation Persian immigrant. She has worked as a freelance journalist and editor for over fifteen years, alongside her work in fundraising and grant writing for Native and BIPOC-led nonprofit organizations serving families and the environment. Leah lives in the Pacific Northwest and is an alumni of the Institute of American Indian Arts and Portland State University's Book Publishing program. Her work has been featured in publications such as *Oregon Humanities*, *The Oregonian*, *Underscore*, and *Indian Country Today*. She is an avid pool player, bead worker, fickle hiker, fair-weather kayaker, and mama bear of two young girls.