

Alan Charles Kors

Linda McCarriston's exquisite, finely wrought, and deeply moving poem, "Indian Girls," sheds sharp, painful, and boundlessly empathetic light upon the experience of powerlessness and abuse. It speaks at once to the mind, the heart, and the conscience of readers.

Efforts to chill expressive and poetic freedom—the freedom from which the possibility of "Indian Girls" emerged—threaten the rare and immeasurable value of being fully human, a value that depends on liberty. Such liberty is under terrible assault at our colleges and universities, most often in the name of "sensitivity." The first victim of repression and censorship, however, would be sensitivity. A society that silences expression silences thought. A society that silences poetry silences the human spirit. Freedom is fragile, precious, and indivisible, and we all enjoy only what the smallest voice enjoys.

Issues of race, sexuality, child abuse, and ethnicity touch raw historical, political, moral, and psychological nerves in American life. The very depth of those tensions, however, should lead us to want to know how individuals diversely think about, experience, and respond to the realities that we face. Repression deprives us of what, humanly and intellectually, we need the most: critical thought, insight, unfettered inquiry, open exploration, and mutual awareness. It protects no one's dignity to be sheltered from freedom, let alone from the freedom of poetry.

Liberty is the exception in human affairs, and once lost, in belief or in practice, it is simply gone. I salute President Mark Hamilton of the University of Alaska, who understood this, and whose ringing defense of the First Amendment and of its underlying value, individual liberty, was one of the richest fruits of these controversies. Above all, I salute Linda McCarriston, both for the humanity of "Indian Girls," and, a second gift, for the courage with which she defended the rights of all minds and sensibilities to freedom of expression, the freedom without which none of the others has protection or authentic meaning.

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