THE LONE RANGER AND TONTO FISTFIGHT IN HEAVEN

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EVERY LITTLE HURRICANE

Although it was winter, the nearest ocean four hundred miles away, and the Tribal Weatherman asleep because of boredom, a hurricane dropped from the sky in 1976 and fell so hard on the Spokane Indian Reservation that it knocked Victor from bed and his latest nightmare.

It was January and Victor was nine years old. He was sleeping in his bedroom in the basement of the HUD house when it happened. His mother and father were upstairs, hosting the largest New Year's Eve party in tribal history, when the winds increased and the first tree fell.

"Goddamn it," one Indian yelled at another as the argument began. "You ain't shit, you fucking apple."

The two Indians raged across the room at each other. One was tall and heavy, the other was short, muscular. High-pressure and low-pressure fronts.

The music was so loud that Victor could barely hear the voices as the two Indians escalated the argument into a fistfight. Soon there were no voices to be heard, only guttural noises that could have been curses or wood breaking. Then the music stopped so suddenly that the silence frightened Victor.

"What the fuck's going on?" Victor's father yelled, his voice coming quickly and with force. It shook the walls of the house.

"Adolph and Arnold are fighting again," Victor's mother said. Adolph and Arnold were her brothers, Victor's uncles. They always fought. Had been fighting since the very beginning.

"Well, tell them to get their goddamn asses out of my house," Victor's father yelled again, his decibel level rising to meet the tension in the house.

"They already left," Victor's mother said. "They're fighting out in the yard."

Victor heard this and ran to his window. He could see his uncles slugging each other with such force that they had to be in love. Strangers would never want to hurt each other that badly. But it was strangely quiet, like Victor was watching a television show with the volume turned all the way down. He could hear the party upstairs move to the windows, step onto the front porch to watch the battle.

During other hurricanes broadcast on the news, Victor

had seen crazy people tie themselves to trees on the beach. Those people wanted to feel the force of the hurricane firsthand, wanted it to be like an amusement ride, but the thin ropes were broken and the people were broken. Sometimes the trees themselves were pulled from the ground and both the trees and the people tied to the trees were carried away.

Standing at his window, watching his uncles grow bloody and tired, Victor pulled the strings of his pajama bottoms tighter. He squeezed his hands into fists and pressed his face tightly against the glass.

"They're going to kill each other," somebody yelled from an upstairs window. Nobody disagreed and nobody moved to change the situation. Witnesses. They were all witnesses and nothing more. For hundreds of years, Indians were witnesses to crimes of an epic scale. Victor's uncles were in the midst of a misdemeanor that would remain one even if somebody was to die. One Indian killing another did not create a special kind of storm. This little kind of hurricane was generic. It didn't even deserve a name.

Adolph soon had the best of Arnold, though, and was trying to drown him in the snow. Victor watched as his uncle held his other uncle down, saw the look of hate and love on his uncle's face and the terrified arms of his other uncle flailing uselessly.

Then it was over.

Adolph let Arnold loose, even pulled him to his feet, and they both stood, facing each other. They started to yell again, unintelligible and unintelligent. The volume grew as other voices from the party upstairs were added. Victor could almost smell the sweat and whiskey and blood.

Everybody was assessing the damage, considering options. Would the fight continue? Would it decrease in intensity until both uncles sat quietly in opposite corners, exhausted and ashamed? Could the Indian Health Service doctors fix the broken nose and sprained ankles?

But there was other pain. Victor knew that. He stood at his window and touched his own body. His legs and back hurt from a day of sledding, his head was a little sore from where he bumped into a door earlier in the week. One molar ached from cavity; his chest throbbed with absence.

Victor had seen the news footage of cities after hurricanes had passed by. Houses were flattened, their contents thrown in every direction. Memories not destroyed, but forever changed and damaged. Which is worse? Victor wanted to know if memories of his personal hurricanes would be better if he could change them. Or if he just forgot about all of it. Victor had once seen a photograph of a car that a hurricane had picked up and carried for five miles before it fell onto a house. Victor remembered everything exactly that way.

On Christmas Eve when he was five, Victor's father wept because he didn't have any money for gifts. Oh, there was a tree trimmed with ornaments, a few bulbs from the Trading Post, one string of lights, and photographs of the family with holes punched through the top, threaded with dental floss, and hung from tiny branches. But there were no gifts. Not one.

"But we've got each other," Victor's mother said, but she knew it was just dry recitation of the old Christmas movies

they watched on television. It wasn't real. Victor watched his father cry huge, gasping tears. Indian tears.

Victor imagined that his father's tears could have frozen solid in the severe reservation winters and shattered when they hit the floor. Sent millions of icy knives through the air, each specific and beautiful. Each dangerous and random.

Victor imagined that he held an empty box beneath his father's eyes and collected the tears, held that box until it was full. Victor would wrap it in Sunday comics and give it to his mother.

Just the week before, Victor had stood in the shadows of his father's doorway and watched as the man opened his wallet and shook his head. Empty. Victor watched his father put the empty wallet back in his pocket for a moment, then pull it out and open it again. Still empty. Victor watched his father repeat this ceremony again and again, as if the repetition itself could guarantee change. But it was always empty.

During all these kinds of tiny storms, Victor's mother would rise with her medicine and magic. She would pull air down from empty cupboards and make fry bread. She would shake thick blankets free from old bandanas. She would comb Victor's braids into dreams.

In those dreams, Victor and his parents would be sitting in Mother's Kitchen restaurant in Spokane, waiting out a storm. Rain and lightning. Unemployment and poverty. Commodity food. Flash floods.

"Soup," Victor's father would always say. "I want a bowl of soup."

Mother's Kitchen was always warm in those dreams.

There was always a good song on the jukebox, a song that Victor didn't really know but he knew it was good. And he knew it was a song from his parents' youth. In those dreams, all was good.

Sometimes, though, the dream became a nightmare and Mother's Kitchen was out of soup, the jukebox only played country music, and the roof leaked. Rain fell like drums into buckets and pots and pans set out to catch whatever they could. In those nightmares, Victor sat in his chair as rain fell, drop by drop, onto his head.

In those nightmares, Victor felt his stomach ache with hunger. In fact, he felt his whole interior sway, nearly buckle, then fall. Gravity. Nothing for dinner except sleep. Gale and unsteady barometer.

In other nightmares, in his everyday reality, Victor watched his father take a drink of vodka on a completely empty stomach. Victor could hear that near-poison fall, then hit, flesh and blood, nerve and vein. Maybe it was like lightning tearing an old tree into halves. Maybe it was like a wall of water, a reservation tsunami, crashing onto a small beach. Maybe it was like Hiroshima or Nagasaki. Maybe it was like all that. Maybe. But after he drank, Victor's father would breathe in deep and close his eyes, stretch, and straighten his neck and back. During those long drinks, Victor's father wasn't shaped like a question mark. He looked more like an exclamation point.

Some people liked the rain. But Victor hated it. Really hated it. The damp. Humidity. Low clouds and lies. Weathermen. When it was raining, Victor would apologize to everyone he talked to.

"Sorry about the weather," he would say.

Once, Victor's cousins made him climb a tall tree during a rainstorm. The bark was slick, nearly impossible to hold on to, but Victor kept climbing. The branches kept most of the rain off him, but there were always sudden funnels of water that broke through, startling enough to nearly make Victor lose his grip. Sudden rain like promises, like treaties. But Victor held on.

There was so much that Victor feared, so much his intense imagination created. For years, Victor feared that he was going to drown while it was raining, so that even when he thrashed through the lake and opened his mouth to scream, he would taste even more water falling from the sky. Sometimes he was sure that he would fall from the top of the slide or from a swing and a whirlpool would suddenly appear beneath him and carry him down into the earth, drown him at the core.

And of course, Victor dreamed of whiskey, vodka, tequila, those fluids swallowing him just as easily as he swallowed them. When he was five years old, an old Indian man drowned in a mud puddle at the powwow. Just passed out and fell facedown into the water collected in a tire track. Even at five, Victor understood what that meant, how it defined nearly everything. Fronts. Highs and lows. Thermals and undercurrents. Tragedy.

When the hurricane descended on the reservation in 1976, Victor was there to record it. If the video camera had been available then, Victor might have filmed it, but his memory was much more dependable.

His uncles, Arnold and Adolph, gave up the fight and

walked back into the house, into the New Year's Eve party, arms linked, forgiving each other. But the storm that had caused their momentary anger had not died. Instead, it moved from Indian to Indian at the party, giving each a specific, painful memory.

Victor's father remembered the time his own father was spit on as they waited for a bus in Spokane.

Victor's mother remembered how the Indian Health Service doctor sterilized her moments after Victor was born.

Adolph and Arnold were touched by memories of previous battles, storms that continually haunted their lives. When children grow up together in poverty, a bond is formed that is stronger than most anything. It's this same bond that causes so much pain. Adolph and Arnold reminded each other of their childhood, how they hid crackers in their shared bedroom so they would have something to eat.

"Did you hide the crackers?" Adolph asked his brother so many times that he still whispered that question in his sleep.

Other Indians at the party remembered their own pain. This pain grew, expanded. One person lost her temper when she accidentally brushed the skin of another. The forecast was not good. Indians continued to drink, harder and harder, as if anticipating. There's a fifty percent chance of torrential rain, blizzardlike conditions, seismic activity. Then there's a sixty percent chance, then seventy, eighty.

Victor was back in his bed, lying flat and still, watching the ceiling lower with each step above. The ceiling lowered with the weight of each Indian's pain, until it was just inches from Victor's nose. He wanted to scream, wanted to pretend it was just a nightmare or a game invented by his parents to help him sleep.

The voices upstairs continued to grow, take shape and fill space until Victor's room, the entire house, was consumed by the party. Until Victor crawled from his bed and went to find his parents.

"Ya-hey, little nephew," Adolph said as Victor stood alone in a corner.

"Hello, Uncle," Victor said and gave Adolph a hug, gagged at his smell. Alcohol and sweat. Cigarettes and failure.

"Where's my dad?" Victor asked.

"Over there," Adolph said and waved his arm in the general direction of the kitchen. The house was not very large, but there were so many people and so much emotion filling the spaces between people that it was like a maze for little Victor. No matter which way he turned, he could not find his father or mother.

"Where are they?" he asked his aunt Nezzy.

"Who?" she asked.

"Mom and Dad," Victor said, and Nezzy pointed toward the bedroom. Victor made his way through the crowd, hated his tears. He didn't hate the fear and pain that caused them. He expected that. What he hated was the way they felt against his cheeks, his chin, his skin as they made their way down his face. Victor cried until he found his parents, alone, passed out on their bed in the back bedroom.

Victor climbed up on the bed and lay down between them. His mother and father breathed deep, nearly choking alcoholic snores. They were sweating although the room was cold, and Victor thought the alcohol seeping through their skin might get him drunk, might help him sleep. He kissed his mother's neck, tasted the salt and whiskey. He kissed his father's forearm, tasted the cheap beer and smoke.

Victor closed his eyes tightly. He said his prayers just in case his parents had been wrong about God all those years. He listened for hours to every little hurricane spun from the larger hurricane that battered the reservation.

During that night, his aunt Nezzy broke her arm when an unidentified Indian woman pushed her down the stairs. Eugene Boyd broke a door playing indoor basketball. Lester FallsApart passed out on top of the stove and somebody turned the burners on high. James Many Horses sat in the corner and told so many bad jokes that three or four Indians threw him out the door into the snow.

"How do you get one hundred Indians to yell *Oh, shit?*" James Many Horses asked as he sat in a drift on the front lawn.

"Say *Bingo,*" James Many Horses answered himself when nobody from the party would.

James didn't spend very much time alone in the snow. Soon Seymour and Lester were there, too. Seymour was thrown out because he kept flirting with all the women. Lester was there to cool off his burns. Soon everybody from the party was out on the lawn, dancing in the snow, fucking in the snow, fighting in the snow.

Victor lay between his parents, his alcoholic and dreamless parents, his mother and father. Victor licked his index finger and raised it into the air to test the wind. Velocity. Direction. Sleep approaching. The people outside seemed so far away, so strange and imaginary. There was a downshift of emotion, tension seemed to wane. Victor put one hand on his mother's stomach and placed the other on his father's. There was enough hunger in both, enough movement, enough geography and history, enough of everything to destroy the reservation and leave only random debris and broken furniture.

But it was over. Victor closed his eyes, fell asleep. It was over. The hurricane that fell out of the sky in 1976 left before sunrise, and all the Indians, the eternal survivors, gathered to count their losses.

Discussion Questions

1. Explain how the poet contrasts the past and the present. Analyze the images that represent each time period.
2. Describe the functions of the several uses of the word "dream."
3. Explain the images of the wolf in stanzas 7, 8, 11, and 12. How are they connected? How does the meaning change through these stanzas?
4. Interpret the final line of the poem.

Fig. 7.3 Bennie Buffalo, *Cheyenne in the Moon* (1991), lithograph on paper. Donald C. and Elizabeth M. Dickinson Research Center, National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, OK; 96.27.0308.

SHERMAN ALEXIE (1966–)

Born upon the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington, the author still makes his home there, and it is a major setting for his works. His father, an alcoholic, was absent for much of his youth, but his mother worked at the Wellpinit Trading Post to support the family. He read voraciously as a child and decided to attend the public school in Reardan, some thirty miles from home, in order to gain the college preparatory skills that would ensure his acceptance to an academically rigorous college (Witalec). After attending Spokane's Gonzaga University for two years, he transferred in 1987 to Washington State University in Pullman, where he began writing poetry and short stories. When he left in 1991, he was still three credits short of graduating. Nonetheless, in 1995 the school granted him a B.A. in American studies, along with an Alumni Achievement Award (Brill).

He began writing for journals and popular magazines and published his first chapbook of poetry, *I Would Steal Horses*, in 1992. This was but the beginning of a prolific five-year period in which he churned out nine more books of poetry and fiction, including two novels. His works cover a wide range of topics and themes about contemporary Native Americans: "pain and humor, hunger and survival, love and anger, broken treaties, Manifest Destiny, basketball, car wrecks, commodity food, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development houses, smallpox blankets, and promises and dreams" (Brill 4). Through all his depictions of the physical and mental cruelty that Indians suffer, including "their own self-hatred and sense of powerlessness," there is still "a sense of respect and compassion for characters that are in seemingly hopeless situations" (Witalec 119).

Possibly his most popular work, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993) uses ironic humor as social criticism, while presenting bizarre and desperate responses to a chaotic world as sincere acts of dignity and self-assertion. Alexie's style is very much a part of his urgent message, composed as "a collage of dreams, journal entries, quotes from other native writers, archival letters, fictional Kafkaesque court transcripts, tribal newspaper reports, drug trips, and basketball games" (Witalec 123). Even though the disjunction of the narrative is very contemporary, he also enacts the oral tradition through demanding that his reader/listener participate in creating the story. Sometimes he achieves this through disconcerting shifts in person, from the distancing voice of third person to the personal address of second person, involving the reader

directly in a dialog; and even to the intimate first person, identifying speaker and listener together. Another means of approximating the oral style is providing the reader with an explanation or coda at the end of a puzzling story or poem. Although the images of the world he shares are harsh, Alexie affirms that Indians can and do survive through their relationships and through mythmaking. In a sense, becoming a writer and wielding the power of language is a means of salvation (Brill).

The text for the following poem is from *The Summer of Black Widows* (Brooklyn: Hanging Loose Press, 1996), pages 94–95.

Brill, Susan B. "Sherman Alexie." *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 175: Native American Writers of the United States.* Ed. Kenneth M. Roemer. Detroit: Gale, 1997. 3–10.

Witalec, Janet, ed. "Sherman Alexie." *Native North American Literature.* Detroit: Gale, 1994. 119–24.

HOW TO WRITE THE GREAT AMERICAN INDIAN NOVEL

All of the Indians must have tragic features: tragic noses, eyes, and arms.
Their hands and fingers must be tragic when they reach for tragic food.

The hero must be a half-breed, half white and half Indian, preferably
from a horse culture. He should often weep alone. That is mandatory.

If the hero is an Indian woman, she is beautiful. She must be slender
and in love with a white man. But if she loves an Indian man

then he must be a half-breed, preferably from a horse culture.
If the Indian woman loves a white man, then he has to be so white

that we can see the blue veins running through his skin like rivers.
When the Indian woman steps out of her dress, the white man gasps

at the endless beauty of her brown skin. She should be compared to
nature:
brown hills, mountains, fertile valleys, dewy grass, wind, and clear
water.

If she is compared to murky water, however, then she must have a
secret.
Indians always have secrets, which are carefully and slowly revealed.

Yet Indian secrets can be disclosed suddenly, like a storm.
Indian men, of course, are storms. They should destroy the lives

of any white women who choose to love them. All white women
love
Indian men. That is always the case. White women feign disgust

at the savage in blue jeans and T-shirt, but secretly lust after him.
White women dream about half-breed Indian men from horse cultures.

Indian men are horses, smelling wild and gamey. When the Indian man
unbuttons his pants, the white woman should think of topsoil.

There must be one murder, one suicide, one attempted rape.
Alcohol should be consumed. Cars must be driven at high speeds.

Indians must see visions. White people can have the same visions
if they are in love with Indians. If a white person loves an Indian

then the white person is Indian by proximity. White people must
carry
an Indian deep inside themselves. Those interior Indians are half-breed

and obviously from horse cultures. If the interior Indian is male
then he must be a warrior, especially if he is inside a white man.

If the interior Indian is female, then she must be a healer, especially if
she is inside
a white woman. Sometimes there are complications.

An Indian man can be hidden inside a white woman. An Indian
woman
can be hidden inside a white man. In these rare instances,

everybody is a half-breed struggling to learn more about his or her
horse culture.
There must be redemption, of course, and sins must be forgiven.

For this, we need children. A white child and an Indian child, gender not important, should express deep affection in a childlike way.

In the Great American Indian novel, when it is finally written,
all of the white people will be Indians and all of the Indians will be
ghosts.

SHERMAN ALEXIE

Evolution

Buffalo Bill opens a pawn shop on the reservation
right across the border from the liquor store
and he stays open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week

and the Indians come running in with jewelry
television sets, a VCR, a full-length beaded buckskin outfit
it took Inez Muse 12 years to finish. Buffalo Bill

takes everything the Indians have to offer, keeps it

[1] Piero della Francesca (1420?–1492), Italian painter.

all catalogued and filed in a storage room. The Indians
pawn their hands, saving the thumbs for last, they pawn

their skeletons, falling endlessly from the skin
and when the last Indian has pawned everything
but his heart, Buffalo Bill takes that for twenty bucks

closes up the pawn shop, paints a new sign over the old
calls his venture THE MUSEUM OF NATIVE AMERICAN
CULTURES
charges the Indians five bucks a head to enter.