

New Nonfiction from Ulf Pike: “Tone Deaf”

With a slightly youthful blurring of reality, sandhill cranes resemble pterodactyls in flight. Each year when they return to the valleys and high plains of southern Montana, their warm bugles trill two miles in advance of their prehistoric forms, sounding the merciful turning of the season.



Fuzzy aspen catkins map sporadic, swirling gusts while the thawing ground gives underfoot. Surrounding peaks loosen their hold on treasuries of snow, reluctant at first and then with the ecstatic flourish of a gambler intent on losing it all—as one must be, in the end, to live free and die well.

Drainages thrum with frigid, crystal surges, pulling down silver snags and churning up boulders. A great tumbler, the mountain unlocks, releasing winter to the rivers and creeks in muddied volumes. Sagebrush slopes and grassy pastures blush green where fawns wobble on new legs after their mothers and drop like speckled stones at the faintest threat. Smoke rises in thin columns from slash piles and wafts throughout the valley, drawing on long memories of starry skies, the sharing

of food and mingled voices around an evening fire. Days open and close in slow beauty along the arc of the sun, in the ungovernable balance of the planet, in the violent, wordless, infallible perfection of natural phenomena sustaining us. Atmospheric pressures constrict into fists and then fall sharply. Cumulus clouds gather and darken into an anvil where the season's first low peal of thunder is hammered out like a skeleton key to the warm womb of the universe.

In the beginning was the tone: that matter-manipulation wrought between the amplitude of some original cosmic drop. The vibratory paradox of which resonates in perpetuity, pleading with us like a mother to please, for heaven's sake, turn off that noise and go outside. Deep down she feels an impossible urgency to protect her babies from her own need to protect them. She is plagued by her duty and meditates on one true miracle: In the beginning, she knows, either something came from nothing or everything is infinite. She peers into the pit of strip mine, down through geologic eras and finds herself traversing veins of minerals through time. She feels the sublime adrenaline of a shrew falling under the shadow of an archaeopteryx, everything vibrating at harmonic frequencies with the unequivocal imperative of that original-bird. Both lived in

vibrant, kinetic, absolute necessity. The shadow of death is what kept them both alive. That was the tone. For millions and millions of years. Anthropologists surmise that during an era in emergent hominoid history the tone forever changed when consciousness was identified.

What is perhaps most unique about being human, as far as we know, is that we know. We know we are here. There is a thing that it is like to be human and we know of this thing as an abstraction from our corporeal, moment-to-moment presence. And what purpose does this knowledge serve? To know we are here means we also know that at some point we will cease to be? This ancient epiphany was the foundation of the first

timeline, the first mystery of existence.

Life was suddenly charged with new impulses for projections and provisions. Planning on death redefined human instinct to produce surplus, more resources than were required to satiate immediate hunger. By fortune of birth or early migration, populations in resource-rich environments were able to procure exceptional stores of wealth allowing their numbers to grow exponentially. In their numbers was previously unknown strength. The protection of such wealth spawned the crude hierarchy of class and government, the legacy of organized warfare and systemic dependence under which our race of knowers still generally functions today. Though "functions" is a relative term. A heart, after all, can function just as flawlessly as a guillotine.

On the flip side of the surplus coin was the novelty of free-time, at least for those of some status. The cultivation of self-consciousness, almost by necessity, amplified the otherness of everything outside the experiencer's internal landscape. Just as projections of an abstract physical future produced surplus and therefore power, so a burgeoning mind-world whispered of similar promise. That which was hunted and grown for food became the subject of worship. It became the life-giver, the savior. In the form of painted representation it became an idea which transcended the physical realm into the other place, the spirit-world, the invisible home of the soul into which death was the portal. Perhaps the sum of all human expression—technological, artistic, religious—can trace its origin to a single moment of clarity between near-human eyes staring into glassy water—the moment a mind cleaved itself from nature.

We've come a long way in a very short time. The standardly cited fulcrum is the Industrial Revolution, a mere 250 years ago. The chart graphing human consumption, reproduction and toxic emissions from that point on looks like a cartoonishly steep tidal wave looming over all

our tomorrows. Ever since, many constructively sane and criminally insane have been waving their hands, warning us that we're taking a long walk off a short pier. They cry that we have gone deaf. That seems to be the tone these days. Panic, desperation, delusion, denial. Through technological proliferation and our inextricable integration with it, our abstraction of death is now so thorough and complete that its sudden arrival falls over us like the shadow of some prehistoric terror. Our dependence on surplus and the powers that rule over it has been proven our greatest weakness. But for very few, we no longer are capable of providing for ourselves, for directly contributing to our own survival and the survival of those for whom we are responsible.

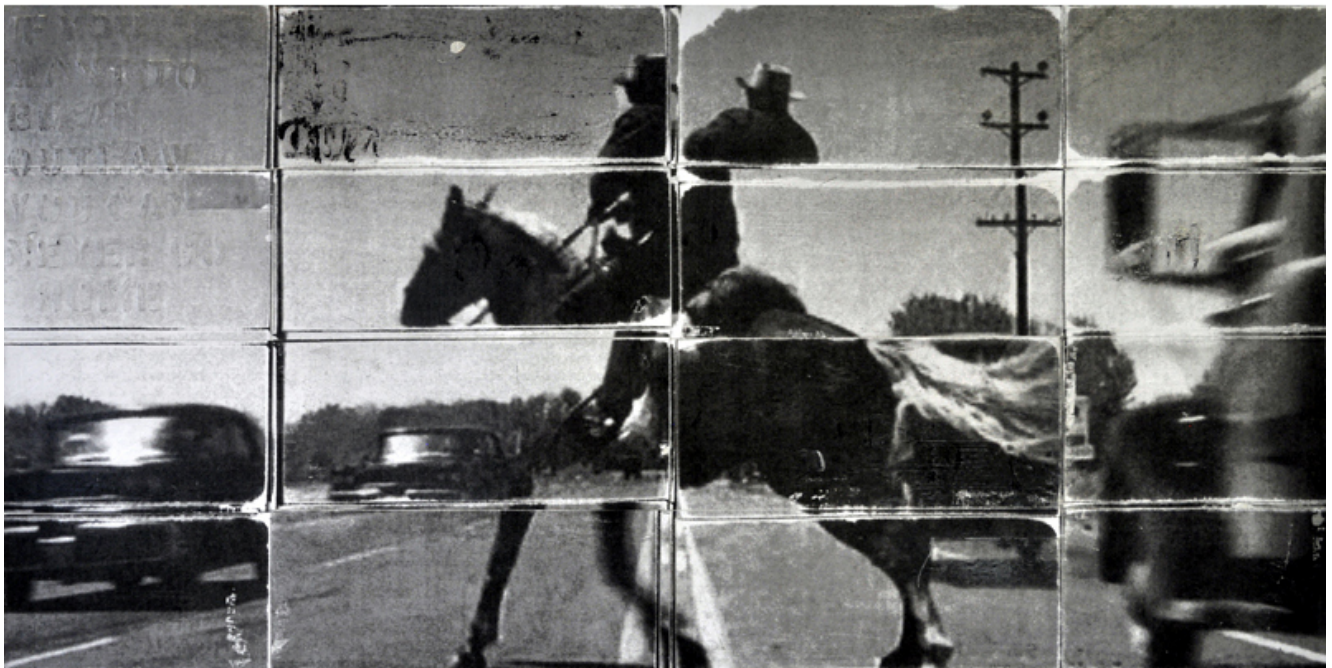
The system thrives on our unexamined dependence on it. The system, as it were, is the Shadow Mother and we the feeble children at her chaffed nipples, dimly aware of the in beauty we have forfeited for instead being coddled. This revelation is a profound, visceral injury to our pride, one from which the psyche staggers back and hides in the dark to protect itself from the compounding insult of closely assessing the trauma. Yet this is what must happen. The hard look in full sunlight at the wound. Tragically—perhaps catastrophically—this wound will fester in darkness while we fumble to put the fragments of our habituated, abstracted conceptions back together then sheepishly push them out into the light as decoys, only peeking out once in a while from hidden safety. We will not risk enough to be free.

A time traveler wandering deep into the misty mountains might find themselves greeted with outstretched hands holding a vessel of water which had been hummed and chanted over for days, purifying it for the intrepid visitor. Endlessly compelling is the geometric symmetry of fine sand formed on a screen when vibrated by harmonic frequencies and then is scattered and blurred by dissonant frequencies. More compelling still, is the same effect such frequencies have on

the molecular structure of water. Which begs the question: Are we not mostly water ourselves? What is humming and chanting over us?

Spring is returning and with it the sound of sandhill cranes, of rushing wind and water. Soon like a mother that low peal of thunder will vibrate through the atmosphere and lodge in our chests: *Go out there, child. It is dangerous. I love you, and you must go out there.*

New Fiction from Ulf Pike: “Title and Price”



Art by Gordon McConnell. ON THE ROAD, photomontage and acrylic on canvas, 24 x 48 inches

It was not rare to see horses on Main Street when I was growing up in this town. I was spindly and spry then, when distances were calculated by how much jerky and water to pack, when the idea of pocket-sized computers was still the realm of science-fiction, the same stuff as teleportation devices and alien invasions. Around the house an intricate network of deer trails canvased the woods like a sense of smell. I'd run them through the sagebrush and chokecherries, shivering in the shade of dense lodgepole pine stands. Still panting, I'd knock on a neighbor's door and ask a mother if her child could go to the river.

We'd walk miles in our minds, finely-tuned to the snapping of dry branches in the needle-cast, summoning to our soft skin the possibility of predators emerging with the warmth of a late spring day. The distant sound of swift water rushing over boulders always made us start running.

Rays broke on the surface and scattered as if through a fractured emerald onto the slick stones below, shimmering off the scales of large trout and made hazy where their tails whipped up a cloud of fine silt, spooked by our careless approach. In the deeper pools heated by afternoon sun there was no place for our bodies to know their own boundaries. It was a richer kind of air through which every motion rippled to the bank and returned to us, but slower, expanding.

Where the May and June runoff cut the bank from beneath a large cottonwood its roots reached exposed like tentacles into the water. By mid-summer we could entwine our arms in them and float on the surface cutting the gentled current with our heads as we looked to the bottom and into the shadows, hoping the fish might not mind our company and maybe even glide along the length of our bodies. We would bask on the smooth, day-baked stones, let the sun dry us, scratch the sand from our scalps and feel clean, even a little magical walking home.

In late summer my father would wake me before dawn with his large hand on my shoulder, the smell of coffee drifting in behind him. A quiet blue light through the trees laid our shadows down before us on the trail, fishing poles sprouting from our heads like antennae. Sleep still in my eyes, I imagined being led to the river by some dreamed extension of myself, one who might rather do anything than trick a fish into swallowing a hook just to turn it back to the current, stunned and bleeding. Tearing barbs from their mouths and throats then holding them like trophies while they mouthed the air was a suffering I learned to fold into layers of pride. I'd ask why we didn't keep them and was told there was no need.

The temperature dropped sharply near the river as soon as it could be heard. My skin raised with the chill and my heart sank to hear my father's pace quicken. He inhaled the cool morning into his nostrils with pious vigor. Later, looking upstream, he welled with pride to see my pole bowed down to the weight and fight of a large trout. He laughed and shouted, "Fish on!" as he made his way toward me with the net in his hand.

I knew they were Cal's boots stomping around on the hardwood. His restless energy vibrated through the floor and into my head. I gathered my jacket back into a lumpy pillow and tried to fall asleep again. He opened the front door then stomped back, smacking me on the head as he passed with the rolled up newspaper he had retrieved then trumpeted the first few notes of reveille through it.

Every minute or so, just as I started to doze off, he'd loudly clear his throat, pick up the paper by either side and *pop* it as if to freshen the news before smoothing it back down on the table. I squinted with one eye and leered at him across the room with all the hungover evil I could conjure. His hair was

cow-licked where his head had finally come to rest after the long night of drinking and dancing, embellishing war stories, and doing whatever we thought those stories gave us license to do.

Every couple of weeks it seemed we began making feints into blackout territory, each night a fresh chance to regain the thrill of courting death and going *once more unto the breach*, as Cal liked to call it. Empty bottles stood gathered together on the table. From my floor's-eye-view they looked like a city of glass buildings. I remembered Cal upending one then musing woozily to it, "Thank you for your service," as he added it to the skyline. I remembered dancing wildly to Louis Prima and an almost inhumanly beautiful, dark-haired young woman yelling at me and storming out into the snow—*Oh, Marie! Tell me you love me*. I let out a long dramatic groan and rolled onto my back.

"Where'd she go, Cal? Where's the girl of my dreams? The love of my life?"

Even when he wasn't reading the paper he never really listened to anybody. He ignored me and started reading out loud: "*At 3:36 a.m. a woman reported a nude man at Main Street and 3rd Avenue jogging with a hammer and chanting...*" In the seven years I'd known him, reading the police blotter had become something of a ritual, one which required coffee to be fully appreciated first thing in the morning. I reminded him of this. He told me to get up and make it myself.

"Wouldn't go in there barefoot," he added without looking up from the paper as I pulled myself off the floor.

"Why not?"

He scoffed.

I stepped into a pair of Cal's beat-up cowboy boots by the door and walked to the kitchen. It looked like a grenade had gone off. Cabinet doors were splintered on the linoleum or

dangling from their hinges, the breakfast table and chairs laid upended surrounded by shards of bottles and dishes. In a corner the coffee machine was in pieces, all of it soaking in pools of wine. My eyes rolled over the scene turning up little flashes of memory. My stomach began to turn. I knew what had happened but I asked Cal anyway.

"You happened, you crazy bastard. You went dark as the devil."

I was locked inside my skull again, where Cal's voice echoed absently like some tired machine switched-on and abandoned. I remembered a dream-like space where time and gravity unfixed themselves and there was nothing to give my body shape but vague, immovable objects where the waves crashed; where I wanted wild and inexplicable things; to catch a rattlesnake, kiss it on the mouth, grip it by the jaws and pull it over my head like a balaclava. I wanted to vibrate. To hum and rattle into pieces.

Cal and I would jog from downtown calling cadence like the ghosts of soldiers, released to haunt everyone's dreams on those snowy, sleeping streets. We would call on the emptiness to recognize us, to embrace us as its own: *Mama, mama can't you see...what the Army's done to me?* We'd wake up and drink coffee and read the paper like we'd aged a hundred years overnight.

Cal said we needed to quit blowing money on hangovers and buy a couple horses already. I could usually count on this train of thought after a night of dragging our drunk bodies around town. "All my old tack's just gatherin' dust in my aunt's barn. Bet she'd probably cut us some slack on a couple geezers. Get us started anyway. Get us outta this shithole and into the wild anyway." He'd dream us there and try to convince me it was what we were put on earth to do. That one cool morning we'd saddle those horses and disappear like phantoms

into some blue shadowland, as if somewhere just beyond the horizon a paradise was waiting to be reclaimed. "We'll sell everything and just go. What's the song say? *Rob the grave of the setting sun.*"

He'd *pop* the paper as if to set it all in motion. I'd go along, too sick and tired to pretend like I had a better idea. Not to say he didn't have something. Cal had vision. If anyone did, he had the drive to turn back the clock, or if not, at least smash the damn thing and start from scratch. He accused the world of trying to pull one over on him, trying to wash his brain clean of some ancient instinct. He knew better though. He could see it all happening right before his eyes. And he'd be damned if so-called *progress* was going to catch him sleeping. He'd roll a fat joint and lay on his back on the hardwood floor, blowing clouds of smoke at the ceiling, picturing exactly how he was being screwed out of his destiny.

In a sterile, over-air-conditioned conference room Cal pictured a three-point-plan written on a dry erase board. He could hear the *whisk* and *thwack* of an aluminum pointer striking the whiteboard under each number as a buttoned-down agent eyes one of the many pale faces around the table. "One," said the agent with detached authority, "Disenfranchise." Cal saw him swat the board under the next word, scan and lock eyes with a different face. "Two," he shouted this time, making his victim pucker and quiver, "Romanticize." Then a *thwack* and a new face for the third and final pronouncement: "Commodify."

The room nodded in obedient assent. "It's that simple, men. If it ain't broke don't fix it." He then led them in a three-count, swatting each word down the list for punctuation and lastly under the slogan written above them all, which they uttered in solemn unison. I heard Cal's voice before I walked in. He was laying on the floor, chanting at the ceiling: "*Kill*

the Cowboy, save the boots!"

When Cal came home from areas he often referred to as the "wild west," he felt everything harassing him, closing in on him, telling him he was too late. "Too many goddamn people on this earth. *Zombies*," he'd correct himself, "and their kiss-ass little cyber-lives; big-money buyin' up the whole goddamn valley, pricin' out *real* goddamn people; fuckin' movie-star wannabes turnin' working ranches into playthings..." He'd work himself up and have to roll a joint. Though he would never admit it, he was paralyzed with fear. He saw the way of his father and grandfather, his birthright, the way of the cowboy "going the way of the Indian," as he put it. He laid on the floor throughout the day exhaling thick clouds at the ceiling and rubbing his temples. Images of conspiracy and betrayal loosened and drifted from his mind. *Like Judas*, he thought, feeling suddenly a new, special kinship with Jesus.

He pictured a resurrected Christ clinching a thin cigarillo between his teeth and squinting through the shadow of a sharp, felt brim. He saw the hand of God drawing the cold, heavy steel from his holster as he considered a man in a business suit kneeling before him, shielding the sun from his eyes. Arrayed in that righteous light, thumbing back the hammer and tenderly touching the muzzle to the man's impure lips, Jesus smiled—Cal smiled. "Kiss *this*," they said.

When I came home I burned my uniform with all its ribbons and badges. Made a ceremony of it and everything. Cal considered it an act of treason and shunned me for months. But, for better or worse, I was bound to him. And him to me. Without Cal's kind of animal sensitivity and callous justice, I might not have made it home at all.

We put it behind us, both desperate for an old kind of familiarity, even if a false and decidedly immoderate one. I had developed lofty ideas of self-deconstructionism, that I was somehow dismantling something broken inside my head. And I did truly believe this. But after a couple bottles of wine it became tiresome and all I had was bleary aim at something near pleasure. I could at least hit the present moment, it being a pretty big target. In it I surrendered to a sense of time and gravity backing their screws out of my bones. Every motion seemed fluid, intuitive, rippling out from my body toward some mystical integration, but ultimately retuning a kind of lazy hypnotism—the kind of magic you long to believe but also loathe for the weakness that longing betrays. That was the general, dull ache of it. Things that could never truly be, maybe never were at all. Out of place. Out of time. But we soldiered on through the illusion, allowing the selves we remembered being to manifest friction for traction.

It was a Friday night. Every Friday night art galleries on main street opened their doors and offered complimentary wine to anyone who entered so long as they pretended to care about the stuff inside. Cal and I used to make it our duty to impose and make sure that no wine went to waste. We filled and refilled plastic cups as if hydrating for a mission. Once loose enough, we'd liberate bottles from the table and walk around with them, standing in front of Western landscape paintings, probing the air for volatility.

"Me. Oh. My," Cal would say, adding a little whistle. "A damn sight better than the real thing, you ask me. Who in his right mind would ford that river horseback in *real* life? You know there's rattlers in there will swim right in your saddlebag and take a nap, and you never even know it till you reach in there happy as an idiot for the wineskin...then fffft, ffft fft..." he struck my forearm, shoulder then the side of my neck with his fingers as fangs, "It's goodnight, Irene, goodnight."

I'd hum and turn the price-tag, speaking with a degree of dismay, "How could you live with yourself knowing someone else walked out of here with this beauty?" Then feigning a scan of the gallery for someone to talk to, I'd say, "I must have it."

The night would go on like that until we reached a kind of critical mass, finally just walking out the door, bottles in hand, whistling, humming, leaning into a kind of warning buzz.

Some mornings after a night of unraveling Cal and I would meet in a coffee shop to spool back into the form of something socially acceptable. We'd read the paper at a corner table and psychically loom. The walls were almost always hung with big glossy photographs of wildlife. Under each photo was a little wooden placard with a title and price. Above Cal's head was a photo of a herd of bison. Hungover and slightly nauseous, I sipped my coffee and stared at it osmotically.

I looked down at Cal. His head was lowered to the paper. Not moving his eyes from an article he took a sip from his mug and made a sound like he was expelling steam.

"Did exactly what I knew they would," he said without looking up, after a minute going on, "Abandoned their tanks and guns...*our* tanks and guns...burned their uniforms and ran away like babies from the boogeyman." He loudly folded up the paper in disgust and stared off toward the front windows. "You can lead a horse to water," he said to himself, raising his mug again. "Fucking cowards."

I looked up at the photo then down at Cal. Nothing mattered all of a sudden. I felt the urge to throw my coffee in his face, walk out and never think twice about anything ever again.

Cal had his visions. I had mine.

The feeling surged then dissolved. I looked back up at the photo and imagined us just out of frame sitting our horses, Cal's eye laid down the barrel of a rifle. Very near us the photographer stood aiming his camera down the slope. Cal tested the wind then reached to make adjustments to his sights as the photographer made adjustments to his camera. Seasons altered when I blinked. The river valley below flashed white and frozen then vibrant and lush, full of grazing bison, then hazy red as if lit by a smoke-veiled sun.

Cal spun his horse a half-turn then kicked up his legs and spun his body the opposite way. He laid his barrel across the horse's hindquarter, lowered his body behind it and wrapped his legs around the horse's neck. Chinning a mocking glance at the photographer then looking down at the heard, he wagered he could shoot more of them. They both squinted with one eye, fingertips poised.

I couldn't discern the explosion of gunpowder from the snapping of the shutter. They were simultaneous and unmitigated. Cal seemed to levitate above his horse, purring with the recoil and instantly, expertly retracting the bolt with the meat of his palm, extracting each cartridge with a shimmering *ting*, then racking the bolt forward, slightly adjusting his aim and firing again. His zeal was as lethal and endless as his ammunition. The stampeding herd was swallowed up in a cloak of dust but Cal continued shooting, now indiscriminately, wildly into the cloud until finally spinning on his haunches back riderwise, sheathing his rifle and trotting down the slope.

Streams of blood merged into pools, gathering momentum through dirt for the river, then dripped viscous over the bank and into the current, carried down-valley, frothing over boulders and swirling into sun-warmed eddies. Our horses emerged on the other side as if dipped up to the withers in rusty oil. We

made camp atop the opposite plateau.

I saw our fire spitting embers up at the night. I saw Cal's face warping through the flames, a mesmerized glimmer there. I saw him get up, walk to his horse and reach into his saddlebag for the wineskin.

I wanted to tell him he was nothing, tell him to swallow his tongue and get out of my head. But I drank my coffee and agreed. "Fucking cowards."

We rolled cigarettes and sauntered from one art gallery to the next, getting drunker, whistling and humming obnoxiously. Cal hurled a wine bottle like a grenade over his head and didn't look to see where it shattered. All glass started to pulse with fragility. From the street the galleries looked like snow-globes, I thought. We watched them sip their drinks and attempt to shake their evening into something special. Cal and I joined them. I overheard someone suggest that the price-tag dangling from a bison skull was "irrelevant, really." I laughed out loud. Everyone seemed to be laughing. I drank deeply from a bottle and laughed again. A laugh I hardly recognized.

From the sidewalk I peered back inside through my reflection in the window, suddenly paralyzed. They swirled their cups. A weird light shifted through the window onto them. I saw a race of aliens discussing a different skull: "This," one said, cupping it like a wineglass, "this was one of the snow-globe dwellers. They were the first to be eradicated or relocated. They seemed to possess no memory nor useful skill to contribute to the re-cultivation of these once fertile lands." The alien swirled it and took another drink. "We were baffled, and quite frankly horrified, to see them building their settlements on the richest soil in the valley. Even worse, they hunted large creatures for the size of their crowns, not

the yield of their sustenance. They tricked fish into swallowing hooks on strings that they might enjoy the suffering and fear transferred to their hands, just to rip the hook from their flesh and throw them back to repeat the ritual." Exhaling sharply then making a motion to drink but balking, the being continued, "In fact, we have discovered evidence that their economy relied heavily on these '*sports*,' as they called them." They all drank and another chimed in, "Where they got the food they actually consumed is another story entirely." Their long antennae wobbled as they shook their heads and sipped from their cranial vessels, "Savages, I tell you. *Real savages.*"

Apparently, there was one more gallery, though I couldn't really say.

The last thing I remember is standing in front of a hundred old machine parts—gears, springs, brackets—all tack-welded into the form of a giant bison skull. Its hollow eye-sockets glowed with electric lights timed to change every few seconds from white to green to red. I looked around and saw everyone taking photos of the sculpture with their phones then bow their heads. Their faces glowed piously, bathed in the light of their screens.

I saw them growing undead, praying as though from that liquid crystal had whispered a promise of immortality. I saw the ghost within it baiting them, desperate for them to vacate their own minds that it might take up residence and power there. I saw them offering their knowledge and memory, their lives as tribute.

I saw horses and a long, cold winter. I saw ribboned stacks of paper bills, photographs, paintings and furniture piled high in the center of a room. I saw fire in the floor, fire licking at the rafters. I saw blood rising to my skin in a vacuum

ravenous for it, inhaling me as if for the marrow in my bones, as if to extract from my body that which my dreams had promised it.

I saw white then green then red.

The judge gave me my own private cell and some time to think about my life choices, as he put it. Miraculously, the only book I could get my hands on when the library cart rolled by was *The Death of Jim Loney* by James Welch. Jim Loney is my age, estranged from his community and going “gently insane” on his drunken descent toward “noble, inevitable self-destruction,” as one reviewer suggested. I had to laugh. I read it in one sitting. Then I cried. Simple tears at first as I reluctantly turned the final pages, feeling that the resolution would be far too costly. Then involuntary, spine-binding weeping to the edge of suffocation and back. An hour, maybe two, three before the waves subsided. Rolling over, I mouthed silent, unknown things at the ceiling, staring holes through it. I traced forms of animals on the naked cinder-blocks and wanted to die.

The night before I was released, I dreamed. I stood under bright stars at arms-length from a fire. I reached in with my hand and held it there, entranced by the impossibility of not being burned. There was a metallic *clink* followed by a voice. “Will is fate,” it said. I turned to see him bent to the ground with a hammer in hand. Around his wrists were manacles attached to a length of chain rooted in stone. He set the hammer to mark his aim then raised it above his head and swung it, sending the sound into the night and a splash of sparks to the ground. Without looking up he said, “Until it breaks,” and marked his aim again. He punctuated himself with the slow but deliberate rhythm of a simple machine made to mark its own rate of function: “Will is fate...” *clink...* “Until it breaks...” *clink...* And on and on, chanting through the night.

I turned back to the fire and felt the memory of stepping into it. There was a vibration each time the hammer struck. The light began to pulse. A step closer brought a roar like waking up at sea in a terrible storm followed by a deeper vibration, a kind of rhythmic thudding and a drone of voices. As I stepped fully into the flames figures appeared to be weaving themselves into each other, their bodies bound up in one form of writhing then another, their desperate faces mouthing the air, their arms and hands hitting me unfeelingly as I pushed my way through. Everything mounted into a violent, unbearable wave of anguish. I was knocked to the ground and began scrambling furiously. The thudding grew in my hands and knees, in my stomach, vibrating everything into one densely concentrated center until it could no longer contain itself. Light flashed from the core of an explosion, consuming everything. Then darkness. Silence. I felt the coolness of night as if directly on skinless muscle.

I woke up and stared at the ceiling, something inching its way from my stomach into my throat and finally over my lips, so delicately that even I could not quite make it out. Though I understood. *Kill the soldier, save the man.*

Cal picked me up. He rolled around the corner of the jail in my 1986 Land Cruiser. The old leaf spring suspension had long since lost its spring and took all bumps under the tired, squeaking protest of its joints. From a dead stop it coughed up a little cloud of exhaust and could putter up to sixty-five mph given a long enough, flat enough stretch of highway. I smiled to see it parked at the curb.

Cal waited for me to move but I just stood there and stared at him through a fog of breath. His hand went up as if to ask if I was getting in or not. He eventually got the picture, opened his door and circled around front to the passenger side, lunging toward me, shouting "Shotgun!" in my ear as he passed.

He didn't even have a driver's license.

In fact, I wasn't sure if Cal existed at all. As far as I knew he had gone completely off the grid. In his mind, veterans of our stripe were all on a secret government watchlist. He believed the state was not so obtuse as to train us to abandon empathy, kill on command, send us to war, and then simply release us back into the world with a pat on the back, an unlimited prescription for drugs and a suicide hotline card without at least keeping an eye on us, see if we could still play the game without getting too wise. Cal had it all worked out. When he smoked he became very lucid, almost telepathic, he claimed. He'd lay on the floor blowing thick clouds at the ceiling and intercept conference calls from the Pentagon between a handful of politicians, a data-storage gate-keeper, and a spooky DoD agent going on about *"the imperative to track and, when necessary, guide liabilities as they are released back into the mainstream."* There would be unofficial requests for sensitive information and off-the-books transactions.

Cal would close his eyes, point to both of his temples and see top-secret memos appearing in encrypted email inboxes regarding a surveillance operation to acquire location- and activity-intel on veterans who meet signal criteria. He'd start listing them: "...combat...college...debt-free...single...", as if straining to receive each word which, according to him, constituted a probability of ideological disillusionment and sedition sufficient to red-flag an individual for life. According to Cal, one of us was on the fast-track to being "disappeared." He'd relight his joint and blow smoke, occasionally mumbling another paranoid stream of thought: "If credibility is established by credit...and credit is debt..." He'd take a long drag and ash in the big planter pot then keep going: "...and debt is forced labor, and forced labor is the mechanization of humans, and...", and on and on.

He tapped out a short couple of beats on the dash board. "The Colonel's looking for guns," he said to the windshield,

waiting to see if I'd respond, then continued, "I told him we'd meet just as soon as I could spring your sorry ass." What he meant was *hired* guns. The Colonel was actually a retired Army Colonel who by whatever nebulous network of connections was eager to put together a private security team to head back into high-conflict areas. His types of teams ran defense and often offense for god-knows-who, doing things that made for long redactions in official reports. The one certainty was the money. "A hundred fifty Gs for six-month's work, boy." I could tell by his voice Cal was already there. He never really left. "Fuck it," he said, "I'll text him right now."

I don't know why I didn't tell him not to. The cold, clean air drafted through the window and I was just glad to be feeling and breathing it. I couldn't summon the energy to negate anything that was going to happen. He plugged the auxiliary cable into his phone as he read the Colonel's text. "*Sanctuary. One hour.*" He cocked his head at me, "There it is. Let's get a few freedom beers in you, partner." He scrolled down his screen and selected *Oh, Marie* by Louis Prima, rolled the volume knob, drummed the dash with his hands and yowled as the cymbals and sax really kicked in, "*Once more unto the breach!*"

I righted the table and chairs, found a broom and swept all the glass, mopped the floor and fastened the cabinet doors best I could back on their hinges. Cal sat at the table with the paper, occasionally reading out loud something that twisted up in his mind just right. I finished putting the kitchen back in order, poured myself a glass of water and sat down across from him. Without looking up he said something about meeting the Colonel again to iron out the details, sign some papers for clearance. It hadn't registered to me that a decision had been made, as though I was simply caught up in some kind of entropic undertow. I didn't even know how many days I'd been waiting to get spat out and wash ashore. But

there I was. He told me I better go warm up the beast.

On cold mornings, because the cable was broken, I had to pop the hood of the Cruiser and manually wedge the choke closed with a stone that had sat in the console for years and just so happened to be the ideal size, apparently waiting for that very purpose. We cut tracks through a couple inches of fresh snow, hit main street and headed downtown. The sidewalks were empty. We sipped coffee at our usual table in the corner and waited for the Colonel.

Every few feet on the walls were different glossy photos—a silhouetted elk, spotted whitetail, nesting blue herons, rainbow trout. Above Cal's head was a photo of a single bison, its eyes like polished obsidian squinting against wind-driven snow directly into the lens. Written beneath it on a little wooden placard was the title and the price: *Winter Hunt, \$290*. It was number four of twenty-three prints. I scratched out the math on a napkin and said the amount to myself. Cal asked what it was. Ignoring him I looked around the shop counting the photos with similar placards and did that math. "One hundred thousand, fifty dollars." I sat there waiting for whatever else was rising to the surface.

Cal sensed a shift and switched to recruiter-mode. "Don't get weird on me, son. We'll be out of this sorry shithole by tomorrow. There's a zero-six-thirty to Seattle, Seattle to Frankfurt, Frankfurt to a nice desert paradise, eighty-five degrees. Masters of our own destiny again." He kicked my chair to get my eyes off the photo. "Hey, you listening to me? Don't forget you're getting paid to get the hell out of this phony-ass town to do some *real* shit again. It should be the easiest decision you ever made."

I stared into my coffee and spun the mug a half-circle by the handle and muttered it back to myself. "The easiest decision."

"The *easiest*. What's there to think about?"

"You ever wonder why it's easy?"

"Christ almighty. Is your head screwed on? I just told you why."

"I don't think I need easy. I don't need a way out of here." I sort of rolled my eyes around the coffee shop then leveled them across the table. "I need a way out of *here*," I said, reaching across the table and tapping Cal's temple with my finger. He grabbed my wrist and stared at me, then through me as he let go. He wasn't there anymore. I stood up sharply, knocking my chair over. A couple heads turned to see what was happening. I picked up the chair, gathering myself upright, then pushed it back under the table and inhaled slowly. "Thank you for your service, Cal." I apologized to no one in particular then turned and walked out the door.

The Cruiser stuttered faithfully into action. I pointed west and drove until all signs of civilization faded but the road itself and a few old ranch houses. I drove for an hour, then two, in silence except for tires on pavement and crisp air whistling through a crack in the window. I knew where I was going. Soon the road turned to frozen dirt and up ahead cut through the crest of a ridge at the base of a giant V in the earth before descending sharply into the river valley. I could hear the glimmer in my father's voice telling me I'd better hold onto something as the truck accelerated toward what looked like the edge of the world.

Even though I knew what was coming my stomach would rise into my throat, out of my body it seemed, and stay suspended somewhere above in a moment of perfect weightlessness before rushing back into me like a flood as the wheels received the full weight of the truck again. With a big youthful grin he would gently apply the brakes and, taking in the view, exhale as though to slow down his heart. I let myself believe that

was the memory which accompanied him over the edge when his heart finally slowed to a stop.

The width of the valley was marked distinctly by sheer plateau walls like far-reaching bookends. It spanned maybe a mile at most and was never so narrow that you could throw a stone from one side to the other. The road sort of disintegrated into a primitive two-track used occasionally to hay cattle and check fences. But there were no cattle to be seen and all the post-latch gates were laid open. Where the way intersected the river I turned left paralleling it upstream through dormant, snow-dusted grass and sagebrush. In the narrow sections of river the water was frozen solid like frosted glass and I wondered how thick, if it could be driven across without breaking through or getting stuck. A couple of times I passed large stones and nearly stopped to hoist them from the bank down onto the ice but decided to keep going.

Eventually the road curved out into the field and then back toward the river-crossing. I held the wheel at an angle and the slight pull felt like being in a slingshot. Depressing the pedal and bracing either side of the wheel my head hit the roof as I sped over a sharp dip at the bank. Ice shards and water instantly cascaded over the hood and windshield. I instinctively ducked and held my breath, pinning the accelerator to the floor, feeling each stone under the tires claim a little more momentum. And like a beast whipped to the brink, hissing plumes of steam and coughing, the vehicle limped up the bank on the other side. I managed to coax it to the foot of the escarpment, where it sputtered to a halt alongside a small juniper. There was no sense in trying to start it again but I tried anyway, turning the ignition over and over until there was nothing. I opened the door, stepped out and closed it, reluctantly accepting I was stuck there.

When I was just a boy, standing very near that same place, I'd look up the steep slope to the base of the cliff with dread anticipating the burning in my lungs and thighs, the terrible

thirst and having to claw through the crevice at the top. Somehow everything I'd seen since in no way diminished that feeling of dread. I started hiking.

Halfway up I kicked through the snow a bit, more for the memory than anything. In the summer if you dug around in the talus you could sometimes find tooled stones, pieces of spear or arrowheads, even bison remains, bone shards. I was so much smaller then, when the world went on forever yet seemed closer somehow. Peering up to the top of the cliff I would shudder to imagine an entire herd leaping one after the other from the edge and plummeting toward me, the frantic adrenaline in their eyes, the earth heaving under the impact of their massive bodies. Young men would peer panting from the edge down to the bloodied arms of women expertly stripping those bodies of their hides and carving the meat from their bones. They would be all around me as I made my way up the slope to the base of the cliff wall.

The only way to the top was through an opening there wide enough for one person. It led through the stone where water had eroded its way for thousands of years through weaknesses and where very little light penetrated. Acute claustrophobia held each breath just out of reach as I inched my way up and through, relieved only in the assurance that at least in the winter, rattlesnakes lay dormant, brumating in their dens, their hibernacula. In my mind they were coiled tightly together, purring through dreams in the buried warmth of the earth around me. My skin ran flush with a surge of heat then shivered in the last shadow as I pulled myself finally from the hole at the lip of the plateau. Catching my breath, I turned to survey the valley. Behind a thin veil of clouds the sun was soft and low on the horizon. I stepped back from the edge and picked a couple of rocks from beneath the snow. Flinging them underhand I watched them spin silent in the air and tumble down the slope. I threw one half-heartedly at the Cruiser before sitting down and staring out across the valley.

It seemed there was nothing in sight to indicate *when* I was. It was all time and no time at all. I plucked a sprig of sagebrush, rolled it in my fingers and held it under my nose, inhaling its sweetness, cool like mint in the back of the throat. I scratched up a small handful of icy snow, compressed it in my palm and sucked the moisture from it. Tracing the river upstream I saw sun-baked ground and fine clouds of dust rising along the banks behind horse-drawn travois, the sinew-lashed lodgepole bowed under a winter's rations. I saw naked young men and women washing blood from their bodies where the current was swift. I felt everything slow and waited for darkness.

New Fiction from Ulf Pike: “Welcome Home, Brother”

My arm burned red resting out the window in the summer sun as I drove east out of the mountains. I passed through the shade of centuries-deep bluffs carved by the Yellowstone River, then curved south into open, tall-grass prairies.

A road sign for Little Bighorn Battlefield flashed by with its mileage—more than once a “stop along the way” during road trips when I was young. A few cars passed with the vanity license plate of General Custer staring across the plains at Sitting Bull. I tried to picture the battle, as I always had, hear the rifle-fire and war cries. I tried to picture my great-great grandmother, speaking no English, boarding a passenger train with her children en route to a new life in Montana. What might she have been picturing? What did she hope

for and fear, studying the strange landscape into the West, into *Indian Country*, news of Custer's defeat no older than her youngest daughter?

Being a fifth-generation Montanan had always nurtured in me a special kind of pride and ownership. But nothing felt that way anymore, not since I got back.



My brother-in-law's penciled directions read *end of the world gas station – L*. I turned the wheel as I took in the derelict old building, scrawled with graffiti, a sunken canopy over absent pumps, pointed shards left in the windows. The truck bumped a few more miles through open range where sparse groups of horses pondered the ground and swatted flies with their tails. One tan and bony mare ambled along the shoulder of the road, unfazed by my passing.

As I drove through town past pairs of following eyes, I had to

reassure myself that I'd been invited. Feral dogs with taut stomachs trotted through alleyways, cowed as if under an invisible raised hand. In a dirt lot a girl of maybe three sat alone on a swing, pumping her legs and grinning vibrantly. I caught her eyes and smiled. Behind her, two shirtless teenage boys with long braided hair played basketball under a netless hoop.

Turning onto a dusty two-track, I saw the first sign and slipped the directions into my shirt pocket. Through sagebrush up the hill, spray painted in safety-orange on scraps of plywood with arrows at the turns, they guided me to the *Other Medicine Sun Dance*.

I woke in the bed of my truck to the first rays of light and the sound of drumming, rhythmic and steady, above which men's voices sang in solemn unison, one occasionally leaping from the rest, a piercing wail which made my blood rush. The first of the four-day ceremony had begun and the many family and friends who'd come to support the dancers and offer prayers gathered around the lodge, which was constructed of numerous tree trunks stripped and re-planted in a large circle around a much taller center-tree, all of them linked with draping boughs and long strips of thin fabric which wavered in the gentle morning breeze. I stood a distance away and waited. No one regarded me with scorn, nor did they encourage me to come closer, until a man in a wheelchair rolled up from behind me and told me they didn't bite, "...most of them anyway."

I followed close behind him and stopped at his side in the shade just outside the lodge. He wore a black hat with "Iraq War Veteran" embroidered in yellow around a Purple Heart. His face was puffy and badly scarred. Both of his legs were missing above the knee. When he turned his head to look up at me he seemed to smile and spoke so as not to be heard over the singing: "An Offering Song."

I nodded.

He extended his massive calloused hand and said even softer, "No Mud."

I took his hand and told him my name.

"So," he went on, keeping his grip, "how many years did they get out of you?" At my hesitation he explained, "I saw your vet plates last night when you drove in."

"Oh, right. Just three. One deployment."

His dark eyes were watery. He seemed to be looking vaguely beyond me. I asked him the same question.

He applied more pressure and pulled me closer as if to tell me a secret and breathed warm into the side of my face, "They took years I ain't even lived, little brother." He loosened his grip and disarmed his voice, adding a quick, "Hey!" before dropping my hand as if forgetting why he was holding it. A couple people glanced back with looks of restrained concern then sent their eyes in search of someone else.

A tall woman approached No Mud, crouched and put her arm around his shoulder, lowered her face to the side of his and said something softly in another language. He appeared to weep momentarily but quickly composed himself and kissed her on the cheek. She squeezed his shoulder as she stood up and then the back of his neck, glanced a courteous smile at me and returned to what she had been doing. We waited in silence until there was a change in drumming and the singers began a new song.

Four men emerged from a small tent behind the lodge and filed toward the center tree. They wore only red and white cloth around their waists and a whistle-like piece of bone with a feather at the end around their necks. No Mud nudged my leg and leaned towards me: "Eagle Dancers," he said. I didn't tell him one of them was my brother-in-law, but I figured it was

obvious enough. Seeing him made me blush with the heat of a hundred eyes.

Each dancer stood his turn before the center tree as a long-haired elder wearing aviator sunglasses and latex gloves, used a surgical scalpel to make two inch-long incisions down each of their pectorals. Then like a lace through a stiff leather boot-tongue he pushed the sharpened end of two three-inch sections of deer antler under each bleeding loop of flesh. Four ropes hung from the top of the center pole, each split at the end like a Y. He attached these ends to either side of both antler tips thus marrying each Eagle Dancer to the tree. For the next four days they would go without food and be called upon to dance when the drumming and singing began, their sacrifice shared and elevated by the presence and prayers of their family and friends.

My brother-in-law had ridden bulls in a semi-pro rodeo circuit for a few years until finally giving in to the doctor's insistence that his body wasn't going to last another eight seconds up there, let alone under hoof and horn. He moved to Montana to cowboy with a vision in his head he gathered from accounts like *Yellowtail: Crow Medicine Man and Sundance Chief*, a book he would later present to me as a gift. The author spent months with the Crow leader recording everything he was told. He was adopted by the Yellowtail family and in time participated in their Sun Dance. For my brother-in-law it was more than a romantic notion, it was a calling from a time he felt he was meant for, but by some tragic cosmic glitch had ended up fair-skinned and red-bearded in a world of credit cards and cell-phones.

He hunted elk, deer and antelope with both rifle and bow in the valleys and eastern plains of Montana and alone deep in the Tobacco Root, Beartooth and Crazy Mountains. Each time was a spiritual attempt, he insisted, to dislocate his *self* from

his body and reintegrate with the universe. Though I barely knew him then, he would send letters to Iraq, to the brother he never had, a brother fighting in a war, also in pursuit of something beyond his sense of self. I received envelopes with return addresses of *Deep in the Crazies* and *The teeth of a Chinook*. I imagined him crouched behind a boulder high above the timberline gripping the paper and pencil, jotting down a few words between gusts. He was almost mythical to me, as I would learn I was also to him.

I read of his friends, the sweat lodges, feasts and the Sun Dance. The new-old way. I allowed myself to escape through his descriptions of rituals and celebration, of the *eternal hunt* and finding his *forever eyes*. Under stars after a night patrol through open desert, where there was no thing nor body, where officers would call for fire from artillery to explode in the emptiness, I'd relieve myself of armor and ammo, light a cigarette and try to imagine myself stalking elk in knee-deep snow through the mountains or crawling naked into a sweat lodge, into the *womb of the universe*, as he said it was called. I tried to imagine it and hoped to dream of it when I fell asleep—though dreams were rarely anything but fevered scenes of some repetitive task like cleaning a combat-load of bullets one-by-one after a sand storm.

People ask how hot it was over there and I tell them many nights failed to sink below triple digits and we patrolled often in a hundred-and-thirty degrees during the day. They raise their eyebrows and I don't tell them of the eighty-plus-pounds of body armor, weapon, ammo, food and water. I don't tell them how unnatural it all felt. And I don't tell them how our suffering seemed almost absurd reflected in the stare of a shepherd, a shop keeper, a mother standing in the doorway of her home as we passed, assuming the worst of them. Theirs was an ancient suffering most of us could only wear like a costume. Whenever I locked eyes with them I found it nearly impossible to pretend they weren't beyond us somehow, seeing

us not as we imagined ourselves but as we truly were. They were willing us away.



Official U.S. Navy photo by Photographer's Mate 1st Class Arlo K. Abrahamson.

Every day I wanted to leave more. And every day it was less from fear of dying. It was a feeling that slithered around inside. The best you could do was try and shake it loose and hope it coiled up in a different part of your body.

—

A stern wind carried dust from the road and drove it through the lodge. Thin strips of fabric tied to the tips of each tree thrashed at nothing from their knots. The drummer's song fled out over the sage brush and a distancing presence was felt. New resolve seemed to rise in the dancers against the assaulting air, each of them tasting the ground in it with dry tongues, reassured of their purpose in the sting of splitting lips.

No sacrifice can be made if doubt is not confronted. No Mud assured me of this. I saw it in the dancers when they closed their eyes and gathered themselves against visible inner friction, lifting and dropping their bare feet as if to draw the song back from the squall driving it away. I imagined myself an Eagle Dancer, the person enduring suffering that it might be undone, though vanity banished the vision like a swirl of fine earth to some unseen end. The wind tore at us in gusts and No Mud secured his hat on his head with one hand.

As a boy I rode a dreamed horse through desert washes, open plains and timbered mountains with a carved tree branch for a rifle. I imagined ambushes and firing lead into swift animals, into enemies as they rose from behind boulders and thickets with bows drawn. I'd mouth the explosions of my rifle and fall from my saddle with an arrow sunk deep in the muscle. Invoking the movie scenes which most haunted my sleep, I'd break off the fletched end, clinch it in my teeth and push the tooled stone out the other side and pull it free, wincing with great drama at the tragedy of my own blood. I'd pack the entry and exit wounds with gunpowder and taste the bitter chokecherry wood as I brought the flame to each wound and my eyes would roll back in my head with the pain and smell of carbon and seared flesh and I would fall into sand, into pine needles, and follow the merging and dispersions of clouds.

After carrying my rifle for almost a year through the desert, the day finally came when I switched it off of *safe* and squeezed the trigger. It was not an ambush, not a battle, not movie material. It was a serene afternoon in late October. We were patrolling outside a rural village when someone spotted a tunnel entrance dug into the side of a canal. Ordered to *recon by fire* I prayed my bullets would find a meaning there. For months I tried to convince myself I was disappointed that the only thing I ever shot while at war was a hole in the ground.

"Come to the Sun Dance," my brother-in-law wrote in his last letter. "As a warrior you are invited to help cut down the center tree for the lodge." Even though most people I met seemed obliged to convince me, or at least themselves, that I was a warrior or some kind of hero, I had stopped trying to convince myself. When anyone shook my hand and thanked me for my service, or worse, for their freedom, I became vaguely nauseous as if shallowly buried beneath our feet was a decaying corpse we both pretended not to smell.

By the third day the Eagle Dancers seemed to have transcended the failure of their bodies and rose each time from the grass to pledge their feet to the drums and move in toward the center tree then back, breathing rhythmically through the eagle-bone whistles between their teeth with the drummer's voices urging them in song to dance "for their heart's deepest wound," No Mud told me, "and pray for healing."

The sun was high behind us and burned the back of my neck. I drank guiltily from my water and watched my brother-in-law. His skin was badly burned, as if bruised by exposure and peeling from his forehead and shoulders. His lips were visibly cracked and bleeding, the loops of skin in his chest stretched and raw from being pulled taut repeatedly by the weight of his body as he danced away from the center pole to the full extent of his rope, sometimes leaning back, his points of flesh pulling skyward as he sunk into the pain.

A breeze occasionally wafted smoke by, giving the air a burnt sweetness. Anyone entering the inner portion of the lodge received the attention of an elderly woman holding a bundle of smoking sage, which she would pass over and around the individual's body in a motion that reminded me of an airport security guard scanning someone with a handheld metal detector, which she performed with similar practical efficiency. I followed No Mud's gaze to a line of women

approaching the lodge. Each stood before the elderly woman as she drew the smoke over their heads with a cupped hand and under each of their feet, indicating when she was finished with a hand extended in the direction of their next steps toward the long-haired elder wearing latex gloves.

“The women will make flesh offerings,” No Mud said to me leaning closer but not turning his head. Then looking at me askance and patting his stumps he said, “I already made mine,” managing an upside-down grin. His eyes returned to the elder who was pushing the root of a feather through the incisions he had made in a woman’s shoulder. “That’s my sister,” he said, “the tall, pretty one.” She waited her turn behind two other women. I remembered her measured smile and feeling politely tolerated. The elder held both ends of the feather and made a quick jerking motion breaking the loop of skin holding it in place. “I made her a promise,” No Mud continued. “I’m here to honor that promise.”

The Eagle Dancers laid in the cool grass under the first stars blinking into sight. A drumless song was being sung almost like a lullaby by two elderly men, both with long braided hair and wearing pearl-snap western shirts. No Mud invited me to eat with him. We filed through the tent and filled small bowls with elk heart stew and a piece of fry bread. Crickets seemed to sigh with relief in the cool stillness as we made our way across the matted grass of the field turned parking lot. I lowered my tailgate like a table and waited for No Mud to finish before asking him what had been bothering me ever since I decided to come to the Sun Dance. He laughed to himself and told me other tribes have made declarations of war against non-Native participation in their Sun Dances, calling it a desecration of their sacred ceremony. “Some people don’t think your brother should be here,” he told me plainly, “or you.” Feeling the blood run from my face I asked him what he thought about it.

He looked away past the lodge up a darkening hillside, tilted his head back slightly and spoke from a different place, "My grandfather says some people have blind sorrow, and they abuse us with it. They make themselves feel better by honoring us like ghosts. But they honor their own guilt." Then leveling his eyes after considering this he continued, "Sometimes I wish I was a ghost." He was quiet again and seemed to be listening to the men singing, who could be heard faintly. "If people tell you what you are for long enough then that's what you can become in your own mind if you're not careful... But I think your brother has a good heart. Maybe he wants to assimilate to our ways for the sins of his people. *Your* people." He laughed again, hitting my leg with the back of his hand. "Maybe it's a sin for my people to let him think he can."

Late in the sun of the final day the singers struck the drum with a tempered fury and dug for their most naked voices. The long-haired elder approached my brother-in-law, standing as if in a lucid dream, and removed the tether-loops from the antler ends letting the rope swing back to the center tree as he pulled out his scalpel and stepped around to face his back. Of the same size and depth as the chest incisions he calmly made six, three down the right, three down the left side of his back, pushing then the sharpened antler tips through each and attaching to them the six split ends of another rope which hung slack like a tail on the ground behind him.

A man from the far side of the lodge labored slowly toward them, his fists around a rope at his chest and slung over his shoulder pulling behind him six horned buffalo skulls linked and dragging the well-danced ground by their teeth, dust rising around them in the dry heat. This man collected the rope from the ground and tied them together so the chain of skulls lay only a few feet behind my brother-in-law. A third man draped a buffalo hide over his shoulders like a blanket and gave him a tall staff.

His first attempt to move forward summoned a kind of impossible acceptance to his eyes as the rope pulled taut and he planted the end of the staff, clutching it with both hands and leveraged himself forward, each step holding that acceptance as if too close to a flame. Sharp, deliberate breaths left his mouth as he pulled the skulls around the center tree, eyes cast to the ground, blood staining the white of his cloth and running in thin streams down the backs of his legs. The singers sent their drum sticks into the stretched hide as if to drive it into the ground and the high, clean voice of a young child sprang from among them singing with un-lived years. I heard the murmuring pleasure of proud parents.

My brother-in-law made his way around the inner lodge and soon he was near me and he lifted his eyes from the ground as he approached and held mine as if to pull himself closer. I shuddered to be recognized and though I wished to shield my heart from the piercing eyes I imagined all around me I could not. Righting himself before me, seeing me from some burning emptiness, he extended the staff to touch my shoulder, and spoke his only words in four days as if speaking them made our bodies present and visible again. Standing next to No Mud, who did not so much as shift his weight, my skin flushed to be so spectacularly recognized.

As the skulls were drug out of the inner lodge my brother-in-law was reattached to the center tree. Before the pounding of my heart could subside I was asked to participate in a final ceremony where a sacred pipe would be passed between anyone with a prayer before being given to an Eagle Dancer that he might finish his dance with those prayers in his guard. No Mud urged me to do it.

The elderly woman drew sage smoke over my head and under my feet and I again tried and failed to shield my heart. We lined facing one another as the lit pipe was passed down the line alternately, each individual placing it to their lips briefly and inhaling. At the mouth of the line where the pipe would be

handed to a dancer, my brother-in-law stood waiting.

The final dance is a rite by which each dancer prepares their heart to break free from their rope by moving methodically, prayerfully into the center tree then back, gathering the strength and resolve needed to honor their sacrifice before sprinting backwards from the tree with enough force to break the loops of flesh, as foreshadowed by the women's offerings. Each dancer in their own time did this, the sound of their separation a visceral snap in the dry air.

As the pipe-bearer, he went last. With it cradled in his arm he moved in toward the tree, his bloody legs tensing then gaining speed until meeting the full purchase of his rope. But instead of breaking free, his body bucked forward, sending its extended length past parallel with the ground and six feet above it then down on his chest with a dusty thud. Returning to his feet and immediately back to the center tree he danced without noticing half of the pipe lay broken behind him. A second time running back and he met the end of his rope as if being shot in the shoulder, one loop breaking sending that half of his body in a violent twist hinged off the other. On his third attempt, he broke free and stood panting for a moment before looking finally at the pipe.

His eyes searched back to where he had first impacted the ground. Kneeling there as if to make himself as small as possible he retrieved the other half. I looked at No Mud and knew nothing would be said. The collective silence was static like that of dry lightning and followed me back down the dusty two-track onto the highway, through the tall-grass prairies along the Yellowstone River, into the low sun.

We all crawled naked into the lodge, No Mud using his fists like feet, the rest of us on our hands and knees, shoulders and thighs pressing together as we formed a tight circle

inside. The elder shoveled stones from the fire outside and placed them in the pit between us. Once full he crawled in and closed the flap behind him, sealing the lodge in darkness. At his side was a pile of beargrass bundles which he passed around one-by-one. "It opens your pores," my brother-in-law whispered as he handed me one. Into a bucket of water at his side the elder dipped a cup and poured it over the rocks which hissed and steamed and he began to sing.

The heat was instantly unbearable, the vapor burning the back of my throat, searing my skin. I clinched my eyes shut and rocked back and forth begging myself to endure it. Everyone sang, their voices moving through my head with a submerged, burning singularity and I felt myself sinking into the ground. They soon began using the beargrass like whips over their legs, stomachs, shoulders and backs. I bent to the dirt in search of cooler air. Finding none I sat up desperate for breath. I gripped the beargrass and whipped my face reflexively then my chest and shoulders. I whipped my back repeatedly as if the thin clean sting of it might drive the deeper burning away. This went on until it seemed there was no time nor space and I was certain my muscle shone exposed beneath the skin.

The singing eventually ceased and the flap was peeled open, flooding the lodge with light and cool air. Relieved and suddenly proud, I watched for the men near the entrance to begin crawling out. But they remained seated with their eyes closed, inhaling sharply through their nostrils then letting the air out slowly, silently. No Mud clutched the beargrass between his legs. His chest rose and fell, glistening, spotted with the scars of many Sun Dances. I looked to the entrance and saw the elder watching me. He turned, reached up behind him and pulled the flap closed, sealing the lodge in darkness. There was only breathing until my skin became warm with it. I heard the cup emerge from the bucket and the thin, seething hiss of the stones.

New Fiction from Ulf Pike: Son of God

I. Esses

The warmth of his voice makes us wary of his intentions. He bears our sin of greenness like a precious burden, our softness like a direct order from God to transform us in his image.

A helmet fits his skull like the mold from which it was cast. When he removes it his bare head glistens in the sun. We pretend not to look, as though he were a woman undressing, feeling almost queasy waiting for him to put it back on. His skin is fair and something childish in his face does not relieve it of an old mortality, which is what one feels when caught in his stare. Under the kevlar brim crouches some secret in eyes, level as a landless horizon. He takes in the world as if in the path of some vast, righteous burning.

“Without death,” he tells us, “there could be no beauty.” Behind us in all directions, warping heat weaves the sky and earth together like two banners in a low wind. He continues, “They had to consume death to know how to live.”

Had we not been standing around the smoldering carnage of a recent Apache gunship engagement, talk might have remained speculative. The target was a small truck, now a skeletal remnant riddled with 30mm holes. We all lean on it and peer in. Of the reported three enemy kills, the charred remains of one are scattered in the bed. The way the body has come to rest, it looks as if his hand is trying to prevent more of his brains from spilling

out. Esses fixes his eyes there while he removes one glove and probes gently around. He pulls at the partially coiled pink and black matter.

Standing at the tailgate he considers what he holds between his fingers like a sacrament.

He looks up, holds each of us in his gaze, searching our eyes as if for the words he wants to say.

He speaks warmly: "Even the light of a dead star can guide us." He smiles, pleased by his own insight. He says, "The past is always present but never as it was." Then extending his hand: "Memory comes back in pieces, some of them not our own."

II. Chrysalis

Upstream, an elk lowers his velvet crown to drink. A sudden gust tears a flurry of leaves from their branches and they flutter to the current like butterflies. He remembers being told as a child that before they could fly, they were caterpillars, and they ate milkweed because they knew it was poisonous to their predators. Some predators were too hungry to care and ate them anyway. Only one-in-a-hundred caterpillars would get to fly. But they ate milkweed anyway until they were fat, then they curled up in a sleeping bag called a chrysalis and hung from the branches of trees to wait for their second birth.



Abraham Begeyn, "Still Life with Thistle,"
circa 1650s.

A storm rumbles off across the valley and sunlight breaks through in its wake. The dirt road is scattered with shining blue and silver portals. He remembers walking with his mother, holding her hand, imagining being pulled through them into that underworld and drifting weightlessly. He remembers her voice, excited to show him something beautiful. How she motioned ahead: "Oh, sweetie, look!"

Wing-to-wing, hundreds of Monarchs covered the surface of a puddle like a burnt-orange blanket, undulating lethargically in afternoon warmth. He remembers crouching down and his hand recoiling to

the sharp change in her voice, "No, no! Don't touch! You can't touch them, honey. They are very, very delicate."

He remembers curling up on the couch early in the mornings and twirling her hair between his fingers while she leafed through the thin pages of her old King James Bible. She says it was the most obsessive thing he did. If he was crying in church it was likely because she wouldn't let him claw his way into her long, brown, carefully styled hair. In the event of an outburst he would be escorted to the nursery and left with all the other criers. He learned to twirl his own hair and draw on the back of donation envelopes and prayer request cards, whatever it took to endure an hour of liturgy without causing a scene. According to the pastor there was an invisible war being waged inside of him and his soul was in the balance. According to his mother, his actions and even his thoughts could tip the scales.

When he walked through the sliding glass door, blood streaming from his scalp, holding a fistful of his own hair in one hand and scissors in the other, her terror was quickly suppressed by rage. Following the swift and blunt force of her hand he was marched to the barber shop where for the first time he felt the cool, metallic pleasure of clippers vibrating over his skull and the feeling of wind moving over his exposed mind as they walked back home. They stopped on the sidewalk to speak with her friend who insisted on running her open palm over his new bristle. She cooed to the sensation and a mysterious pleasure fused him to that moment, to her touch, like a corridor of heated light.

He remembers hiking to Fallen Leaf Lake in northwest Montana and his father giving him what was in his metal-frame rucksack so his weary youngest sister could fit inside. The extra weight made his shoulders chafe and bleed, made him proud. It rained a warm summer rain and when they arrived they were all soaked through their clothes, except for his sister who emerged from under the top

flap of the rucksack dry as a bone. They had a small fire and he remembers feeling almost magical as he unrolled his sleeping bag and sealed himself inside.