

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.

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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.