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Winter Naming: James Welch

KENNETH LINCOLN

They Speak Like Singing: Native (American) Crossings focuses on early books of poetry and prose by select Native writers, showcasing the distinct voices and tribal diversities of living Indians.¹ Through the pan-tribal medium of English, a second language for some, now a mother tongue for most, all of these Native writers begin as poets and go on to write novels. Long, long ago the Lakota matrix White Buffalo Calf Woman brought the medicine pipe. Nick Black Elk recalls in *The Sixth Grandfather*: “And she knew their thoughts and said in a voice that was like singing . . . ,”

With visible breath I am walking.

A voice I am sending as I walk.

In a sacred manner I am walking.

With visible tracks I am walking.

*In a sacred manner I am walking.*²

“He spoke like singing,” says Black Elk as he remembers the *wanékia*, or “make-live” prophet, of his Lakota Ghost Dance vision, whose “all-colors” voice goes everywhere. As with the grandfather stallion songs, everything hears and dances—the leaves, grasses, waters, leggeds, wingeds, and crawling beings. The savior’s chant is a Native blessing for all. “They were better able now to see the greenness of the world,” Black Elk says of *heyoka* curing songs, “the wideness of the sacred day, the colors of the earth, and to set these in their minds.”³ *They Speak like Singing* honors talk-song visions for all relatives and seeks to distinguish, if not to reconcile, Native with American poetics.

Kenneth Lincoln grew up in northwest Nebraska south of Wounded Knee. He went to Stanford University for a degree in American literature, to Indiana University for a doctorate in modern British literature, and to UCLA, where he has taught contemporary and Native American literatures for thirty-six years. Beginning with *Native American Renaissance* and *The Good Red Road* through *Indi’n Humor* and *Sing with the Heart of a Bear*, he has published widely in American Indian studies, chaired the country’s first interdisciplinary master’s program in the field, and written novels, poetry, and personal essays about western Americana, including *Men Down West* and *A Writer’s China*.

The genius of Native voices has been around for tens of thousands of years. Theirs are not so much twice-told tales as ceremonial sites revisited, no less than the thousand-year-old ancestral petroglyphs standing watch over my Santa Fe valley homeland today—original stone-carved texts, oral and more recently written, that bear a revisionary, indeed a retranslated, look. The working language of tribal experience is the subject of this study, newly expressed in English, as Simon Ortiz, my Acoma neighbor to the south, says, “language as perception” is its critical premise.⁴ My approach, as with petroglyphs or codices, is to touch the texts regeneratively in our shared language. I want to come as close as possible to the translated classics of Native American literatures, parsing select readings as set texts in contemporary crossings—the Sappho and Homer through Plath and Heaney of Native oral and literary traditions, all the way from rock art and purblind singing to modernist literacy and WordPerfect. I do not regard Native cultures as *reserved*—“out of sight and out of mind,” Russell Means said in the Wounded Knee American Indian Movement days—or ghettoized, as in some academic settings. Beginning with the Lakota where I grew up in northwest Nebraska during the 1950s, evolving through Native American studies at the University of California, Los Angeles for thirty-six years, residing for fifteen years now in a Native fertile crescent of the Rio Grande Valley, I consider tribal peoples to be human beings with languages and literatures long living with both grounded Native ceremonialists and emerging American writers speaking among us today.

Compared with pioneer erasure of history and ethnic identity in an émigré New Land, Native ancestral traditions grant tribal peoples special heritage in the Americas. The fact that they survived a 97 percent hemispheric extermination of sixty million human beings compels Native Americans to talk and to sing themselves anew or fall mute and perish. Survival carries future responsibility. Neither killing fields nor suburban malls, extermination camps nor trashcans in an existential cul de sac today silence their regenerated traditions. The old ways renewed through ongoing ceremonies and acculturated literacy, Native culture hinges on tribal survival.

Blackfeet poet-novelist James Welch says, “I feel that I’m always writing from the same world in the poems and the novels.” With 82 percent of Native peoples living off reservation—many going through mainstream schooling, retribalizing to traditional ways, writing about contemporary reacculturation—Native American literature today charts a passage, a *Nostos* or odyssey, of returning home.

Before us lay

the smooth stones of our ancestors, the fish,
the lizard, snake and bent-kneed
bowman—etched by something crude,
by a wandering race, driven by their names
for time: its winds, its rain, its snow
and the cold moon tugging at the crude figure
in this, the season of their loss.⁵

In the early 1970s James Welch enters American literature as an Indian postmodernist, a fractured classicist of the West, drawing fragments from both sides of the Buckskin Curtain. Reading the likes of Cesar Vallejo and early modernists from Ezra Pound to Theodore Roethke and decreationists such as Ray Carver (through Richard Hugo's tutelage at the University of Montana in the 1960s), Welch translates the nightmarish reality of a postwar Native Fall and a postholocaustal Wasteland into contemporary Blackfeet truth-telling. He writes "hard and clear about what hurts," to reapply Hemingway's formula to the daily lives of modern-day Indians. Welch's work is not heroic, legendary, or mythic: he writes of the true West, working cowboys and real Indians, hard-scrabble survival and off-rez scrabble. His kinships are broken, the sacred hoop warped. As evident in his titles and names (or lack of), there is a misnaming imbalance of human, animal, and natural life-forms, "cock-eyed" as the deer see things, the hermit grandfather says. In *Winter in the Blood* a pale horse named Bird dies freeing a cow stuck in the mud, bawling for lost sons and brothers. The "airplane man" buys a blue car called Falcon for a no-name narrator delivering him fugitive to Canada. (Mother) Theresa sacrifices a duck named (Prophet) Amos for Thanksgiving dinner. (Father) John First Raise falls dead-drunk in the blue-white winter ditch, where brother Mose(s) was killed by a drunk motorist a decade before. A distempered, unsaintly Teresa farms the left-over homestead with a newly wed, rickety breed husband, Lame Bull.

The novel registers asymmetry in the four winds and seasons, a hard rain falling from the Northwest, as Job's Whirlwind says, "to satisfy the desolate and waste ground." Subzero numbness sears a late-summer winter of delayed tremens and battle-fatigue depression. Our antihero is as distant from himself as a "hawk from the moon," turning winter count icons upside-down.⁶ His is an eccentric antistyle of nameless, faceless, sodden mirages against a toneless horizon—generic old lady, runaway lover, dead dad, lost brother, caustic mother, parodic stepfather, and hallucinatory Anglo airplane man who took a little something not belonging to him. The old images of pilgrim up against Indian—cannibal, barbarian, *Wilden*, libidinish, pagan, warrior, heathen, feathered savage, lawless hostile, ageless *Abergeny*—tip cartoonishly *virtual* in this surreal fiction (the "real" real or suprarreality of things, so Andre Bretón defined the *sureal* in French modernist poetry). This story will take some parsing at the outset.

Hath the rain a father?
 or who hath begotten the drops of dew?
 Out of whose womb came the ice?
 and the hoary frost of heaven, who hath gendered it?
 The waters are hid as with a stone,
 and the face of the deep is frozen.⁷

To have something "in the blood" means you were born with it, maybe a good or a bad thing. To have romance in your blood—a born lover, for example—can be fetching or, if you're loathsome, not so. A born loser is agreeably a bad thing. Reality in the blood might be better, if you have the

Native heart and guts to stomach cruelty, loss, or outright tragedy. Blood is blood, and families are thick with it, thicker than wine, they say, especially Native families. We all know that bad blood is trouble; eugenicists argue the purity of true blood. And in the traditional Indian world a pecking order declines from full-blood (real Indian) to mixed-blood (bitribal Indian) to half-breed (half an Indian), to bloodless, indeed *bloody*, as the Brits say, white man (not Indian).

Winter words? Welch is no stranger to the Western canon. “Now is the winter of our discontent,” carps Shakespeare’s Richard III, fomenting civil strife in trochaically reversed blank verse. “Winter kept us warm,” the torpid maiden Marie laments in T. S. Eliot’s *Waste Land* three centuries later in London. From discord to distemper, dead winter gets a bad literary name until “The Snow Man,” in which Wallace Stevens posits, “One must have a mind of winter” *not* to hear what is not there—*no* misery in the wind among a few snow-shagged leaves. Resisting human projection, we discover “the nothing that is not there” in our crystalline alter ego, too often sentimentalized in anthropomorphic pathos. *Winter* is its own native reality, the word itself cognate with the Proto-Indo-European root for *water* (Mediterranean winter meant fertile rains, a godsend to Eliot’s hollow men gathered on the tumid river’s beach). So, too, the whiteness of winter is dyadically charged: light itself, innocence, and idiosyncratic, even sacred albinism; inversely death bones, sterility, absence. To an Indian this inversion points a pale bony finger at the white man as invader, destroyer, prevaricator, and jailer. Yet in Blackfeet mythology “Old Man” the Sun, *Na’pi*, is known as “dawn-light-color man,” associated with the sallow or yellow-white newborn bison. These tribal icons, native ironies, and modern laments are peckishly buried throughout *Winter in the Blood*.

So just what does James Welch, writing a Native novel for Americans at large, mean by “winter” in the blood? Curse, blessing, or mixed-blood of both Native culture and American invasion, dubiously good and bad? Real and seemingly unreal, the uncertainty certainly triggers an ironic disquiet about any mix of white and Indian, promise and betrayal, vision and bitterness. *Winter in the Blood* extends this ethnic division to good/bad blood between men and women, realist continuity and romantic tension, issues of intimacy and distance between writer and reader. “Bones should never tell a story to a bad beginner”; the epigraph to the novel opens with a torn-off scrap of the title poem to Welch’s first book, *Riding the Earthboy 40*. We are in a tilting blood feud with titles alone. What’s up with this Indian writer?

The verbal noun *riding*—to ride and a ride—teeters between pure action and portable stasis. One state is verbal motion or energy active, the other a noun that begs the question of acting or acted on, given the unbalancing ride, a debatable instability. Is this *riding* a condition played out or upon (*give me a ride*), or perhaps an unsteady perch on the back of something skittishly moving out West (*they took him for a ride*)? These and other questions decenter our entry into *Riding the Earthboy 40*, whose outtake as poetic shard introduces *Winter in the Blood*. Passive or active (try straddling the difference with the motion-sick rider)—to stay up on this thing moving, whatever it is, or wants to be, this book of poems or stories, or both, is hard. . . .

Earthboy? Boy of the earth, a reader assumes, even child of nature in the popular Western lexicon—born of the fertile elements (*earth* suggests agrarian nurturing rather than the cowboy struggle with its unruly synonym *dirt*). Perhaps Earthboy is akin to “red earth” boy, as in the Aramaic etymology of the word *Adam*, not to mention Choctaw “red earth” *Oklahoma*. Red for ancestral blood, then; red for passion and violence; red for heat, anger, and action; red for Indian? It’s truly a dayglow misnomer, Red Indian (for Iroquois face-paint, it is said), but that’s what we’re dealing with—images and their relation to reality, words and implications, the romance of truth and vice versa. And Welch’s fictive earth seems falling and fallen as in “dirty.” The torn-off piece of a poem goes on to question “those foolish claims that he was better than dirt.”

Boy—that is, Western cowboy or young Huck Finn running off to the Territory—seems paradigmatic of the New World frontier, but does this bad-boy paradigm apply to nomadic red Americans? Are these delinquent Indian cowboys, Native Earthboys, or “dirty” *savages*, as the Puritans complained of people who bathed daily in streams, rather than the weekly or even monthly Plymouth Anglo ablutions? Natives held aromatic flowers to their noses to blunt the stench. “*Earthboy calls me from my dream*,” the fragment closes in trochaic tetrameter off-rhymed, “*Dirt is where the dreams must end*.”

What about the numerals 4 and 0, as in *Earthboy 40*? Four is a sacred earth designation in the Native world, a stable grounding number (“rational”) in most numerical systems of thinking—four winds, four roads, four cardinal points, an x/y quadrant axis, and the twice bisected or squared circle. But to couple 4 with 0, the naught of numbers, spells trouble. Balance four with the black hole of nothing or zero? When Emily Dickinson notes the startle of a garden snake as in “Zero at the Bone” (from her poem, “A Narrow Fellow in the Grass”), she cuts to a leukemic fear of emptiness, even a colorless void of dis-ease at the Edenic heart of matters that terrify Westerners. Call it white absence or abyss, anxiety or ennui, obsession or depression, any zero at the bone is dead-center unsettling.

Maybe there’s another tack to this erratic craft of *Riding the Earthboy 40*. Consider geographers and cartographers drawing and quartering the New World—property squaring of riparian watersheds and ragged mountains and broken coasts and endless rolling prairies and desert plains. George Washington, our prime and most noble war president, was a surveyor who was a party to the 1787 Northwest Ordinance, beginning “Of utmost good faith . . .”⁸ His thirteen colonies ran right over America’s surveyed allies in a few years, forging west through the Alleghenies and into the Ohio River Valley frontier. Think of national heroes like Daniel Boone or Davy Crockett, Native resisters like Tecumseh or Black Hawk. Over a century or so of frontier wars, surveyors forged straight lines across the country, made right angles out of slopes and curves, staked the plains for fence posts, and checkered rectangular grids across pooling lakes and wandering rivers. Quick claimers and Sooners and homesteaders boxed the lots and squared America for ownership and equity resale, then banked the real estate venture profits. One might say that we have a national industry founded on stolen, squared, and resold Indian land.

So the Natives—in Welch’s case buffalo-hunting, seminomadic Blackfeet—were conquered, boxed in, and fenced inside prisoner-of-war camps called “reservations” by 1883 (“land set aside for Indians, surrounded by thieves,” General William T. Sherman said).⁹ By 1887 the Dawes Allotment Act mapped 140 million acres “in severalty,” which meant that any acreage left over, when every Indian head of household got 160 squared-off acres, was given free to migrant whites. What Indians weren’t using, Anglo-Americans reasoned, they didn’t need, and soon enough whites got 640 acres after the 1898 Curtis Act. Tribes got salvage lots at best, usually the land that could not be farmed, logged, mined, or otherwise reengineered, hence “waste” land.

Between allotment and reservation relocation, gerrymandered land rip-offs, and outright thievery, some 87 million acres of Indian lands disappeared overnight, or shifted ownership, as “settlers” saw the swap. Natives saw them as *unsettlers* usurping Georgian valleys of loam, civilization, and gold, Ohio bottomlands, Red River Dakota farmlands, Kansas pasturage, Washington forests, Oregon fisheries, California orchards, and Arizona riverbeds. What acreage still Indian was soon chopped and quartered into smaller parcels of inheritance, down to quarter-sections of land. Not given citizenship until 1924, Indians were dumped on their checkerboarded reservations and forgotten (until Indian gaming, that is; witness a city plat of Palm Springs crisscrossed with the Morongo Nation). Most know the general outline and gist of our Buckskin Curtain history.

Welch starts *Winter in the Blood* historically bracketed with the broken chert of a poem. “Earthboy: so simple his name / should ring a bell for sinners,” we find from the original lines lost in transition to the epigraph. “Earthboy farmed this land / and farmed the sky with words.” Written in staggering iambic trimeters but metric feet all the same-scoured diction, lyric minimalism, stubborn logic, taciturn imagery—these startling mean lines lead to Christian curses, bad jokes, racial slurs, fallen metaphors, and elegiac shards that *deride* the Earthboy name. “I ride / romantic to those words,” the poet canters into his fiction with a cleansing, end-stopping, anti-sentimental realism as the ground sense essential for renewal, and if it ever has a chance, modest romance based on dark comic promise. We are back to Blackfeet Adam and Eve, *Na’bi* and *Kipi’taki* in the old creation stories recorded by George Grinnell. Old Man Sun and Old Woman Moon gamble creation in a tragicomic dialogue of promise and limit, fancy and fact, innocence and irony, romance and realism—the ways we fool ourselves, together and apart, and the ways we try to fix it.

To catch the flavor of Blackfeet storytelling, listen lyrically to the opening narrative voice of *Winter in the Blood*:

In the tall weeds of the borrow pit, I took a leak and watched the sorrel mare, her colt beside her, walk through burnt grass to the shady side of the log-and-mud cabin. It was called the Earthboy place, although no one by that name (or any other) had lived in it for twenty years. The roof had fallen in and the mud between the logs had fallen out in chunks, leaving a bare gray skeleton, home only to

mice and insects. Tumbleweeds, stark as bone, rocked in a hot wind against the wet wall.

On the hill behind the cabin, a rectangle of barbed wire held the graves of all the Earthboys, except for a daughter who had married a man from Lodgepole. She could be anywhere, but the Earthboys were gone.

The fence hummed in the sun behind my back as I climbed up to the highway. My right eye was swollen up, but I couldn't remember how or why, just the white man, loose with his wife and buying drinks, his raging tongue a flame above the music and my eyes. She was wild, from Rocky Boy. He was white. He swore at his money, at her breasts, at my hair.

Coming home was not easy anymore. It was never a cinch, but it had become a torture. My throat ached, my bad knee ached and my head ached in the even heat. (1-2)

"In the *tall weeds* of the *borrow pit*," our man confesses more or less in blank verse, "I *took a leak* and *watched* the *sovel mare*, / *her colt beside her*, / *walk* through *burnt grass* to the *shady side* of the *log-and-mud cabin*."¹² Native placement first: the weeds have gone feral for some time. Our no-name Indian stands discarded in the unwanted wilds of a "pit" where highway engineers "borrowed" or stole dirt to crown a blacktopped, white-striped highway across aboriginal land (ironically an echo of Dante's *Inferno* opening, "Mid-way in my life I fell off the straight path into the dark wood").

He may have seen taller grass, this red cowboy, but urinates where he can and must (scatological evacuation purges the story throughout—John First Raise pissing the boy's name in the snow and Yellow Calf recalling him as "a young squirt," his off-color stepfather guffawing purgatively and falling drunk off his chair, teenagers masturbating in filling station toilets, old men spitting, one-night relieving stands in hotels and trailers, a thin tourist girl vomiting in the weeds by the road, Bird the horse farting cathartically in the recognition scene, and the narrator finally laughing out loud epiphanically about ancestral winter in his blood—a nasty joker playing a bad joke on all). So our man straddles his manhood unceremoniously in a ditch where the earth has been dredged, an absence of stolen land by the ghosted Earthboy homestead. This opening scene serves the vernacular with a twist, the homely poetry of "leaky" working men (women would never say it this way)—toxic elimination in bodily functions made public, first-person candor, creative desecration, small-time crime, and Ray Carver's grainy realism all in one opening sentence. He's a dispassionate observer of mother-child kinships, mare and colt, later cow and calf in his brother's death and the final mud rescue when Bird dies, and finally mother-daughter and father-son lineage.

The "burnt grass" bespeaks a seared desert needing rain, a Native wasteland. The "shady side" or shelter refuge of a "log-and-mud" box cabin, not a circular tipi, recalls Black Elk's remark that the white men even pen up the grass. Rather than Momaday's "they called themselves" naming of the Kiowa, the narrator says, "It was called the Earthboy place, although no one by that name (or any other) had lived in it for twenty years." Casually enough,

the subjunctive, subjective nature of Indian-white tagging suggests that a secondary language is only attached to things—not the Native thing itself but what it's called in English, loosely.

Is the chthonic name *Earthboy* then archaic? What has happened to our Mother Earth in this story? A corrosive, reverse-field irony jerks the syntax, “although,” as realistic corrective to romantic looking back. The fact soon emerges that brother Mose (monosyllabically contracted prophet of Exodus, dubious witness to the milk-and-honey Promised Land, God's burning bush, and the stuttering Ten Commandments) died on the spot as roadkill in this borrow pit twenty years ago, when the Earthboy house was deserted. Is No Name a latter-day Indian Aaron who lives to speak for his speech-defective brother prophet? And here ten years back John First Raise, an ironic Baptist and Redeemer precursor, froze to death coming home blind drunk (“just a *blue-white lump* in the *endless skittering whiteness*,” as imaged nine chapters later in iconic blank verse).

The Earthboy roof has fallen in, the mud fallen out (inversional patterns throughout) in a low comedy of dereliction and neglect. This is the death rattle of tradition, the tribal bones of the matter. The abandoned house registers the singsong collapse of a “bare grey skeleton” home to varmints and vermin. Only small crawling creatures survive out here. The rootless, tumbling homelessness of the West hollows the bare necessity of existence in rolling iambic hexameter. Homer's six-beat verse-line impacts with four spondees: “*Tumbleweeds, stark as bone, rocked in a hot wind against the west wall.*” Anglo boxes resurface in the “rectangle of barbed wire” fencing the Earthboy dead in a barbed coffin. That military wire kept Indians on reservations and cattle from straying, as ranchers “won” the Wild West and still overrun it (to this day millions of reservation acres are leased to white cattlemen).

One daughter escaped to Lodgepole and married out (so she can't pass on the Earthboy name), anticipating runaway Agnes (“chaste”) with the stolen rifle and razor, a siren virgin Cree (teen Pocahontas as Algonquin out West) in green mermaid dress and white graduation flats who shows up late in a bar. This dusky Eve is advised by our narrator to “learn shorthand” as the “essential” language of survival, a coded essentialism that rules the novel's fenced range. Be brief, be blunt, the confessional advises, be gone. “She could be anywhere,” No Name opines, “but the Earthboys were gone.” Anywhere, nowhere, Native claims are unlocatable, accountability incalculable, kinship lost, families scattered, names erased. The king's prodigal son is “coming home,” an ironic *Nostos* crossed with lamentable Hamlet fable, to a generic mother, a rocking old lady, and the absence of “the girl who was thought to be my wife.” Grandmother never does get a name, as with the narrator himself who hasn't earned one, the foggy airplane man who doesn't recall one, and the old man in straw hat and green gabardines face-down dead in oatmeal at midstory.¹³

The resident language of character-in-place internally rhymes with torqued blank verse and broken trimeter: “The *fence hummed in the sun behind my back / as I climbed up to the highway.*” The poetry of this prose catches the ear by surprise in fallen places unsuspected. And then the opening story

mode switches to plot, action, and character definition: with a swollen eye from a bar brawl, a wounded knee from long ago beside his dying brother, our nameless Native foggily recalls the Indian girl from *Rocky Boy*, her white husband, swearing and probably a skin-color fight—but none of that counts, he says, along with his homecoming. “For that matter none of them counted; not one meant anything to me.”

Distance is his psychic razor through cursed country or “burnt prairie,” rancid green Milk River, sagebrush and cottonwood, “the dry, cracked gumbo flats.” This is the spondaic beat of a beaten man and land, the sun-pounded dirt of “a distance as deep as it was empty.” No boundaries, horizontal or vertical, this emptiness out West dwarfs a man. The chapter ends in a dry pocket of white space, “My throat ached with a terrible thirst.” Invoking Eliot’s *Wasteland*, the famished Fisher Prince will plead for rain the rest of the story.

Is this stumble-bum stagger meant as an ironic figure of vision quest or fallen delirium tremens, or some of both? Visionary aloneness has morphed into a conquered sense of Indian alienation. Our numbed, catatonic, travel-shocked pilgrim may not make it back on his secular trek home. Everywhere he goes dry-drunk, cotton-mouthed, breast-famished, and mother-rejected. “I drank a long sucking bellyful of water at the tap” (53), our boy says, temporarily home. And here the story rests, momentarily. It never goes anywhere very swiftly, or in a straight line, and nothing much happens dramatically, except to say that No Name discovers his true grandfather—his mother’s father in a story that defines the ancestral past and fallen present, no paternal ancestry revealed, as John First Raise may be the last unrisen Indian. Shadowing Momaday in Rainy Mountain Cemetery, No Name puts his grandmother to rest in the end, which is no small spiritual matter, ending a surreal tale.

“One of the things I found when I was trying to balance poetry and prose,” James Welch at home in Montana said to Kathryn Shanley, “was that my prose was very jumbled up, very thick, and my poetry was kind of losing the lyric quality and losing its elasticity. So I was not satisfied with the language in either one. That’s why I had to drop poetry and concentrate on the fiction.”¹⁴ *Winter in the Blood* began as a poem after writing verse for seven years, the author says, and its prose reaches poetic measure and density.

Crossing poetry to prose, the language of *Winter in the Blood* is both musical and conversational, alternating rhythms from imagist concision and metric density, to cowboy and barroom talk, through the first-person dramatic monologue of a Montana Indian—all in a medium and tongue we would call Western, even frontier demotic, certainly farmhand and wrangler working-class. As with the opening verse fragment, a touch of poetry adds texture to the fictive stew and savors the reading. The compressed diction here is hard-bitten, tangible, leathery—like beef jerky or Native pemmican from lean wild meats, dried and pressed for lasting through a hard winter. The monosyllables are concentrated, the images stripped of decoration, the rhythms tendoned. Here is an essential common tongue with unflinching honesty, candid and close to the bone.

Consider the poem “Surviving” as a lyric rider to the prose narrative. Welch’s wintry blood tale in “Surviving” is lyrically compressed, dramatically inscripted, and shamanically encoded. A reader unpacks it carefully or not at all.

SURVIVING

The day-long cold hard rain drove
 like sun through all the cedar sky
 we had that late fall. We huddled
 close as cows before the bellied stove.
 Told stories. Blackbird cleared his mind,
 thought of things he'd left behind, spoke:

"Oftentimes, when sun was easy in my bones,
 I dreamed of ways to make this land."
 We envied eagles easy in their range.
 "That thin girl, old cook's kid, stripped naked
 for a coke or two and cooked her special stew
 round back of the mess tent Sundays."
 Sparrows skittered through the black brush.

That night the moon slipped a notch, hung
 black for just a second, just long enough
 for wet black things to sneak away our cache
 of meat. To stay alive this way, it's hard. . . .¹⁵

No poem opens so spondaically driven. "The day-long cold hard rain drove / like sun." Six drilled accents, the first hyphenated for double stress ("day-long") radically slow the run-run of narrative progress to a broken-step pace. The dental *d*'s toll through *a*'s and *o*'s—*a-o o-ah a-o*—lowing back and forth as moaning cavities. There's an unsettling sense that the line might not make it to the first break—that drives across the metric drop with an illogical and cracking iambic simile "like sun." "Rain / like sun" will be a hard rain all around, since sun is everywhere insistent and nowhere soft on a hot, late, summer Montana day.

Out West working men and women ask how a piece is made—how its components interconnect and how it functions. We can parse the syntactic ligatures of "Surviving" in prose parts of speech to see how its parts work and what it does, the shorthand "essentials," as No Name says to Agnes. Prosaic tare thickens Welch's poetry toward narrative lyricism. First the simple nouns: *rain, sun, sky, fall, cows, stove, stories, mind, bones, land, range, girl, kid, coke, stew, tent, Sundays, brush, night, moon, notch, second, things, meat*. These are real nouns you can bite into and test like old coins—the many common noun-things of Western experience, two dozen crowded into the poem, simple off-rhyming diction (to be exact, 108 monosyllables to 20 disyllables and a single trisyllable, no less an actor's dream speech than "To be or not to be—that is the question").

Down the avian ladder, eagles to sparrows suggest winged spirits, high dropping to low. In the name *Blackbird* a winged noun becomes a human-animal totem, generically a trickster spirit. Blackbird is dark, testing, daring,

mischievous, mysterious, dangerous (in “Christmas Comes to Moccasin Flat” he reappears as Charlie Blackbird, stabbing fire far from bar and church). Animate presences spirit through things. Guardian powers charge the metaphoric potential in all Native objects, beings, and conditions. Though common, everything means something further, every object goes totemically deeper than first thought, as with wind and moon, elk and badger, quartz and cedar.

So common becomes uncommon, first and finally considered: rain is not just “rain,” but spring promise (inversely so in the “fall” ending of the novel). Elements frame the day. Sun shines, sky beckons, fall falls, cows feed, stove warms. Noun-things narrow down in the West: range ranges, girl thins, kid cooks. And in human cultural terms stories tell, minds mind, bones last, land gives (“making” the land incests the Mother Earth).

Coke, stew, tent, and Sundays flag the non-Indian elements in this narrative, as *brush, night, and moon* return the story to the natural spiritual world. *Notch, second, things, and meat* leave a consonant haunted sense of ending that doesn’t end—the need at any cost is to survive, as in the last line. Conversely to these endless endings, spring, food, warmth, tribal history, and generosity would naturally feed body and soul, from the most common daily necessity of rain, sun, stew, and stove, to the cultural sustenance of stories and land, to the spiritual cruces of the vision quest—sun’s day, moon’s night, the creationist province of Old Man *Na’pi* and Old Woman *Kipi’taki*. This density is not easy to unpack. Fictional prose proves more thematically accessible, as Welch’s novel challenges tribal values with father-loss, brother-grief, misogynist suspicion, and petty chauvinist crimes. Yet both poetry and prose register a human testimonial that would cleanse and purge the confessor in his fallen state out West.

Pronouns in “Surviving”—that which precedes to *own* a noun—are minimal and tribally or familiarly referential: *we* (twice), *his, my, I, her, our*. There is no *they* or *theirs, he* or *she, him* or *them, us, you, or yours*. This is a very tight campfire, some say a story that should not go outside the tribal circle.

Verbs embody physical motions, concrete actions: *drove, huddled, skittered, slipped, sneak. Told, cleared, left, spoke, dreamed, stripped, and cooked* offer the gritty monosyllables of personal actions. We can feel these tonalized gestures as movement, the verb-as-the-motion of people and particular things. Significantly there are only two weak or *linking* verbs, “was” and “it’s” (non-verbs as it were, since linking verbs are positional markers). A past casual loss and slackening verbal tension show up in “sun was easy.” It’s a relaxing that betrays Blackbird, a false dream before Adam’s curse with the cook’s kid.

The infinitive phrase “to stay alive” says all, and the contracted linking verb of “it’s” leads to a final admission of difficulty, anguish, vulnerability. “To stay alive this way, it’s hard. . . .” The line’s inverted syntax ruptures grammar, while the simple transitive verb contracts to an idiomatic monosyllable: *it-as-Id* or “other” is the most of what *it is*, no motion going anywhere, just hanging on, foreshortened. So, too, “it’s” calls back eleven lines to “he’d,” a contracted masculine pronoun in past possessive—things he’d rather forget, or leave back there in the black sack of guilt and self-loathing. This leaves the speaker with an endless confessional lament, “it’s hard. . . .”

The construction “to stay alive this way” echoes the infinitive “to make this land” in line 8, but from “dreamed of ways to make” through “to stay alive this way,” how long is this hard living *infinitively* viable? Will the story go from mythic origins in medias res to personal salvation and tribal reacceptance? Will it lead through the Native Holocaust to a genocidal Final Solution, Revelations and the Second Coming of what rough slouching where? A final ellipsis suspends the imploding point: a hard rain falling before winter snow, hard times to get through, hard edges on all things. An ellipsis of darkness mutes losses and regrets, the abuses and sins of omission, the coming silence.

The physical pointers of articles (Latin *artus* meaning “to join”), that is, directives of action (where to look for a noun)—*the, that, this, a*—scatter minimally, beginning with “all the cedar sky” that points to an animate, concrete adjective in *cedar*. In this encrypted text, adjectives shape-change as metaphors of things—sparse, spare, real, and densely imagist. To press the issue, the phrase “cedar sky” is not so much an image as the blooded nature of the sky, surreally, a forest-thing-in-a-vacant-space-*thinged*. Consider that cedar is a dream wood the world over, a red-brown or flesh-blood-and-bone-colored arboreal “meat” wood that serves ceremonial incense-burning for Native Americans (sweat lodge, house blessing, sacred objects, even the lowly #2 Blackfeet lead pencil once ubiquitous for scoring tests and voter ballots). But this is an apocalyptic sky at sunset in late fall. The surreal “cedar sky” carries both the physics and psychic colorings of “things” bloodied in our sensate world. And it is expressly “late fall” where timing is essential, the slippage of seasonal light and heat dangerous, the coming winter darkly lethal. The poem is running out of time the moment it begins.

The “bellied stove” works as a male-protuberant Homeric epithet set terribly against the “thin girl” or “cook’s kid.” “Out back of” the men-feeding “mess tent Sundays” (of all missionized days in a Sun Dance culture) the kid stoops and “cooks her special stew.” Lonely men around a campfire dream of “ways to make” a resistant hunting land, unfit for white farming, and they commit unnamable *makings* with a girl-child. And so in the “black brush,” an alliterative dark thicket, “wet black things” steal away “our cache of meat.”

The spondaic fecundity of this wet darkness, inchoate and blindly terrifying, creates a condition where men don’t see but hear and feel awfully bad. *Toward me the darkness comes rattling*, Owl Woman chants. These dissonant “wet black” adjectives (Latin “to-throw-to”)¹⁶ are parts of speech of another color—colors of the night, as Momaday writes, decreating language and reality: “A young girl awoke one night and looked out into the moonlit meadow. There appeared to be a tree; but it was only an appearance; there was a shape made of smoke; but it was only an appearance; there was a tree” (“Colors of the Night”).

There is only one verbal modifier among the bone-clean verbs. The lone trisyllable among 129 words stands as a colloquial adverb, *Oftentimes*, a lowly, turgid dactyl (“finger”) offset with a comma. *Once upon a time* begin traditional stories, or as Native tales open, *Long time ago, the old ones tell, when people spoke with animals and the sun came down for water, coyote was going along. . . .* This *Oftentimes* entry into the poem slows Blackbird’s confession, as though he were

hesitant to speak, nervously clearing his throat. It's too often, too "easy" that a false Montana sun slackens his bones; the farmer's dream becomes wasteland delusion for a hunting Indian.

The only other possible adverb in the poem is an enjambed adjective, "hung / black for just a second," where a gaping line break gaps the spondaic accent line to line. It's as close as adverbial outriding comes to color the verse (not black-ly, but "hung / black"), more a verbal action or extension than a qualifier or tincture. Think of this "black" as the true stain of bad verbal action extended, all the way to the infinitely echoic ellipsis at the end. Such "black" is an adverbial condition of absence, an ad-verb of a lost verb ghosting the entire poem. It's terribly true, if in no way a pretty picture, this bad Indian testimonial—a lament, an under moan, a confessional necessary to survive desecration and starvation and antivisionary humbling. *Tunkáshila, onshimála ye, wani gta*, the Lakota sing, piercing and breaking free during Sun Dance, "Grandfather, have pity on me, I want to live."

There are few conjunctions, misappropriately, but for a terribly dis-junctive coupling, "stripped naked / for a coke or two and cooked her special stew." For one "or two" sodas, sadly, a thin kid stripped "and cooked" her childhood innocence "round back of the mess tent Sundays." Blackbird's cowboy *cri de coeur* comes from a solo fear of the heinous things that a man, isolate and alone, has done to the young in dreams of *making* the land. There is no tribal pairing or parental connection, no amorous *arm* or locating *article* or fertile *articulation* (Proto-Indo-European *ar-* "to connect," as in Latin), only a desperate and indefensible coupling that disconnects gender and generation. So, too, "and cooked her special stew" desecrates by way of coarse metaphor, a bad "liking" or anti-image to dislike—shamefully disconnecting in child abuse (recalling Pocahontas or Sacajawea or La Malinche as teen concubines; here the Indian men violate their own). So the poem goes bad, lower than a Native poet ought to go, some fear, lower than a man would ever stoop if he were really a man.

Prepositions function in pre-positions as extensions of verbal actions: drove *through*, huddled *before*, thought *of*, dreamed *of*, stripped *for*, skittered *through*, sneaked *away*. The prepositions get more ghostly and disconnective, progressively, as the verbs get more dangerous. Nouns cloud and slip off to "things" wet and black that lurk and steal but can't be seen or known, a shadowy sexual darkening. There are no prepositional "phrases" or tripping cadences as such—sentimentally in the dark, down by the river, of the night—only verbal thrusts *through* and *of*, *for* and *away*. These prepositions in motion extend and unsettle events as ad-verbial disconnectives, things and actions hopelessly estranged. The effect is to shrink prepositional slackness back into concrete nouns against physical verbs of action—the syntactic and stylistic impacting of cut diction, tense grammar, imploding imagery, and taut rhythms that the poem rides on and through.

All this leads to "poetic" likenesses that we don't much like but must hear. These dislikings tell a story as cautionary tale, an antitricksster history whose poetic display grounds out in personal suffering, narrative penitence, and petitioned grace. Think of it as testifying negatively. The initial simile

“rain / like sun” offers a torqued likeness that is arresting, strange, disturbingly real in the Montana seasons of intense summer heat and driving fall rain and coming winter freeze. The surreal image of a “cedar sky” gives us a noun-in-space axed from the forest, uprooted from any sense of healing incense or dream vision. The homely metaphor of “bellied stove” touches a warming noun with a swollen tag lifted from Homeric epic, perhaps grafted from Pound’s opening Canto, Odysseus’s ship with “bellying canvas” (drawn from Homer’s “bellied sails” of black Greek warships). And the totemic man “Blackbird” figures shamanically as a winged spirit grounded in disgust and self-recrimination, tormented with personal castigation and confessional guilt. The “special stew” rustled up with a cook’s kid “behind the mess tent Sundays,” a last cowboy supper, is a bad likeness of Charlie’s crime.

The final symbol, the “moon hung / black” and “slipped a notch” in the cedar sky, hangs dissonant. The lunar spell of witchery drops with a catch in the speaker’s throat and twists his gut. As Sylvia Plath writes in “Edge,” her last testament before suicide, “the moon has nothing to be sad about, / Staring from her hood of bone.” The implacable sister is “used to this sort of thing. / Her blacks crackle and drag.” Welch’s spondaic “wet black things” also recall Pound’s “wet, black bough” of petaled faces in a 1913 Paris Metro station (from “In a Station of the Metro”) just before the outbreak of the Great War (the “lost generation” of wintry ennui aftershock). And so with modernist lyric there is interjective tension everywhere in Welch’s poem but never stated directly, only synapse, disconnection, fear, startle, and the final symbolist burst of “wet black things” stealing the men’s winter cache of meat away. *Aiee, a-ho!* Perhaps the men’s lunar grief is a distant echo of the 1883–84 Winter of Starvation that frames the backstory of Welch’s novel. All the way back to Blackfeet origin stories: the rain-driven sun *Na’pi* to the notch-slipping moon *Kipi’taki* recalls the creation story of Old Man and Old Woman in Grinnell’s *Blackfeet Lodge Tales* gambling life and death with a floating buffalo chip and losing their firstborn daughter to a sinking stone. The lunar-slippery moon is anciently feminine province (“Moon is speaking / woman to the ancient fire. Always woman,” the poet grieves in “In My Lifetime”).¹⁷ And “wet black things” are dangerously fecund succubi of the lunar night, feminized sensual spirits, sexual demons. Old Woman may be avenging the desecration of her girl-child: both father and mother lose another issue, “old cook’s kid,” to the incestuous Sunday stew of predatory lust—famished, rancid men without decency with their own tribal offspring.

The range of diction in the poem does not violate common speaking. It is weirdly “real,” convincing as the talk of ordinary horror daily witnessed on reservations and off. Iambic lyric speech, trimeter to hexameter, recalls the natural talk of Frost’s dark poems like “Design” or “Acquainted with the Night” or “Desert Places” or a historic Native epilogue “The Gift Outright.” Less oracular than Frost, Welch’s power of imaging goes inward without affecting tone or forcing subject, as with Garcia Lorca’s concept of “deep song” in *The Gypsy Ballads*, his first collection, the scorched flamenco throat seared with “tears of narcissus and ice.” This is searching song-poetry, never decorative but arrestingly physicalized, disturbingly true.

The poem's structural change of pace, as the diction shifts gears and descends, moves from a density of natural poetic detail in "cedar sky," to the demotic image of the cook's kid stripping and stewing for the men, to the dangerous night tricks played on their guilt by slipping lunar spirits, to the shamanic disturbance of "wet black things," to the antistyled statement of fact on a contemporary rez afflicted with poverty, despair, shock, and self-abuse. "To stay alive this way, it's hard. . . ." Eat salt and speak truth, the desperate say. As Robert Lowell opined in his lowest moment of self-realization, "Why not say what happened?" The final ellipsis admits of humility, mortality, limits of speech, and a courage of voicing powerlessness. I am powerless before . . . all things, the Alcoholics Anonymous addict says.

It is a start.

This narrative lyric is bled true as tales get: "Told stories." The diction is cleansed of loose detail, false connectives: "Blackbird cleared his mind, / thought of things he'd left behind, spoke:" and everywhere stop-enjambed, "special stew / round back." Line breaks shatter syntax: "hard rain drove / like sun" and "stripped naked / for a coke or two" and "hung / black" and "cache / of meat." The structural effect of the six- then seven- and four-line stanzas replicates a crazy quilt, ragged-edge sonnet that spatters over the *volta* in the thirteenth line when the poem sneaks into the third stanza of ghosted consequence, breaking all form. First a trimeter line with three spondees, then iambic quatrameter loosening and lengthening the second line, then a trimeter pulling back with two spondees divided by a full stop, down to the horizon line of iambic pentameter, solo rhymed. The lines stumble, lurch, fall away, adumbrate, jam, enjamb, and barely *survive* the rigors of scansion as a true poem searching for the sense of its sound (Frost's "sound of sense") in some elusive measure.

In the fifth line alliterative spondees thickly back up the tetrameters with identical rhymes and echoic vowels ("Told stories. Blackbird cleared"), slipping into the rolling pentameter of the sixth line. There's more or less a regular 5/4/5 pattern in lines 7, 8, and 9, until the terrible revelation in line 10—a triple spondaic impacting of Blackbird's confession, "That *thin girl*, old *cook's kid*, *stripped naked*," replicating the jammed rhythms in the opening line. The 5/3 line pattern then repeats, followed by two four-beat lines with heavy alliterative spondees, easing into the final three lines of irregular iambic pentameter, the base spine of the poem. This is a stumbling measure to stagger on, slipping feet to stay up—a stumble-bum meter that hardly holds form as it falls (collapsing blank verse, as in T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock").

The poem's metric drag carries a radical resistance to end-rhyme. The scheme unravels a/b/c, then makes a weak attempt to square things rhyming *drove* with *stove*, but then jumps to *mind* and attempts a poor vowel rhyme with *spoke*, less certainly with *bones*, then gives up kinning the ends of lines—but for an echoic *mind* with *land*, *brush* with *cache* (actually not a bad attempt to off-rhyme). There are twelve isolate phonemes in seventeen ends-of-lines, a record dislocation of rhyme scheme, except for the art hidden within—compressed and smuggled into the lines in surreptitious ways that allow the whole to sound naturally gathered, even idiomatic. This is Native art in the face of

charges that poetry is too crafted, too well made perhaps for reality—not for real American men to do or to have to stomach, to waste time on.

Conversely, everywhere within lines come hidden rhymes. Long, rain, sun, mind, and behind cluster assonantly, as day, cold, drove, cedar, had, huddled, told, Blackbird, mind, and behind consonate through their vowelized dentals, all in the first six lines. Phrases like *special stew*, *cook's kid*, and *sparrow skittered* press the alliterative crowding. *Huddled with Blackbird*, *mind with behind* seem decently embedded rhymes, the nervous crowding even more jammed in smack rhymes like *that night*, *close as cows*, and *told stories*. There are fetching hints of slant rhymes in *notch*, *black*, *second*, *cache*, and *meat*.

Yet the final line's ending "hard. . . ." rhymes with nothing at all—a vowelizing consonant with the Proto-Indo-European root *-ar-* as ironic dis-"connective" of art, arm, arc, arch, etc. In the Euro-American beginning *arch* was the defining word, *En archei en ho logos*, but where is the connection now? *Hard* is stuck on its own at the end, trailing *hung* four lines up, repeated from first to last line as metronomic toll, "hard rain" to "it's hard. . . .," but tied into nothing specific. *Hard* has no kinship, no assonance anywhere (some "h" and "d" overtone with had, huddled, or behind, but "hard" is essentially stranded).

Thus this hard-driven poem "Surviving" stands alone and lonely as the cowboy's orphaned lament, Indianized. The estranged workingman admits frustrated desire, shameful lust, and poverty-driven grief. Cold, hunger, false hope and lasting despair, broken narrative and shattered dream, sham comfort and kinship disconnect—all the Indian tenets of tribe are defiled, indeed *de-riden* on Earthboy 40, in this wretched trickster lyric. "To stay alive this way, it's hard. . . ." Notwithstanding history or holocaust, Indians are doing these things to Indians, the poet laments, men to minors, Earthboy deridden into the dirt. This may be the most terrible lyric ever told about Native Americans. It takes us back to a novel radical in "dirty realism"—poetry darkly radiant with truth, prose thick with hurt, humor, and heart.

A poem that tells a disturbing tale, an opening chapter rife with poetic grist: where do we go from here? Mother Teresa, the story's unsaintly martyr, serves as acerbic foil to the narrator's bruised innocence and callow aches, and his stepfather Lame Bull stands up fool to filial kinship. No Name "never expected much" from Teresa's "clear bitter look, not without humor" (134) and he "never got it"—an edgy mother *not* with *no* humor, so to speak, minimal laughter in her nominal humor. It's doubly twisted, twice ironically maternal—the negated negative as a motherly absence proves a dangerous intimacy, just close enough to be distant (as writer to reader at times).

The old lady rocking holds the key to No Name's past and future, but this smoking sphinx isn't talking now. "One winter evening as we sat at the foot of her rocker" (two decades back when brother Mose was still alive), "she revealed a life we never knew, this woman who was our own kin" (34). She has traces of grandmother ancestry in her eyes, "black like a spider's belly," her hands "small and black as a magpie's feet," but granny rocks under three army-issue blankets and a star quilt. This small set of details tells all in a novel where lint on a comb, collar dandruff, nostril hair, lip mole, or a fly drowning in spilled wine spatter the narrative. A star quilt is an ancestral blanket from birth to death on the

high plains, a visionary icon of hope and guidance, a four-color balancing, both spiritual and worldly pattern for life. The three army blankets bespeak military conquest and prisoner-of-war camp, bad commodities and broken treaties, the ignominy of a conquered people and their ongoing despair and poverty. Such is the condition too often today on the rez, especially among the old nameless ones who look back into the traditional past but in shock say nothing. This is a far cry from Momaday's grandmothers telling tribal history.

MAGIC FOX

They shook the green leaves down,
 those men that rattled
 in their sleep. Truth became
 a nightmare to their fox.
 He turned their horses into fish,
 or was it horses strung
 like fish, or fish like fish
 hung naked in the wind?

Stars fell upon their catch.
 A girl, not yet twenty-four
 but blonde as morning birds, began
 a dance that drew men in
 green around her skirts.
 In dust her magic jangled memories
 of dawn, till fox and grief
 turned nightmare in their sleep.

And this: fish not fish but stars
 that fell into their dreams. (3)

Buried thirty-three pages into the 1971 first edition of *Riding the Earthboy* 40, "Magic Fox" opens the reissued 1976 Harper & Row collection. It is a fairly simple iambic poem, almost free verse, about nightmare and reality—until you factor in the realization that old Indian warriors snoring the green leaves down is about all that's left for them of tradition and history. Imagine Homer, Sophocles, and Tiresias locked up in a hospice on Lesbos. Sappho is a taunting blonde dancing like morning birds of dawn, dragging the nightmare of grief down around the snoring relics of warrior times past—the 1833 Year of the Falling Stars, when meteorites and smallpox began to decimate the Native West. Anything but simple, "Truth became a nightmare to their fox," too foxy for Trickster's antics. Horses turned to fish, or "strung / like fish" on wired simile, or worst of all, "fish like fish / hung naked in the wind?"—reality echoically mocking itself. Everything is metaphor, horrifically. There are times when we can't believe what we see—when reality terrifies perception into disbelief and we conjure things as shadows of themselves.

And this: fish not fish but stars
That fell into their dreams.

When the heavens fall, and earth is no longer earthly, shamans fail and truth defies poetic likeness: falling stars, fish-strung horses, nightmare images. No metaphor fits or grounds truth. The dream of the real swells too unstable to trust.

Just such happened to the Blackfeet when they went out to hunt bison in the fall of 1883, seeking their winter cache of meat, and came home empty-handed. Government-hired sharpshooters had slaughtered two million of the western herd, and the bison stragglers refused to migrate north across the Union Pacific tracks. Soldiers herded the famished warriors onto unarable reservations and ordered them to be Bible-toting, flannel, potato farmers. A quarter of twenty thousand Blackfeet died in that “winter of starvation,” the beginning of the end of their way of life. Ten years later the frontier was declared officially closed, Indians reserved. The national parks began reserving what was left of the West, including wild flora and fauna. The Great American Desert was whitewashed with quick claims, homesteaded, plowed, fenced, and gun-powdered into Manifest Destiny by the White Man’s Burden. Civilize the savages or, barring that, slaughter them.

In that 1883 “winter of starvation” Yellow Calf, the blind hermit seer circa the 1960s, saved Standing Bear’s ostracized young widow by staying behind and hunting deer rather than removing to the new reservation with the others. Eighty some years later this unknown grandfather to No Name carries wintry resolve, manly courage, and stoic wisdom in his blood, an unheralded heritage, a heroism lost on fools of the present—but for the “silent laughter” of one who knows, who need not explain saving the nameless old rocker back home, No Name’s mute grandmother. Who will tell the unstoried past? “When the old lady had related this story, many years ago, her eyes were not flat and filmy; they were black like a spider’s belly and the small black hands drew triumphant pictures in the air” (36).

If winter in the blood is nascent ancestral history, positively speaking, the negative side remains torpor and amnesia, tribal despair and cultural depression at large. Prisoners of war are after time prisoners of failed memory, bloodless detainees, ghosts of a shattered past walking around numbly, or catatonically rocking. The old forgotten ones withdraw into blindness, poverty, dull regret, and the simplicity of few possessions, language at its essentials. Every holocaust leaves a shattered legacy to the remnant survivors, a tragic-low-comic Blackfeet revelation for No Name. He teases the blind old hermit Yellow Calf:

“Come on, tell me. What have you got in those pants?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know . . .” With that, his mouth dropped open another inch but no sound came out.

“I’ll bet you have a woman around here. I know how you old buzzards operate.”

His shoulders continued to shake, then he started coughing. He

coughed and shook, holding his cup away from the cot, until the spasm of mirth or whatever it was had passed.

He stood and walked to the stove. When he reached for my cup, his hand struck my wrist. His fingers were slick, papery, like the belly of a rattlesnake. He poured to within half an inch of the cup's lip, to the tip of the finger he had placed inside.

"How is it you say you are only half dead, Yellow Calf, yet you move like a ghost. How can I be sure you aren't all the way dead and are only playing games?" (67)

No Name's ancestral secret hovers in tribal images and silent innuendoes (too easy to find, you might think it too easy to do): grandmother spider's hands and grandfather snake's fingers, the spent lexicon of traditional song-poetry. But these old stone faces aren't talking to postmodern Indians.

Clues to the iconic ambiguity of old-timers appear in Welch's poems, outriders to his fiction. "Her husband was a fool," the lyric narrator says in "Grandma's Man." "He laughed too long / at lies told by girls whose easy virtue disappeared / when he passed stumble-bum down the Sunday street."¹⁸ And in the century-old race over eroded hills, the poetic myths that children need to grow alive are forgotten with "Blackfeet, Blood and Piegan Hunters":

Comfortable we drink and string together stories
of white buffalo medicine men who promised
and delivered horrible cures for hunger,
lovely tales of war and white men massacres.
Meaning gone, we dance for pennies now,
our feet jangling dust that hides the bones
of sainted Indians. Look away and we are gone.
Look back. Tracks are there, a little faint,
our song strong enough for headstrong hunters
who look ahead to one more kill.¹⁹

The lyrics of "Thanksgiving at Snake Butte" come with 1621 reminders of old betrayals, mutely etched stone icons of even more ancient slippage ("the cold moon tugging at the crude figures / in this, the season of their loss"). Christmas comes to Moccasin Flat with reappearances of Old Man and Old Woman, Yellow Calf and the granny rocker. The quatrains drill home the blood lessons of winter in insistent off-rhymes and urgently repetitive spondees.

*Christmas comes like this: Wise men
unhurried, candles bought on credit (poor price
for calves), warriors face down in wine sleep.
Winds cheat to pull heat from smoke.²⁰*

Far from church and bar, distant from "Surviving," Charlie Blackbird "stabs his fire with flint" and dreams of wise men among wine-drunk warriors. Drunks drink antifreeze "for love / or need," and fallen chiefs eat snow, while

elk cavort in the mountains. Medicine Woman smokes twist tobacco in her clay pipe and names the blizzards by spitting at the five o'clock news, the weather as predictable as time's nameless clock face. The "news" has replaced storytelling, public television standing in for myth. Still children need stories to live by. Medicine Woman tries to explain the solstice mystery of winter in the blood: Christ as the re-arisen Ghost Dance warrior or *make-live* savior, men back rich with "meat and song," a starry sign in the eastern sky, quick rebirth. Government commodified, they all wait, as Indians have for centuries. "Blackbird feeds his fire. Outside, a quick 30 below." Far below "Zero at the Bone," colder than Dickinson's snake in the garden—"so cold no fire can ever warm me"—the reality of poetry takes the top of Charlie's head off. All the wise lyricists agree: that's the only way to know winter blood or deep song, fire or ice, the end of the world or the beginning.

So, in terms of song-poetry and talk-prose, what did the Native ancients know and old ones do that we don't? Painfully silenced today, Welch intuits that the ancestors knew heroism and honor, martyrdom and sacrifice, life-giving story and song; at least the blind grandfather Yellow Calf knew days before white devastation. They knew to speak their names, sing and dance their ceremonies, pray to their gods, call their spirits, and tell their stories one generation to the next, lest their culture be lost to memory.²¹ They knew the four winds and seasons, times to plant and hunt, times to go out and come home, times to praise the dead and circle the living. All this to survive winter in the blood. They gave their lives down to the present generation of retribalizing descendants, who may know this, or not.

Dead brother Mose knew that drunk drivers and rez horsemen come to a bad end. "There was no headstone, no name, no dates" (143). In his sunken grave under a Styrofoam cross, dead-drunk father John knew where to kick a baler awake but didn't know his way home through snow-banked borrow pits. "Was it a shoe sticking up, or a hand, or just a blue-white lump in the endless skittering whiteness?" (19). The old man in green gabardines and Van Gogh straw hat can only say "Heh, heh" to the *Field and Stream* mystery of fish in the river before dying face-down in his oatmeal. Grandma says only one word twice, "Ai, ai," when asked if she wants radio music, then stonewalls history to her orange-coffin burial, a slapstick parody of Hamlet's fatherless quandary. No Name's stepfather muffs the eulogy: "Here lies a simple woman . . . who never gave anybody any crap. . ." (175-176).

Yellow Calf knows all but says nothing, only that "hunger sharpens your eye" and the deer sense by the moon that the world is "cock-eyed." He knows to keep things essential, including explanations. He knew his grandson when he was just a "little squirt," when father John stood "peeing what he said was my name in the snow" (161), when changing childhood times were different.

Now the distance in Yellow Calf's eyes is permanent. He lives alone. As with the sole Yana survivor, Ishi, farther west at about the same time, Yellow Calf has watched his family die off, one by one, except for Teresa, his illegitimate daughter, and her rocking mother, widow before she herself became a mother. Yellow Calf knows what his people did to survive, how they outlived the removals, slanders, and betrayals, why they now isolate themselves in

cataract silence. He knows winter in a man's bones, the always changing seasons, by the way ancestral blood makes him laugh silently. He knows ironic persistence no less than old Bird the cow pony senses the sheer irony of it all, the mean quirks of destiny, the way survival turns on deep humor in the humus of all things, including scatology. The bathroom graffiti in the American Legion Club tells the low patriarchal gaffe: *What are you looking up here for? The joke's in your hand* (92). The Malta barmaid, who knows her father when he doesn't know her (reversing No Name's predicament), knows the rules of social engagement and the novel's bottom line, "you don't joke with them unless you mean business" (50).

Bird's fart punctuates No Name's insight into family history, a vision through the snow-white blindness of his grandfather. "I began to laugh, at first quietly, with neither bitterness nor humor. It was the laughter of one who understands a moment in his life, of one who has been let in on the secret through luck and circumstance. 'You . . . you're the one'" (158). Indeed, Yellow Calf's the one who saved Teresa's rocking mother and withdrew not to disgrace their name. Grandfather and grandson wordlessly share "this secret in the presence of ghosts, in wind that called forth the muttering tepees, the blowing snow, the white air of the horses' nostrils" (159). The litany of white offenses is thick: butchering Long Knives, hapless game-and-fish idiots, storytelling anglers, love-starved suits, airplane man on the run, self-righteous off-rez missionary, pathetic Michigan tourists, one-night stands with the M-girls (barmaid from Malta, Malvina, Marlene). No Name pursues the mermaid Cree *virgin* Agnes ("chaste" in name only) who got away with his rifle and razor but might one day be his wife (the coupling anagram MMMA?). Indians are the butt of this long bad joke, the Creator a trickster, an *isolato*, or a confidence man on the lam.

No Name now knows the source of familial naming, the tribal genetics of his own life story, if nothing else, before a blind old man standing in for *Na'pi* the sun father, Old Man himself. "The answer had come to me as if by instinct, sitting on the pump platform, watching his silent laughter, as though it was his blood in my veins that had told me" (160). And so the story ends with the deaths of the spotted cow, the pale horse, and the rocking grandmother. No Name finds the cosmic joke and winter/water fertility in a "driving rain" trying to rescue an old cow stuck in the mud. He cries satirically to his horse Bird and mother Teresa, "Slack up, you sonofabitch! Your mother dead, your father—you don't even know, what do you think of that? A joke, can't you see? Lame Bull! The biggest joke—can't you see that he's a joke, a joker playing a joke on you? Were you taken for a ride? Just like the rest of us, this country, all of us taken for a ride. Slack up, slack up! This greedy stupid country—" (169).

With no brother left, fatherless, No Name goes back to the beginning, warily riding the Earthboy 40, hanging on for dear life.

The novel's final line seems both curse and blessing, a throwaway heritage, either good medicine or bad, never simple. No Name ends things, "I threw the pouch into the grave" (176). Grandmother will need her tobacco for the spirit journey that Aho dreams on the way to Rainy Mountain. Running past

wintery graves, laughing darkly in his blood, the mute poet rises from the dead in “In My Lifetime”:

Now the fool is dead. His bones go back
 So scarred in time, the buttes are young to look
 For signs that say a man could love his fate,
 That winter in the blood is one sad thing.
 His sins—I don’t explain. Desperate in my song,
 I run these woman hills, translate wind
 To mean a kind of life, the children of Speakthunder
 Are never wrong and I am rhythm to strong medicine.²²

NOTES

1. “Winter Naming” is taken from a chapter in a book-length manuscript-in-progress to be entitled *They Speak Like Singing: Native (American) Crossings*.

2. Raymond DeMallie, ed., *The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk’s Teachings Given to John G. Neihardt* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 284.

3. *Ibid.* For a discussion of Black Elk’s Ghost Dance visions, see DeMallie, 260–66; for the *heyoka* ceremony, see 232–35.

4. Simon Ortiz, “Song, Poetry, and Language-Expression and Perception,” in *Genocide of the Mind: New Native American Writing*, ed. Marijo Moore (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2003), 105–118.

5. James Welch, “Thanksgiving at Snake Butte,” *Riding the Earthboy 40* (New York: World, 1971; reprint, New York: Harper and Row, 1976), 40. Subsequent references will be taken from this text.

6. James Welch, *Winter in the Blood* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 2. Subsequent references will be taken from this text.

7. Job 38:28–30.

8. *Northwest Ordinance*, 13 July 1787, *Statutes at Large* I, 51–53.

9. Peter Nabokov, *Native American Testimony: A Chronicle of Indian-White Relations from Prophecy to the Present* (New York: Viking Penguin 1999), 189.

10. Welch, “Riding the Earthboy 40,” *Riding*, 32.

11. See George Bird Grinnell, *Blackfeet Lodge Tales: The Story of a Prairie People* (1892; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962).

12. I have used italics to indicate the stressed syllables in Welch’s prose throughout this text.

13. See Van Gogh’s 1888 *Portrait of a Peasant*, in the artist’s own words “a poor old peasant, whose features bear a strong resemblance to Father, only he is coarser, bordering on a caricature,” as well as T. C. Cannon’s Institute of American Indian Arts ancestral portraits with Van Gogh inserts.

14. Kathryn Shanley, Interview with James Welch, 12 July 2000, *Paradoxa* 6, no. 15 (2001): 17–37. [PAGE #?]

15. Welch, “Surviving,” *Riding*, 46.

16. From the Latin origin of “adjective”—*adjicere*, “to throw to.”

17. Welch, “In My Lifetime,” *Riding*, 27.

18. Welch, "Grandma's Man," *Riding*, 64–5.
19. Welch, "Blackfeet, Blood and Piegan Hunters," *Riding*, 36.
20. Welch, "Christmas Comes to Moccasin Flat," *Riding*, 26.
21. See James Welch, *Fools Crow* (New York: Viking, 1986).
22. Welch, "In My Lifetime," *Riding*, 27.

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