

REVIEW

Winterkill (1984)



Craig Lesley

(1945-)

Accounts of captivity among Indians were a popular American literary genre from the seventeenth to the last quarter of the nineteenth century. *Winterkill*, a first novel set in Eastern Oregon, is in the more recent genre of *Black Elk Speaks* and *House Made of Dawn* and other accounts of Indian captivity among the whites—winterkill, death through exposure to a coldly exploitive civilization. Danny Kachiah of the Nez Perce Tribe is the consciousness of *Winterkill*, a survivor on the rodeo circuit whose situation as an Indian is capsulized in the opening scene, when he is disqualified on dubious grounds:

NO TIME FOR DANNY KACHIAH, THE INDIAN RIDER FROM PENDLETON, OREGON, the announcer blared. Danny stood slowly and dusted off his pants. HOW ABOUT A HAND FOR HIM ANYWAY, FOLKS?... NEXT TIME USE BOTH HANDS, DANNY. One of the pick-up riders handed him the gelding's reins. NO MONEY FOR THAT COWBOY...DOG-GONE.

Disqualified, dispossessed and divorced, Danny misses his ex-wife Loxie, his dead father Red Shirt and, most of all his teenaged son Jack. His sense of personal loss expands through scenes depicting collective loss, especially the destruction of Celilo Falls and its Indian fishing culture by The Dallas Dam. "We sold our mother," weeps a chief, "and now they have drowned her." Danny Kachiah, like Black Elk, is inspired by a vision to do what he can to sustain the spirit of his people, which he does chiefly by rescuing his son Jack from a white stepfather and teaching him what is left of his heritage. "But the loss stayed anyway, right at your very center, like a drowning cramp."

The novel is rooted in an older grief, the legendary winterkill at Bear Paws, Montana, where Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce trying to reach sanctuary in Canada, were forced by cold and bluecoats to surrender. High in the Wallowa Mountains, the mystical hunting ground of his tribe, Danny brings his son to the grave of old Chief Joseph, as his father Red Shirt had brought him. At a time when Indians live in "mobile homes on the range" with pink plastic flamingoes and brown plastic deer in front, Red Shirt was able to transmit the spirit of Joseph and the old values to Danny before getting killed in his pickup while attempting to escape from an unfair fight with some white men, a victim too of winterkill, found in a ditch with his hands frozen to the steering wheel.

The pathos in *Winterkill* derives from acquiescence as well as from resistance to the forces of exploitation. The white man's civilization is seductive Danny's mother dies of suffocation in a mobile

home. His father's last fight is over an unhappy white woman, and Danny himself is infatuated—snakebit—for awhile with Tenley Adams, a former Homecoming Queen and rodeo trick rider who is now “doing tricks” for a land development company, ironically called SUNCO, which is trying to acquire mineral rights and leases on the part of the reservation where his father is buried. In the delirium from the snakebite, as his system resists the poison, Danny has the vision that prompts a spiritual revival, his effort to save his son Jack. Too many Indians are selling out. Even Pudge Whitecloud, the woman to whom Danny is closest: “...we'll all be cashy when the tribe approves the SUNCO leases.” The summer after his son was born, his wife Loxie “started modern dance lessons at the studio above the Starlite Lounge, where Madame Renee encouraged her dreams of becoming a famous dancer.” She left Danny to become a topless dancer in Portland. “Neither one of us really knew what we were up against,” he said finally.”

Danny Kachiah's ritual preparation for rebirth is the ancient Circle Dance, “where he belonged, in the center of things with his father and grandfather.” *Winterkill* is profoundly traditional, sustaining one of the major themes of mainstream American literature from Thoreau through Toni Morrison, most influentially expressed by Melville in *Moby-Dick*, Eliot in “The Waste Land,” and Faulkner in *The Bear*: the death of the soul due to dissociation from Nature, and the need for regeneration through a spiritual quest in the wilderness. Danny's quest takes the form of elk hunting with his son and old Ass-Out Jones in the Wallowa Mountains, where campfire and the warmth of spiritual kin ward off the winterkill. The archetypal pattern of revival here is especially poignant because it is barely surviving even among Indians, who throughout American history have been embodiments of wilderness and, in writers such as Melville and Faulkner, of the soul.

The novel is written in a modest style that evokes its settings, the rolling plains and mountains of northeastern Oregon, expresses the character of its protagonist, and conveys an equanimity of spirit that attains at times the majesty of Indian myth. The prose is polished: “The roan gelding shot out of its chute after the spurting steer.” The structural sophistication is subtle: When the irrepressible Henry Nine Pipes escapes from jail he flees to Canada, recalling the legendary tribal retreat, a tragedy that becomes an inspiration. At places the narrative stitches back and forth between episodes of Danny as a son with his father and episodes of Danny as a father with his son, and the feeling of continuity, theme expressed by form, is strong. Sad ironies abound, as in the farm implement company sign, “NOTHING RUNS LIKE A DEERE,” and the sign carried by missionaries holding Bibles and pretending to preach to the “Indians” who walk beside them in the Westward Ho parade in Pendleton, “GOD COMES TO OREGON.”

At a time of decadence in fashionable literary criticism and fiction, novelists such as Craig Lesley—Toni Morrison, Alice Walker—are a source of revitalization, an antidote to deconstruction. They write from the roots, deriving power from archetypal forms that originated and have revived our humanity for thousands of years.

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