

Poems from *Of Hawks and Horses*

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Death of a Leftfielder

He was Chickasaw.

He was eleven
long-limbed
brown skinned,
long shining black hair flying
beneath his Braves cap.
He was spring unfolding into summer.
He was the wind
covering the earth,
as he ran toward the left field foul line,
glove extended for the catch.

He dove for the ball
landed hard
but rose and made the throw.

He was fifty-seven
long-limbed
brown skinned.
He dove for the ball
and the empty bottle of white port wine
shattered when he hit the black top back street.

He sat up in jeans he'd worn now for weeks,
and looked at his tee shirt,
the unstrung bow of the Choctaw Nation
covered in dirt and blood.

He was Chickasaw.

The voices rose from the bleacher seat.
Throw the ball, Travis
hit the cut-off man

hit the cut-off man,
but he couldn't find it through a bleeding eye.

For just a moment he sobered.
He tried to blink the world back in focus,
but his eyes liked it better
when they were drunk
so they were.
And he looked again for the lost ball.

The game on the line,
he began to crawl off the hot paved road
through two inches of rainwater,
puddled in a drainage ditch
deeper into tall, cool, green grass.
He rose and threw the bottle neck
at the cut-off man
before he fell back into the soft grass
where they would find him in a day or two.

He was Chickasaw.

Between the Moon and Mexico

I'm looking for a day I left behind
I'm looking for the place
where trail rides into sky on a moonlit night
I'm looking for the words
to a sad, old Hank Williams song,

and another summer jumps the fence.

Wild blue phlox is blooming
round the wrought iron railing
that guards the graves of a Choctaw chief
from the meandering of fenced cattle.

The old homeplace has fallen,
leaving only granite markers of a little cemetery
standing beneath tall trees
where my pony and I ride through pasture grass
in the white light of coming stars.

I haven't found the day
nor the place where trail and moon collide.

I must settle for blue phlox
white stars
and night cooled pasture grass.

But just before a press of knee
signals time to go,
we pause under night's blackened field
and listen to a whippoorwill
sing a sad, old Hank Williams song
while September slips away on silver wisps
above rough banks that hold Red River in
somewhere south of here
between the moon and Mexico.

October Rising

Diving on southbound lanes of concrete

I see October rising.

An early morning sun lights hay bale buffalos
gathering across eastern pasture land
as morning breaks the grey.

Summer is leaving
green strewn on both sides of the highway,
and wild flowers have rooted the season
to this bit of Oklahoma
where mythic beasts breathe the past
in vapors of dawn.

I would have those dark round humps
sprout sturdy legs
and the short curved horns of bison,
have them snort and paw the earth
before rolling in a herd of shaggy thunder
ripping out metal posts and barbed wire;

I would have them explode
in a surging wave of bound grass
and baled ghosts from another century
a hundred thousand hooves beating
tractored rows and black asphalt

back into this southern edge of the plains.

And from the back of my quick-footed pony
hawk feathers braided in his mane,
I would watch them stampede
across disappeared ribbons of cement
and feel the earth tremble
beneath my chasing horse.

Lawton, Oklahoma (February 17th 1909)
(For Jay Watson & Geronimo)

I

Life hangs on
like tattered leaves
refusing to release a winter branch;
the last rays of the setting sun
ricochet gold
before the black swallows the sky
throws back its head
and howls.

When moons fall and trees topple,
what is lost?
A century of rings and roots, hard bark
and dying branches?
Time?

What falls
when antique fingers draw back a bowstring
from the white man's Cadillac seat?
The "last kill"?
A dying bull buffalo,
stumbling into the wrong century,
three red arrows jutting from its ribs?
History?

II

February stars find an old man staggering
in plowed earth
a drunken Apache
trying to throw his cavalry jacket
over the moon,

50 Poems from *Of Hawks and Horses*

to slip up on the wind.

His ankle twists like the lid
off a bottle of White Port wine.

What falls then?
The shadow of an unhorsed warrior?
A grandfather, skin brown as his fallen bison
breathing in snorts of dust
eyes blinking in the last blue sky?
A people?