

## 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,

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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?