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Letter to the Little Shell

This insatiable drive toward understanding has . . .
created a consciousness in order to know what is and
what happens, and in order to piece together mythic
conceptions from the slender hints of the unknowable.

—C. G. Jung

*MEMORIES, DREAMS,
REFLECTIONS*

. . . . A man [sic] who sees a different world with each
eye is paralyzed.

—Earl Shorris

*THE DEATH OF THE GREAT
SPIRIT*

I.

You'd think I was crazy even if you didn't say it
If I told you I listen to war dances all day
& sit in a vision of Red Cloud, Crazy Horse, & Man Afraid
The swamps of sentimentality suck at my shoes
The prairies of October & all that
I was told not to talk about being Part-Indian
& a lot of other things

II.

These days I wake up heavy
Coffee out of your cup tastes like wax
On the way back to my place I think of
The oncoming procession of guilty scenarios
I enter myself in the room I have created
Guiltily chopping the insanity from my life
I have made a room for my Indian blanket
Searching the ice flow for tongues
Looking for what happened

III.

I waited 'til I was 17 for a smartass farmboy to call me squaw
It had never quite occurred to me
This unprecedented taste of swamp water

I had to look suddenly down
& off to the left into the erotic confabulation
That separates politics from mythology

IV.

Who was she, your Saskatchewan Indian Grandmother
Who played & sang the mandolin like a bird
Thirty-some odd years dead, Grandmother
& one son tosses you off as a squaw
& the other one keeps saying you're white
I keep asking about you
& they keep saying they can't remember
Or they never knew
Or it isn't polite to talk about it
They think you're part-Chippewa or Cree or both
Sometimes they say you're French-Canadian
Or even French 'n Indian
But most of the time they say it's just water under the bridge

What is the sign on the foreheads of Indians
In Montana In the fifties
Of fullbloods Mixed bloods Less than
Halfbreeds Métis Canadian Cree Renegade Cree
White Indians passing
Redheaded redskinned freckle-faced Indians
Little white girls who grow up to be called squaw
What kind of slow wail for the empty valleys
Before the Whites came

V.

The wolves howling again
Remind you of lies you know
You're a drifter
You have a short attention span
Homesick your life
Piled up around you like the fat of unread books
This silence does not belong to you
These corners in the street where the drunks hide
Without a lamp or a chair hoping no one will notice
You're thirty-three
You're still searching for the names of your Grandmothers

VI.

On the slow rise from LA to the High Mojave
I bear myself into the dreadful sweetness of the beginning
My life half over After many times For the first time
I'm going home to my people on the Eastern Side
Whom I have never seen
We are the survivors
There are no messages from California
We're supposed to be dead
Water under the It is not
There are no messages

VII.

Each day moves me further north into misgivings & longing
To share this once in a lifetime
Lonely as lonely at Gull Point in the prehistoric mist
The sound of their crossing brings a moose & her calf
Washing over me the singing voices of Subarctic women
It is all right to go on