Takes Enemy by Shann Ray

**AN ESSAY**

**1.**

**IN THE DARK** I still line up the seams of the ball to the form of my fingers. I see the rim, the follow-through, the arm lifted and extended, a pure jump shot with a clean release and good form. I see the long-range trajectory and the ball on a slow backspin arcing toward the hoop, the net waiting for the swish. A sweet jumper finds the mark, a feeling of completion and the chance to be face-to-face, not with the mundane, but with the holy.

**2.**

In Montana, high school basketball is a thing as strong as family or work, and when I grew up Jonathan Takes Enemy, a member of the Apsáalooke (Crow) Nation, was the best basketball player in the state. He led Hardin High, a school with a years-of-losing tradition, into the state spotlight, carrying the team and the community on his shoulders all the way to the state tournament, where he averaged forty-one points per game. He created legendary moments that decades later are still mentioned in state basketball circles, and he did so with a force that made me both fear and respect him. On the court nothing was outside the realm of his skill: the jump shot, the drive, the sweeping left-handed finger roll, the deep fade-away jumper. He could deliver what we all dreamed of, and with a venom that said *don’t get in my way.*

I was a year younger than Jonathan and playing for an all-white school in Livingston when our teams met in the divisional tournament, and he and the Hardin Bulldogs delivered us a crushing seventeen-point defeat. At the close of the third quarter with the clock winding down and his team with a comfortable lead, Takes Enemy pulled up from one step in front of half-court and shot a straight, clean jump shot. Though the range of it was more than twenty feet beyond the three-point line, his form remained pure. The audacity and raw beauty of the shot hushed the crowd. A common knowledge came to everyone: few people can even throw a basketball that far with any accuracy, let alone take a real shot with good form. Takes Enemy landed, and the ball was in the air as he turned, no longer watching the flight of the ball, and began to walk back toward his team bench. The buzzer sounded, he put his fist high, the shot swished into the net. The crowd erupted.

In his will even to take such a shot, let alone make it, I was reminded of the surety and brilliance of so many Native American heroes in Montana who had painted the basketball landscape of my boyhood: Jarvis Yellow Robe, Georgie Scalpcane, Joe Pretty Paint, Elias Pretty Horse, the Pretty On Top family. And Cleveland Highwalker, my father’s closest friend back then. Many of these young men died due to the violence that surrounded the alcohol and drug traffic on the reservations, but their natural flow on the court inspired in me the kind of boldness that gives artistry and freedom to any endeavor. Such boldness is akin to passion. For these young men, and for myself at that time, our passion was basketball.

But rather than creating in me my own intrepid response, seeing Takes Enemy only emphasized how little I knew of courage, not just on the basketball court but in life. Takes Enemy breathed a confidence I lacked, a leadership potential that lived and moved. Robert Greenleaf said, “A mark of leaders, an attribute that puts them in a position to show the way for others, is that they are better than most at pointing the direction.” Takes Enemy was better than most. He and his team worked as one as they played with fluidity and abandon. I began to look for this way of life as an athlete and as a person. The search brought me to people who lived not through dominance but through freedom of movement.

In the half dark of the house, a light burning over my shoulder, I find myself asking who commandeers the vessels of our dreams. I see Jonathan Takes Enemy like a warhorse running, fierce and filled with immense power. The question gives me pause to remember him and his artistry, and how he played for something more.

**3.**

Our family was distant. Basketball held us together. As a boy I felt we existed in a nearly rootless way, me and my brother, Kral, like pale, windblown trees in a barren land. Our father’s land, to be precise, the land of a high school basketball coach.

We were raised in trailers and trailer parks.

My father was a bar fighter.

Getting ready to fight he’d say, “I’m taking my lunch and I’m not closing my eyes.”

He meant he wasn’t going anywhere. He meant hit hard until it’s done.

In college he’d fought his way into the starting lineup his first two years at Miles City Community College, his final two at Rocky Mountain College. He was a shooter, runner, rebounder, a six-foot-three wiry swing man with a great outside touch who loved to mix it up on the boards.

After college he led the family to Alaska and back, then crisscrossed Montana, moving seven times before I was fourteen—all in pursuit of the basketball dynasty, the team that would reach the top with him at the helm and make something happen that would be remembered forever. He’d been trying to accomplish that since before I was born, and it got flint hard at times, the rigidity of how he handled things.

**4.**

By the time Kral and I reached high school, we both had the dream, Kral already on his way to the top, me two years younger and trying to learn everything I could. We’d received the dream equally from our father and from the rez, the Crow rez at Plenty Coups and the Northern Cheyenne rez in the southeast corner of Montana. In Montana tribal basketball is a game of speed and precision passing, a form of controlled wildness that is hard to come by in nonreservation basketball circles. Fast and quick handed, the rez ballers rise like something elemental, finding each other with sleight-of-hand stylings and no-look passes, pressing and cutting in streamlike movements that converge to rivers, taking down passing lanes with no will but to create chaos and action and fury, the kind of kindle that smolders and leaps up to set whole forests aflame.

Kral and I lost the dream late, both having made it to the Division 1 level, both with opportunity to play overseas, but neither of us making the league.

Along the way I helped fulfill our father’s tenacious hopes: two state championships at Park High in Livingston, one first as a sophomore with Kral, a massive win in which the final score was 104–64, with Kral totaling forty-six points, twenty rebounds, and three dunks. And the other two years later when I was a senior, with a band of runners that averaged nearly ninety points a game. We took the title in what sportswriters still refer to as the greatest game in Montana high school basketball history, a 99–97 double-overtime thriller in ’85 at Montana State, the Brick Breeden Fieldhouse, the Max Worthington Arena, before a crowd of ten thousand.

Afterward, on the bus ride through the mountains, I remember my chest pressed to the back of the seat as I stared behind us. The postgame show blared over the speakers, everyone still whooping and hollering. “We’re comin’ home!” the radio man yelled, “we’re coming home!” and from the wide back window I saw a line of cars miles long and lit up, snaking from the flat before Livingston all the way up the pass to Bozeman. The dream of a dream, the Niitsítapi and the Apsaalooké, the Blackfeet and the Crow, the Nēhilawē and the Tsitsistas, the Cree and the Northern Cheyenne, the white boys, the enemies and the friends, and the clean line of basketball walking us out toward skeletal hoops in the dead of winter, the hollow in our eyes lonely but lovely in its way.

**5.**

At Montana State I played shooting guard on the last team in the league my freshman year. Our team: seven African Americans from all across America and five white kids mostly from Montana. We had a marvelous, magical point guard from Portland named Tony Hampton. He was lightning fast with wonderful ball-handling skills and exceptional court vision. He brought us together with seven games left in the season. Our record at the time was seven wins, sixteen losses. Last place in the conference. “We are getting shoved down by this coaching staff,” he said, and I remember the criticism and malice were thick from the coaches. Their jobs were on the line. They’d lost touch with their players. Tony said, “We need to band together right now. No one is going to do it for us. Whenever you see a teammate dogged by a coach, go up and give that teammate love. Tell him good job. Keep it up. We’re in this together.”

A team talk like that doesn’t typically change a season.

This one did.

Tony spoke the words. We followed him and did what he asked, and we went on a seven-game win streak, starting that very night when we beat the seventeenth-ranked team in the country, on the road. The streak didn’t end until the NCAA tournament eight games later. In that stretch Tony averaged nineteen points and eleven assists per game. He led the way and we were unfazed by outside degradation. We had our own inner strength. Playing as one we won the final three games of the regular season. We entered the Big Sky Conference tournament in last place and beat the fourth-, second-, and first-place teams in the league to advance to March Madness. When we came home from the conference tournament as champions, it felt like the entire town of Bozeman was at the airport to greet us. We waded through a river of people giving high fives and held a fiery pep rally with speeches and roars of applause. We went on to the NCAA tournament as the last-ranked team, the sixty-fourth team in a tournament of sixty-four teams. We were slated to play St. John’s, the number one team in the nation. We faced off in the first game of the southwest regional at Long Beach, and far into the second half we were up by four. St. John’s featured future NBA players Mark Jackson (future NBA All-Star), Walter Berry (collegiate player of the year), and Shelton Jones (future winner of the NBA dunk contest). We featured no one with national recognition. We played well and had the lead in the second half, but in the end we lost by nine.

When my brother graduated from Montana State I transferred, playing my final two seasons of college basketball for Pepperdine University. Our main rival was Loyola Marymount University, featuring consensus All-American Hank Gathers and the multitalented scorer Bo Kimble. My senior year at Pepperdine we beat Loyola Marymount 127–114 in a true barn burner! Also a fine grudge match, considering they beat us earlier in the season at their place. We were set to play each other in the championship game of the West Coast Conference tournament but before we could meet at the top of the bracket Hank died, and the tournament was immediately canceled. The tragedy of Hank’s death stuns me. He had just completed a thunderous alley-oop dunk and was running back on defense when he collapsed near midcourt and fell, dead of a heart attack. The funeral was in Los Angeles, a ceremony of gut-wrenching grief and bereavement in which we gathered to honor one of the nation’s best young players. We prayed for him and for his family and for all who would come after him bearing his legacy of love for the game, elite athleticism, and the gift of living life to the full. His team went on to the NCAA tournament and made it all the way to the final eight teams, the Elite Eight. Bo Kimble shot his first free throw of the NCAA tournament left-handed, in honor of Hank. The shot went in.

As a freshman in high school I was tiny, barely five feet tall, and my goal was to play Division 1 basketball. I’d had this goal since I was a child and because of my height and weight it seemed impossible and actually felt impossible. I was small, but I made a deal with myself to do whatever it might take from my end to try to get to the D-1 level, so if I did not accomplish the goal I would know at least that I had given my all. I grew eight inches the summer before my sophomore year in high school, thanked heaven, and began to think perhaps the goal was not totally out of reach.

Hour after hour. Every day. The dream was now fully formed, bright shining, and excruciating. I played seventeen hours in one day. The days of solitude and physical exhaustion were plentiful. I gave my life to the discipline of being a point guard and a shooting guard. I worked on moves, passing, shooting, defending, ball handling. The regimen involved getting up at 7 a.m. at the trailer we lived in, on my bike by 7:40, traveling downtown in Livingston, yellow transistor radio (borrowed from my mom) in the front pocket of my windbreaker, the ball tucked up under the coat, and riding to Eastside, the court bordered by a grade school to the east, the sheriff’s station and the fire hall to the north, and small residential houses to the west. A few blocks south, the Yellowstone River moved and churned and flowed east. Above the river a wall of mountains reached halfway up the sky.

Mostly I was by myself, but because the town had a love for basketball there were many hours with friends too. In those hours with others, or isolated hours trying to hone my individual basketball skills, I faced many, many frustrations, but finally the body broke into the delight of hard work and found a rhythm, a pattern in which there was the slow advance toward something greater than oneself. Often the threshold of life is a descent into darkness, a powerful and intimate and abiding darkness in which the light finally emerges.

“Beauty will save the world,” Dostoyevsky said.

Because of basketball I know there exists the reality of being encumbered or full of grace, beset with darkness or in convergence with light. This interplay echoes the wholly realized vision of exceptional point guards and the daring of pure shooting guards, met with fortitude even under immense pressure.

**6.**

I’m missing the rez, Northern Cheyenne, and I wish I could bring it back, here, now, bring back Lafe Haugen, Russell Tall White Man, Stanford Rides Horse, or Blake Walks Nice with his little side push shot that hits the net in a fast pop because it flies on a straight line, lacking any arc.

After I left the rez Blake married a Wooden Thigh girl, and they had kids.

Then I heard he was found dead behind Jimtown Bar, stabbed five times in the chest.

**7.**

At Eastside the playground has a slant to it that makes one basket lower than the other. Both low end and high end have square metal backboards marked with quarter-size holes to keep the wind from knocking the baskets down. Livingston is the fifth-windiest city in the world. The low end is nine feet ten inches high, and we all come here to throw down in the summer. Too small, they say, but we don’t listen. Inside-outside, between the legs, behind the back, cross it up, skip to my Lou, fake and go, doesn’t matter, any of these loses the defender. Then we rise up and throw down. We rig up a breakaway on the rim and because of the way we hang on it in the summer, our hands get thick and tough. We can all dunk now, so the breakaway is a necessity, a spring-loaded rim made to handle the power of power dunks. The breakaway rim came into being after Darrel Dawkins, nicknamed Chocolate Thunder, broke two of the big glass backboards in the NBA. On the first one Dawkins’s force was so immense that the glass caved in and fell out the back of the frame. On the second the window exploded and everyone ducked their heads and ran to avoid the fractured glass that flew from one end of the court to the other. Within two years every high school in the nation had breakaways, and my friends and I convinced our assistant coach to give us one so we could put it up on the low end at Eastside.

The high end is the shooter’s end, made for the pure shooter, a silver ring ten feet two inches high with a long white net. At night the car lights bring it alive, rim and backboard like an industrial artwork, everything mounted on a steel-gray pole that stems down into the concrete, down deep into the hard soil.

A senior in high school, I’m seventeen. I leave the car lights on, cut the engine, and grab my basketball from the heat in the passenger foot space. I step out. The air is crisp. The wind carries the cold, dry smell of autumn, and further down, more faint, the smell of roots, the smell of earth. Out over the city strands of cloud turn gray, then black. When the sun goes down there is a depth of night seemingly unfathomable, and yet the darkness is rent by a flurry of stars.

This is where it begins, the movements and the whisperings that are my dreams. Into the lamplight the shadows strike, separate and sharp, like spirits, like angels. I’ve practiced here alone so often since Kral left for college I no longer know the hours I’ve played. I call the ballers by name, the great Native basketball legends, some my own contemporaries, some who came before. I learn from them and receive the river, their smoothness, their brazenness, like the Yellowstone River seven blocks south, dark and wide, stronger than the city it surrounds, perfect in form where it moves and speaks, bound by night. If I listen my heroes lift me out away from here, fly me farther than they flew themselves. In Montana young men are Indian and they are white, loving, hating. At Lodge Grass, at Lame Deer, I was afraid at first. But now I see. The speaking and the listening, the welcoming: Tim Falls Down, Marty Round Face, and Max and Luke Spotted Bear from Plenty Coups; Joe Pretty Paint from Lodge Grass; and at St. Labre, Juneau Plenty Hawk, Willie Gardner, and Fred and Paul Deputee. All I loved, all I watched with wonder—and few got free.

Most played ball for my father, a few for rival teams. Some I watched as a child, and I loved the uncontrolled nature of their moves. Some I grew up playing against. And some I merely heard of in basketball circles years later, the rumble of their greatness, the stories of games won or lost on last-second shots.

**8.**

Falls Down walked with ease in his step, his body loose and free. Tall and lanky, he carried himself with the joy of those who are both loved and strong. He wore his hair tall too. As if guided by wind and light he flew from the ground to the sky, snatched the ball in midair and rocketed an outlet pass to Dana Goes Ahead. He followed his outlet pass, taking a wide arc to the lane where Dana laid down a no-look pass, and Falls Down finished with a reckless flare, falling to the hardwood as the ball came through the net. I was seven years old. After the game he spoke to me with humor in his voice and something electric, like lightning.

He was buried at eighteen in buckskin, beads, and full headdress, his varsity uniform, turquoise and orange, laid over his chest: dead at high speed when his truck slid from an ice-bound bridge into the river.

People packed the gymnasium for his funeral.

The old women wailing, their voices ripping a hole in the world.

**9.**

Paul Deputee stood with his chest high, his chin on a level. He looked straight ahead, eyes focused as if on a distant point. His leadership was calm and fast. He took few shots, a selective point guard who always put others before himself. When he chose to shoot he used a set shot and put a lot of air under the ball. Like water in a cut riverbed his teams followed him without resistance.

Quiet and steady, Paul looked boldly to the future.

He was shot in the head with a high-powered rifle at a party near Crow Agency.

**10.**

Pretty Paint died before he was twenty-five, another alcohol-laced car wreck.

Half-Cheyenne Bobbie Jones, dead. A suicide, I believe.

By knife or rope or gun, I can’t recall.

There are these and many more. “Too many,” say the old Indians, “too young.” They motion with their hands as if they pull from a bottle. With their lips they gesture and place their index finger and thumb to their lips in a mock image of smoking dope. They spit on the ground. Some of those who died held me in their hands when I was a boy, when they were young men. I remember their faces, their hair like a black wing, eyes the push of mountains, silvery laughter ever present in their smile.

Of the living and the dead, two above the rest: Elvis Old Bull and Jonathan Takes Enemy. Stars I played with and against. Both Crow. Elvis was three-time MVP of the state tournament: ambidextrous, master passer, prolific point maker. And Takes Enemy scored like none other. He shot the leather off the ball.

The Crow reservation runs the Montana-Wyoming border in a place of plateau flatlands. The carved canyon of the Bighorn River like a vein on the land. A haze of mountains at the edge of the eye. Top a grassy rise and make a slight descent to the Little Bighorn battle site where Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho forces took Yellow Hair Custer and kissed the earth with his blood. Crow Agency is the centerpiece, the town like a tangled chessboard made of sticks and gravel, frayed to open fields. Out there horses stand in twos and threes, windblown and slope backed. Lodge Grass, a smaller outpost farther south.

Old Bull, long-legged with a slender barrel chest, like a fluted wine glass. When he was a few years out of high school and I’d finished college we played a money tournament together in northeast Montana. Three grand in prize money for the champions. To raise money for the local high school, on Friday night the small white town gathered and auctioned off the shooters for Saturday’s three-point contest. Elvis Old Bull’s jumper went for a couple thousand dollars to an old rancher, and Elvis made good on the investment. In the championship game on Sunday against a group comprising wingmen slashers and a few guards from the Canadian national team, we rode to victory on the back of Old Bull’s beautiful passing. He threw assist after assist, dime after dime, opening wide the dunk lanes to the delight of a crowd made up mostly of farmers and ranchers, their wives, and children. In the second half the crowd raised the roof after a shot Old Bull made that still stands like a torch in my memory. He crossed half-court hounded by defenders, a spin move once at the hash mark, another at the top of the key where he went directly into his jump shot. But when he spun, the defender was draped on his shooting hand. In midair, nonchalant, Elvis switched the ball position and shot left-handed, holding his follow-through with gorgeous form even with his off hand.

All net.

Applause and shouts of praise from the crowd.

Elvis smiling on an easy backpedal downcourt.

Year by year, I saw less of him.

He grew large, heavy headed with alcohol.

Much later I met his son at a tournament in Billings. I didn’t see Elvis and haven’t seen him since.

**11.**

Twenty-seven feet. Thirty. The NBA line is twenty-three feet nine inches. The message is an echo in my mind, only one shot at the game winner. In the 99–97 double-overtime title game my senior year in high school our team rallied, my friend John Moran hit two game-sealing free throws, and we won in the closing seconds, the gym noise like an inferno. My brother met me and we stayed up the whole night and laughed together and talked hoops.

**12.**

The body in unison, the step, the gather, the arc of the ball in the air like a crescent moon—the follow-through a small well-lit cathedral, the correct push and the floppy wrist, the proper backspin, the arm held high, the night, the ball, the basket, everything illumined.

We are given moments like these, to rise with Highwalker and Falls Down and Spotted Bear, with Round Face and Old Bull and Takes Enemy: to shoot the jump shot and feel the follow-through that lifts and finds a path in the air, the sound, the sweetness of the ball on a solitary arc in darkness as the ball falls into the net.

All is complete. The maze lies open, an imprint that reminds me of the Highline, the two-lane highway that runs the northern border below Canada, the Blackfeet and Charlie Calf Robe, the Crow and Joe Pretty Paint, a form of forms that is a memory trace and the weaving of a line begun by Indian men, by white men, by my father and Calf Robe’s and Pretty Paint’s fathers, by our fathers’ fathers, and by all the fathers that have gone before, some of them distant and many gone, all of them beautiful in their way.

**13.**

The moon is hidden, the sky off-white, a far ceiling of cloud lit by the lights of the city. Snow falls steady and smooth like white flowers. I put the ball down and blow in my hands to warm them. My body is limber, my joints loose. I have a good sweat going. It’s just my hands that need warming so I eye the rim while I blow heat into them. The motion comes to me, the readying, the line of the ball, the line of the sky. I remove my sweatshirt and throw it out in the snow toward the car. I’m in a gray T-shirt. Steam lifts from my forearms.

Oceans and continents away from home, pro ball in Germany, in an old, small gym in Düsseldorf, four seconds on the clock and the team down one, I missed the free throw we needed to get to the playoffs.

Growing up I missed my father. We missed each other.

The Blackfeet reservation is in the far northwest corner of the state, tucked against two borders. Glacier National Park to the west, to the north Canada. Bearhat and Gunsight and Rising Wolf Mountains. The Great Garden Wall. The Marias and Two Medicine Rivers. The backbone of the continent. Browning is a lean spread of buildings on the windswept steppe below the great rocks. Thin rail line near black in the dark. Amtrak’s Empire Builder like a shout on the outskirts of town.

Fresh from professional ball in Germany I went with my dad to the Charlie Calf Robe Memorial Tournament on the Blackfeet rez. The tribe devoted an entire halftime to my father and he didn’t even coach on that reservation. They presented him with a beaded belt buckle and a blanket for the coaching he’d done on other reservations—to show their respect for him as an elder who was a friend to the Native American tribes of Montana. During the ceremony they wrapped the blanket around his shoulders, signifying he would always be welcome in the tribe.

On that weekend with him I received an unforeseen and wholly unique gift. Dedicated as a memorial to the high school athlete Charlie Calf Robe, a young Blackfeet artist, long-distance runner, and basketball player who died too early, the tournament was a form of community grieving over the loss of a beloved son. The MVP award was made by Charlie’s wife, Honey Davis, who spent nine months crafting an entirely beaded basketball for the event. When the tribe and Honey herself presented the ball to me, and I walked through the gym with my father, an old Blackfeet man approached us. He touched my arm and smiled a wide smile.

“You can’t dribble that one, sonny,” he said.

**14.**

Marty Round Face was smooth and fast. He ran strong and flew high. When he cut to the middle and parted the defenders he rose like something celestial and let the ball fall off his fingers into the net, echoing the Iceman, George Gervin, of the San Antonio Spurs. As a boy, when I watched him my heart filled with expectation.

“How does he jump so high?” I asked my father.

“He works at it,” my father said. “He cut a lodge pole and stuck it in the field behind his house. He placed small pieces of yarn up high on the pole, each one six inches above the other. That’s how he leaps, son. Practices day after day until he reaches the next piece of yarn.”

Marty Round Face leapt to touch the sun.

The entire town flocked to see him.

Not long after high school he committed suicide.

**15.**

Young, I spent much of my life lost in loneliness and fear. My father, as I grew to know and love him, may have been lonelier still.

I saw my father’s father only a handful of times.

He lived in little more than a one-room shack in Circle, Montana. In the shack next door was my grandfather’s brother, a trapper who dried animal hides on boards and leaned them against walls and tables. I remember rattlesnake rattles in a small pile on the surface of a wooden three-legged stool. A hunting knife with a horn handle. On the floor, small and medium-size closed steel traps. An old rifle in the corner near the door.

My father and I drive the two-lane highway as we enter town. We pick up my grandfather stumbling drunk down the middle of the road and take him home.

Years later my grandpa sits in the same worn linoleum kitchen in an old metal chair with vinyl backing. Dim light from the window. His legs crossed, a rolled cigarette lit in his left hand, he runs his right hand through a shock of silver hair atop his head, bangs yellowed by nicotine. Bent or upright or sideways, empty beer cans litter the floor.

“Who is it?” he says, squinting into the dark.

“Tommy,” my dad says, “your son.”

“Who?” the old man says.

When we leave, my grandpa still doesn’t recognize him.

On the way home through the dark, I watch my father’s eyes.

My grandfather was largely isolated late in life. No family members were near him when he died. He once loved to walk the hills after the spring runoff, in search of arrowheads with his family. But in my grandpa’s condition before death his desire for life was eclipsed. He became morose and very depressed. In the end, alcohol killed him.

**16.**

One shot. The ball is perfect, round and smooth. The leather conforms to my hands. I square my feet and shoulders to the rim and let the gathering run its course. At the height of the release my elbow straightens. I land and my hand as it follows through is loose and free, the ball the radiant circle I’ve envisioned from the moment I looked out the trailer window, even now in sheer darkness a small sphere in orbit to the sun that is my follow-through, a new world risen with its own glory here among the other worlds, the playground, the schoolhouse, the sheriff’s station, the fire hall.

The Cheyenne rez abuts the Crow rez but moves farther east. The Powder and Tongue Rivers run through a dry land of flats and coulees, sandstone ridges and scrub pine. The main town, Lame Deer, is set at the juncture of a crossroads among low hills. Dirt side streets and makeshift cul-de-sacs, clusters of pastel-colored HUD houses. Jimtown Bar is just past the north rez line, a neon flash on the highway before the big industrial smokestacks of the Montana Power Company in Colstrip.

When young my father drove the back roads of that rez with Cleveland Highwalker. The two were inseparable. Town ball and tournaments, laughter and brotherhood. I remember my dad’s hand on my jaw, gently. Him telling me how he went with Cleveland into the far hills in winter to make a trade with Cleveland’s grandmother for two sets of beaded moccasins. Him punching through snow to bring two deer, a gopher, and a magpie to the old Highwalker woman who spoke only Cheyenne and traced his footprints on leather she later chewed to soften. The picture of it makes me wonder now if there is still blood for forgiveness. Dead things for the new day.

“Cleveland was flat-out an athlete,” my dad said. “And he could sky. Leap straight out of the gym.”

My father shook his head. Water in his eyes. “Wouldn’t find a better player anywhere, and no better friend.”

Not long after high school, married and on the way to fatherhood, Cleveland took his own life.

At the funeral, the small box church overflowed.

People lined up outside and looked in through the open windows.

**17.**

My cousin Jacine, a beautiful young woman, fell headlong into drug culture.

She died of multiple bullet wounds in a drug shootout on the south end of Billings near Montana Avenue. I think of my aunt. Our family, still mourning.

I think of Takes Enemy, and Walks Nice. Joe Pretty Paint’s father, his generations, his country overcome by violent men. I think of his mother loss, and father loss. And my father and mother, their sisters and brothers . . . the losses that reside in our blood like shards of glass.

**18.**

In present-day Montana, with its cold winters and far-distant towns, the love of high school basketball is a time-honored tradition. Native American teams have most often dominated the basketball landscape, winning multiple state titles on the shoulders of modern-day warriors who are both highly skilled and intrepid.

Tribal basketball comes like a fresh wind to change the climate of the reservation from downtrodden to celebrational. Plenty Coups, with Luke Spotted Bear and Dana Goes Ahead, won two state championships in the early eighties. After that Lodge Grass, under Elvis Old Bull, won three straight. Jonathan Takes Enemy remains perhaps the most revered. Deep finger rolls with either hand, his jump shot a thing of beauty; with his quick vertical leap he threw down 360s, and with power. We played against each other numerous times in high school, his teams still spoken of by the old guard, a competition fiery and glorious, and then we went our separate ways.

For a few months he attended Sheridan Community College in Wyoming, then dropped out.

He played city league, his name appearing in the Billings papers, with him scoring over sixty on occasion, and once seventy-three.

Later I heard he’d done some drinking, gained weight, and become mostly immobile.

But soon after that he cleaned up, lost weight, earned a scholarship at Rocky Mountain College, and formed a nice career averaging a bundle of assists and more than twenty points a game.

A few years ago we sat down again at a tournament called the Big Sky Games. We didn’t talk much about the past. He’d been off the Crow reservation for a while, living on the Yakima reservation in Washington now. He said he felt he had to leave in order to stay sober. He’d found a good job. His vision was on his family. The way his eyes lit up when he spoke of his daughter was a clear reflection of his life, a man willing to sacrifice to enrich others. His face was full of promise, and thinking of her he smiled. “She’ll graduate from high school this year,” he said, and it became apparent to me that the happiness he felt was greater than all the fame that came of the personal honors he had attained.

**19.**

Even now at forty-six I take the ball from the space in the backseat of my car and walk out onto the court. I approach the top of the key, where I bounce the ball twice before I gather and release a high-arcing jump shot.

Beside me Blake Walks Nice sends his jumper into the air, and Joe Pretty Paint’s follow-through stands like the neck of a swan.

The ball falls from the sky toward the open rim. The sound is a welcome sound.

I breathe and stare at the net, at the ball that comes to rest in the key.

Behind us and to the side only darkness.

An arm of steel extends from the high corner of the building in the schoolyard.

A light burns there.