THE MAN MADE OF WORDS

Essays, Stories, Passages

N. Scott Momaday

For Yvor Winters and Janet Lewis

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The Homestead on Rainy Mountain Creek

The house and arbor stand on a rise on the plain east of the town of Mountain View. A little to the north and west are the Washita River and Rainy Mountain Creek. A few miles to the south and west is Rainy Mountain itself, scarcely a mountain, rather a knoll or a hummock. But in a way it is a singular feature in the immediate landscape. From the top of Rainy Mountain you can see a long way in any direction. It is said that when the Kiowas camped on this ground, it inevitably rained, thus the name. At the base of the mountain is the ruin of the old Rainy Mountain School, which my grandmother, Aho, attended as a young girl. Nearby is the Rainy Mountain Baptist Church and the cemetery in which many of my forebears are buried.

The house was built in 1913, the year my father was born. He was in fact born while the house was under construction, in a tepee close to where the arbor now stands, on the corner closest to the well. And in that house and arbor he grew up with his sister, Clara, and his brothers, James, Lester, and Ralph.

My grandfather, Mammedaty, was greatly respected by all who knew him. For one thing, he was a successful farmer. The Kiowas, who migrated to the southern plains from the north, were a nomadic tribe of hunters; they never had an agrarian tradition. In my grandfather's day, when only a generation before the old roving life of the buffalo hunter had been intact, the Kiowas did not take easily to farming. Their land was fertile, but they preferred to lease it to white farmers. Mammedaty was an exception. He worked hard, and he saw that his sons worked hard. He made a good life for himself and his family.

I never knew my grandfather. He died in 1933, the year before I was

born. But I feel I knew him. His powerful presence was discernible in his wife and children, in the homestead on Rainy Mountain Creek, and in the countless stories I was told about him. All my life he has been an inspiration to me. His grandfather was the great chief Lone Wolf, and his grandmother was Kau-au-ointy, a Mexican captive who raised a great herd of cattle and became a prominent figure in the tribe. His mother, Keahdinekkeah, loved him above all others, I am told, and when he died she had him buried in a bronze casket, over which she placed her favorite shawl.

My grandmother, Aho, was the principal force in the homestead when I was a child. She was a beautiful and gracious woman, and she presided over family affairs with great generosity and goodwill. She was in her middle fifties when I was born, and she died at the age of eighty-five. About the time of her death I was writing *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, and in that writing I retraced the migration route of the Kiowas from western Montana to Oklahoma. My pilgrimage ended at my grandmother's grave. The introduction to *The Way to Rainy Mountain* is in large measure an evocation of my grandmother's spirit, and for this reason among others that book is my favorite of my works.

The house seems small to me now, but when I was a child it was grand and full of life. Aho and my uncle Jimmy, who never married, were always there. There were frequent reunions when my aunt Clara and my other uncles, Lester and Ralph, my cousins, and my parents and I convened to rejoice in the institution of our family. There were frequent visitors, kinsmen who brought greetings from, and news of, friends and relatives. We were always glad to see them. They would stay for days, according to the Kiowa notion of a proper visit.

It was not until later that I became aware of the real significance of these reunions and visitations. They were matters of ancient tradition and necessity. In the heyday of the plains culture, the tribe was composed of bands, each one going its own way. The essential integrity of the tribe was maintained by means of a kind of institutionalized visiting, whereby persons and families would venture abroad to pay visits, to keep intact a whole network of news and trade. This communion was of course a principal function of the annual Sun Dance as well.

The visitors I liked best, besides the children of my own age, were the old people, for they were exotic. They wore their hair in braids, both men and women, they spoke only Kiowa, and they imaged for me the bygone and infinitely exciting time of the centaurs, the warriors, and the buffalo hunters.

Among the visitors in my father's day was the old man Koi-khan-hodle, "Dragonfly," who to pay his respects every morning would get up before dawn, paint his face, and go out to pray aloud to the rising sun. I have stood on the red earth just east of the house where Koi-khan-hodle stood; I have seen across the plain to the edge of the world; and there I have seen the sun rise. And it was for me the deity that it was for Dragonfly. In that image is concentrated for me the great mystery of the Sun Dance, the long migration of the Kiowas to their destiny, and the tenure of my people on this continent, a tenure of many thousands of years.

When I was a child there was a red barn a little to the north and east of the house, near the place where Koi-khan-hodle made his prayer. I loved to play in the barn, which seemed a great cavern of possibility. There, in the dim light, lay a box of bones, the bones of a horse. The horse, called "Gudal-san" never lost a race. That its bones should be kept long after its death seems entirely appropriate in the context of the plains culture. The Kiowas owned more horses *per capita* than any other tribe on the Great Plains. There is no story of the Kiowa without the horse.

Off the southwest corner of the house, near the kitchen steps, was the storm cellar. On the surface it was an earthen mound supported by concrete or cement, I believe, with a large wooden trapdoor at the end nearer the house, slanted at perhaps twenty or thirty degrees. Beneath this door concrete steps led down into a small, subterranean room outfitted with a bench, and little if anything else. In the springtime, when storms raged on the plains, my mother would take me and a kerosene lamp down into that gravelike room in which the earth had a smell that I have never known elsewhere. With the wind roaring and rain—sometimes earsplitting hail—pounding at the door, my mother would read to soothe her frayed nerves, and I would fall asleep in spite of the fury. My father, who had a Kiowa indifference to such weather, could not be bothered to join us.

The arbor was the center of summer. When the weather turned hot we lived in the arbor. It was a sizable frame building, open and screened on all sides, so that the air could move through it freely. It was basically one great room, though a small kitchen extended from the northwest corner. When it rained, water came in from the roof and all around. There was a large table in the middle of the red earthen floor, large enough to seat a dozen people easily. Along the south and east walls were broad wooden benches. On these we slept at night. Along the north wall were cabinets in which were kept dishes and flatware, an ice box (I loved to go with my father to Mountain View, where we bought great blocks of ice), and a shelf on which were a bucket of water and a dipper for drinking and two or three metal basins for washing. When I was old and strong enough, I drew water from the well and carried it to its place on the shelf. There was no plumbing in those days, and no electricity. We walked to the outhouse, and we lighted the nights with kerosene lamps.

Most of the Kiowas in the vicinity, including my grandmother, were members of the Rainy Mountain Baptist Church congregation. There were prayer meetings in the arbor on summer nights, and these were wonderful occasions. The older people came in their finery, and they brought good food in abundance. They sang hymns in Kiowa, they gave testimony to their faith in the rich oratory of the Native American oral tradition—and they visited. The children played outside in the lamplight that fell upon the grass, caught up in the sheer excitement of communion, celebration, festivity. I can still hear the singing and the laughter and the lively talk floating on the plain, reaching away to the dark river and the pecan grove, reaching perhaps to Rainy Mountain and the old school and cemetery.

Home. Homestead. Ancestral home. If I close my eyes, I can see Dragonfly there beyond the hedge. I can see my young parents walking toward the creek in the late afternoon, a coppery light on the path. I can hear my grandmother's voice in the rooms of the house and in the cool corners of the arbor. And these are sacred recollections of the mind and heart.

part three

THE STORYTELLER AND HIS ART

plans to build a multilevel parking lot on Apodaca Hill have already been approved, and indeed construction has begun. We have to speak above the noise of earth-moving machines.

"Why here?" I ask. "Why did you choose this location, Mr. Greed?"

He looks at me as if I am mad, and he replies, "Because I was attracted by the beauty of the land."

The Toll Road

I know a man who runs every morning. He runs into the foothills, where there are deep, many-colored folds in the earth and there are many more rabbits than people. The running, it may be, satisfies some longing in his breast.

He told me this story, which I relate in his own words.

"For some time, several weeks, I ran on the road that lies in the hills to the south. I like to run early in the morning, as you know, when the skyline is a silhouette and there are long shadows in my way—shadows within shadows—like deep, dark pools of water. It is a wonderful time to regard the earth, and a wonderful way to be in touch with it; I tell you, it is a religious experience I'm talking about, a holy thing.

"Well, one morning, after I had been following the same course for many days and had established a clear right-of-way, so to speak, I was amazed to find that someone had placed a barrier across the road, a bundle of branches! Oh, it was nothing that I couldn't negotiate with ease, mind you—it was only a token, after all. But the point is, it was there. It threatened me in some way, stood against me, destroyed the rhythm of my running . . . and of my life. I had to deal with it, don't you see? I removed it."

He paused here. I had become keenly interested in the story. It had begun to take the shape of a riddle, I thought. I asked him to go on.

"At first I supposed that the barrier was a joke or an accident," he said. "I thought that perhaps it had fallen from a wagon. I didn't want to take it personally, you see. But it was there again the next morning, and again I removed it. Every day it was there, and every day I removed it. Then I had to admit that the barrier was *mine,* that it was placed

there every day for no other purpose than to deter, impede, irritate, and finally infuriate *me*.

"Well, at last I discovered who my antagonist was, an elderly Indian man who lived nearby. His father probably lived there before him, and his father's father. He had no deed to the land, you know, but it was his all the same, by right of possession. He had centered his whole life upon it. In his eyes I was merely some pest, some vagrant—but eminently more dangerous than most because I had set up a continuum of intrusion, a persistent encroachment upon his domain, spiritual as well as physical. I never saw him, and as far as I know he never saw me, but we were engaged in a skirmish of the soul.

"On Christmas morning I took a bottle of wine with me into the hills. I removed the barrier which, sure enough, my adversary had again laid in my way, and I left the bottle of wine in its place.

"Not since has there been a barrier there, and every morning now I have only the open road before me and the sunlight breaking upon the red earth. I am free to run on the road, having paid my way, don't you see? And I have no complaints. It was a reasonable fee, after all—oh, a token—to be sure but, you know, there are times when nothing is so valuable as a token. I am convinced that a handkerchief or a robin's egg or a sack of tobacco would have sufficed as well. The important thing is that I acknowledged the old man's possession of the land. That's all he wanted."

Graceful and At Ease

When she was a young woman, Karen Blixen, later known as Isak Dinesen, went to live on a coffee plantation in Africa. Years later, when she had returned to her native Denmark, she wrote of her life on the farm in Kenya and of the East African landscape. *Out of Africa*, published in 1937, is one of the great books of our time, I believe. I would not presume to say why it is great; there are probably many reasons, and no doubt they have all more or less to do with that ineffable quality which we call genius. But one of the reasons is surely this: that Karen Blixen entered so completely into the landscape of the place that it became at last the landscape of the spirit. This is not an easy transformation to make, and it is not easy to understand. It is as if the very soil itself had never really existed, until it came to exist in the writer's particular expression of it.

She wrote short stories as well, marvelously intricate fantasies that are as rare, faceted, and gleaming as gems. They take hold of the imagination. They seem to verify that literature is, after all, nothing so much as profound consolation. "All sorrows can be borne," she said, "if you put them into a story, or tell a story about them." This was a principle of her life.

She visited the United States in the late 1950s, shortly before her death. It pleased her to gather people about her, and when she spoke to them she most often began by saying, "Let me tell you a story." I never met her, but I have often wished that I had been in her audience on one of those occasions. It would have been a large moment in my life, I am sure.

Her own story was a tragic one, in many respects. It involved her

his resignation of the parish of Taos to Bishop Lamy on grounds of old age and infirmity. Thereafter, serious differences of opinion grew up between Padre Martinez and his successor, Father Demaso Taladrid. Though officially retired, Padre Martinez continued to say the mass, and he officiated over parish affairs when it pleased him to do so. At last there came about a rupture that was not to be tolerated by the Church, and Padre Martinez was suspended from the exercise of all priestly functions. He nevertheless continued in his posture as a religious and a revolutionary, and indeed went so far as to set up an independent church. At last Bishop Lamy was obliged to pronounce upon Padre Martinez the most grave sentence of excommunication.

This affair of the schism at Taos polarized sentiment, of course, and there was very nearly an eruption of violence. Those were tense times at Taos.

Willa Cather neglects to mention what are surely the most important accomplishments of this man, the true measures of his genius. Padre Martinez was passionately dedicated to learning, and he spared no effort to further the cause of learning in his parish. To this end he opened a school in which he was himself the principal instructor. Determined that his parishioners, all of them, should be literate, he founded a printing office, the first in New Mexico, in which he printed his own schoolbooks, among other things. And he published a newspaper, *El Crepusculo*, the first in New Mexico. Of his home he made a kind of monastery to which the best young men of his time and place came to study and to formulate ideas.

This is the basis upon which Padre Martinez should be remembered, surely: he made of Taos in the first half of the nineteenth century a center of intellectual activity. Perhaps there is no way to account for such things—or such men. They happen upon us, and they are the pillars of our civilization.

The Octopus

Several years before she died, Georgia O'Keeffe and I were talking about various places we had been, Ghost Ranch among them, where she spent her summer in New Mexico.

"It is simply the place that I like best in the world," she said.

It was not an unlikely statement, but I have been unable to put it out of my mind.

There are places where you feel you have truly invested your life, where you have been alive more intensely than elsewhere. And certain people, too, have a more highly developed sense of place than have others, I believe. They seem to have a better idea of where they are or ought to be. For me this sense of place is a thing of moments.

Once, I wrote in my journal:

> At five o'clock this afternoon I looked out across Monument Valley. The air was very thin and cold. The great rocks were pink and purple and deeply etched with vertical shadows. The floor of the valley reached away to the horizon of darker pink and purple stripes. The valley is stranger and more vast than other places I have known, or it is of another order of strangeness and vastness. As I contemplated the monuments, something powerful happened—a feeling of awful peace and quiet came over me. For a long time, then, it was as if I had happened into the nearest corner of eternity.

On another occasion I went with a friend into Canyon de Chelly, and we slept under a cliff that seemed to ascend to the stars. We dined

on steak au poivre and a bottle of Romanée-St.-Vivant. And at sunrise, having eaten cold, crisp apples and drunk coffee laced with brandy, we climbed up to a window in the rock. Far below, like ants, were Navajo men on horseback. They sang their riding songs. Their voices drifted up to us like the scent of sage.

And several years ago, in the early morning, I walked along the beach at Santa Barbara. The tide was out, and there were pools in the sand. Then I saw something in one of the pools, under a large piece of driftwood. It was an octopus, small and motionless, only partly submerged, and it seemed to be dead. It filled me with curiosity, for I had never seen such an unlikely creature before. I stood over it and studied it for a long time, and it did not move. It was supple and stark in the water, the color of bone, and I was afraid to touch it. After a while I got a stick and probed at it. Suddenly it blushed pink and blue and violet, and it began to writhe about. The stiff reaction, total and grotesque, alarmed me, for everything about it seemed to describe some profound agony. It took hold of the stick and clung to it; I carried it away to the surf and laid it down. I supposed that it would go off at once into the depths, but no, it settled again and lay still.

I like to think that it might have been dealing with me, that in its alien, ocean mind, it was struggling to take my presence into account, that I had touched its deep, essential life, and it would never lose the impression that I had made upon it. It was still there when I came away, and it had not moved, except that it rocked very slightly to and fro in the water. And now I wonder, What does it mean that, after these years, I should speak of the octopus? It may be that I saved its life, but I know very little about the life of an octopus, and I shall not presume to say what salvation is worth to either of us. Only just now, as a strange loneliness, it occurs to me that this creature has, for some years now, been of some small consequence in the life of my mind. And I wonder if, in the dark night of the sea, there, deep within its own sphere of instinct, the octopus dreams of me.

Dreaming In Place

On such an evening as this, it is good to dream. It is raining, and a great, gray cloud lies out across the valley of the Rio Grande. Over the Jemez lightning flickers and flashes, and the thunder is so constant as to be subliminal. I crave an audacious music, yet easy, comfortable, native. Copland comes to mind, and I put on *Billy the Kid.* A frontier town looms up in the mind's eye. There is brawling and gunplay. A woman is cut down in the crossfire, and it remains, alas, for her son, a mere lad of twelve, to avenge her death and to flee. In that awful moment of pain and rage his whole destiny is determined. The music swells upon me, and I am carried along in the swift current of his legend: night on the prairie, a card game, a gunfight, capture and escape, and, at last, death in the desert. The evocation is all but irresistible, and an epic notion of heroism lies at the center of it.

We Americans have always cherished the institution of "the dying cowboy." From the dime novel to the silver screen it has been one of our most perdurable sentiments, an authentic national treasure.

> *We beat the drum slowly and played the fife lowly,*
> *And bitterly wept as we bore him along;*
> *For we all loved our comrade, so brave, young, and handsome,*
> *We all loved our comrade although he'd done wrong.*

But if this is not precisely a false view of Billy the Kid, it is decidedly a partial one. And the irony is that the other side of this particular coin is just as ambiguously true and false; to wit, the famous photograph (the only one known to exist, if I am not mistaken) in which Billy