Massacre Canyon

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I STAND ATOP A WINDY KNOLL above miles of river valley. Few signs of human habitation are visible. A road, some fence lines. A train track runs through it. A couple hundred feet below me, the mouth of a canyon opens into the valley. The clearing at the canyon floor is picturesque, bucolic. Gnarled cottonwoods guard a twisting creek; a few white-faced cattle stand still as tree stumps in the waving grass. The wind carries faint industrial noise from an ethanol plant on the next hill. Closer by, an idling pick-up reminds me that the landowner is waiting for me in the air-conditioned cab. He brought me up here, pointed to where I could find this weathered square of concrete that was once the base for a 90-ton granite obelisk. The monument was later moved to the designated historical site, a location more accessible but far less dramatic. Here you can see out across the valley of the Republican River; here you can look down on the killing field of Massacre Canyon.

This is Nebraska, but not my Nebraska. I grew up three hundred miles to the east—apple orchards and walnut groves, more Iowa than Dakota, more Twain than Cather. This is something else entirely, a harsh tableland of arid vistas and sudden gorges, a Nebraska that unrolls seamlessly, mostly without trees and mostly without people, into Colorado and Wyoming.

I visited Massacre Canyon once before, many years ago. I was another person; it was another life. I have returned to find out if I still hear the blood crying out to me from the soil.

I went to Denver for college, an untethered boy with too much attitude and not enough sense. I attended three schools, held a handful of jobs, and crashed

several relationships with women whose patience should have run out sooner than it did. The one constant in that time of turmoil: a couple times a year I drove home to Nebraska City. I performed the good son, cleaning my parents' gutters, playing their card games, saying how much I missed Friday fish fry at the Elks Club. Our interactions were determinedly banal. We did not talk about my fractured college career, or my ongoing need for financial help, or their worries about my future.

Crossing back and forth on that endless stretch of I-80, I got into a bad habit, the precursor to texting: I read novels. I held the wheel at ten and two, and used my thumbs to splay open the book. One trip I read all of *Moll Flanders*. Several times I nearly killed myself straying onto the shoulder or veering across lanes. In those days I thought nothing of playing three hours of shirtless tennis in the afternoon sun, then partying all night at a dance club. I took for granted that my body, pulled and pushed to extremes, would snap back into shape like a rubber band.

I flattered myself that I also had a meditative side. On drives across Nebraska, I sometimes took the back roads, the "blue highways" as Least Heat-Moon would call them. The state has more than 400 State Historical Markers, and I never passed one without stopping. Fort Banishment. The Blizzard of 1888. The Flood of 1935. Ash Hollow. Wild Horse Spring. I bought a T-shirt at the Pony Express station in Gothenburg. I beheld the awesomeness that is Carhenge, where upended Plymouths and Studebakers stand in for prehistoric monoliths.

It was on one such meander that I came across Massacre Canyon. Over breakfast that day I told my parents I planned to drive back along Nebraska's southern border, staying just above the Kansas line.

My father, from whom I inherited my cartographical obsessions, told me to pick up highway 136 in Auburn, and head west through Beatrice. He pronounced it the Nebraska way, to rhyme with "Ye mattress." I did as he suggested, and on this shining spring day the route took me through Crab Orchard and Gilead, Deshler and Ruskin. In Red Cloud I paused for lunch and a stop at the Cather house. A few miles past Oxford (the place oxen crossed the river), 136 ended, T-boning into highway 6, which introduced itself as *The Highway of the Grand Army of the Republic*. On to Cambridge (originally Pickletown, renamed to sound fancy, like Oxford) and the sprawling metropolis of McCook (pop. 8000!).

Late in the afternoon I saw the sign for Massacre Canyon, and even though my dallying had already pushed Denver ETA to well past nightfall, I had to stop. I pulled into the parking lot and got out, curious to find no gash or gorge visible on the prairie landscape. As I started along the footpath toward the towering monument, the sun got lost in a hazy sky, and my mood turned sour. The wind kicked up, sullen and strong, and I hugged myself against a chill that was as much psychic as physical. No cars anywhere, not a farmhouse in sight. It occurred to me that I was farther from another living human than I had ever been in my life.

The vague dread intensified as I came to the monument. The spire had carvings of two faces, looking opposite directions. Near the top, Chief John Grass of the Sioux gazed implacably to the west, stone war bonnet crowning his head. Lower down on the other side was the primitivist rendering of Rules His Son, weeping for his dead Pawnee. The marker told me that the canyon, a half mile to the west, was where "a Pawnee hunting party of about 700, confident of protection from the government, were surprised by a War Party of Sioux. The Pawnee, badly outnumbered and completely surprised, retreated down the canyon."

I do not know how to describe what came over me. I felt grief-*stricken*, in a literal, not a figurative way. Sorrow rode on the wind, as real as sand or hail. I stood still for several minutes staring at the stone faces, and out across the grasslands, not sure what to do with this pain, not sure what was wanted of me. Eventually I staggered back to my car. Or more precisely, I walked back, staggered by the experience.

Back in Denver I tried to describe it to my girlfriend, but it sounded like melodrama, like hyperbole. "No, really!" I said, and Katie nodded. "No, you don't get it!" I said. Then I got broody and changed the subject, but the conviction stayed with me that something singular and profound had been etched in my empathic constitution. In the years that followed I tried to call it forth—in Hiroshima, at Gettysburg, at the still-smoking hole where the World Trade Center had been. At each dread location I asked the earth itself to be animated by outrage, as at the murder of Cain in Genesis: "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground."

But who can measure sorrow? Who can command grief? Those places filled me with sadness, but I never re-experienced what I felt at Massacre Canyon.

And now I have returned. It seems an instant; it has been a lifetime. I stand

on a windblown knoll above the killing field on a hot August day. I am not the free spirit that I was in my twenties, but I'm better at homework. I've read eyewitness accounts. I've made arrangements with the landowner. These days, as well, I'm a lot more mortal. Now when I visit my parents in Nebraska City, it's to stand silent in St. Mary's Cemetery. Three friends have died in the last year (cancer, heart attack, cancer). I take folic acid for my arteries and saw palmetto for my prostate.

I shade my eyes to look south, maybe as far as Kansas. A dark ribbon of trees crosses the valley right to left, marking the path of the Republican River. One might find that name all too predictable in this part of the country, but it has nothing to do with politics. The first white settlers were so moved by the beauty of this landscape they envisioned a utopia here, like the one described in Plato's *Republic*.

My host, the landowner, waits in his truck. He is a big man, probably in his seventies. When I called from Philadelphia, weeks ago, he was friendly. He told me about his hip replacement. He told me about the stegomastodon excavated on his land. When I asked if I could go into the canyon itself, he told me about this spot where the monument once stood, said he'd tell me how to get up here.

I arrived at his house less than an hour ago, at the agreed upon day and time. He was sitting on a bench in the shade of his garage. The sun was high and it was—it still is—beastly hot, topping one hundred degrees. He didn't immediately answer my greeting, but looked me up and down, as if trying to recall who I was. I repeated who I was and tried some small talk about the heat, but didn't get very far.

He came right out with it: "What is it you want, anyway?"

Usually I am adept at trading on my Nebraska roots. Huskers football, Creighton basketball. The price of corn. I flubbed it this time. I heard myself babbling about "body memory" and "first peoples," and, god help me, "thanatourism." In that moment I saw myself as he saw me: a snooty, snooping outsider. Philadelphia, Nebraska City—practically the same thing. I was from Back East. Finally, I just said, "I want to see where it happened."

"Well, then, you've come to the wrong place," he said. "Most of the fighting took place up at the head of the canyon, three, four, miles away. This was the end of it down here. This was where they got chased to."

What he did not know (or maybe he did) was that the rancher who owns the head of the canyon does not answer calls from Philadelphia, and does not

take kindly to strangers who want to walk on his land. The man in front of me was the more approachable landowner. Or so the local librarian had confided in the email with his name and number.

"You planning to go up there in that?" He stared scornfully at my rental car, a low-slung Camaro in absurd canary yellow. "Can't hardly get up there in a four-wheel-drive truck."

"I reckon I might get part-ways," I said, finally shifting tone.

The rancher heaved himself up. "I'd best take you there myself. You flip that car and the coyotes will find you before the state trooper does. With this hip, though, I'm not one for walking around."

I said that I would be much obliged.

And here I stand on what's left of the cracked base for a vacant monument. As I gaze into the canyon, I feel the presence beside me of a young man in fringed buckskin. He shakes his head, and says softly, "I tried to stop it."

I have summoned the ghost of John B. Williamson, the Indian Affairs Bureau sub-agent who rode with the Pawnee—the victims—on a different hot August day, back in 1873.

He says, "I wasn't the only white man, you know."

"I know."

Agent Stephen Estes was nominally in charge of the Brule Sioux, and Antoine Janis was with their allies, known as the "Cut-Off Band." For years afterward, the agents traded accusations and blame. On the eve of the slaughter, the Cut Offs asked Janis if he had any orders from the Great Father in Washington to stop them from attacking Pawnee. Janis said that he had none.

The Pawnees were the good Indians, at least by the white man's standards. They'd gone peacefully to the reservation on the Loup River in east-central Nebraska. Pawnee braves had joined the U.S. Army as scouts, providing reconnaissance against the Sioux. The tribe had filed the proper papers with their reservation overlords to venture west to this area for a buffalo hunt. They had every reason, as the historical marker puts it, to be "confident of protection from the government." A buffalo hunt, it is important to note, was different from a war party. Women, children and old people outnumbered the warriors. They did the complicated work of drying meat, tanning hides, and strapping it all onto ponies. The hunt was a success. Williamson reported the Pawnee had killed 300 buffalo.

Their hereditary enemies, the Sioux, had a reservation in Dakota Territory,

but war parties still roamed the high plains, regularly clashing with the settlers and the army. Three years later the Sioux would team up with Arapaho and Northern Cheyenne along a river called the Little Bighorn.

Williamson was twenty-three at the time, the same age I was when I first came here. A couple of white traders passing through tipped him off that a massive Sioux war party was closing in. Unable to make contact with Estes or Janis, Williamson rode out to meet the Sioux with just an interpreter and a white flag. As he approached, war whoops erupted, and shots whistled by his ears. He threw down the flag, drew his revolver, and galloped back to the Pawnee, shooting backwards over his shoulder. He was in the thick of the fighting all day, and, by some miracle, he survived to write the most detailed account of what happened.

The Sioux had twelve hundred warriors, the Pawnee three hundred. Sky Chief sent the women and children in retreat down a then-unnamed canyon toward the Republican River, and his Pawnee braves charged the enemy. The battle was short and bloody. After overwhelming the warriors, the Sioux rode down both sides of the canyon, raining death on the fleeing noncombatants, torturing survivors and mutilating corpses.

The Omaha World Herald printed an account from the first white men to visit the scene, two days later. It read, in part, "Dead braves with bows still tightly grasped in dead and stiffened fingers; sucking infants pinned to their mothers' breasts with arrows; bowels protruding from openings made by fiendish knives; heads scalped with red blood glazed upon them—a stinking mass, many already fly-blown and scorched with heat."

I say out loud the official U.S. government death toll: "sixty-nine." The ghost of John Williamson scoffs, curses vehemently, and fades into the summer sky.

The rancher eases his truck into gear. "You took long enough," he says. "Old boys like us need to watch it with that sun. You looking for something particular?"

"Talking with ghosts," I say, and regret the sound of it.

But if he finds my reply precious, it doesn't show. He seems thoughtful himself, and asks if I want to go down to the canyon floor. We lurch over yucca and ruts, pass singular snarled pines, to where the land flattens out. The rancher tells me to watch my step, and I don't know if he means cow pies or rattlers. In the cool cottonwood shade along the creek, the white-faced cattle take no notice of me. Scrub-covered canyon walls rise up gracefully on both sides. A lovely spot

for a picnic, if history had happened somewhere else.

As the rancher said, the main battle took place farther up the canyon. But I am not wrong to call this a killing field. This would have been where the Sioux peeled off, where straggling Pawnee survivors slowed from their headlong flight. Here is where they were hit with the full realization of what had transpired, where they collected their wounded and dying, where they endured the first pangs of survivor guilt.

This might also have been the spot where the U.S Cavalry rode to the rescue, scattering the Sioux and preventing a greater tragedy. That was the story the white people liked to tell, the focal point of the fulsome speeches in 1930 when the monument was raised on the hill above. Except it never happened. More recent historians have pointed out the obvious: the nearest cavalry unit was maybe fifty men. They would not have confronted twelve hundred Sioux—and there's no evidence that they did.

Darker theories contend that the U.S. government knowingly choreographed the massacre, baiting the Pawnee with buffalo and the Sioux with Pawnee. Their aim: break the back of the Pawnee nation in order to steal the valuable Loup River reservation land. If that was the scheme, it worked; just a year after the massacre the broken Pawnee nation "voluntarily" evacuated Nebraska for Indian Territory in what is now Oklahoma.

The very water in the stream is inauthentic, as I learn on the ride back. The rancher tells me it's coming from the ethanol processing plant, which has an outflow of fifty-six gallons per minute. "There's no natural stream in the canyon these days." He says this without ruefulness or irony. He is proud of the new industry, the new market for corn, and the jobs. I don't bring up global warming or the Ogallala aquifer.

By the time we get back to his house we are almost buddies. I shake his hand, and promise to visit his stegomastodon bones at the museum in Lincoln. I think I even mean it at the time.

I drive to the historical site on Highway 6. And there it is, the obelisk. I park in the same lot I parked in all those years ago. I walk down the same path to approach it. I see the carved faces of the chiefs. I now know that it is made of Minnesota pink granite, and is thirty-five feet tall. I know that the planners wanted Gutzon Borglum, the Mount Rushmore sculptor, but he lost interest when he learned their budget. I know that Hitchcock County, which includes this site, according to census data is 98.36% white, .029% Native American. I

know so much more, and I feel nothing.

I shouldn't say nothing. I feel the conventional solemnity of the thanatourist, along with conventional nostalgia for lost youth. But the ground does not cry out to me. The wind carries no pelting sorrow.

I stop briefly at the Visitors Center, an air-conditioned prefab box that was not here thirty years ago. I meet Jenny, the volunteer guide. She has the look of an aging hippie intellectual, with her long skirt, hair in a bun, glasses on strings. Jenny says a dozen people have stopped by today, making over 500 for the summer so far. "That's a lot," I say, agreeably, "considering the remoteness." A shadow crosses her features, and I understand my misstep. No place is "remote" to those who live there; my comment rings faintly of condescension. I choose not to buy a souvenir pen or made-in-Mexico arrowhead, give Jenny an apologetic smile, and head out to the Camaro.

As I'm about to turn onto the highway, I spot an unmarked dirt road, heading due north. I veer onto it, letting the car wind out, and creating a plume of dust visible from space. I pass an abandoned house with a matching barn of the same blistered gray wood, a still-life in macabre monotone. I slide to a stop at a crossroads, and turn left onto twin ruts, following my instincts. This is no place that a Camaro should ever be, but I keep going in spite of the scraping on the undercarriage.

An odd thrill surges inside me. This would be the domain of the unfriendly landowner. The no-doubt armed landowner on whose land I am trespassing. The road dips into a shallow swale a few hundred yards across where the groundcover is richer, and the road worse.

"Bingo."

My gloating dissolves as the ruts get deeper, the scraping more violent. I am in genuine danger of getting hung up, high-centered. Turning around is not a not an option; backing up would lose me a muffler. I am committed to see where this road takes me once I make it—if I make it—to the other side. I pick my way, skirting the deepest ruts. The floorboard feels like cardboard; root and branch stab at the soles of my shoes. Halfway across I feel something catch, and I hit the brake. I slam the shifter into "Park" and get out. The heat is shocking.

Under the car is spiky grass and no clearance. I find a stick and make my way around, stabbing underneath in futile attempt to dislodge something I can't see. Even this much exercise has me sweaty and panting, too aware of my wonky knee. Fear creeps into me, and my inner voice turns sardonic. *Nice going.*

You're stuck out here with no water, no hat. Brilliant. A genius. Absolutely superb.

I try to regulate my breathing, slow and deep. I let my eyes follow the depression as it widens and deepens to the southwest, greenly contrasting the papery flatlands shimmering in every direction. This is what I was seeking; this is where my instincts led. The head of the canyon, the very tip. I visited the conclusion of the massacre; here was its inception, the last chance to avoid catastrophe. Williamson's futile try at negotiation. The war cries. The first blood spilled. I know this must be true, but the hypercharged grief still eludes me. No haze blots the sun, no buckskinned ghosts conjure themselves. It's just me, paunchy, gray-haired, and dizzy in the million-watt sun, squinting down a valley in the direction of a granite marker some miles away.

The realization comes over me slowly. This whole journey, this return trek, it's not about some mystic connection to native peoples. It's not about blood crying out from the ground. It's about me coming to terms with the recklessness of my youth—the wasted opportunities, the unwise choices, the people I hurt. But also the fearlessness. Plunging the car onto this road, I was briefly that kid again, the one who'd spark a joint on the chairlift to a double black diamond ski run, read Defoe while doing seventy on the interstate, or ride out to meet the Sioux with just white flag and pistol.

Enough.

I get in the car, turn up the AC, and put the Camaro in gear. Whatever is trying to hold my drivetrain breaks off, and I crunch through the underbrush, determined not only to make it to the other side, but to confront squarely the future that awaits me there. No more backward-looking melodrama or misplaced nostalgia. At the far rim, the road turns left, goes half a mile to the middle of a dry field, and ends.

"Very funny," I say to the cosmos.

I do what I have to do, following the tight loop of dusty tire tracks, willing the car over ruts and sagebrush across the top of a canyon whose massacre is not mine, heading back the way I came.