Intertext

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The Salvation of Whiskey

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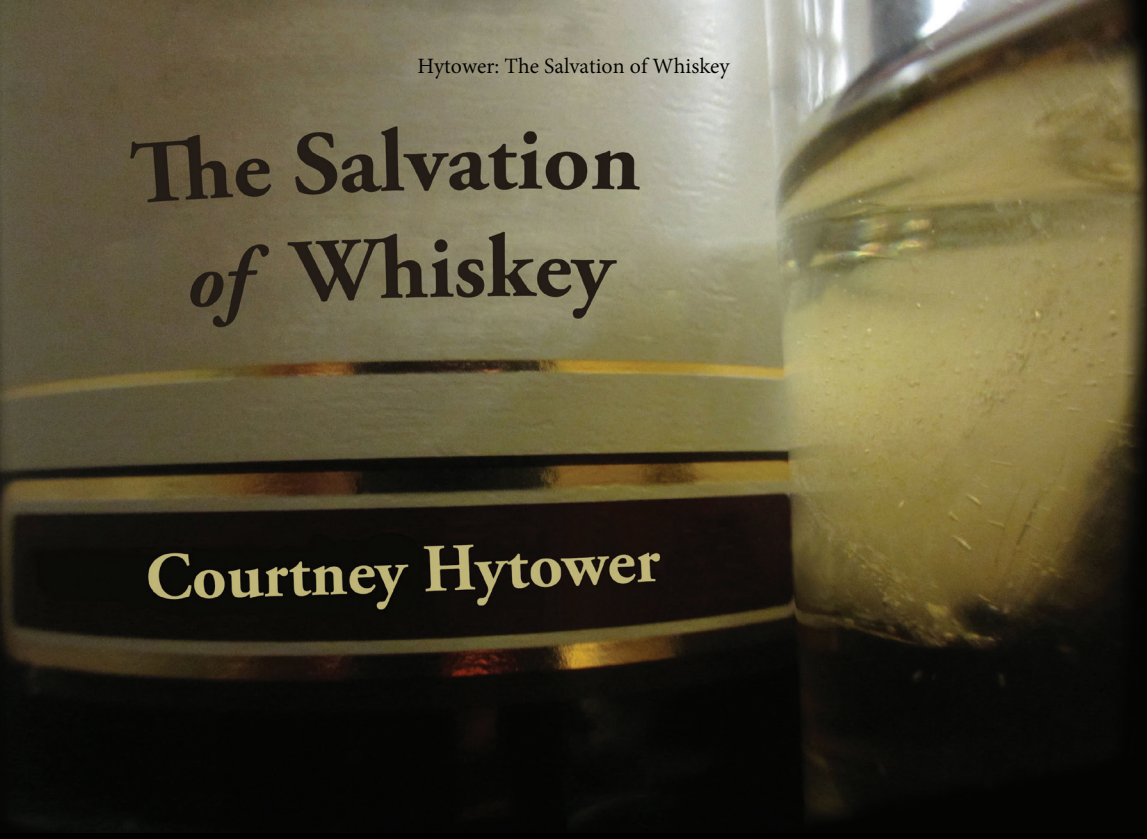

I think I can actually count the times I've had a pleasant conversation with my grandfather on one hand, all of them being the few times I encountered him sober. The rest have become the only way I know how to characterize him: a stereotypical Native American drunk. I remember standing in front of my seventh-grade class with a white poster board displaying my family heritage with a collage of different Native American flags that had long been forgotten. Unlike my mostly-white classmates—whose boards showed pictures of the widely known Irish, Italian, and French flags—I had to explain which tribe each flag belonged to, what they meant, and why they no longer appeared as "national" flags. It was a lot more than I had the knowledge to express. All I knew was that there were three tribes—Blackfoot, Cherokee, and Apache—that ran through my blood, and these were their flags. The rest had never been passed down to me; the knowledge was lost to a generation before my time.

I blamed my grandfather for that. Had he not been drunk off his rocker from a bottle of whiskey half the time, perhaps he would have been able to share more about the history of our people (his people) with my mother, and then later with me. The best he did at any point in my life was suggest a few lengthy books on tribal lineage that he thought I could read in my spare time. While it was a kind gesture at heart, I still longed to sit on his lap and listen to his grand tales of both the triumphs and horrors of each of my ancestors from the three tribes. There was so much I wanted to know—to be able to share about my ancestors that I was so proud

of—yet my access to this experience had been blocked by alcohol's relentless grip on my grandfather. My substantial lack of understanding led me to ask "why," which became the first stepping-stone through a journey of research. What I found was neither what I expected nor what I wanted, but simply a layout of an unfading truth.

As I look at my notes, I have listed a YouTube documentary on a homeless Native American as the starting point for my research, which I find striking now, considering what conclusions I have drawn from this quest. I originally used YouTube just to see what I might find, but I instead stumbled upon a multipart documentary called *Wolf: Homeless in Native America*. In this fourteen-part production, an aging man named Wolf discusses his life experiences as a homeless, alcoholic Native American. At one point in the series, he begins describing the different standards to which he has lowered himself in order to receive enough money to buy more beer. He describes one night where he was offered twenty dollars by a group of filmmakers to participate in a *Fight Club*-like battle against another man—with a bottle of whiskey as the prize. It was an eye-opening look at the type of desperation that could so easily outweigh a person's ability to place reason first. Later, Wolf goes on to identify the everlasting rage he feels as a result of his own past struggles, as well as those of his people. He comes to the conclusion that when he is sober with a clear mind, all of his pain and suffering come to the forefront, and the only way he knows how to dim the aching of this harsh reality is by drinking. Alcohol, he claims, is his only way to "find momentary peace." As I finished the final installment of the documentary, I was moved by the depths of pain Wolf had endured but was unwilling to admit the connection between the sorrows of a single man, the agony of an entire race, and the sickening image of a bottle of cheap whiskey.

As I continued this "quest," swarms of questions began filling my head, to the point where I was agitated by the task of determining where to look next. I settled on a question that had come to mind both before and after my chance encounter with Wolf: why did alcohol seem to affect Native Americans in a negative way more than other races? My choice of direction led me to an article by Matthew Kelley of the Na'nizhoozhi Center that explained some of the reasons of common alcohol abuse among Native Americans. One anthropologist, Robert Mail, who was cited in the article, suggested that alcohol use among Native Americans was a way to shield the pain and cope with their own historical trauma, describing them as "an oppressed people who have suffered from 'deculturation' stresses." Drawing on the work of other researchers, Kelley also noted that "200-500 years of physical suppression, domination, depopulation, and relocation of the Native American race have produced a cultural trauma which has in effect led to excessive drinking." It was a survival method, I concluded, and simply a means to building a faulty desire to keep living.

As I continued researching, I was able to find a more contemporary source to expand upon what these anthropologists were implying. Laurence Armand French discusses the difference in methodologies between the western-oriented society and that of traditional Native American ways in his 2008 article "Alcohol and Other Drug Addictions Among Native Americans." He notes that western societal values are based upon the Protestant ethic, with individual competition being at the core, while the Native American belief system is shaped upon the Harmony Ethos, focusing on cooperation and group responsibility. As a result, French believes that Native Americans becomes subject to psychocultural marginality; because they are denied their "traditional enculturation," they are placed at a

Layout and photograph by David Swenton.

higher risk for "self-medication and escapism," with alcohol as an enticing option (84).

From there I spiraled off to another question: how had alcohol been introduced to Native Americans in the first place? I found myself gazing over pages of a montana.edu site focused on Native Americans' first experiences with European settlers in the 16th century. One of the pages, titled "An Introduction of Alcohol Through the Fur Trade: A Brief Overview," indicated that the European settlers (mostly along the East coast) introduced alcohol as a trading mechanism with the Native Americans. By trading their furs, Native Americans who lacked social status were able to increase their wealth and standing within a given tribe, making it a seemingly worthwhile deal.

However, European traders were able to take advantage of them when whiskey became involved, thus creating a vicious cycle within the tribe: the Native American man trades his furs for whiskey, eventually losing his earnings from this addiction. He forfeits his standing within the tribe, becoming depressed—and sometimes violent. The cycle continues until it has affected many families, ultimately leading to the suffering of the tribe as a whole. At the top of the site the author included a series of quotes concerning Native Americans and the fur trade in early settlement days. One in particular caught my attention, as an expert from E.C. Abbott in the semi-autobiographical novel *We Pointed Them North*: "You take one barrel of Missouri River water, and two gallons of alcohol. Then you add two ounces of strychnine (poison) to make them go crazy—because strychnine is the greatest stimulant in the world—and three plugs of tobacco to make them sick—an Indian wouldn't figure it was whisky unless it made him sick—…and boil it until it's brown. Strain into a bottle, and you've got Indian whisky; that one bottle calls for one buffalo robe and when the Indian got drunk it was two robes."

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The feelings that grew within me were not what I had expected. I knew the gist of the tragic Native American history from years of schooling, so reading these should not have affected me like they did. Yet I found myself writing down my reactions at the bottom of my notes: I was empathetic, resentful, dispirited; filled with grief, disgust, and absolute loathing...rage.

I was home for Thanksgiving break in Illinois at the time, and I knew that this would be the opportune time to visit an Indian reservation somewhere near my home. Although I'd done some research, I still needed my own account to confirm the information I had already found. There was a difference between obtaining information online and ac-

tually experiencing it for myself. When I tried to search for Native American reservations in my area to visit, I was directed to a separate link claiming that I had reached the Native Americans by States portion of the Native-Languages.org website. Right below the headline, a miniature map of Illinois displayed where Native American tribes—such as the Shawnee and Dakota—used to live. The site made it clear, however, that these tribes (and all tribes in general) no longer dwelled there, having been forced out to Oklahoma reservations by the American government many centuries ago. These tribes ceased to exist in their home state.

Again, I found myself feeling the urge to write down my reaction to this new information. On a fresh page of notes, I wrote: anger, resentment, a storm of despair, and misplaced irritation. Despite the knowledge that there were no reservations left in Illinois, I decided to drive to the area where the Shawnee tribe had lived, just to see what had become of the land that rightfully belonged to them. After about a two-hour drive south of Chicago, I came upon a neighborhood my map marked as former Shawnee territory. There was a series of townhomes and complexes grouped together in units sprawled along both sides of the road. Most of the tree life had been cut down, and from what I could see, the majority of people who lived in the complexes were white. The stores and other businesses in the surrounding area appeared rather well-off, with a few designer boutiques that ran along the streets and women pushing strollers with Marc Jacobs bags in hand. I left the neighborhood and drove back to Chicago, realizing how much I resented these people I knew nothing about, simply because I assumed they lived their quaint lives with no thought of who came before them.

As I sat down to write this, I found my thoughts drifting back to the image of Wolf. He had described the rage that kept him drinking each day, and the more research I did on Native Americans and their long-standing history with alcohol, the closer I grew to accepting that same rage in my heart. By the end of it all, I found myself wanting a drink as well. I wanted to numb the pain of past discrepancies I could not change. I came to see the staggering impact of alcohol on Native Americans as one that was by no means commendable, yet not without history and reason. With a new set of eyes, I thought of my grandfather and his infatuation with whiskey and decided to give him a call.

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