

GHOSTS OF WOUNDED KNEE

Photographs by Aaron Huey, text by Matthew Power



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WOUNDED KNEE, SOUTH DAKOTA 57794**

Metal letters on a low, windowless bunker of weathered concrete, a flagpole raised against a dark underbelly of cloud. The flag—seven stars more than the 7th Cavalry rode here under—hums in the Plains wind, fraying, fading, unstitching itself, the stripes splitting to ribbons.

Across the road, a large historic marker, filled with dates and details—Ghost Dance, Hotchkiss guns—green paint bleaching in the sunlight: MASSACRE OF WOUNDED KNEE. The word “Massacre” is a patch, affixed to the sign, covering some earlier word. The sign’s final sentence reads, “The site of the last armed conflict between the Sioux Indians and the United States Army.” A further edit, scratched in the paint over the word “armed”: LIES.

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On top of the hill, chain-link fence around the mass grave. Another tall stone marker with some of the names of the hundreds killed December 29, 1890: Chief Big Foot, Mr. High Hawk, Mr. Shading Bear, Long Bull. A spare roll call of catastrophe.

The prints from the glass-plate negatives taken in the days following reveal more: dead grass and frozen ground, bodies gathered by the wagonload. A pile of corpses by the lip of the long ditch and in rows at its bottom, soldiers leaning on their rifles. Another of a medicine man, frozen to the earth, his body rolled over for a portrait—a crosshatch of grass stems imprinted on his cheek, the arms reaching out, the glass negative itself fractured like ice.

The grass, sunburned, low to the ground, rolls beside the miles-long straightaways of cracked asphalt. A tribal police unit, lights stuttering, siren a Doppler-shift whine, races past, makes the hard turn toward Manderson.

This is Pine Ridge Reservation today: somewhere between 13,000 and 40,000 Oglala Sioux spread across an area the size of Delaware and Rhode Island combined. Unemployment is 89 percent, the few jobs in the tribal bureaucracy or the Prairie Winds Casino. More than half the population lives below the federal poverty line.

The youth suicide rate is ten times the national average. One in three women is a victim of rape. Life expectancy is roughly equivalent to Somalia's. Plagues of alcohol, drugs, domestic and gang violence. Pine Ridge is as profoundly damaged a place as exists in America.

If past is conclusion, is enough distance from history to gain perspective, there is no past in Pine Ridge. To grow up here is to be forever aware of what was lost, or to bludgeon oneself into forgetfulness.

MARTY RED CLOUD

How can you be far from the past with a last name like Red Cloud? A peeling sky-blue house, its particle-board siding dissolving, on a rise several miles outside of Pine Ridge. Cars on blocks, broken toys, an old trampoline. A friend's "rez-mobile" pulls up: no hood, a flashlight wired into the engine housing to replace a deer-shattered headlight. Marty is in his twenties, tall and buzz-cut, dressed in a basketball shirt and shorts. An echo in his face, the long nose and square jaw, of his great-great-great-grandfather Red Cloud, last of the Lakota war chiefs, who fought the U.S. government in the 1860s, ultimately moving his people to Pine



Ridge Agency a decade later. Marty is one of The Wild Boyz—their graffiti tag, a stylized bear paw, is seen on walls across the rez—a gang that takes its cultural cues more from Tupac Shakur than Crazy Horse, affecting the styles and slang of urban blacks. Marty moved out here with his girlfriend, Courtney, to get away from the corrosive influences of town life. Marty's grandfather, Oliver Red Cloud, wants him to return to the traditional ways, to speak Lakota, to live up to the name he has inherited.

I didn't talk to him for a long time. That's because he knows things that people do. I've been kind of sinning, not living healthy. I know he knows. I don't want him to talk to me about changing. 'Cause I'm not ready to change in his ways. It's a different deal when you go out there. He watches you all the time. And he talks to you, you have to listen. Usually he chews you out. Told me there's a lot of hard choices I have to make for myself. He tells me to behave. He don't like the baggy pants, he doesn't like the gang-oriented shit. He tells me what would be the right thing to do, he tells me don't fight with your fists. He's one of the reasons I let so much people talk shit, don't get so violent and aggressive, don't talk shit back.

Oliver also wants Marty to perform the sun dance ceremony, four days of ritual fasting and

purification, with a flesh offering made by piercing the skin of the chest with a peg of bone, fastening it to a tree, and then tearing oneself loose. It is a sacred act, and something for which Marty doesn't believe he's ready.

I want to be true to it. To feel that full effect. I see so much people do it, say it's this and that, then they go off and get lit, not even a couple weeks or a month after.

I'm trying to show them that I can be strong. So I'll do it when I'm ready. I see all my friends, how they're proud when they do it. I want to be proud like that. But I want to do it the right way. I want to have the elders look at me and respect me for doing it the way I did it.

RAMON TWIST

Ponies grazing among wreckage in the long afternoon light, graffiti-covered tribal housing tumbles down the hillside. The houses are falling apart, surrounded by burst garbage bags dug through by slinking dogs, dead cars on blocks, windows smashed. Most basements are rotting with black mold and mildew, and half the houses on the hill have had their electricity shut off. A small boy plays in the dirt, shirtless, his face almost catlike, the sign of Fetal Alcohol



Syndrome. Ramon Twist leans into the car window. Pocked skin, broad smile, front teeth knocked out. In faded blue ink, FUCK runs across the scabbed knuckles of his right hand, YOU across the left. He talks down his body, a story written in scars and tattoos.

I was twelve years old and I was like, Fuck the world, so I put them on my knuckles, pissed my mom off and shit. This right here says TBZ—The Boyz—that's me, then THUGS 4 LIFE PATRICK AND RAMON, my homeboy Dynamite. We went and killed somebody, he took the rap for me, he took the rap, he's doing life now for me. Patrick. His real name's Patrick but we call him Dynamite. He's in Denver. We got shot at, we went after this guy, retaliated, bust a cap on the fool, and they was questioning both of us, and he was like fuck it, he took the whole rap. Life, he's doing life. When you kill somebody in Denver, Colorado, that's life. He didn't mention my name, he could have, I could have been right there, probably got two life sentences being an accessory and shit.

This is my wife and daughter. This one right here I did when I was fifteen, that was my first girlfriend, my first love and shit. These right here, supposed to be four burns for TBZ, but one of my homies passed away, so I burned myself again. And then one of my other homies passed away, so I did it again.

Ramon points to two vertical rows of dime-sized scars on his chest.

These right here from when I sun danced, this was when I was twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen years old. And on my back. I did these for four years straight, till I was fifteen years old. I went from that, from being that way, then I got into the gang life and shit, and I got myself all twisted up. I'm looking at ten years now, that's why I don't leave the rez. I leave the rez and I get caught, I got to go do ten years in the state penitentiary. That's why I stay right here and that's me. That's life and that sucks.

I make money thieving, doing whatever I had to do, just to make money, fuck my whole family over, even steal from my own crib just to make money. That shit sucks. Reality sucks. If anybody had to live like that, I don't wish it on them.

In the twilight of Manderson, ponies wander between the shadows of darkened houses. An unwanted kitten mewls from a rooftop, thrown there in the hope it will be snatched away by an owl. On the neighboring Rosebud reservation, there were three youth suicides and dozens of attempts the previous winter. In Manderson, a few years earlier, a fourteen-year-old girl hanged herself. There are the common psychosocial explanations—poverty, despair, alcoholism. But among young people in the town the story was passed that the Tall Man would come and whisper to them, tell them to kill themselves. Ramon describes it:

These guys were sitting out round about this time, nine o'clock, when it was getting dark. They looked

out by the fence, there was some tall dark dude just standing there, so they jumped in their car and they took off. And here just again, during the powwow, a week or two ago, they seen it again. Their daughter was sitting in her truck and she was talking on the phone with her boyfriend, and she looked and it was right there in the back mirror. So she started honking the horn, really screaming. He's a spirit though, he's Bigfoot, you could never see his print. When you see him he's bringing you a message, either someone's gonna die in your family, he's bringing you a bad message or a good message, you don't know. You can't say it's gonna be a bad message, so be careful, all your family should take care of each other and watch out.

KIMBERLY LADEUX

Night on the hill at Manderson. EBT cards have just been charged up with their monthly allotment from the government, and the parking lot at Pinky's store at the bottom of the hill is crowded with people. Lisa Lone Hill sits in her house in the darkness, her son Travis beside her, smoking. The electricity bill is \$600 past due, and the power has been turned off. A candle illuminates their faces, and the face of Kimberly LaDeux, in a shifting chiaroscuro. The propane tank out back is empty—\$800 to fill that—and a chicken boils in a pot outside over a fire of gathered wood. The wind stirs the flames to a roar, and they lick against the side of the house as the pot spits and hisses. Kimberly is in her early twenties, has two children.

Even the fire outside, it just represents what we go through. There's a lot of people around who have their jobs, have their lights on, they go through it. Then there's people like us that are struggling, we don't have enough money to get by, and we have our lights turned off. They came and turned off just in our district thirty-eight goddamn houses. That's mostly our whole community, all the houses around Manderson Hill. It just pisses me off, the fire we have to make. It just makes me mad, because we are struggling like back in the day.

Custer was owned by the Oglala Sioux, they couldn't beat us. That's why we own what we still own. Until the day I die I'll take pride in it. Look at what we have, it's not much. No lights, barely surviving off food stamps. But we're still here, we're surviving.

Kimberly sits in the candlelight and drinks a can of Camo Black Ice malt liquor, chasing each gulp with water and grimacing.

It's only \$2.50 a can. If we lived in cities we could buy a Budweiser or a Bud Light, something that won't kill us off, but you know, we're at the reservation, some of us don't even have cars. Camo's just the way you gotta take it, I guess. Gets you drunk faster.



It's like drinking whiskey in a can, you have to chase it with something. The old people, they've been drinking so long they could drink a Camo straight. If you want to be an alcoholic and drink Camos, you will surely die.

The screen door slams. Her aunt enters, shouting at Kimberly to come get her kids.

You need to come get your kids now or I'm gonna report you and turn 'em back in to welfare. They're both right here. Trudine's pissed. You shouldn't have sold your EBT card. That's why she's so pissed. Said you been ditching these kids for days and days now. She says you have to find somewhere else to live. She's tired of this. You've been taking advantage staying down there. You need to keep these guys with you. Quit hiding from them.

I ain't fucking hiding, Kimberly replies, voice slurred and angry. She picks up the baby, who is still and quiet as her mother begins to cry, and stands in the circle of streetlight on the hilltop.

TRAVIS LONE HILL

Trav is twenty-four, and the walls of his room are covered with graffiti: self-portraits, cartoons, elaborate designs and phrases from a reality he calls "reztitutionalized." He has tried to kill himself three times. Most recently, the cord

he tied around his neck snapped when he put his weight to it. The pictures on Trav's MySpace page show him throwing gang signs, smoking blunts, holding hundred-dollar bills in fans or arranging them artfully with piles of weed. NATIVE HUSTLER is tattooed on the backs of his hands, and a pattern of veins stretches across his cheekbones. A National Honor Society certificate hangs on his wall, and the hundreds were part of the money he was given for a Gates Millennium Scholarship.

Threw my Bill Gates scholarship away too. Threw it away, I let it go, I didn't reapply. I didn't want to go to college in the first place, just did for the teachers, to satisfy 'em. Not sure how hard I could go without getting tired, I'm not ready for it. Got 4.0 two years in a row. They said I should apply for it because I was getting good grades. It was an easy school, it was too easy. When I went to a white school up in Rapid it was hard. It was more of a challenge, but I came out here and went to school on the rez, it was really easy. Never got any Fs there. I went to that school and graduated at age twenty-one. I don't know, I just wanted to do something with my life, I was tired of sittin' around, I wanted to do something. Something inside of me just said, Get up and go, or you're never gonna be nobody or nothing, you're not gonna



do shit, you're not gonna be shit. Only 1,000 people get it across the country, in all the high schools. It tripped me out, tripped out a lot of people actually. Right now I'm just at kind of a standstill. I got to think about my next step, my next move, what the fuck am I gonna do next. I don't know, it's crazy, I just didn't wanna think about it no more. I didn't want to go back. I think a lot of people were pissed off at me. I don't know, the world was dragging at me. I just said fuck it . . . I wanna move to California by myself, I wanna get away, do something with my life.

The next day, Trav was gone. He and his mother got in a fight, and she called the tribal police on him. He vanished. In later months he was in and out of jail, in trouble for assaulting a police officer in Rapid City, looking at a two-year sentence.

BUBBS HIGH WOLF

Bubbs sprawls on his mattress on the floor of his basement room in North Ridge. It is damp, and black mold blossoms along the base of the wall. Bubbs is one of the founders of The Wild Boyz, grew up in the gang with Marty and their other friends. A week after his second sun dance, the scars where his flesh was torn are

still forming, round black scabs frayed pink at the edges, just above his nipples.

Everybody has their own different reasons, but I made a vow to sun dance for my grandma. She passed away, but I'm gonna finish my four years, and the prayers, my chest and back. I'm gonna finish four years, I'm gonna quit and put my pipe away. I'm gonna do my vow, but then, shit, I still got lots of shit haunting me. I ain't gonna have anything haunting me after that, because I made that vow.

I try to chill, can't even walk around no more. Used to like to walk around a bit, checkin' out the bros. I got done sun dancing, the fucking cops came here. I was sleeping it off. The fucking cops came here and said that I robbed someone's house or some shit, some bullshit. Then they almost took me into jail, when I was fresh done, I didn't even sleep yet.

Right off you got to come back here and worry about eating, worry about lights. Fuck, there ain't no jobs around here. So right off you got to go to something bad and start hustling, and right off you're in the bad again.

That's what I talked to Ricky Grey Grass about. I take him a cigarette offering, I told him the reason why I sun dance, the reason why I made this vow. He said, Just finish your vow.



That's all you could do, and whatever you do after that, the spirits will let you know. Whatever hardships. I had a hard year, from last year at the sun dance, I went to prison, I lost some friends. My gram died. I had a hard year, and I suffered this year at the sun dance. I couldn't break from the tree while those pegs were in my chest. So Rick and the other one, they had to pull me off the tree. It's a flesh offering, you give the flesh off your chest to the tree. Those prayers I was doing, those were for my grandma. All the other people I was praying for, all those prayers were hard. So I had a hard time.

RICK GREY GRASS

Rick sits on his front lawn in the darkness in a folding chair. The sound of car wheels humming over gravel interweaves with the staccato chirp of crickets. He is a medicine man with two cell phones, runs sweat lodges and sun dances, teaches Lakota traditions and language, counsels young people from across Pine Ridge. A puppy trots over to him, and he reaches down and strokes it. "That's soup," he says, referring to the puppy's eventual destiny in a medicine ceremony. His voice is low, the words measured out slowly. He met Bubbs

a few years before, convinced him to join in ceremonies and, when he was ready, to sun dance.

I turned him into a tiny speck. He wanted to quit. Not on my watch.

Went over to the sweat lodge and he came out, told me what was going on, gave me some tobacco. At the time we went into the lodge and prayed. You know, this young man is having a tough time, and he has dreams he needs to fulfill, and all the people he hurt. So I pulled him aside and told him what he has to do to change his life. He went back and talked with his friends. Already I got a lot of younger people I sit with and sun dance with.

I treat 'em like that, you know, with respect, try and pass them on. I've seen it like that, with Bubbs, all those others struggling with all the addictions here. That's how I work with those young people that come from a whole different background, that come from the city, that come from gang life. I've got these nephews that come from Denver, they come up and pray and sun dance with us. I've got ones that come from Fargo, Bismarck. So they all come with the city, the city influences that they have. And it feels good that they come back. At least they're learning. Four, five days that they're here sun dancing, they hear

This page: Manderson
Opposite page: Watching TV, Manderson
Homeless behind community center, Pine Ridge village





me talking the language, they hear me talking in the sweat, or over the mike at sun dance. So they take that back, and I challenge them, I say, Next year when you come back, give me a sentence in Lakota, talk to me as much as you can. Without that language we're nothing, we have no identity.

Everybody hears that advice for that person who has come and wants to sober up, that wants to change in life, that wants to go back to that traditional way of praying. I sing them a song, I throw cedar on the rocks for them. They keep coming back and they want some more. And pretty soon that's their addiction. They let go of the alcohol, they let go of the drugs, and pretty soon their addiction is praying to the creator god.

WHITE CLAY

South from the four-way at the center of Pine Ridge, the road runs dead straight into the prairie. After a few miles there is the Nebraska border and the town of White Clay. Alcohol is banned on the reservation, though there is a profitable trade in bootlegging. In White Clay, a handful of weathered wooden structures at the roadside, there is no such restriction. Blind-drunk Lakota stumble along the road. A man with a hat that reads **NATIVE**

PRIDE sleeps against a building, using a five-gallon bucket for a pillow. The only businesses in town are "bars," really just tin-roofed shacks, owned by whites, with stacks of malt liquor cases behind counters. On offer: Hurricane High Gravity, 8.1 percent alcohol, one dollar for a twenty-four-ounce can. Or Camo Black Ice. Or Evil Eye Red Kiwi Strawberry. All cheap, all around 10 percent alcohol, twice an ordinary beer. They taste like paint thinner and burnt brakes. Heavy drinkers on the rez are often said to be "mizzing out" or "blank," the alcohol obliterating all memory and control. Dust-Off, a compressed-gas keyboard cleaner, is popular as well, huffed directly from the can.

On a trail through the high grass, past a burnt-out truck chassis, there is a ragged cottonwood and a weather-beaten garage, its roof caved in. Amid a wrack of crushed cans, old clothes, and broken bottles, Brian Believer Jr., Duane Fire Thunder, and Cyril Warrior sit on a mattress dragged out to the center of a clearing by a fire pit. They are all veterans, all homeless. Their friend Johnny Red had lived here. He died, and they burned his clothes to keep his spirit from lingering in the place. Fire Thunder, his face ravaged, nose distended



with rhinophyma, eulogizes through a haze of Hurricane.

He lived a good life in this life. Which is called alcoholism. Which is not really verified in life. People say here and there, which is not. We have to control our situations in White Clay, Nebraska, we have to do our own, maybe some of us are maybe not really for sure, but we have to, which is not. We have to see what's going on, what's not, here and there. I'd like to say I miss him. We used to be together as one. But now he's somewhere where he is happy. Now we have to look at one another.

Believer walks through the wreckage of the shack—rain-soaked newspapers, broken furniture half-burned, half-rotted, where his friend used to sleep.

Winter, Johnny was always bundled up, they'd offer him a sleeping bag or a blanket. Sometimes I'd come over here, colder than hell, he'd still be standing out here with a big old hood sweater on. I said, Where do you sleep, and he says, Don't worry, I got a place to sleep. The reason why they stay here is some of them got no place to go, or they got someplace to go but it's too far, and they're scared to walk back toward Pine Ridge 'cause a cop might pick 'em up. Some of 'em have got warrants or something.

We're Lakota warriors, and we should be able to take care of ourselves, but all we get is just the VA checks. A VA check won't even buy you a house. I don't know what's going on. I don't care. I hang out with all my homeless veteran buddies. I'd rather be up here than be a burden on them. I'd rather beg for food than beg them for food. Sometimes I see some of my friends, and they're so very hungover. See, we drink and we get drunk, and we sing, we take turns to sing military songs, we sing cadence or we sing Lakota songs. Then we go to sleep. Next day we do it again. We don't have no family anymore.

Fire Thunder beats a drum rhythm out on the mattress, closes his eyes, and wails out a phrase in Lakota, a sacred song to the four directions. The three men beat the cadence together, and the voice rises, hoarse and fierce, and the wind picks up, stirs the half-burned trash in the fire pit, rattles the dry cottonwood branches, bends the grass. Louder, and the wind fiercer, and, spinning with eyes closed, the wind sweeps away the bars, destroys them plank by plank, draws off into the sky like scattering seeds the cans of Camo Black Ice and Evil Eye and Hurricane, all the shards of loss and grief plucked out and gone, and the Lakota men are alone on the wide silent prairie. ■