

*MOTHERLESS*

by

**Gabriel Horn (White Deer of Autumn)**



### **Prolog: *There...and Not There***

*The little girl with long brown and sun streaked hair, who was just learning to speak, stood on the shore, holding her mother's hand as the Ocean lapped around their bare feet. Their ankles shared similar strands of pink and white shells buried in the soft sand as colorful coquinas wriggled around their toes. The wet hems of their floral sun dresses flowed back and forth with the water.*

*"Mommy! Mommy!" she called, the child's outstretched arm and fingers pointing, reaching, at something she was seeing, almost touching, across the water. "Look!"*

*The woman strained her eyes. "What is it, Sweetheart? I don't see it ...."*

*"Look!" the little girl called out again, her entire body energized and moving.*

*The woman squatted, her focus following her child's raised arm and tiny fingers, her mind stretching beyond the waves and the sand bar, and then at the moment she wondered if it must be her excited daughter's imagination, she caught a glimpse of a silver dorsal glistening in the sunlight. "A dolphin!"*

*"No, Mommy. Look!"*

*The woman held her breath. Beyond the silver dorsal, an island appeared wavering in the sunlight, white sand, palm trees, and tall sea oats rising from the dunes, everything undulating and dream-like, and then - not there....*

*"See it, Mommy?"*

*At first, the woman couldn't answer. "Yes.... Yes, I did see it.... I did."*

*The child finally dropped her arm and squeezed her mother's hand. Still looking across the water at the island her mother could no longer see, she smiled.*

*... love knows not its own depth until the hour of separation.*

- Khalil Gibran

**The Opening:**

*Meeting Destiny at the Bus Stop*

*(destiny: the power determining the course of events that can be fulfilled or missed depending on the individual's response)*

The semi-frantic bus driver gripped his long dreadlocks, pulled them tight behind his shoulders, and fastened them with a thick stretch band. He looked down at his watch, then into his cracked side view mirror.

“Come on, Little Girl!” he hollered at the kindergartener with long sun-streaked auburn hair. She was still standing near the back of the bus staring into the ditch that ran the length of the road into a channel that emptied into the Gulf.

“Dat be de Indian kid,” he said to himself in a Jamaican whisper.

The other children at the bus stop, and the ones retching in their seats inside the bus, held their noses and gagged as the ones outside squeezed through the slim opening of the jammed door; some bigger and older kids pushing behind and passing the slower and smaller kids up the steps; each with an acute sense of urgency trying to escape the stench coming from the ditch where the kindergartner appeared oblivious to the stink and to the bedlam.

Across the narrow two lane street, a heavy first grader who really should have been in second grade, wrestled with his nylon Nike backpack out the back seat of a shiny gold car with dark tinted windows, which sped away almost simultaneously as the heavy kid's new Sketchers hit the asphalt.

In what appeared like a hurried waddle across the intersection, the boy paused on the faded yellow line in the middle, not because the weight of his 200 dollar iPod (a gift from his mother for being a good boy during the divorce), and those extra packs of cream-filled cupcakes he began carrying since the first day of school that year, were weighing him down, but because

the putrid cloud of stink he had ambled into had triggered the mechanism in his half asleep brain to suddenly stop and pinch his nose shut.

“What the hell?” he bawled, scrunching his face behind his hand in a distortion almost as ugly as the stench. “Who farted?”

Unlike other mornings, he didn’t cause any of the girls to cringe at his crudeness because they were already wincing from the stench. And the boys, given other circumstances would have laughed, but not now.

“Oh Mon!” the bus driver gasped, bravely poking his head out the window and turning to look at the little girl still standing by the ditch. “Come on, Child! Get in de bus, Mon!” he shouted.

Then he grumbled to himself, the new influences on his language mixing with the old. “Dey ain’t paying mi to breed dis shit.”

“Leave her!” a tall fifth grader demanded, then held his breath, slamming the nearest windows, and then shouted again for the bus driver to leave the girl. He was leaning over the boy in front of him with the Nike backpack whose head was pressed against the grimy glass, watching the kindergartner.

“Please, Bus Driver!” the children shouted in a whiny, gut wrenching, out of sync chorus. “Let’s go! Let’s go before we *die* in here!”

The driver sounded the horn two times, but it was as if the little girl at the edge of the ditch didn’t hear it or didn’t think about hearing it. He glanced at his watch. They were running late for the second time that week, and he would hear from the principal about it. He sounded the horn again, and again. The small kindergartner just stood there like the stink had somehow gotten herself frozen stuck. She wasn’t moving.

Reaching under his seat, the driver had grabbed an old red rag, tied it into a bandana so that it covered his nose and mouth, and sort of slid down the bus steps, prying himself through the jammed door, and then moving as fast as he could to the rear of the bus.

In an instant that seemed to him and everyone else – a much longer time, he was reaching down and had taken hold of the kindergartner’s hand, but, immediately, he could feel the resistance in her little arm, her doe brown eyes desperate as she gazed up at him, like hope before it dies.

“We can’t leave her there,” she said.

His thick brows rose up his forehead as his own eyes went wide open at the very idea that there might be someone down there, maybe even a kid from the bus stop. He peered over the rag, down at the two grungy barrels that had been illegally dumped overnight.

“Leave who, Child?” the bus driver’s muffled plea under the rag was near to panic, his eyes now squinted and wildly searching where the lid on one of the rusty barrels had popped open, spilling noxious gunk he recognized as too awful for him to even imagine who could do such a thing. “I don’t see no one!” he said, as he scoured down the ditch at the corroded drums’ deadly swath to the shallow stream where the water had changed colors.

He pressed the bandana to his face, his eyes blurry and still straining, they probed passed the other barrel that had a crack running the length of it, leaking used motor oil and diesel and what appeared like antifreeze from car radiators, and rancid smelling used power steering and brake fluids. Now desperate, he continued scanning around the barrels where several torn up tires and cracked and seeping car batteries had also been discarded into the ravine that was a little creek and supposed to be a runoff for rain water during big storms.

“Oh, dis be bad, bad!” he cried.... “Where? I can’t see no one. Show me, Mon!”

He had always tried never to curse around a child, even his own, and he didn't allow it on his school bus, and he didn't mean to now, but the kids were pounding on the windows, and the smell was truly getting to him too, and he knew that if he didn't leave soon, he could wind up possibly suspended without pay along with losing in a very unpleasant way his breakfast: two cups of tea and a bowl of fruit. *No milk. No meat. No fish too big.*

"Little One..." the bus driver begged, not hardly being able to catch his breath without feeling the urge to puke, eyes red veined and narrowed, still scanning over the frayed bandana down into the ditch. "I don't see who in de Lord's name yuh lookin' at!"

Then, the kindergartner with that long dark and sun-streaked auburn hair hanging past her shoulders, falling down her back, pointed; her stare fixed beyond the tip of her forefinger to a spot on the cracked drum just above the grimy liquid surface.

And, in that pool of oil chemicals and colored smelly slime, the driver did finally catch sight of a tiny body. Shaking his head slow, he stared and gasped at what appeared like something holy in a most unholy sight. "Ahh,... Ain't dat too unreal!" he said soft and low in his exhaled breath, humbled at what he was seeing, and puzzled at his own feelings that for an instant had distracted him from the smell.

A green tree frog that could sit in the palm of your hand was lying lifeless on the side of the cracked drum illuminated in a suddenly appearing single beam of morning sunlight shining through a jungle-like myriad of trees.

"Yuh make dat light happen, Child? Dat some Indian magic yuh duh'?"

She looked up at him and blinked, like the eyes of a doll, closing and opening, and he felt embarrassed for asking.

“Listen, Sweet Child...,” he said, trying to clear his mind, gasping, and doing his best to sound caring.

Any spark of hope that showed when she looked up at him again was disappearing along with the last lingering stars of the morning.

“Ain’t notten’ gonna bring God’s little creature back,” he said. “It’s dead. It got stuck tryin’ to hop itself outta dat --” and he couldn’t think of a word that wasn’t swearing to describe what he was seeing and smelling in that ditch. “Wi don’t know why sum’ady done dat.... Oh Mon, I am so sick ah dis. Now, come on, Sweet child, it ain’t good wi breedin’ dis shit.”

“But we can’t just leave her,” she said again, her voice cracking and course and pleading, her stare, without hope’s spark flickering any longer, returning to the petrified image of the tiny frog’s long and powerful back legs bent in the position to jump, now glued to the dark sticky goo leaking from the drum, the tips of her once orange colored feet soiled black and immobile. Her big ebony eyes staring through a thread of opening at a world they will never see again. Her white throat smudged in black.

The girl had never heard the word *innocent*, but she recognized what it was. And though she did not know the word *dignity*, she understood its absence.

The bus driver had pulled the rag from his face so that it hung under his chin. And he stood with a pitiful gaze, looking down at the little girl.

“Wi can’t know it be female,” he said.

But she did know. The frog’s white throat, the circles around her ears, the fact that she was larger than a male would have been.

“Please, Child, wi gotta go. How I say yuhs late for school because of de dead frog? Wi can’t do notten’ now.”

“But what if she has babies?”

“Oh Mon, dead be dead.... Wi can’t know it had babies.” Then he coughed, the toxic smell irritating the back of his throat. “Hell, dey be probably all dead too. Or, maybe dey get out sum’how.” He coughed again, yanking the bandana up. “I don’t know, Child,” his despair and desperation muffled in the words under the red rag covering his mouth and nose. “It’s total contamination, so we can’t even touch de ding.”

*Dead is dead*, the bus driver had said. And she knew he was right; the tiny tree frog was dead, and a little girl was learning that death means never coming back. The pretty frog would not be listening to the singing of the male tree frogs that night as an angry off-shore storm, responding to their mourning songs, would bring a deluge of rain that would fall and finally free the dead frog from the corroded barrel, and in the little girl’s mind she could see in that instance of pouring rain, the small stiffened body sliding down the ugly drum into the once purified water that all her life had sustained her. The little girl could even see beyond the dump site, the tiny lifeless form carried in the night songs of the other tree frogs with the rushing water on towards the womb of the great mother of all life, the Ocean.

Somewhere, at the very edge of the kindergartner’s life experience, she understood, *dead is dead*, and yet, somewhere deep inside, she also understood that in some primal way, her death deserved more than this, more than dying in toxic waste she had no part of creating, more than dying without purpose. Death should have meaning. Death should have *dignity*.

She worried about the babies, waiting for a mother who will never return.

The bus driver looked at his watch again. “Come on, Little One,” he implored, tugging her hand towards the front of the bus. “Dey get dis cleaned up soon,” he assured her, but more himself.

“But the *babies*,” she pleaded.

“I gotta get yuh kids to school. Heaven’s sake, Mon, wi can hear the principal already.... Now come on,” he repeated, as he helped her up the first step. Then, suddenly, he grasped her arm, and she turned as he let go. “Membra mi tell yuh **dis**,” **he said**, talking over the red bandana, pronouncing his words as clear and serious as he could. “Everydey buck-it go a well....**Wan day de battam drap out....**”

She gazed at him with curious contemplation.

“Notten lasts forever, Child.”

As she climbed the steps, he said, “I’m sorry,” his words reaching out to her small saddened form as she headed down the aisle to find a seat amongst the commotion of grumbling and retching students.

The bus driver shook his head, and glanced again at his wrist, sad himself for the death of something so delicate and for the little girl who cared, and exasperated at the idea of a watch and an inflexible schedule holding him captive. Whether in natural time or the time ticking on his wrist, he knew that maybe we were all *...runnin’ outta it*.

His gaze shifted up through the half opened door across the bus stop and across the two lane road and focused on the tall palms and pines and wild oaks shimmering in the early sunlight, and then he thought outside his mind, a prayer of some kind, a dreadful prayer to God.

“It’s bad, bad, Jah,” he said, “such disrespect tuh nature, is disrespect tuh yuh.”

He turned, pulled himself up the steps, and slid into his seat behind the wheel, the raucous in the bus, becoming a dull almost muted muttering in his head. As he pushed the ignition switch, the noisy engine started.

But, just about ready to finally leave the scene of horror, something made him glance again into the cracked rearview mirror at the ditch where the little Indian girl had been standing. Something had caught his immediate attention. Something with the color of sunlight in the eyes looking at him, looking through him, and into his soul. Something too extraordinary to imagine in this place....

The erect ears, the black nose twitching, assessing; the strong tall and powerful legs and body of golden tan and black, a white belly and paws, and a bushy black tail with a white tip that brushed the ground. Something that resembled a dog, but was not a dog at all. An animal so rare, he might've stepped in from a dream. Sacred and fearful all at once. Shocking. Captivating. The bus driver blinked. And the animal was gone.

***You have noticed that everything an Indian does is in a circle, and that is because the Power of the World always works in circles, and everything tries to be round..... The Sky is round... the earth is round like a ball, and so are all the stars. The wind, in its greatest power, whirls. Birds make their nest in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours.... Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing, and always come back again to where they were. The life of a man is a circle from childhood to childhood, and so it is in everything where power moves. -***

Black Elk

## **Chapter One:**

### ***This Thing Called ... Time***

The beautiful young woman sat on a bench in the sun, staring up across the concrete walkway at the large, old clock high on the wall of the Science Building. She laughed quietly to herself, thinking that her grandfather would have also found humor in such irony, for the dictionary defines science as *the study of the natural world using information gathered from the natural world*, and the mechanical clock hanging from the Science Building wall is defined as *a man-made device that has little or nothing to do with natural time, nor is an aspect of the natural world*.

Still smiling, she remembered her grandfather saying once, that when he was a small boy, the last elder of his mother's people had told him that of all the ancient Native American languages he knew of, "None had a word for *time*."

In front of the University Conference Room where the young woman sat, and waited, its imposing metal door remained closed.

When you're waiting for something you want, this thing we've learned to call *time* seems to slow down. When you're awaiting something you don't want, this thing called *time* seems to speed up.

Sitting on the bench in the warm sunlight, with the big clock just off in the distance, the she shifted her attention to the east, where across the bay, storm clouds were gathering, and she was remembering her grandfather again, recalling a moment one sorrowful morning many years ago. She was a little girl, and she was scared and she was sad and she was angry, and she was sitting on the top step of the front porch waiting for something then too, only at that moment she was waiting for this something called *time* to turn back.

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“Time is of the Mystery, Granddaughter,” he said. He had seated himself on the porch step alongside of her. “One day,” he said, “you’ll be able to remember those ye loved that you’ve lost, and ye won’t feel so bad. You’ll feel the slant of warm sunlight streamin’ through a window touchin’ your skin, or you’ll wake up deeply moved after seein’ who you loved in a dream, or you’ll be walkin’ home from the bus stop and you’ll smell the beach at low tide recallin’ when you strolled on the sandbars together, searchin’ for shells, and that tingling feelin’ of warmth, or in that brief instant after a special dream, or embracin’ that salt water scent of memory on your way home will fill you up, and may cause ye to close your eyes and put you in a different state of mind, and ye may even smile, and you’ll feel better about havin’ loved at all.”

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The gaze of the young woman with eyes the color of a young deer, lifted up again to the old clock, and she was smiling, still halfway in the feelings of that long ago memory crouched on the edge of the porch steps, when she and Grandpa, like always, were trying to make sense of things.

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“Time is, indeed, of the Mystery, Granddaughter,” he said again, raising his head, breathing in the ocean air, looking in the direction of the water that he could not see beyond the front yard and the trees and dunes.

“It is of this moment,” he said. “And yet, it ebbs and flows like the tide. It circles the earth like the Moon. It circles the Sun like the earth. Time can move slower than the sap of an oak tree in winter, and faster than the speed of light through a galaxy. It can disappear into a black hole. Time does not run in a straight line, beginnin’ here, and endin’ there. Not *time*. Our lives and everything we’re connected to move in circles and cycles,” he said, “and one day, Granddaughter, this cycle of your life will be over, and a new one will begin.”

Even now, in her mind’s eye, as she sat on the bench in the warm sun, she can still see him next to her through the enchantment of memory, nearer to her than the metal door of the conference room, where she is scheduled to enter soon, and clearer to her than the hands of the old clock on the Science Building wall.

Sitting on that bench at the university in the sun on such a pretty day with the big clock just ahead hanging high up on the wall like an ornament of modern civilization, caused this very consciously aware young woman to reflect more on what she had learned about this thing called *time*.

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They stood together on those very dark nights when the sky was absent of any light from the Moon, and on those special other nights when the Moon was full, the girl’s small hand held in the security of her grandfather’s, together, standing at the edge of each other’s shadows, looking up at the exquisite bright being he had always called, *Grandmother*.

“I love you,” she would hear him say to the Moon. “You are beautiful.” The words as soft as the night air from a child to his grandmother, his eyes and heart in sacred wonder, gazing up, the resonance of his voice reaching across the space between them.

“Don’t forget natural time, Granddaughter,” she could hear him now, even as she sat quietly on a bench at a university, waiting for the hands of the large old clock on the Science Building wall to reach 3:15. And still, she could see him too, there again, in her mind’s eye, her grandfather, now leaning against the porch post, the wolf Koda nearest her, standing alongside the sad little girl that she was then... so many years ago.

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“No, Granddaughter,” he repeated, “don’t forget natural time, even though we must live in a world that is also run by the clocks of man-made time.... To forget the passage and cycles of natural time would also be to forget your kinship with the Earth, the Sun, the Moon, and the Stars. And that would be awful, Granddaughter. For nothin’ can make us feel so empty than separation from our kin.”

The child she was then gazed up at him, the feeling of that kind of separation connecting them.

The world she had known was changing into something else, something unknown, something new. And she was afraid.

“So,” he said into the quiet of afterthought, “despite the goings on of civilized folks with appointments, time clocks, and rush hours, and regardless of what human bein’s like us have gained or have lost, the sun still rises and sets. The moon waxes and wanes. The earth rotates on her axis, circlin’ the great star we call our sun. Stars move with their galaxies. The galaxies move. Everything spinnin’ and spiralin’ in circles and cycles. All movin’... *together*. And us movin’ right along with ‘em.”

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Still, this young captivating woman, who knew all this because it is the foundation of her ancestral way of *being human*, who was aware of the nature of natural time, found herself staring up at the mechanical hands of an old time piece suspended in technological time on a university building; 3 o'clock, it read. *Fifteen minutes*, she thinks. Fifteen minutes and she will be judged.

In this man-made world of time, she has learned to function... in which we all learned to function. But for her, it became a symbol of the struggle she always faced, *seeing the world in the ways of her ancestors, living in the ways of civilized men*.

She does not give herself fully to the clock of artificial time, as Grandpa had said, for that would mean a disconnection from nature, and her ancestors, and even her celestial kin. So, she told herself, "Stop it," and turned her attention, instead, to natural time, focusing on those great mountain clouds piling high in the east, just beginning their trek across the bay.

She knows that, soon, over the churning waters, the wind will send them, the Thunder Beings and the rain. They will arrive about the time the sun moves behind the Science Building wall where the big clock hangs, and then, she imagines, the purpose and the cycle of her being in this place and time will be complete, and her life path from the time of her birth until now will have reached its destination, and a new cycle will have begun.

Taking a deep breath from the depths of her abdomen, and releasing it slowly, she feels relief. Now she was back to thinking in natural time.

How fitting it would be, she thought, to rain on such a special day, making it seem all that more amazing, like another rebirth for her in the same lifespan. For now, though, while she

waited with the patience she had spent her life learning, Father Sky covered the world above her in blue, and the mighty Sun shined on everything, and warmed her face in his light.

Her perfect lips forming a contented smile once again, she sighed, brushing away strands of her long chestnut hair, delicately touching the eagle feather fastened to her single sun-streaked braid lifting in the cool early autumn air. What a journey this has been, she thinks, to be here in *this* moment and place and to see it all opening in her mind's eye, like an ancient Mayan codex, the stories of the stars and of the earth and of her life unfolding, like so many stories, and she scanning these painted pages of her mind, looking back into this thing we call *Time*....

## ***Chapter Two:***

### ***Burial in the Trembling Earth***

For several months the unusual tremors had shaken their small homes in the middle of the night. Now in the middle of the morning the trembling Earth was shaking again beneath the

boots and covered shoes of the people gathered in the old cemetery. Snowflakes floated silently, landing on the snow covered and frozen South Dakota ground, even as it shook. The snowflakes fell on the many gray headstones, and on the feathers and colorful ribbons decorating the coup sticks leaning on them. The snowflakes fell on the dream catchers and hickory medicine wheels and other sacred objects, suspended from the bare boughs of the sleeping trees, lingering there and turning them white. They fell on the many crosses spread out on the snowy hill. They fell into the two deep rectangular holes dug side by side, and on the two pine boxes being lowered into the graves.

They fell on the people's teary faces as their cold breath drifted like smoke into a slate colored sky, the Earth beneath them trembling again. They fell on the men beating on a drum who sang a song that the child she was then did not understand, but the feeling of the words made her sense the strength and the sorrow of her own heart beating. The snowflakes fell and shivered on the drum. They fell on her grandfather's uncovered head and heavy coat, and on his arm that was wrapped around her little shoulders the whole time, holding her tight. They fell on the silvery white hair of the ancient woman standing otherworldly behind them who had held her in the classroom when the news of death arrived.