



NOTE ON THE COVER ART:

It wasn't long ago that millions of buffalo wandered the prairies in large herds. For thousands of years, our ancestors lived off these resources, receiving food, clothing, medicines, and shelter. In respect, they took only what they needed to care for their families, and gave prayerful thanks to the buffalo for giving up their lives. Tragically, over a short period of time, this great nation of animals was hunted almost to extinction by foreign governments and big business. Today the buffalo only exist in small, protected herds, in parks or on farms.

Today the salmon of the West Coast are in danger of being killed off by foreign fish farms, corporations, and governments focused on jobs in the present and profits for the immediate future. Will the salmon nation go the way of the buffalo? Or will we learn a better way of relating to our natural relations? Can we live in respect with the rest of creation? Can we steward the earth, but even more importantly, let the earth, and the One who made it, steward us?

My artwork depicts a resurgent buffalo carrying within her the life and bones of the salmon. In a spirit of solidarity, they resist extinction and erasure.

—Jonathan Erickson (*Nak'azdli, Carrier-Sekani*)

BUFFALO SHOUT, SALMON CRY

**CONVERSATIONS ON CREATION,
LAND JUSTICE, AND LIFE TOGETHER**

EDITED BY STEVE HEINRICHS



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*for indigenous cousins
fractured by church
yet keeping on like few others
living icons of enemy love
re-membering a trickster more than crucified*

*for the church
segregated from host
a body struggling to guest its way,
naming red skins there, forgetting white camouflage here
we offer hope, and calculate too*

*behold that body, broken, blessed, bloodied
there it is
more than hope, healing too
touch, see, and go*

*for other creaturely cousins
all around but more distant than plastic
dying and knocked off
forced out of womb by an idolatrous lust
back to the soil of a menstrual mother*

*what can we give?
not much
but here's a fool's gift for you
and with any luck, some animalized lives*

—SH

beginning . . .

god and the devil
hooked up on social media recently and
still caught in a colonial time warp
decided to start everything over again
by meeting in the church parking lot
to shoot craps to decide who would create whom
and despite his omnipotence
god kept rolling ones, but putting his
most articulate doctrinal spin to work
claimed one plus one is three
(to try to get a little advantage)
but the devil rolled two twos
laughed
danced off his disguise
shape-shifted into coyote and
bull-elk and saguaro and iron,
and said, two plus two—is thirteen blessings,
just like you and me, land and sea,
day and night, sky and earth
corn and lightning, raven and
sapling, and winners
and losers becoming losers and winners
—two is the truth
even of us!
but god turned pink with disbelief
said, “don’t give me that Potawatomie gift economy crap!”
became a white man and started killing everything in sight
until he finally killed himself
and then the earth said to the sun
“burn the flesh off
so we can gather all the relatives
gamble with the bones
and see what comes next!”

—Jim Perkinson

WHY I DO NOT BELIEVE IN A CREATOR

By Tink Tinker (Wazhazhe/Osage Nation)

What is your word for God? What do you mean you have no word for God? Everyone believes in a Creator, don't they? Our more liberal-minded White friends always want to know more about us, so they naturally come with questions. Thirty-five years ago, a Native elder from northern California told us a creation story. Long ago, Coyote was floating through the air and wanted some place to rest. So he created the earth—although it was just an accident. So is coyote God? *The Creator?*

As we have learned from the world of physics, even scientific observation changes what is being observed (i.e., the “observer effect”). In this case, the very question that any White person (say, an anthropologist) asks a Native person shapes her answer in decisive ways. Whatever the Native person has to say about the matter must now use the language categories of the colonizer. In this case, the key problematic words are *god*, *creator*, and *believe*. The question itself shapes the reality that the Native person must try to describe. Now she must struggle to use colonial language of god, creator, and belief to interpret her own world back to the well-meaning colonizer, who seems to assume that everyone in the world is similar to himself. The more these euro-christian friends hear about Coyote, however, the clearer they are that crazy Old

Man Coyote is not exactly what they mean by the word *god*—even if he created something.¹

It must sound quite incredulous and heretical to announce a disbelief in a creator, since talk of a “creator” and a “creation” has become second nature in the euro-colonized world, as liberal Christianity attempts to reclaim a theology rooted in what some call its “First Article” doctrine (i.e., beginning with the creator and creation, as in the Apostles’ Creed). My objection to creator/creation language, however, is vitally important to preserve the coherence of an American Indian worldview. My concerns include both linguistic complexities involved in any translation and the imposition of categories of cognition in the colonizer’s language as though they represent some level of normative universality in this late colonial world. This is *necessarily complex*, and requires some detail in explanation.

The up-down image schema

In this case, creator and creation are key categories of presumed universality deeply embedded in the “social imaginary”² of euro-colonial people in north America as normative truth. As such, they get too easily imposed on the vanquished Aboriginal owners

1. My use of the lower case for such adjectives as *english*, *christian*, *biblical*, etc., is intentional. While nouns naming religious groups might be capitalized out of respect for each Christian—as for each Muslim or Buddhist—using the lower-case *christian* or *biblical* for adjectives allows readers to avoid unnecessary normativizing or universalizing of the principal institutional religious quotient of the euro-west. Likewise, I avoid capitalizing such national or regional adjectives as *american*, *amer-european*, *european*, *euro-western*, etc., and decline capitalizing the *n* in *north America*. It is important to my argumentation that people recognize the historical artificiality of modern regional and nation-state social constructions.

Quite paradoxically, I know, I insist on capitalizing *White* (adjective or noun) to indicate a clear cultural pattern invested in Whiteness that is all too often overlooked or even denied by american Whites. Moreover, this brings parity to the insistence of African Americans on the capitalization of the word *Black* in reference to their own community (in contra-distinction to the *New York Times* usage). Likewise, I always capitalize *Indian*, *American Indian*, and *Native American*.

2. A phrase coined by the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (Catholic) that refers to the set of symbols and values that construct a society’s field of understanding and determine what is thinkable and doable.

of the land as though the euro-american metaphoric imagination were so concrete and tangible, a presumably obvious “first principle,” as it were, that all peoples must inherently find some way to talk about this colonial christian imaginary—even if in their own discrete language. First of all, the word necessitates a couple of other cognitional categories that I am increasingly disavowing. Those two categories include both the notion of a “creator”—that is something euro-westerners would call “god,” usually with a capital letter—and a much more pervasive cognitive model we might call an up-down cognitive image schema (using the language of cognitive linguistic theorists). This image schema then identifies a whole social imaginary that organizes everything from political realities (even in a “procedural” democracy) to theologies (from conservative to liberal). Identifying a creator as a super-personality who is responsible for creating all things, a “god on high,” is a euro-colonial hierarchic imaginary that lends itself both historically and presently to euro-christian notions of hierarchy and inequality.

Here, I am not simply objecting to the language of god and creator as language embedded in a european worldview or christian ideology. It is much more crucial to notice that imposing these religious metaphors of a hierarchical divine as an overlay on Indian cultures irredeemably distorts the Native culture and destroys the intricacies and the beauty, that is, the coherence, of the Native worldview. An up-down linguistic cognitive image functions to structure the social whole around vertical hierarchies of power and authority.

Largely unnoticed by those who are immersed in it, an up-down image schema is an ever-present american conceptual metaphor, one that creates the hierarchic notions that dominate our euro-colonial world of christian conquest. It puts some over others, and someone always seems to be “in charge.” The up can be a king or a president, but that person is the One, the top of a hierarchy. Until recently, european theorists explained White as the superior form in their racial hierarchy with a descending rank according to the darkness of skin color. While man is “head of the household” in european gender hierarchy (the so-called “order of creation” that suppresses women into a lower status; see Genesis 2 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15), children are always thought to be subservient to the

parents (to be “seen and not heard”). This order-of-creation mentality then evolves politically into the valorization of “meritocracy” as a norm in American political, intellectual, and socioeconomic culture. Especially beginning in the sixteenth century, humans come before all the rest of creation. Since trees are far down the hierarchy of being, clear-cutting a forest for human profit is an easy thing to rationalize. Capitalist economies function with a clear up-down hierarchy of command, as do modern military “chains of command.” Up-down lends itself especially to the language of ruler and sovereignty, words that lack any ancient counterpart in Native languages. And in the euro-christian worldview, there must be a spiritual power (higher power) who rules over humans and over all creation. So people generally talk of a god who “looks over them.”

In other contexts I have noted that the Indigenous worldview is primarily spatial, while the euro-western worldview is primarily temporal. That may seem a bit paradoxical in my description, here, of what seems to be a spatial up-down euro-christian imagery. The temporality that is so characteristic of the euro-western worldview is somehow morphed into this physical-space image of the up-down deity. There is a hierarchical “geography” that is attached to the euro-western temporal worldview, resulting in this up-down, spatial imagery (or imaginary) that gets populated with all kinds of concrete objects that inhabit actual space—such as a kingdom, and a white-haired, bearded god sitting on a throne in a heavenly palace. It is indeed spatial imagery—everything in it has a “footprint”—but the spatial here is “located” in a way-off, distant, abstract place. The up-down image schema seems to be inherently temporal and only subordinately spatial.

A clear and particularly disastrous use of the up-down image schema in relation to Native Peoples is the use of “Great White Father” to refer to the U.S. head of government and “Great White Mother” in Canada, in reference to the Queen of England. The language does not come from Natives themselves, but was the vain attempt of White colonial functionaries on the frontiers to name both White superiority and the authority of the political leader of the european invaders, whether Washington or Ottawa. The hierarchy is obvious: White conquistador (White superiority) over savage, uncivilized Natives.

An American Indian worldview, to the contrary, generates a social whole that eschews up-down hierarchies in favor of lateral social constructs that are much more egalitarian and predicated on balance and harmony. The important distinction, here, is that “lateral” does not imply “neutralizing,” or a dismissal of the uniqueness of persons (whether two-legged, four-legged, winged, or all other forms of living and moving persons) within the greater whole. In other words, it is not a worldview that could be equated with the euro-western notion of “communism.”

Imposing an up-down cognitive schema overlay on an Indian collateral worldview not only fails to allow for the expressing of Native realities, it is ultimately very destructive of those Native realities. And it certainly does not matter that many, if not most, Native People have made—under the duress of sheer survival—the concessive move to adopt those cognitional categories as somehow meaningful in their own postcolonial contexts. Ultimately, this new euro-christian colonial imaginary, imposed on Native Peoples and their lands over the past centuries, grossly distorts what is left of Indian cultures, and remains an impediment to continuing any egalitarian relationship between Peoples (using *Peoples* as a legal technical term). More to the point, I would argue that this newly imposed euro-christian worldview is ultimately destructive to the earth and all our relatives here on the earth, and thus imperils all Peoples, including those who live within the euro-western worldview.

The key problem is that the deep structure realities of the two worlds, those of euro-Christianity and American Indians, are inherently opposite to one another. Or, as Seneca scholar Barbara Mann puts it in *Iroquois Women*, “[I]n the european/Iroquoian instance, none of the metanarratives of the two cultures coincide.”³

Collateral-egalitarian image schema as community-ist

The worldview that traditionally pervaded all Native communities in the Americas embodies a cognitive model we might call a

3. Barbara Mann, *Iroquoian Women: The Gantowisas* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 63. Note also Vine Deloria's comment in the introduction to his *Metaphysics of Modern Existence*: “The fundamental factor that keeps Indians and non-Indians from communicating is that they are speaking about two entirely different perceptions of the world” (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), vii.

collateral-egalitarian image schema, which is more of a community-ist model. As noted above, this is distinct from what the euro-west too easily imposes on Native peoples as a communist model. To understand the radical difference this model embodies, we need to begin with the numbers one and two and unpack the difference culturally. Mann rightly insists that Indian people are dualistic, in the sense of paired reciprocity, and that two represents the number of balance and wholeness. The number one, she insists, is dysfunctional. We need to see the number one as extractive rather than reciprocal. Value is placed in the One as superior, and the euro-west cannot envision a distribution of value or meaning across multiplicities of Two. In the euro-western, christianized mind, this kind of distribution dilutes value. There is only a monolithic image of power and value of the one, which is static—and superior. Two, in the American Indian context, is necessarily dynamic and lends itself to reciprocity.

For Indian peoples, this duality inherent in the number two is the balance of two paired halves necessary to make a whole: light and dark, male and female, sky and earth, night and day, sun and moon, etc. This American Indian reciprocal dualism of paired halves is the opposite of what she identifies as the Manichaeian oppositional dualism, an up-down image schema that fuels euro-western political and religious ideologies. So, first of all, the notion of a single creator immediately participates in the dysfunctionality of the number one, signaling a hierarchical order of creation. The dualistic opposite, rather than a feminine co-participant, is then abject evil, or the Devil, something entirely lacking in Indian cultures until it was read back into our traditions by missionaries who needed to find (and still do) an equivalent evil to fit their own theologies. For Indian folk, the notion of a single, male sky god is decidedly unbalanced and leads to chaos, competition, male supremacy, racial hierarchy, and competing notions of a single (doctrinal?) truth over against falseness, heresy, and evil. It immediately allows for an anthropology that is decidedly anthropocentric and elevates the human (superior) over all other life-forms (the inferior), and equally allows for the elevation of male over female—since it is the male/man/*adam* who is particularly made in the image of the christian, male sky god.

Indians, creator, god, and the colonization of the mind

“Wait a minute there!” some colonialist critic might insist, “I hear Indian folk call on Creator in their prayers all the time.” Yes, it is true that many Indian folk and even national communities have today fallen into using Creator language, and I must admit to having fallen into that usage myself in some previous writings. Yet this reflects a couple of postcolonial realities. First, Indian minds have been so deeply colonized into colonial discourses—even discourses about ourselves—that we have come to believe what the missionaries have told us about ourselves. Even those of us who claim to have rejected the imposition of colonialist language and cognition can find ourselves slipping into euro-christian colonialist usage at the strangest and most unguarded moments.

Under the intense colonizing pressure of the invader governments (i.e., Canada and the United States) and the steady stream of euro-colonial missionaries, too many Indian folk have simply capitulated to Christianity in the guise of one denomination or another. To use creator language instead of missionary-god language helps these Indian folk feel a little more Indian-like, since all our traditions do acknowledge a variety of powers that brought about our present world. Second, many Indian folk have held on to something of their traditional ways, but those ways have been effectively altered along the way by euro-colonial interpreters (missionaries, anthropologists, elitist tourists and adventurers, etc.) in processes that Mann usefully calls “euro-forming.” In this process, even our traditional ways are persistently reshaped particularly to exclude the feminine and to replace reciprocal dualism with the masculinist oneness of a sky-god.

wako"da, the colonial missionaries have long told us, must be the Osage word for “God.” Osages, and other Natives, must necessarily have some innate sense of a monolithic high god (read hierarchic/up-down god). The necessity, of course, is for affirming the self-identity and cosmology of the conquering colonizer and to coerce the Native into the new cultural modality of singularity and hierarchy of the up-down image schema imposed by the colonizer. The first step, then, is to erase women, erase the feminine, entirely. So, what was a powerful reciprocal duality of collateral balance becomes a male-dominant monotheistic modality. *wako"da*

mo"shita ski wako"da udseta, Life Maker Above and Life Maker Below, Grandfather and Grandmother, all get reductively suppressed into "Dear heavenly Father." And that dear heavenly father, we are assured by the missionary voice, is the english equivalent of the original Native *wako"da*. *What a tragic loss, a loss of cosmic balance.* The power of the old Osage traditional experience of the world, and of every Native community of the Americas, was its implicit and explicit sense of balance and harmony. That collateral image schema of balance and harmony, then, is replaced by the multiple euro-western cultural image schema of up-down (masculinist) hierarchy. The co-lateral, community-ist image schema of interrelationship ("we are all related") is replaced by hierarchy and ultimately of domination. The role of the feminine in our experience of the cosmic energies is erased in favor of male supremacy; the collateral image schema of cosmic (and personal) balance is instantly discarded in favor of the new up-down image schema of power and control. Not only is the masculine high god fully in charge, a masculinist clergy is vested with full authority to interpret the will of that one. And that has become the predominant Osage reality today after more than a century of intense missionization.

Cosmic duality and balance (expressed in *wako"da mo"shita* and *wako"da udseta*) are as much at stake as are personal and community-ist balance. These spiritual energies are dual and reciprocal, mutually reinforcing of one another and vitally necessary for balance. In my wife's dissertation about Indigenous Andean mining, she describes the Andean view that everything under the surface of the earth was not "evil," but rather held a different kind of energy that needed to be respected when going underground. Those underground or subterranean energies are absolutely necessary for balance in all of the universe, but they must be approached and interacted with differently. As Aaron Running Hawk listened to her description, he said that from a Lakota perspective, the unearthing of minerals and bringing them up to the surface for modern industrial use was creating a huge imbalance of the earth. One can picture the sphere of the earth becoming distorted in shape and wobbling out of its spin and orbit. Also, during the Latin American celebration of Carnival, the purpose of the event is to momentarily reverse the duality in order to preserve balance. Thus, the Andean procession of dancers wearing fearsome masks of

the underground powers is exactly meant to maintain balance. "El Diablo" (the post-Christianizing name for Tio or Muki) is brought into the light of day for a little while, but then one would presume from this that the above-earth powers become subterranean for a little while. Then it all shifts back to the way it was. This has incredible contemporary relevance. For within the Indigenous Andean worldview, which respects both powers above and below, the very minerals of the earth are considered to be the veins and blood of this living, animate earth. And thus, modern industrialization is committing extraordinary personal violence by leeching all that blood to the surface in order to satisfy the monotheistic imaginings and desires of those who live by the "Protestant ethic" of capitalism and prosperity theology.⁴

Indian "creation" stories

While all Indian people have stories of origin—called "creation stories" in euro-talk—these stories differ significantly from the euro-west's. Osages remember that the dry-land portion of this world was made in the long ago by *o'po" to"ga*, the bull elk. So, why can't we just say that Bull-Elk is the Creator and leave it at that? The first problem with that choice is that human people and, at least, elk already existed. So did the earth. When the sky people/humans came down from the stars, they were brought down to the earth by the eagle (another creator figure?) but found it covered with water. It was Elk who then created the dry ground and all kinds of living things to help the humans to be able to survive. Once these sky people began to make their way around *mo"sho"*, then they discovered another community of humans, the earth people, who were already here. So, Elk shared a role and responsibility in making the world the way it is—as did Eagle. But neither one is the sort of monotheistic "creator" like the one brought over the waters with the christian european invasion. Indeed, recall that the world and people already existed—particularly the oak tree in which the sky people first landed. Namely, there are no credible, historical American Indian

4. See Loring Abeyta, *Resistance at Cerro de Pasco: Indigenous Moral Economy and the Structure of Social Movements in Peru* (PhD diss., University of Denver, 2005).

stories that tell of a creation *ex nihilo*, a creation from nothing. Nor is there a super-personality who is ultimately in charge. This same structuring of beginnings plays out in all Indian traditions. As Barbara Mann describes the Iroquois traditions, for instance, there are pairs of individuals who contribute to the making of the world—Sky Woman, her daughter Lynx, and Lynx's two sets of twins, one male and one female. Writing in correction of the euro-formed version of Iroquois traditions, which labels the male twins (Flint and Sapling) as one good and one evil, she insists, "Flint was not a 'destroyer,' nor Sapling a lone 'Creator.' Instead, both Twins were creators of life abundant—as were their female elders before them."⁵ Mann's point, here, relates exactly back to Indigenous Andeans' understanding of Muki as a separate spiritual power source, as well as explaining carnival's misuse of Muki as a christian devil figure. Here we could add one more note of difference. While there is no garden of bliss in Aboriginal American traditions, all these stories tell of balancing the world from the beginning, without any aspersions of human fallen-ness or sin, and without any notion of an evil influence in the process. That only comes with the christian euro-forming of our traditions.

We are all related

In terms of euro-christian theological notions, the contemporary and more liberal idea of stewardship continues precisely this notion of hierarchy in an anthropocentric modality that is antithetical to an Indian worldview and the values that emerge from that worldview. Since our experience of the world is one of interrelationship, we cannot conceive of a human superiority to any of the other living things of the world. They are all "relatives." And to put ourselves somehow in charge seems to Indian peoples to be a very dangerous move, which puts the balance of the whole in great jeopardy.

Experiencing all non-human persons as relations generates an affect or way of life in which there can be no hierarchy of being, either among a human community or between the different categories of persons in the world: two-leggeds, four-leggeds, flying ones, or what we call the living-moving people, for example, trees,

5. Mann, *Iroquoian Women*, 89.

corn, rivers, and mountains. All of these persons are our relatives and need to be attended to with appropriate relationship behaviors. If we are all related, then the ideal that every Indian community strived to achieve was and is harmony and balance with all life around us, that is, with all our relatives. And this epitomizes the collateral-egalitarian image schema. Even an up-down hierarchy of human/non-human proves destructive to any ideal of cosmic balance.

Disruptions of balance (from personal to cosmic) occur daily, so they must be mitigated with ceremonial reciprocity. Whatever we human beings acquire or receive, we must give something back. So, if we take an animal relative's life—for example, the buffalo—there must be a ceremony to restore balance in our relationship with the buffalo and with the earth. The ceremonial giving back might include, for instance, a sprinkling of corn pollen (Navajo or Pueblo traditions). Then, when we harvest agricultural goods—for example, corn and corn pollen—there must likewise be a reciprocal ceremony of giving something back. Perhaps the gift might be one of tobacco, but harvesting tobacco likewise requires us to give in order to maintain balance even as we disrupt balance by taking. So, we are constantly reminded that the people whose lives we disrupt by taking are indeed our relatives: corn, buffalo, tobacco, and all other living beings. None of these people are there merely for human consumption or at-will usage. Rather they inhabit the earth along with us and have intrinsic value equal to that of humans. And our response to disruptions we necessarily create, in order to eat and live, requires a constant cycle of ceremony intended to restore balance.

In our living room, we have a lovely lithograph by Hopi artist Dan Namingha titled *Ceremonial Night*, a scene with the moon rising over a Southwest pueblo. The irony of the title, of course, is that there is never a single ceremonial night. The ceremony includes all the nights and days leading up to and preparing for the ceremonial night, and then includes all the nights and days afterward spent fulfilling the obligations, which are communicated from the spirits in the ceremony itself and which lend themselves to maintaining community balance. This hardly accords with the drive for efficiency that is the reality of our modern-day, post-industrial, digitalized

twenty-first century.

Even under the conditions of conquest, generations of propagandizing residential schools and missionaries, and the radical urbanization of many contemporary Native folk, we still try to pay attention to this need to maintain balance. At urban powwows or community ceremonies, someone always takes responsibility for making a "spirit plate" to set aside for our ancestors and for the spirits, something that many of us do even as we cook in our high-rise condominiums or apartments. There is constant travel from north american cities back to reservations and reserves just to maintain the ancestral connections. The land here takes on a continuing importance in the self-identity of people. For some national communities, there is still a tradition of taking a baby's umbilical cord back to the home territory (now usually reduced to a reservation) to be buried there in order to maintain a life-long ceremonial tie to that place.

In this spirit, our responsibility as humans, and the responsibility of every other life form, is to help maintain harmony and balance in the cosmic whole around us. While we can destroy that balance and have a responsibility to help maintain balance, we are never conceived as being in charge in some hierarchical chain of being. This is very different from the story our colonizers tell.

How our White relatives might join us in this cosmic task of maintaining harmony and balance, I cannot even begin to suggest. Sorting out that task after centuries of living out of the up-down hierarchic worldview is something that these relatives must sort out themselves—even though we Natives can certainly help inform that process along the way. But the up-down metaphoric conventions of life that seem so natural and intuitive to all euro-christian folk must give way to a new notion of collateral-egalitarian balance. From our experience with the modern economics of power politics, especially around the use and abuse of Native lands (think Alberta tar sands), to the United States' reliance on foreign policy modalities that rely so heavily on the threat and use of violence (including economic violence in this late colonial period), to the startling realities of global warming and climate change, it seems that two-leggeds are being given a strong message about the way of life that has come to dominate the earth. Up-down theologies of domination have not served

the world well. Even the more liberal and entirely post-modern theologies of "stewardship" are still stuck in that up-down schema that inordinately privileges the human being in an anthropocentric hierarchy. All this points to the need for a serious rethinking of the one, cosmic, male creator god who rules all things. Talk of creation and the single creator it implies is not possible for those of us who take seriously collateral-egalitarian balance and community-ist living.

jumping from heaven
and landing on the ground

white settler eye in my head
seeing "god" at the dead-body end of bread
broken in hand, sands of time falling towards the end
sending prayers up, and life down, on the ground
again
red people's red blood like abel's
still weeping in the loam
buffalo roaming through the heart
no longer on the land
salmon canned to be served on the table
sandwiched between the spam and the lamb
larder waiting fat to be carved from the cow
bowed at the knee like an our father to
the cleaver
drink my beefeater!
but a kettle drum reverb fevers
my nightmare dreams of dread comeuppance
like a rasta head learning arawak tricks of survival
staring straight through my fear
maroon croons from the outback of florida
seminole red leading renegade white and escaped black
to repel the 1816 anglo-attack, and jesus now
broken back into native roots and corn mothers
frybread and bison head dragged
in honor of sun, moon eye glowing from a height
even god fears, deer and leering fox, eagle drift
like a smoke signal over south dakota rock imprisoned
in a jeffersonian deadpan face, waiting rivers racing
with climate change waters to climb the sky, rain
on the unblinking eye, ice the cracks with slow-flaking
truth about the lie, undoing missionary hubris that
it all began in the impossible mathematics that zero plus one . . .
can equal anything other than "dead."

there is nothing sacred about three when the holy is
a multiplicity
of twos bartering bull-elk scat and pollen
into everything
and the ceremony that "saves"
is a red version of instructions
given from the belly
of coyote's never ceasing
laughter!
and i awake softer, and wanting
finally
to listen.

—Jim Perkinson