



Crazy Horse Speaks

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“Crazy Horse Speaks,” which can be understood as a companion piece or response piece to “Custer Speaks” (also a seven-part poem collected in *Old Shirts and New Skins*), is the first of a number of instances in Alexie's literary corpus in which he invokes the character of Crazy Horse, Tashunka Uitko of the Oglala, both for the nobility of his character and for the irony of his destiny. Crazy Horse (c. 1842-1877) seems to appeal to Alexie's literary consciousness for a number of reasons: his mystical visions as a child and throughout his short life; his success as a warrior at the Battle of the Rosebud and at Little Big Horn; his mostly unrequited love and tribally tragic affair with Black Buffalo Woman; the suspicious circumstances of his bayoneting and death at Fort Robinson. Crazy Horse provides a shorthand representation of tragic vulnerability to which Alexie continued to return in prose and poetry over a decade.

From the perspective of Crazy Horse, the poem considers in seven numbered stanzas the responsibilities and burdens of tribal leadership, whether practiced by Sitting Bull (Hunkpapa Lakota leader) or the adversary George A. Custer or by Crazy Horse himself. In the fourth stanza, Crazy Horse recalls sitting across the fire from Sitting Bull: “We both saw the same thing/ our futures tight and small/ an 8 10 dream/ called the reservation./ We had no alternatives/ but to fight again and again/ live our lives on horseback.”

Alexie's speculation raises a fascinating question: Did Crazy Horse, and perhaps Sitting Bull as well, perceive the inevitability of Indian military defeat yet continue to wage war with the U.S. cavalry to forestall the ultimate retreat to demarcated reservation land? The closing two-line stanza, however, shows Crazy Horse's indefatigable spirit, even as it implies that the battle is indeed not over.

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