

World Science Fiction Spring 2019

Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction

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Distances

SHERMAN ALEXIE

(1993)

Survivance is an active sense of presence, the continuance of Native stories, not a mere reaction or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry. Survivance means the right of succession or reversion of an estate, and in that sense, the estate of Native survivancy.

—*Gerald Vizenor*

HEAVILY SATIRIC, SHERMAN ALEXIE'S "Distances" intertextualizes the popular paradigm of Asimov's "robots run amok" in a renewed Wovokan sf narrative of "Indian Traditionalism run amok." The Indian trapdoor humor of this piece invites a closer look at the great Apocalypse supposedly presaged by the historical Ghost Dance prophesied by Northern Paiute holy man Jack Wilson, known as Wovoka, as well as the tradition of transmission within Native literature itself.

Wovoka had a vision of resurrected Natives and the expunging of all whites from North America. To achieve the end times of white supremacy, Wovoka instructed the people to conduct round dances, known as Ghost Dances. Predictably, the Ghost Dance was outlawed by the US government. Significant as a symbol of unification among all Native peoples despite tribal affiliation, the Ghost Dance has become iconic of Native hope and resistance and is treated amply throughout the literature—we see its influence here in "Distances," in

the earlier excerpt from Andrea Hairston's *Mindscape*, and in the later excerpt from Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*.

"Distances" imagines a postapocalyptic landscape in post-Ghost Dance terms—that is, the state of things after the Wovoka prophecy has come to pass. The Others, huge emanations or ancestral persons from ten thousand years ago, "taller than the clouds . . . faster than memory," come back to haunt the remaining Urbans, the city Indians who survived and made their way out to the reservations after the effects of the Ghost Dance became manifest, and the Skins, those living on the res when it happened. In this world, electrical circuitry is cautiously destroyed if not already obliterated, and a tribal council determines what is evil under the prevailing policy that all white-man artifacts are sinful, while Skins counsel together on who should burn. The sense of Native Apocalypse extends beyond the more commonplace sf Armageddon or end-of-the-world scenarios drawn from a Eurowestern biblical tradition, which informs mainstream sf in notable instances such as Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), Albert and Allen Hughes's 2010 film *The Book of Eli*, and television series such as *Survivors*, a BBC venture of the mid-1970s that was reenvisioned in 2008 by Adrian Hodges for subsequent global distribution. Often triggered by specific events such as nuclear warfare, biological disaster, cosmological phenomena, or abrupt ecological "takeovers," sf postapocalyptic narratives feed into the desire for a new frontier and a new start. The Native Apocalypse typified by the Wovoka tradition is often marked by the nostalgia of what was irrecoverably lost in contrast to any hope for a brighter future. It is this more nuanced sense of irony over loss that underpins Alexie's satiric adaptation of Wovoka tradition.



All Indians must dance, everywhere, keep on dancing. Pretty soon in next spring Great Spirit come. He bring back all game of every kind. The game be thick everywhere. All dead Indians come back and live again. Old blind Indian see again and get young and have fine time. When Great Spirit comes this way, then all the Indians go to mountains, high up away from whites. Whites can't hurt Indians then. Then while Indians way up high big flood comes like water and all white people die, get drowned. After that, water go away and then nobody but Indians everywhere and

game all kinds thick. Then medicine man tell Indians to send word to all Indians to keep up dancing and the good time will come. Indians who don't dance, who don't believe in this word, will grow little, just about a foot high, and stay that way. Some of them will be turned into wood and burned in fire.

—Wovoka, *the Paiute Ghost Dance Messiah*

After this happened, after it began, I decided Custer could have, must have, pressed the button, cut down all the trees, opened up holes in the ozone, flooded the earth. Since most of the white men died and most of the Indians lived, I decided only Custer could have done something that backward. Or maybe it was because the Ghost Dance finally worked.

Last night we burned another house. The Tribal Council has ruled that anything to do with the whites has to be destroyed. Sometimes while we are carrying furniture out of a house to be burned, all of us naked, I have to laugh out loud. I wonder if this is how it looked all those years ago when we savage Indians were slaughtering those helpless settlers. We must have been freezing, buried by cold then, too.

I found a little transistor radio in a closet. It's one of those yellow waterproof radios that children always used to have. I know that most of the electrical circuitry was destroyed, all the batteries dead, all the wires shorted, all the dams burst, but I wonder if this radio still works. It was hidden away in a closet under a pile of old quilts, so maybe it was protected. I was too scared to turn it on, though. What would I hear? Farm reports, sports scores, silence?

There's this woman I love, Tremble Dancer, but she's one of the Urbans. Urbans are the city Indians who survived and made their way out to the reservation after it all fell apart. There must have been over a hundred when they first arrived, but most of them have died since. Now there are only a dozen Urbans left, and they're all sick. The really sick ones look like they are five hundred years old. They look like they have lived forever; they look like they'll die soon.

Tremble Dancer isn't sick yet, but she does have burns and scars all over her legs. When she dances around the fire at night, she shakes from the pain. Once when she fell, I caught her and we looked hard at each other. I thought I could see half of her life, something I could remember, something I could never forget.

The Skins, Indians who lived on the reservation when it happened, can never marry Urbans. The Tribal Council made that rule because of the sickness in the Urbans. One of the original Urbans was pregnant when she arrived on the reservation and gave birth to a monster. The Tribal Council doesn't want that to happen again.

Sometimes I ride my clumsy horse out to Noah Chirapkin's tipi. He's the only Skin I know that has traveled off the reservation since it happened.

"There was no sound," he told me once. "I rode for days and days but there were no cars moving, no planes, no bulldozers, no trees. I walked through a city that was empty, walked from one side to the other, and it took me a second. I just blinked my eyes and the city was gone, behind me. I found a single plant, a black flower, in the shadow of Little Falls Dam. It was forty years before I found another one, growing between the walls of an old house on the coast."

Last night I dreamed about television. I woke up crying.

The weather is changed, changing, becoming new. At night it is cold, so cold that fingers can freeze into a face that is touched. During the day, our sun holds us tight against the ground. All the old people die, choosing to drown in their own water rather than die of thirst. All their bodies are evil, the Tribal Council decided. We burn the bodies on the football field, on the fifty-yard line one week, in an end zone the next. I hear rumors that relatives of the dead might be killed and burned, too. The Tribal Council decided it's a white man's disease in their blood. It's a wristwatch that has fallen between their ribs, slowing, stopping. I'm happy my grandparents and parents died before all of this happened. I'm happy I'm an orphan.

Sometimes Tremble Dancer waits for me at the tree, all we have left. We take off our clothes, loincloth, box dress. We climb the branches of the tree and hold each other, watching for the Tribal Council. Sometimes her skin will flake, fall off, float to the ground. Sometimes I taste parts of her breaking off into my mouth. It is the taste of blood, dust, sap, sun.

"My legs are leaving me," Tremble Dancer told me once. "Then it will be my arms, my eyes, my fingers, the small of my back.

"I am jealous of what you have," she told me, pointing at the parts of my body and telling me what they do.

Last night we burned another house. I saw a painting of Jesus Christ lying on the floor.

He's white. Jesus is white.

While the house was burning, I could see flames, colors, every color but white. I don't know what it means, don't understand fire, the burns on Tremble Dancer's legs, the ash left to cool after the house has been reduced.

I want to know why Jesus isn't a flame.

Last night I dreamed about television. I woke up crying.

While I lie in my tipi pretending to be asleep under the half-blankets of dog and cat skin, I hear the horses exploding. I hear the screams of children who are taken.

The Others have come from a thousand years ago, their braids gray and broken with age. They have come with arrow, bow, stone ax, large hands.

"Do you remember me?" they sing above the noise, our noise.

"Do you still fear me?" they shout above the singing, our singing.

I run from my tipi across the ground toward the tree, climb the branches to watch the Others. There is one, taller than the clouds, who doesn't ride a pony, who runs across the dust, faster than my memory.

Sometimes they come back. The Others, carrying salmon, water. Once, they took Noah Chirapkin, tied him down to the ground, poured water down his throat until he drowned. The tallest Other, the giant, took Tremble Dancer away, brought her back with a big belly. She smelled of salt, old blood. She gave birth, salmon flopped from her, salmon growing larger.

When she died, her hands bled seawater from the palms.

At the Tribal Council meeting last night, Judas WildShoe gave a watch he found to the tribal chairman.

"A white man artifact, a sin," the chairman said, put the watch in his pouch.

I remember watches. They measured time in seconds, minutes, hours. They measured time exactly, coldly. I measure time with my breath, the sound of my hands across my own skin.

I make mistakes.

Last night I held my transistor radio in my hands, gently, as if it were alive. I examined it closely, searching for some flaw, some obvious

damage. But there was nothing, no imperfection I could see. If there was something wrong, it was not evident by the smooth, hard plastic of the outside. All the mistakes would be on the inside, where you couldn't see, couldn't reach.

I held that radio and turned it on, turned the volume to maximum, until all I could hear was the in and out, in again, of my breath.