

"A LANDMARK OF HORROR AND  
HISTORICAL FICTION ALIKE." *VULTURE*  
ON *THE BUFFALO HUNTER HUNTER*



**OFF**

**THE**

**RESERVATION**

**STEPHEN**

**GRAHAM**

**JONES**

**NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR**

**OFF THE  
RESERVATION**

*For Sky*

we do not forget our dead, we know  
where they are

—Katherena Vermette



## THE SUMMER INDIANS

It was the first time Nate Yellow Tail had been back to Duck Lake since it almost killed him five years ago.

“It always winter up here or what?” he said to Sebby, then blew his smoke out and squinted through it down the icy slope.

“Why would I know, I’m a town Ind’n,” Sebby said, draping his hand out between them, his index and middle finger waiting, trembling from lack of nicotine.

“Serious?” Nate asked. It was his last cigarette.

“I drove?” Sebby said back.

“You’ll thank me later, when we’re rich,” Nate told him.

“Rich-rich or rez-rich?” Sebby asked, still holding his hand out.

“*Plum* rich,” Nate told him, then took one last drag, deep as he could, and—palm down, cherry up—passed the cigarette across.

“Ah, *pisstááhkaan* . . .” Sebby intoned, inhaling, his eyelids fluttering. He always called cigarettes that, like they were holy.

“Get a hard-on why don’t you,” Nate said with a halfway grin.

“Your wish is my—” Sebby started, thrusting his hips forward, but the cigarette was blissing him out so much he had to stab his right leg back to keep from splatting on his ass.

Nate shook his head, looked away.

Sebby, if you trusted the rolls, wasn't real Blackfeet, so long as you didn't count that all his blood was Blackfeet, and so long as you didn't take into account that he was born on the reservation, and that he nearly died there weekend after weekend, trying in every way there was to give that blood back to the land it came from.

The reason he wasn't on the rolls was the usual petty bullshit with his dad and the Council—same old, same old. It wouldn't be Blackfeet if there wasn't drama, would it? But what not being on the rolls meant was that he didn't get his claim check last year when he turned eighteen. If he'd gotten that death money, and if Nate's had lasted them longer than a month, they wouldn't even have to be up here in the bitter-ass cold.

Nate glared down the slope, trying to get the resolve to do this, and then, certain a skinny kid bareback on a paint horse was coming up behind them, he jerked his head around to catch him, let him know this wasn't an Indian you could sneak up on.

All around it was just snow, though, and more snow, then a little more snow over there, whichever direction that was. Him and Sebby weren't exactly four-directions kind of Blackfeet.

A quarter mile below them, down this icy slope, was Duck Lake. It was mostly frozen, and had that dry-ice kind of mist rising up from it like it didn't really have anywhere to go but didn't want to be where it was, either.

Nate didn't know anything about that, of course.

He wasn't exactly an expert on Duck Lake, either. Before nearly dying out here five years ago, he hadn't even known what the lake and the whole area up here was called. The only way he learned was because the news station down in Great Falls had taken to calling that night the Duck Lake Massacre, exactly like a horror movie.

One Nate had a starring role in.

And now here he was, standing in the sequel.

“So we doing this or what?” Sebby asked across to Nate. “It’s *cold*, man.” He hugged himself and bounced up and down, the cigarette’s last ash crumbling off.

“You’ve for sure got your keys?” Nate asked. Sebby was bad about saying he had them when really they were two cases and three parties back.

“Oh, shit, the trunk,” Sebby said, slapping at his pockets, eyes big and apologetic.

Nate bared his teeth in frustration at the keys probably still dangling from the trunk’s silver keyhole back at the pullout.

But then Sebby was rattling that key ring up like the best punchline ever.

“Remember who’s got the crowbar . . .” Nate told him, letting it slip down from his right sleeve, catching it at its sharp end.

“Ooohh, Bad Indian Alert, Bad Indian Alert,” Sebby called out, dancing away, blocking hands up.

“Let me just—” Nate said, but had to close his eyes hard against the gut-clenching wave of pain he’d been riding since the Duck Lake Massacre. Dr. Rodge assured him it would pass eventually, that it was better than the alternative, but Dr. Rodge wasn’t the one getting jumped by it at every random moment.

Funny thing was, when Cassidy Sees Elk shot Nate with that World War I rifle, it hadn’t even hurt. Not like Nate thought it would. It was more like all the blood in his body had pulsed at once, surging away from what he knew now to call his abdominal cavity. It had made his fingertips pressure up and go numb, his vision flash bright, his throat fill with regret, his mind taking one snapshot of D’s dad looking back to him in slow-motion, open-mouthed shock and then . . . then just snatches of white, red, and either a horse or an elk walking across the snow, its long, flat face

*not* going up and down with each step like usual but its big yellow eyes absolutely looking at him, which still made Nate recoil inside himself from the wrongness.

What he didn't tell the doctors was that whatever that had been coming for him and D might *really* be where the pain was coming from. The reason he didn't tell them was that they might cover their grins with the side of their hands, make knowing eyes to each other about this spooky Indian.

Nate hated them.

And?

This spooky Indian was one of only two to have made it through that night.

The other had been sitting by his bed in the ICU when he finally opened his eyes, her hands twisting each other in her lap, her eyes full, lips pushing out then pursing in tight.

"*Fuck you, Nate Yellow Tail,*" D had whispered, the first cuss words he'd ever heard from her—they were fourteen—and then her tears were all coming at once and she was running to get Nate's mom, and no one could run like Denorah Cross Guns could. Her feet pounding away down that hall were, to Nate, the drums on the cassette his dad had been playing outside the sweat lodge that night, and that got him looking around his hospital room for Victor Yellow Tail, who had to be there, who had always been there, even when Nate told him not to be, never to be.

Later, the nurses would tell him that those drums were probably his own heartbeat, wasn't that funny?

Not really, no.

Neither was this shudder-and-hold-your-breath thing that locked him up each time the pain came on again, wringing him out more and more.

He felt Sebby grab onto him to keep him steady. Or, just to be there, to try to siphon some of the hurt off. Until Sebby, Nate had

never known what it was like to have a brother—to have someone who would step in front of a truck to keep you safe, even though you didn't deserve it.

"Hey, man," Sebby, so distant, said, "it's cool, we can just—"

"No," Nate just managed to get out, and, because words were hard, just chucked his chin at the shuttered-up A-frame cabin down at the shore of the lake, standing there in the pale, leafless trees like a ghost.

"*Plum*-ass rich . . ." Sebby said. "Let's do it."

With that, he hauled the two sleds up beside them, both of them bright orange. They'd just been frosted over in the bed of some pickup parked overnight at Town Pump, practically asking to be guided away. According to Sebby, whose uncles were always sneaking over into Glacier for meat, the sleds were for dragging game back to the truck.

The idea now was to mound these sleds up with a *different* kind of game, pull it all back up to the road like heroes. But that was before they tried balancing on top of this crusted-over snow, always falling through right when they thought it was going to hold them. And then they looked up from that to how far they still had to go to get down to the lake.

At which point Sebby had looked meaningfully down to the sleds, waited for Nate to get it.

"This is stupid," Nate said, settling down into his sled and pulling the rope in.

Sebby was already in his, gripping the sides.

"Shit," he said, looking this way and that. "We should have brought someone else to push us."

Instead, they rocked and sort of willed themselves forward until gravity got hold of them, pulled them over the edge. Then they were ten-year-old kids, whooping their way down faster and faster, Sebby holding one fist in the air, his long hair blowing

behind him, Nate too scared to let go of the sides. Weren't there three-strand fences out here, for cows and horses?

Just when he saw the wire of one of them coming in at throat level, the skin of his Adam's apple retracting away, their sleds both caught a ditch that came right before the dirt road that was only there at the very last moment. They catapulted up into the air, were flying scarecrows for what felt like ten minutes, until they came down in the matching ditch on the other side of the road, just short of the fence.

It hurt like hell, but they couldn't stop laughing and sputtering snow. Sebby's teeth were red with blood and Nate's right cheek felt raw from scraping some ice, and who cared, they'd been *moving*, hadn't they?

They stood up, brushed the snow off even though it was already inside their shirts and pants.

"You good, kimo?" Sebby asked, holding his hand over his own side to mean Nate's delicate one.

"Dude, I told you not to call me that, I'm not the Lone Ranger," Nate said.

"Not the *Long* Ranger, you mean . . ." Sebby said, cutting his hand halfway down his right thigh, and Nate slung snow at him. Sebby curled away from it, his smile bloody, eyes so alive.

When they were done, Nate upped his chin and pointed with his lips at how close they were to the cabin.

They held the loose fence wires down and up for the other to get through, and, walking in line behind Sebby, Nate looked back to the road, still sure somebody was checking them out, and . . .

Did he *remember* it, this nothing little road? Was it the actual one he'd ridden that paint horse on after he got shot, to flag a truck down at the blacktop? The game warden who pulled over that night told him later that the horse's whole side had been shiny with Nate's blood, and Nate guessed so, sure. It did sound pretty badass, like something he would have wanted to do, anyway.

When the game warden was telling him all that at his office, Nate had been just keeping his eyes flat, not showing anything. He was still drinking shakes then, wasn't on solid food yet, wouldn't be for the next year.

"You must get it from your dad, that kind of fight," the game warden went on, leaning back in the chair, his certificates on the wall all around him. "Victor, sheesh, my daughter told me that even after he was—"

"*I don't care!*" Nate had said, surprised by his own voice, and pushed up hard from the chair, banged the door walking out, and the hardest he'd ever cried, he was pretty sure, was around the side of the fish and wildlife office that day.

It was from that game warden telling him he was like his dad. But he wasn't.

His dad had never been a winter warrior like this, would never go breaking into rich people's extra houses because they deserved it—they shouldn't even *be* here. Stealing their shit was hardly even a crime, to a real Blackfeet. This was cultural duty. This was pay-back for them stealing the whole continent.

A few crunching, post-hole footsteps later, they were to the tall front of the house.

There were all these small little footprints right before the porch.

"Some kid playing with his action figures . . ." Sebby said about them.

"Birds wearing shoes," Nate corrected.

"Little grass dancers," Sebby said with a shrug.

"On the snow, yeah," Nate said.

"Sure about this?" Sebby asked, up to the door now, which was as far as they could get and still back out.

Nate cupped his hand around his mouth, barked out loud, "Hey in there! Anybody home? *Pizza!*"

When nobody answered, Nate spun the crowbar up to Sebby like they did this all the time and Sebby wedged it in between the door and the frame and leaned forward, giving it his lanky weight. When the door gave, he stumbled forward into the house, the crowbar clattering behind him. Alone by the porch, Nate was certain again he was being watched.

He turned fast toward the water, the ice, clocking that, with the lake frozen, with that mist hanging heavy like a curtain, anything could be rushing in at him, about to burst out. A wolf, a snowmobile, a hunter, a little herd of wild horses. But then—

Nate took a step back, shaking his head no, his cheeks cupping his eyes because this couldn't be real. No way.

It was two tiny deer nosing at the snow just in front of that grabby red bush he'd heard called buckbrush. One of the deers was a girl, one was a guy—he could tell by the tall, symmetrical antlers, and the lack of them on the other one, and how her eyes were somehow feminine, like she had eyeliner on.

But . . . he was still shaking his head no, maybe even mouthing it.

He'd seen deer in the headlights before at three in the morning, he'd seen them hanging by their hind legs off the back porches of houses all over Browning, and, no, they weren't huge, probably didn't weigh much more than him if he could hold real food down, but they weren't this *little*, either.

These two deer were—they were like Chihuahuas. Like someone had strapped reindeer antlers onto the tiniest of all lapdogs.

But if these were dogs, their eyes would have to be bigger and bulgier, wouldn't they? And their tails wouldn't be white and twitchy. Their little black hooves wouldn't be the size of Nate's thumbnail.

No, these were—

Nate didn't know what they were.

He shook his head, trying to resist what he was seeing, because it couldn't be real, it was wrong, it was stupid, it was impossible.

It *got* real when a cat pounced in from Nate didn't know where—wherever it had been hiding, wherever it had stalked to.

And, not a cat at all: a bobcat? Town Indians who don't know their directions also don't know lynxes from bobcats from baby mountain lions from house cats gone wild. Whatever it was, it made these deer sort of clench their tiny feet to the crust of the snow, that held *them* no problem, and then use that gription to blast off under the brush, the big muscles of their legs so small but perfect for their size, perfect to make them so fast.

The killer-cat followed, crashing in, little bits of buckbrush exploding all around it, and then the whole thing was over like it hadn't even happened.

"*Dude . . .*" Nate mumbled to himself, right in sync with Sebby calling out *Dude!* from inside, making Nate touch his own lips, unsettled by the doubling.

This time the nurses were right: the drumming *was* just his heart, pounding.

"You coming, man?" Sebby asked, back in the doorway, his grin ear to ear.

Nate watched the buckbrush a second or two longer, daring that cat and the two deer to come out, take their bow. When they didn't, he shook this bullshit vision away as best he could and stepped up, ducked in, stopping to stomp the snow off his shoes.

"Yeah, because that matters," Sebby told him.

Nate flipped him off, closed the door behind him, and cased the place.

Reservation houses were mostly low-ceilinged, the rooms small like the government didn't want Indian families getting too big. This living room was what Nate imagined a ski lodge would look like: big, grand, probably two stories up to the sharp point

of the A, and its whole front wall was windows, for drinking hot chocolate and looking at the lake, something stupid and white like that.

“Yeah, they’re asking for it,” he said to Sebbly, and Sebbly smirked, flipped a skinny book on the coffee table over. The cover was a drawing of a bunch of old-time soldiers with bayonet-muskets up on a ridge, killing the Indians below.

“*American Historical Review*,” Sebbly read, making fun of the title just by saying it.

“It goes like this,” Nate said with a thin grin, and turned the cover around so the Indians were on top, the soldiers the ones upside down and dying. It was what his dad had taught him, what, fifteen years ago? The Reverse Massacre: Little Bighorn.

But his dad was gone. Still playing these kind of games was stupid.

Nate sent this *American Historical Review* fluttering across the room to lodge in the kitchen partway under the fancy dishwasher.

“Hey, man, my mom’s old uncle is in this!” Sebbly said from the big plasma screen, holding a VHS tape up like a prize and chicken-dancing around under it—in elementary, he’d competed.

“In what?” Nate asked, and Sebbly, too into his dance to speak, frisbeed the tape over in a perfect, slow arc.

Nate grabbed it from the air, only had to look at it once.

“Him and everybody else who was alive then, yeah,” he said.

*War Party*, shot right here in Nittowsinan. There were tapes of it in every house on the rez. Even houses without VCRs. It was like a badge that proved you were Blackfeet. It didn’t matter if you actually had a family member in it or not—you *did*.

“Why would these people have it, though?” Sebbly asked, his legs starting to die down, his face coming up.

“Who cares,” Nate said. “Not what we’re here for.”

“What *are* we here for?” Sebbly asked.

That was the question, yes.

On the side wall with the fancy cast-iron stove and its black chimney pipe was a painting or etching on some sort of dull sheet metal six or eight feet long. The picture was a few old-time Indians walking a tired horse that was pulling a junky travois—just an everyday “going from here to over there” thing, when there was all that room for a buffalo hunt, a big raid, some ledger art blown up larger than life.

The other side wall had a porcupine quill bustle, a beaded parfleche on a shelf, not hanging by a strap, meaning it was probably actually old, and a long fancy pipe balanced at an angle on two black hooks. The pipe was one of the ones with a bowl carved from pink rock. It had some part of a furry animal hanging off it.

“Hey, they had one-hitters too,” Sebby said about the pipe.

“If that’s one hit, they went harder than I thought,” Nate said back.

“All this *Indian* stuff, yeah?” Sebby said with a shrug. “Pawn shops in Kalispell’re gonna love the hell out of us. ‘My grandad on my mom’s side just died, I found this in his back closet . . .’”

“More like Billings, or Bozeman,” Nate said. “But yeah. Yeah. Unless we get all guilty or someshit.”

“Guilt—?” Sebby started, but cut himself off when he caught up.

Nate was talking about last summer, when a haul a lot like this one had been left at the museum’s front door the same way babies in stories got ditched in front of churches.

“I’ll start loading up, yeah?” Sebby said, sort of asking permission—this was Nate’s operation.

Nate looked over to the front door, to his stomped-off snow, where neither sled was.

“Only stuff we can carry,” he decided out loud. “That’s probably better anyway. Nothing big.”

“What if I find a five-gallon water jug full of quarters?” Sebby asked.

“Then shove it up your ass?” Nate said back.

Sebby aye-aye’d this and edged sideways down the hall to the back rooms, even though anyone sleeping would have already heard them. Nate walked into the kitchen like he owned it, squatted to yank the cabinet under the sink open. The bright white garbage bags were right there. He peeled one off and rolled the rest across the floor for Sebby to find.

Nate didn’t know whether to empty all the forks and spoons into his bag or not, though. Would a pawn shop pay for this kind of stuff? If he gave them to his mom down in Great Falls, would she immediately know he’d stolen them?

Instead, he took a palm-sized clock by the stove that was green granite, all polished up smooth and fancy, but then he decided it wasn’t worth anything and set it back onto the kitchen table, used the cuff of his sleeve to get his prints off it.

This winter-warrior thing wasn’t as easy as he’d thought.

He flinched back when the little clock ticked, then he bared his teeth down at it, hissed.

“This is stupid,” he mumbled.

To add to the stupidity, this kitchen table was more of a desk than for eating. It was all papers and books, notes and little charts—no, *family trees*, the kind Nate and Sebby had had to make in third-grade, so the white-lady teacher could say all the Indian names like they were super special. And under all the papers and books, rolled out and held in place with stones polished from being in the water, was—

“Dude, a real-live winter count,” Sebby said over Nate’s shoulder.

“Wonder what *it’s* worth,” Nate said.

Nate brushed the papers off the tanned hide but what-all happened on the winter count was faded and almost gone, like this piece of leather had spent some serious time outdoors. There was a careful drawing of it on white paper, though, where the sky of

arrows and the big black elk horns and that weird little okan were more clear.

Nate pulled a random notebook up, flipped through. It was that kind of writing that's blocky and perfect, must take forever to get right.

"Treasure map, love letter, dear diary, what?" Sebby asked.

"Look, *look*," Nate urged him holding his left hand all around but not looking up. "We don't have all day."

"Before they come back in summer, you mean?"

"Before it's *dark*?"

"Oh yeah," Sebby said.

They met at the couch with their trash bags ten minutes later.

Nate had what he thought were probably expensive ski boots and some belts from the closet that were maybe alligator, maybe not. Sebby had a bunch of worthless junk he just wanted, but also the pipe and the parfleche and bustle from the wall.

"You're supposed to carry that in, like, a rifle case," Nate told him about the pipe.

Sebby looked around, settled on that winter count, which he tried to magician out from under all the papers and notes. It worked about as well as both of them expected, Nate snatching the granite clock from the air not to save it, but because he could catch it, wasn't *that* broken. Sebby rolled the pipe up in the stiff leather and jacked a couple stray rubber bands down over it, the pipe held very intentionally out from his crotch.

"You're such an idiot," Nate told him.

"Said the genius," Sebby cut right back, his eyes grinning.

Nate dropped his whole bag to the hardwood with a *thunk*, said, "Doesn't anybody have jewelry anymore?"

"Yeah, but probably back in Denver or Jackson Hole or wherever they are now."

It was supposed to be easier than this. Worth the effort.

Then Nate saw it, on the tall narrow counter between the kitchen and the table, where these city people probably ate their Belgian-waffle breakfasts: a five-by-seven family portrait. It was leaned back on its kickstand between two larger photos of Harleys, each in frames welded from motorcycle chains. The family's frame was just simple wood like a kid had made it at camp, and it was more of a snapshot than a portrait, but it was them, anyway.

Nate picked it up, ready to clown on them, but then he was just staring at it.

"What?" Sebby asked, palming the framed photo over then turning it so the heads were at the top.

"Oh, wow, man," he said. "Think they're Blackfeet?"

The snapshot was an Indian mom and two young girls. They were trying to launch a blow-up raft onto the lake, and having no end of fun doing it.

"Who took it?" Nate asked, turning it over like the answer was going to be there.

"More like who *are* they?" Sebby asked, casing the place all over again.

"Summer Indians," Nate said. "Not year-round ones, like us."

"Not real, you mean," Sebby tagged on.

Nate nodded, repeated it: "Not real." Because these Indians didn't live here, just vacationed here. Because they had money for a vacation house like this, in a prime place. But mostly because winter warriors don't break into *Blackfeet* places, only white people's. Which these Blackfeet had to practically be.

"She's probably your cousin twice removed," Sebby said about the mom.

"Probably yours, not removed at all," Nate said back, and Sebby fainted like sure, whatever, but then pushed Nate, bouncing on his feet like *come on*. Nate shook his head no, this was beneath him, he was too old for this, but then grinned and pushed back anyway.

It almost turned into a wrestling match, but when Sebby slid into the kitchen, his hand came back from the knife block not with a knife, but with a bottle of creamy, sort of chocolate liquor. They passed it back and forth until it was cashed.

“Better in coffee, I bet,” Sebby said.

“Town Pump coffee would buck this right off,” Nate said, using the back of his arm to rub the taste from his lips. Which he realized were on the road to numb. What proof *was* this shit?

“Well,” Sebby said.

“Guess so,” Nate agreed.

They cut the leather couch up with knives from that block then snapped the knives in half, dribbled them onto the floor. They kicked the toilet bowl until it cracked and then they pulled the metal painting down, balled it up between them like foil, which took some real work. Only at the end did they see the price tag written on back with black marker: \$6000.

But now it was trash.

Nate picked it up, hurled it over the counter at the silver stove, the glass porthole set in that thick little door not even cracking. “Oh yeah?” Nate said to it, and, to show it who was boss, he slung the little granite clock hard through one of the high windows, winced from what he was seeing in his head: that little clock landing out in the snow by the lake, right on top of one of those tiny deer, the other one looking inside to who did this.

“Almost dark,” Sebby announced.

“Think they knew not to leave anything valuable here,” Nate had to admit. “Would you, if you knew we were here all winter?”

“They’re smart, yeah,” Sebby said. “Maybe they *are* Blackfeet . . .”

On the way gone, Nate left the door yawning open, to be sure snow and bobcats and whatever would have all the access they wanted.

Getting back up the hill was some bullshit, and somehow they

went a different way than where the sleds were. By the time they were to the blacktop, their shoes were soaked through, their feet were frozen, and the sweat they'd worked up was making their teeth chatter.

Sebby's car was still in the pullout where they'd left it. It was dusted with new snow, the dry kind that's mostly little pellets. Nate wiped the windshield with his sleeve, they threw the pipe and Sebby's trash bag onto the back seat, and then they closed their eyes to pray the car started one more time, making promises to it about all the oil and air and gas they were going to give it—*tobacco*, even—and then they sat there until it was idling steady without Sebby feathering the gas.

He was hunched over the wheel from the cold, his arms pulled back into his sleeveless hoodie, only his hands coming out as much as they had to to shift the car into drive.

"You look like a T. rex," Nate said across to him, unable not to grin.

In response, Sebby reared back like a dinosaur and roared, pawing with his stubby arms, and lurched them forward, up onto the road.

"Do you ever stop?" Nate said to him, honestly laughing now.

He was still laughing when the gravel truck barreling down the road slammed into the driver's-side door, sent them spinning into the trees, the first one catching the passenger side front fender hard, so Nate, rag doll that he was, was flung into the window on his side. The last thing he thought, with everything slowed down, was that it was lucky the window was already breaking like it was.

Otherwise it might hurt, with his face coming through it.