

SHERMAN ALEXIE

Defending Walt Whitman

Basketball is like this for young Indian boys, all arms and legs and serious stomach muscles. Every body is brown! These are the twentieth-century warriors who will never kill, although a few sat quietly in the deserts of Kuwait, waiting for orders to do something, to do something.

God, there is nothing as beautiful as a jumpshot on a reservation summer basketball court where the ball is moist with sweat, and makes a sound when it swishes through the net that causes Walt Whitman to weep because it is so perfect.

There are veterans of foreign wars here although their bodies are still dominated by collarbones and knees, although their bodies still respond in the ways that bodies are supposed to respond when we are young. Every body is brown! Look there, that boy can run up and down this court forever. He can leap for a rebound with his back arched like a salmon, all meat and bone synchronized, magnetic, as if the court were a river, as if the rim were a dam, as if the air were a ladder leading the Indian boy toward home.

Some of the Indian boys still wear their military hair cuts while a few have let their hair grow back. It will never be the same as it was before! One Indian boy has never cut his hair, not once, and he braids it into wild patterns that do not measure anything. He is just a boy with too much time on his hands. Look at him. He wants to play this game in bare feet.

God, the sun is so bright! There is no place like this. Walt Whitman stretches his calf muscles on the sidelines. He has the next game. His huge beard is ridiculous on the reservation. Some body throws a crazy pass and Walt Whitman catches it with quick hands. He brings the ball close to his nose and breathes in all of its smells: leather, brown skin, sweat, black hair, burning oil, twisted ankle, long drink of warm water, gunpowder, pine tree. Walt Whitman squeezes the ball tightly. He wants to run. He hardly has the patience to wait for his turn. "What's the score?" he asks. He asks, "What's the score?"

Basketball is like this for Walt Whitman. He watches these Indian boys as if they were the last bodies on earth. Every body is brown!
Walt Whitman shakes because he believes in God.
Walt Whitman dreams of the Indian boy who will defend him, trapping him in the corner, all flailing arms and legs and legendary stomach muscles. Walt Whitman shakes because he believes in God. Walt Whitman dreams of the first jumpshot he will take, the ball arcing clumsily from his fingers, striking the rim so hard that it sparks.
Walt Whitman shakes because he believes in God.
Walt Whitman closes his eyes. He is a small man and his beard is ludicrous on the reservation, absolutely insane.
His beard makes the Indian boys righteously laugh. His beard frightens the smallest Indian boys. His beard tickles the skin of the Indian boys who dribble past him. His beard, his beard!

God, there is beauty in every body. Walt Whitman stands at center court while the Indian boys run from basket to basket. Walt Whitman cannot tell the difference between offense and defense. He does not care if he touches the ball. Half of the Indian boys wear t-shirts damp with sweat and the other half are bareback, skin slick and shiny. There is no place like this. Walt Whitman smiles.
Walt Whitman shakes. This game belongs to him.