

WOODEN INDIAN SUMMER DAYDREAM

It was noon, and I was strolling by an old department store,
When I saw a wooden Indian standing silent near the door.
Was it autumn's Indian summer, or some fever, that had caused
Me to feel so hot and weary that I breathed a sigh and paused,
Gazing at his sober visage with its glaring eyes of glass?
Legs and knees became so feeble that I had no will to pass.
I was dizzy: things were spinning, so, I quickly took a seat
On the bench beside the statue and was staring at its feet.
In an instant, both those heavy, paint-chipped moccasins of wood
Changed to dusty hand-sewn leather, and before me now there stood
One huge ancient native Red Man, feathered headdress, painted face,
One stern, proud and noble specter of a devastated race.
In his left hand was a tomahawk, a peace-pipe in his right,
And the wind he blew straight at me took my city out of sight.
Modern noises faded fast within his cloudy breath of smoke.
We were standing by a tepee when the gray-haired warrior spoke:

"I was in our sister mountains. I was on our brother plain.
I was in our mother forests, fishing, hunting in the rain.
Birds and bears and wolves and otters were my cousins all around,
And the drumbeat at the village was a proud and pleasant sound.
Young braves dancing by the campfire, small papooses playing near,
And our long-haired squaws in buckskin roasting freshly hunted deer
Made us happy, made us thankful. The Great Spirit met our needs.
We were loyal to our oaths and honored all courageous deeds."

Pausing briefly, this old chieftain pierced me through with eyes aflame.
At my feet he dropped his tomahawk, then shocked me with his claim:

"You have beaten. You have broken. Indian glory now is dead.
And the story of our nations is a story painted red
With the wars from broken treaties. No, we never understood
Why you white men came like madmen stealing all the land you could.
Did you want it for your children? Yet your curse is in the blood
Of our unborn dead papooses that you plowed into the mud
When you ripped the pregnant bellies of our squaws before they died.
Sister wind has borne the echoes of the screams our women cried.

Now that wind blows through your villages and drives your wise men mad
With a skill for killing offspring that your wigwams could have had.
You have poisoned all the rivers, all the buffalo are gone,
And the land is sick with refuse from the greed you built upon.
All the lakes have been polluted, and your children drown in lust.
Your past dreams, that drove my people into hiding, into dust,
Burn within the hearts of renegades who roam your village streets.
Turned back now upon yourself, the death you poured on us repeats."

Then he paused and took a puff upon the peace-pipe in his hand,
Blowing smoke once more into my face and giving this command:

"Hasten back, my paleface brother, to the God of earth and sky,
Him in Whom you talked of trusting, though you walked a faithless lie.
There is only one Great Spirit, Owner of each tree and hill.
In your greed, you slew the red man: now, it's God you try to kill!
For your judges drive Him from their courts and dance to drums of fools,
Locking out His gifts of Wisdom: God is banished from your schools.
Your young braves and maidens wander, lost, and do not know their path.
Your grown men forsake their squaws and never fear the Great One's wrath.
Then you turn to godless chiefs who, loud in council, speak of good,
But, as cunning serpents, do not do the things they said they would.
Paleface brother, earth and field and river weary of your stay,
And the ghosts of Indian nations join to wish white men away.
But your only hope remains to seek that same Great Spirit's will.
Pray to Him Who let you take our lands, if you would stay here still."

Many tears were on his tawny cheeks from eyes that dreamed of sleep.
When he held his pipe up to my lips, I could not help but weep.
So I breathed the smoke of peace deep in my breast until it hurt,
Then I watched him drop the peace-pipe on the ground, into the dirt.
I was reaching for that treasure, symbol of a day that's done,
But was groping near the storefront on my knees out in the sun.
There before me was the Indian made of history and wood,
And I lingered there in homage, kneeling, as a white man should.

--David L. Hatton, 10/17/92