

Or the Grasses  
Grow

AVRAM DAVIDSON

About halfway along the narrow and ill-paved county road between Crosby and Spanish Flats (all dips and hollows shimmering falsely like water in the heat till you get right up close to them), the road to Tickisall Agency branches off. No pretense of concrete or macadam-or even grading-deceives the chance or rarely purposeful traveler. Federal, state, and county governments have better things to do with their money: Tickisall pays no taxes, its handful of residents have only recently been accorded the vote, and that grudgingly: an out-of-state judge unexpectedly on the circuit. Man had no idea of the problem involved. Courts going to hell anyway.

The sun-baked earth is cracked and riven. A few dirty sheep and a handful of scrub cows share its scanty herbage with an occasional sway-backed horse or stunted burro.

Here and there a gaunt automobile rests in the thin shadow of a board shack and a child, startled doubtless by the smooth sound of a strange motor, runs like a lizard through the dusty wastes to hide, and then to peer. Melon vines dried past all hope of fruit lie in patches next to whispery, tindery cornstalks.

And in the midst of all this, next to the only spring which never goes dry, are the only painted buildings, the only decent buildings, in the area. In the middle of the green lawn is a pole with the flag, and right behind the pole, over the front door, the sign: U. S. BUREAU OF INDIAN AFFAIRS. TICKISALL AGENCY. OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT.

Before Uncle Fox-Head sat a basket with four different kinds of clay, and next to the basket was a medicine gourd full of water. The old man rolled the clay between his moistened palms, singing in a low voice. Then he washed his hands and sprinkled them with pollen. Then he took up the prayer sticks, made of juniper (once there had been juniper trees on the Reservation, once there had been many trees) and painted with the signs of Thunder, Sun, Moon, Rain, Lightning; with the feathers tied to them-once there had been birds, too . . .

Oh, people-of-the-Hidden-Places,  
Oh, take our message to the Hidden Places,  
Swiftly, swiftly, now,

the old man chanted, shaking the medicine sticks.

Oh, you Swift Ones, People-with-no-legs,  
Take our message to the People-with-no-bodies,  
Swiftly, swiftly, now . . .

The old man's skin was like a cracked, worn moccasin. With his turkey-claw hand he took up the gourd rattle, shook it: west~ south, up, down, east north.

Oh, people-of-the-hollow-Earth,  
Take our message to the hollow Earth,  
Take our song to our Fathers and Mothers,  
Take our cry to the Spirit People,  
Take and go, take and go,  
Swiftly, swiftly, now . . .

The snakes rippled across the ground and were gone, one by one. The old man's sister's son helped him back to his sheepskin, spread in the shade, where he half sat, half lay, panting.

His great-nephews, Billy Cottonwood and Sam Quarter-horse, were talking together in English. "There was a fellow in my outfit," Cottonwood said; "a fellow from West Virginia, name of Corrothers. Said his grandmother claimed she could charm away warts. So I said my great-uncle claimed he could make snakes. And they all laughed fit to kill and said, 'Chief, when you try a snow job, it turns into a blizzard!' . . . Old Corrothers," he reflected. "We were pretty good buddies. Maybe I'll go to West Virginia and look him up. I could bitch, maybe."

Quarter-horse said, "Yeah, you can go to West Virginia, and I can go to L.A.-but what about the others? Where they going to go, if Washington refuses to act?"

The fond smile of recollection left his cousin's lean, brown face. "I don't know," he said. "I be damned and go hell if I know." And then the old pickup came rattling and coughing up to the house, and Sam said, "Here's Newton." Newton Quarter-horse, his brother Sam, and Billy Cotton-

wood were the only three Tickisalls who had passed the physical and gone into the Army. There weren't a lot of others who were of conscripting age (or any other age, for that matter), and whom TB didn't keep out, other ailments active or passive did. Once there had been trees on the Reservation, and birds, and deer, and healthy men.

The wash-faded Army sun tans had been clean and fresh as always when Newt set out for Crosby, but they were dusty and sweaty now. He took a piece of wet burlap out and removed a few bottles from it. "Open these, Sam, will you, while I wash," he said. "Cokes for us, strawberry pop for the old people . . . How's Uncle Fox-Head?"

Billy grunted. "Playing at making medicine snakes again . Do you suppose, if we believed him-that he could?"

Newt shrugged. "Well, maybe if the telegram don't do any good, the snakes will. And I'm damned sure they won't do no worse. That son of a bitch Easy," he said, looking out over the drought-bitten land. " 'Sending a smoke signal to the Great White Father again, Sitting Bull?' he says, smirking and sneering. 'You just take the money and send the wire,' I told him . . . They looked at me like coyotes looking at a sick calf." Abruptly, he turned away and went to dip his handkerchief in the bucket. Water was hard come by. The lip of the bottle clicked against one of Uncle FoxHead's few teeth. He drank noisily, then licked his lips. "Today we drink the white men's sweet water," he said. "What will we drink tomorrow?" No one said anything. "I will tell you, then," he continued. "Unless the white men relent, we will drink the bitter water of the Hollow Places. They are bitter, but they are strong and good." He waved his withered hand in a semicircle. "All this will go," he said, "and the Fathers and Mothers of the People will return and lead us

to our old home inside the Earth." His sister's son, who had never learned English nor gone to school, moaned. "Unless the white men relent," said the old man.

"They never have," said Cottonwood, in Tickisall. In English, he said, "What will he do when he sees that nothing happens tomorrow except that we get kicked the hell out of here?"

Newt said, "Die, I suppose . . . which might not be a bad idea. For all of us."

His brother turned and looked at him. "If you're planning Quarter-horse's Last Stand, forget about it. There aren't twenty rounds of ammunition on the whole Reservation."

Billy Cottonwood raised his head. "We could maybe move in with the Apahoya," he suggested. "They're just as dirt-poor as we are, but there's more of them, and I guess they'll hold on to their land awhile yet." His cousins shook their heads. "Well, not for us. But the others . . . Look, I spoke to Joe Feather Cloud that last time I was at Apahoya Agency. If we give him the truck and the

sheep, he'll take care of Uncle Fox-Head."

Sam Quarter-horse said he supposed that was the best thing. "For the old man, I mean. I made up my mind. I'm going to L.A. and pass for Colored." He stopped.

They waited till the now shiny automobile had gone by toward the Agency in a cloud of dust. His brother said, "The buzzards are gathering." Then he asked, "How come, Sam?"

"Because I'm tired of being an Indian. It has no present and no future. I can't be a white, they won't have me-the best I could hope for would be that they laugh: 'How, Big Chief'-'Hi, Blanket-bottom.' Yeah, I could pass for a Mexican as far as my looks go, only the Mexes won't have me, either. But the Colored will. And there's millions and millions of them-whatever price they pay for it, they never

have to feel lonely. And they've got a fine, bitter contempt for the whites that I can use a lot of. 'Pecks,' they call them. I don't know where they got the name from, but damn, it sure fits them. They've been pecking away at us for a hundred years."

They talked on some more, and all the while the dust never settled in the road. The whole tribe, what there was of it, went by toward the Agency-in old trucks, in buckboards, on horses, on foot. And after some time, they loaded up the pickup and followed.

The Indians sat all over the grass in front of the Agency, and for once no one bothered to chase them off. They just sat, silent waiting. A group of men from Crosby and Spanish Flats were talking to the Superintendent; there were maps in their hands. The cousins went up to them, and the white men looked out of the corners of their eyes, confidence still tempered-but only a bit-by wariness.

"Mr. Jenkins," Newt said to one, "most of this is your doing and you know how I feel about it--"

"You'd better not make any trouble, Quarter-horse," said another townsman. Jenkins said, "Let the boy have his say."

"-but I know you'll give me a straight answer. What's going to be done here?" Jenkins was a leathery little man, burnt almost as dark as an Indian. He looked at him, not unkindly, through the spectacles which magnified his blue eyes. "Why, you know, son, there's nothing personal in all this. The land belongs to them that can hold it and use it. It was made to be used. You people've had your chance, Lord knows-well. No speeches. You see, here on the map, where this here dotted line is? The county is putting through a new road to connect with

a new highway the state's going to construct. There'll be a lot of traffic through here and this Agency ought to make a fine motel."

"And right along here-" his blunt finger traced, "there's going to be the main irrigation canal. There'll be branches all through the Reservation. I reckon we can raise some mighty fine alfalfa. Fatten some mighty fine cattle . . . I always thought, son, you'd be good with stock if you had some good stock to work with. Not these worthless scrubs. If you want a job \_"

One of the men cleared his sinus cavities with an ugly sound and spat. "Are you out of your mind, Jenk? Here we been workin for years ta git these Indyins outa here, and you trayin ta make urn stay . . ."

The Superintendent was a tall, fat, soft man with a loose smile. He said now, ingratiatingly, "Mr. Jenkins realizes, as I'm sure you do, too, Mr. Waldo, that the policy of the United States Government is, and always has been-except for the unfortunate period when John Collier was in charge of the Bureau of Indian Affairs; man may have meant well, but Lordi hopeless sentimentalist-well, our policy has always been: prepare the Indian to join the general community. Get him off the Reservation. Turn the tribal lands over to the individual. And it's been done with other tribes and now, finally, it's

being done with this one." He beamed.

Newt gritted his teeth. Then he said, "And the result was always the same-as soon as the tribal lands were given to the individual red man they damn quick passed into the hands of the individual white man. That's what's happened with other tribes, and now, finally, it's being done with this one . . . Don't you know, Mr. Scott, that we just can't adapt ourselves to the system of individual landownership? That

we just aren't strong enough by ourselves to hold onto real estate? That-" "Root, bog, er die," said Mr. Waldo.

"Are men hogs?" Newt cried.

Waldo said, at large, "Told ya he w's a troublemaker." Then, bringing his long, rough, red face next to Newes, he said, "Listen, Indyin, you and all y'r stinkin relatives are through. If Jenkins is damn fool enough ta hire ya, that's his lookout. But if be don't, you better stay far, far away, Y'cause nobody likes ya, nobody wants ya, and now that the Guvermint in Worsbermon is finely come ta their sentces, nobody is goin ta protect ya-you and y'r mangy cows and y'r smutty-nosed sheep and y'r blankets--"

Newt's face showed his feelings, but before be could voice them, Billy Cottonwood broke in. "Mr. Scott," he said, "we sent a telegram to Washington, asking to halt the breakup of the Reservation."

Scott smiled his sucaryl smile. "Well, that's your privilege as a citizen." Cottonwood spoke on. He mentioned the provisions of the bill passed by Congress, authorizing the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to liquidate, at his discretion, all reservations including less than one hundred residents, and to divide the land among them.

"Mr. Scott, when the Treaty of juniper Butte was made between the United States and the Tickisalls," Cottonwood said, "there were thousands of us. That treaty was to be kept 'as long as the sun shall rise or the grasses grow.' The government pledged itself to send us doctors-it didn't and We died like flies. It pledged to send us seed and cattle; it sent us no seed, and we had to eat the few hundred bead of Stockyard castoffs they did send us, to keep from starving. The government was to keep our land safe for us forever, in

a sacred trust-and in every generation they've taken away more and more. Mr. Scott-Mr. Jenkins, Mr. Waldo, and all you other gentlemen-you knew, didn't you, when you were kind enough to loan us money-or rather, to give us credit at the stores-when this drought started-you knew that this bill was up before Congress, didn't you?"

No one answered him. "You knew that it would pass, and that turning our lands over to us wouldn't mean a darned thing, didn't you? That we already owed so much money we couldn't pay that our creditors would take all our land? Mr. Scott, how can the government let this happen to us? It made a treaty with us to keep our lands safe for us 'as long as the sun rises or the grasses grow.' Has the sun stopped rising? Has the grass stopped growing? We believed in you-we kept our part of the treaty. Mr. Scott, won't you wire Washington-won't you other gentlemen do the same? To stop this thing that's being done to us? It's almost a hundred years now since we made treaty, and we've always hoped. Now we've only got till midnight to hope. Unless-?"

But the Superintendent said, No, be couldn't do that. And Jenkins shook his head, and said, Corry-it was really all for the best. Waldo shrugged, produced a packet of legal papers. "I've been deppatized ta serve all these," be said. "Soons the land's all passed over ta individi'l ownership-which is 12 P.m. tanight. But if you give me y'r word (whatever that's worth) not ta make no trouble, why, guess it c'n wait till morning. You go back ta y'r shacks and I'll be round, corne morning. We'll sleep over with Scott f'r tanight." Sam Quarter-horse said, "We won't make any trouble, no. Not much use in that. But we'll wait right here. It's still possible we'll bear from Washington before midnight."

The Superintendent's house was quite comfortable. Logs (cut by Indian labor from the last of the Reservation's trees) blazed in the big fireplace (built by Indian labor). A wealth of rugs (woven by Indians in the Reservation school) decorated wall and floor. The card game had been on for some time when they heard the first woman start to wail. Waldo looked up nervously. Jenkins glanced at the clock. "Twelve midnight," he said. "Well, that's it. All over but the details. Took almost a hundred years, but it'll be worth it." Another woman took up the keening. It swelled to a chorus of heartbreak, then died away. Waldo picked up his cards, then put them down again. An old man's voice had begun a chant. Someone took it up-then another. Drums joined in, and rattles. Scott said, "It was old Fox-Head who started that just now. They're singing the death song. They'll go on till morning." Waldo swore. Then he laughed. "Let'm," he said. "It's their last morning."

Jenkins woke up first. Waldo stirred to wakefulness as he heard the other dressing. "What time is it?" he asked. "Don't know," Jenkins said. "But it feels to me like gettin-up time . . . You bear them go just awhile back? No? Don't know how you could miss it. Singing got real loud -seemed like a whole lot of new voices joined in. Then they 211 got up and moved off. Wonder where they went . . . I'm going to have a look around outside." He switched on his flashlight and left the house. In another minute Waldo joined him, knocking on Scott's door as he passed. The ashes of the fire still smoldered, making a dull red glow. It was very cold. Jenkins said, "Look here, Waldo look." Waldo followed the flashlight's beam, said he didn't

see anything. "It's the grass . . . it was green last night. It's all dead and brown now. Look at it. . ."

Waldo shivered. "Makes no difference. We'll get it green again. The land's ours now."

Scott joined them, his overcoat hugging his ears. "Why is it so cold?" he asked. "What's happened to the clock? Who was tinkering with the clock? It's past eight by clock it ought to be light by now. Where did all the Tickisalls go to? What's happening? There's something in the air-I don't like the feel of it. I'm sorry I ever agreed to work with you, no matter what you paid me--"

Waldo said, roughly, nervously, "Shut up. Some damned Indyin sneaked in and must of fiddled with the clock. Hell with um. Governmint's on our side now. Soon's it's daylight we'll clear um all out of here f'r good."

Shivering in the bitter cold, uneasy for reasons they only dimly perceived, the three white men huddled together by the dying fire and waited for the sun to rise.

And waited. And waited. And waited.