Foreword: Two Worlds

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Americans think they can change their life. Americans think “I will move here and be a different person.” Americans are on a false quest. The only voyage of discovery is to go back where you started. It isn’t to flee something, it is to face something and comprehend it.

CHUCK BOWDEN in conversation with Scott Carrier,
December 26, 2005, Tucson, Arizona

Dakotah is the conversation I wanted to have with Chuck Bowden but never did. He answers the questions I wanted to know the answers to but never asked: Where did you come from? Who are your people? What were you like as a child? And how did you come to see and understand the world as, at once, a place of tender beauty and injustices?

“I live in a time when nations harden into fossils and humans retreat into memoirs,” he writes in the opening chapter, “My Piece of Ground.” Call *Dakotah* an anti-memoir, a rearview mirror of a book written by a quick-minded writer who believed these stories would deliver him into the future a little more whole because the time he was living in was breaking his heart.

Bowden had reported on so much darkness and deceit along the US and Mexican border: the women murdered in Juarez; the drug cartels and the border police and all the

shadowy figures in between where nothing is as it appears. He felt a responsibility to report on the unreported. And in the case of the borderlands, he stayed longer, perhaps, than he wanted because he wanted to know who was directing the killing—but nobody could tell him. It eluded him. What he did find were the words that broke us open as readers, forcing us to confront the brutal nature of our own species and that violence and compassion are siblings.

Chuck Bowden never turned his back on hard stories. He sniffed them out and followed his nose, a reporter who knew how to track down a scent that smelled like a lie. And when he found the lies, he exposed them, all of them, in bare-boned language of the desert itself, a landscape of buried secrets uncovered by the wind through time—the same desert that raised him after he left Chicago as a boy, allowing him to keep his own secrets and his one truth, “I have never belonged.”

Dakotah is an intensely personal, relentless rendering of the past and a quiet reexamination of our future. Bowden is the outsider who seeks the insider who will talk to him, whether it is his father’s sister sitting at her kitchen table sharing family lore or El Sicario talking about torture. He knows how to listen. He keeps their stories real, taut, tells them straight with verbs over adjectives; and often what he does say isn’t what you want to hear. He shocks us into the realization that if we are alive then we must feel both the pain and the beauty of the times we are living in. After reading one of Bowden’s stories, my heart hurts. *Dakotah* is no exception. The bubble of privilege and denial that says we get to close our eyes to the world’s suffering, especially that which is next door, bursts in any book Chuck Bowden writes.

I am writing about Bowden in the present tense because he is alive on the page, even though he is dead.

Charles Bowden died in the desert from a heart attack on August 30, 2014, in Las Cruces, New Mexico. He began his

work as a writer at the *Tucson Citizen* as a crime reporter. Max Cannon, a colleague of Bowden's at the now-closed newspaper, said, "He lived on his own terms to the extreme—he was a master wordsmith, a detective, a poet, a scholar, a gentleman rogue, and a fearless traveler into humanity's darkest places."

I often wondered how this loner and lover of truth, a great American writer of nonfiction, held it all inside. How did he bring bullets and blood, cocaine and corruption, and the cold-edged indifference of killers that he befriended into the light of language capable of still illuminating a fierce belief in our humanity?

"There are two worlds," Bowden writes in *Dakotah*. "The living one moving in the day and night through the grass and forests, cruising the rivers, coursing through the seas. The sky, also. And then, there is the world of noise talking money and ideas and patriotism and duties and hundreds of other lies. I am stranded between these two worlds, tugged by the murders and vices of my species and bound by every cell in my body to the stars and dirt and slobbering beasts that live ignored and yet persist."

What persists in *Dakotah* is the ground beneath our feet—what we stand on and stand for, and it begins with family in place. His kinsfolk's place is in the middle of America, the "Heartland": "So my father plows the fields, finds arrows and stone axe heads and treasures them and never speaks of the murders that happened down the hill. Like with the vanished beasts, there is a silence. All the bones coming out of the earth, all the pollen studies suggesting different floras and climates, all the vanished tribes of people speaking mutely through busted stone tools or pottery fragments. The sherry is served after dinner at high table and the gore is entombed in quiet books shelved on the oak bookcases."

Bowden creates parallel memoirs born out of the stratigraphy of histories from his own family's occupation of the

prairie, his family who witnessed days when sandhill cranes blotted out the sun and who recognized: “You live, you love, you learn, you die, and let’s hear no complaining. The death of a child meant more than the reports from the war. The soil underfoot had more power than the machines that pawed it into rows and crops. And in the woods all the mysteries waited and could not be explained.”

The alternate chapters that focus on the dignity and conscious destruction of Native people who lived on the plains generations before and after his ancestors are juxtaposed against the mythologies perpetuated by historical figures such as Andrew Jackson, Lewis and Clark, Daniel Boone, and Wild Bill Hickok, who make shadowed appearances in Bowden’s contrary memoir. He shows us that their contributions to racism and Indian removal, alongside the removal of wild lands and wildlife, are part of our personal history, too, and cannot be segregated from the deep wounds and collective historical trauma that brown and black people carry as they continue to confront a white America. A Seminole chief named Osceola “who fought US armies to a standstill in Florida” eventually died in US custody. Those who knew Osceola said he died from grief.

“There is little to do in my nation but talk about race and little talk about race that faces the dark ground that made us. There is a feeling that that was then and has little to do with the now, a sense that everyone should get over it and move on.”

In *Dakotah*, we are allowed to stay in the tender grounds of a writer’s becoming, not to have his childhood romanticized but considered as a place of both recognition and reckoning.

Chuck Bowden writes: “In that moment when a person first climbed up on a horse and rode, velocity increased a thousand percent and life became the wind in our face. We think velocity is new, change is new, and this vast tumult

and wave of fear is new. And we are wrong. There has never been firm ground for our lives and our only balm has been a forgetfulness of the changes we have endured.”

He shows us memory is fluid, not fixed, and belongs to all of us, with one shared certainty: erasure is our destiny.

“I was born to be erased.

“And accept this fact.”

The beauty of *Dakotah* lies in the pleasure and pain of remembering what it means to be human. Simple things. Daily things. Things that are real, not abstract.

“My mother believed in the power of sweeping the floor and kneading bread.

“My father loved words and books and hand-rolled cigarettes and beer in quart bottles.”

We learn the author receives a box of family memorabilia after his mother’s death. He discovers a bundle of love letters between his parents, one bundle tied with a pink ribbon, the other with string. “Together they number maybe 150, almost all mailed between September 1, 1936, and mid-December.” He didn’t open them for over three years. “I finally opened them when I thought that just maybe they might help me understand my hunger for ground.”

Bowden’s instinct was correct. Within their letters they dream of a piece of land, a farm they will find and call “Rest Haven.” In 1938, they do find their farm in Illinois, with “a fourteen-room stone house on 160 acres of pastures, fields, woodland and orchard.” The descriptions of the familial village emerge, with relatives and “strays” and animals and miles to explore “the dirt” that is the bedrock of Bowden’s *ars poetica*. This is a bare-boned love song to his childhood, unsentimental yet full of the smells of damp earth in the spring, thickets of hardwood in summer, and always the wind. “The plains, big, windy, an ocean of grass that refuses to reveal a center.” The same plains for the Lakota of “endless bones.”

“I am the bold toddler and the rebellious child. I take no discipline, I watch everything, and I suck in scent before words and words before speech.”

In 1948, Jude Bowden writes to his brother Reddy that he is going to sell the farm and move to Chicago. Young Charles is slow to forgive him, never to be healed from being taken off the land. For the rest of Bowden’s life he would be looking for his home ground.

“On a bend, I will see it, a piece of ground off to the side. I will know the feel of this place: the leaves stir slowly on the trees, dry air smells like dust, birds dart and the trails are made by beasts living free. The stars do not complain. They live, explode, die and and send no messages of regret.” He goes on to say, “The wind seldom blows at this place and days are almost always sunny. I’ve never laid eyes on it but I know it is there. There has never been a moment’s doubt about its existence. The place is as solid as rock in my mind. I have never belonged to a place or movement or belief. But I still look. On a bend, I will see it.”

Dakotah is an unfinished manuscript. At least that’s how it feels to me. At times, it feels like Bowden is writing in shorthand: call it a prairie haiku, his mind racing through his fingers as they are flying across the page. Open spaces are created. Stories are cut short. Maybe he intended to return, revise, and deepen. But the words stop. Maybe that’s how all memoirs should end, as a mystery—that word, the last beautiful word of this tender, contemplative book: *mystery*. Do we ever really know any person, any place, or how any story ends?

Charles Bowden may never have belonged to “a place or movement or belief,” but he did belong to a people who were decent and worked hard. He also belonged to a changing America and a community of writers who cared about justice for all, including all species, not just our own.

“Once, I think I was seven or so . . .” Bowden writes, “a red fox darted just ahead of me and disappeared so fast I had doubts that it really existed. And so I pushed on into the tangle of undergrowth, hoping against hope that I would somehow catch up and run with it through the woods.

“I kept a skin complete with the head of a red fox in my room, something given to me by a kinsman, and I would nuzzle it through the long dark days of winter.”

This was the passage that allowed me to believe Chuck Bowden was always searching for what was good and dazzling and just beyond his comprehension, something beautiful and brave, mysterious and enduring.

He kept wandering, writing, looking in the shadows with a bird’s-eye view for that fox, that bend in the river, that out-of-reach truth.

Dakotah is among the last of his heart-written books where we can follow his scent.

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Vamos a ver lo que Dios nos da.
(Just to see what God would grant us.)

A NINETEENTH-CENTURY
MEXICAN BANDIT explaining why
he took up the life

We were not in the least alarmed when the Sioux really came into sight. Our composure was doubtless due to the fact that the warriors had been for some years dead, and were reposing on platforms of boughs, supported at the four corners by poles about eight feet high. On one of the tombs lay two bodies—a woman, decked in beads and bracelets, and a scalpless brave, with war paint still on the parchment cheeks, and holding in his crumbling hands a rusty shotgun and a pack of cards. Beneath the platform lay the skeleton of the favorite pony, whose spirit had accompanied his master's to the happy hunting grounds. A feeling of awe crept over us as we built in through the historic castles of the dead, when the Professor brought us down to the stern realities of science with a remark: "well, boys, perhaps they died of smallpox, but we can't study the origin of the Indian race unless we have those skulls."

C. BETTS, "The Yale Expedition," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, October 1871 (as quoted in Tim Flannery, *The Eternal Frontier: An Ecological History of North America and Its Peoples* [New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2001], 67).