

**P O S T M O D E R N  
A M E R I C A N  
F I C T I O N**

*A Norton Anthology*

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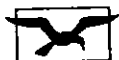
SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY AT CARBONDALE

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(1998)

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# SHERMAN ALEXIE

b. 1966

Sherman Alexie was born in Spokane, Washington. "I am a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian from Wellpinit, Washington," he told an interviewer in 1993, "where I live on the Spokane Indian Reservation. Everything I do now, writing and otherwise, has its origin in that." Alexie has published six books of poetry, a book of short stories, and a novel. An additional novel, *Indian Killer*, was published in the fall of 1996. He is also working on a screenplay and has recorded a CD featuring his own lyrics.

His stories and poems were introduced in *Hanging Loose* magazine, and have since appeared widely in such publications as *Caliban*, *Esquire*, *The World*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Red Dirt*, and *Story*. Awards for his writing include a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, Washington State Governor's Award, and a Lila Acheson Wallace-Reader's Digest grant.

"Captivity" is from *First Indian On the Moon* (1993). Alexie's "elegiac poems and stories will break your heart," Joy Harjo has written. "Watch this guy. He's making myth."

## Captivity

*He (my captor) gave me a biscuit, which I put in my pocket, and not daring to eat it, buried it under a log, fearing he had put something in it to make me love him.*

—from the narrative of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson, who was taken captive when the Wampanoag destroyed Lancaster, Massachusetts, in 1676.

1.

When I tell you this story, remember it may change: the reservation recalls the white girl with no name or a name which refuses memory. October she filled the reservation school, this new white girl, daughter of a BIA official or doctor in the Indian Health Service Clinic. Captive, somehow afraid of the black hair and flat noses of the Indian children who rose, one by one, shouting their names aloud. She ran from the room, is still running, waving her arms wildly at real and imagined enemies. Was she looking toward the future? Was she afraid of loving all of us?

2.

All of us heard the explosion when the two cars collided on the reservation road. Five Indians died in the first car; four Indians died in the second. The only survivor was a white woman from Springdale who couldn't remember her name.

3.

I remember your name, Mary Rowlandson. I think of you now, how necessary you have become. Can you hear me, telling this story within uneasy boundaries, changing you into a woman leaning against a wall beneath a HANDICAPPED PARKING ONLY sign, arrow pointing down directly at you? Nothing changes, neither of us knows exactly where to stand and measure the beginning of our lives. Was it 1676 or 1976 or 1776 or yesterday when the Indian held you tight in his dark arms and promised you nothing but the sound of his voice? September, Mary Rowlandson, it was September when you visited the reservation grade school. The speech therapist who tore the Indian boy from his classroom, kissed him on the lips, gave him the words which echoed treaty: *He thrusts his fists against the posts but still insists he sees the ghosts*. Everything changes. Both of us force the sibilant, in the language of the enemy.

4.

Language of the enemy: *heavy lightness*, house insurance, *serious vanity*, safe-deposit box, *feather of lead*, sandwich man, *bright smoke*, second-guess, *sick health*, shell game, *still-waking sleep*, forgiveness.

5.

How much longer can we forgive each other? Let's say I am the fancy-dancer and every step is equal to a drum beat, this sepia photograph of you and me staring into the West of our possibilities. For now, you are wearing the calico dress that covers your ankles and wrists and I'm wearing a bone vest wrapped around a cotton shirt, my hair unbraided and unafraid. This must be 1876 but no, it is now, August, and this photograph will change the story. Remember: I am not the fancydancer, am not the fancydancer, not the fancydancer, the fancydancer, fancydancer.

6.

Fancydance through the tall grass, young man, over broken glass, past Crowshoe's Gas Station where you can buy an Indian in a Bottle. "How do you fit that beer-belly in there?" asks a white tourist. "We do it," I tell her, "piece by piece."

7.

Piece by piece, I reassemble the house where I was born, but there is a hole in the wall where there was none before. "What is this?" I ask my mother. "It's your sister," she answers. "You mean my sister made that hole?" "No," she says. "That hole in the wall is your sister." For weeks, I searched our architecture, studied the walls for imperfections. Listen: imagination is all we have as defense against capture and its inevitable changes.

8.

I have changed my mind. In this story there are words fancydancing in the in-between, between then and now, between walls in the alley behind the Tribal Cafe where Indian boys smoke old cigarettes at halftime of the all-Indian basketball game. Mary Rowlandson, it's true, isn't it? Tobacco and sugar are the best weapons.

9.

The best weapons are the stories and every time the story is told, something changes. Every time the story is retold, something changes. There are no photographs, nothing to be introduced as evidence. The 20th century overtook the reservation in 1976, but there we were, stuck in 1975. Do you remember that white boy then, who spent the summer on the reservation? I don't know how he arrived. Did his father pilot a DC-10 forced to make

an emergency landing in the Trading Post parking lot? Did the BIA Forestry man find him frozen in amber? Did Irene sweep him up from the floor of a telephone booth? Lester Falls Apart says he himself drank and half-swallowed the white boy out of a bottle of Annie Green Springs wine and spat him out whole into the dust. The nightwatchman at the Midnight Mine tells us he caught the white boy chewing uranium. Do you remember that white boy dove naked into Benjamin Lake? He wore the same Levi's hung low on the hips, a red bandanna wrapped around his head. He tugged at his blond hair, yes, telling us "It will grow, I promise." We beat him often, specifically. Arnold broke the white boy's nose with a snowball he had saved, frozen and hidden in the fridge since March. It was July 4th when we kidnapped him and kept him captive in a chicken coop for hours. We spat and pissed on him through the wire; Seymour shot him twice with a pellet gun. That white boy fell backward into the nests, crushed eggs, splintered wood, kicked chickens blindly. I was the first to stop laughing when the white boy started digging into dirt, shit, the past, looking for somewhere to hide. We did not make him any promises. He was all we had left.

10.

All we had left was held captive here on the reservation, Mary Rowlandson, and I saw you there chewing salmon strips in the corner, hiding from all the Indians. Did you see him, Mary Rowlandson, the Indian man who has haunted your waking for 300 years, who left you alone sipping coffee in the reservation 7-11? I saw you there, again, as I walked home from the bar, grinning to the stars, but all you could do was wave from the window and mouth the eternal question: *How?*

11.

How do you open a tin can without a sharp-edged dream? How do you sleep in your post office box using junk mail for blankets? How do you see past the iron bars someone painted on your U.S. government glasses? How do you stop a reservation tsunami before it's too late?

12.

It's too late, Mary Rowlandson, for us to sit together and dig up the past you buried under a log, salvage whatever else you had left behind. What do you want? I cannot say, "I love you. I miss you." June, Mary Rowlandson, the water is gone and my cousins are eating Lysol sandwiches. They don't need you, will never search for you in the ash after your house has burned to the ground one more time. It's over. That's all you can depend on.

13.

All we can depend on are the slow-motion replays of our lives. Frame 1: Lester reaches for the next beer. Frame 2: He pulls it to his face by memory, drinks it like a 20th century vision. Frame 3: He tells a joke, sings an-

other song: *Well, they sent me off to boarding school and made me learn the white man's rules.*

14.

White man's rules: all of us must follow them, must remember the name of the officer who arrested us for running when the sign said DON'T WALK. It's the language of the enemy. There is no forgiveness for fancydancing on WET CEMENT. Before we move into the HUD house, we must build dreams from scratch, piece by piece, because SOME ASSEMBLY IS REQUIRED. Remember to insert CORRECT CHANGE ONLY when you choose the best weapons, the stories which measure all we have left. How do you know whether to use the IN or OUT door to escape? But it's too late to go now, our four-door visions have been towed from a NO PARKING ZONE. Leonard tells me he's waiting for the bus to the dark side of the moon, or Oz, or the interior of a drum. I load up my pockets with all my possessions and wait with him. That Greyhound leaves at 3 A.M. That's all we can depend on.

1993

## JOSEPH HELLER

b. 1923

Born in the Coney Island section of Brooklyn, New York, Joseph Heller attended public school and then enlisted in the United States Army Air Force. After his discharge in 1945, he married, then pursued a university education, attending both the University of Southern California and New York University, from which he received a B.A. in 1948. While publishing short stories in *Esquire* and *The Atlantic Monthly*, he earned an M.A. from Columbia University and won a Fulbright Scholarship to Oxford University. His five novels are *Catch-22* (1961), *Something Happened* (1974), *Good as Gold* (1979), *God Knows* (1984), and *Picture This* (1988). He has also authored several screenplays for film and television.

"I never thought of *Catch-22* as a comic novel," Heller told *The New York Times* in 1986. "I wanted the reader to be amused, and . . . I wanted him to be ashamed that he was amused. My literary bent . . . is more toward the morbid and the tragic. Great carnage is taking place and my idea was to use humor to make ridiculous the things that are irrational and very terrible."

### *From Catch-22*

#### *Chapter 9. Major Major Major Major*

Major Major Major Major had had a difficult time from the start.

Like Miniver Cheevy, he had been born too late—exactly thirty-six hours too late for the physical well-being of his mother, a gentle, ailing woman who, after a full day and a half's agony in the rigors of childbirth, was depleted of all resolve to pursue further the argument over the new child's