# Earth Power Coming

Short Fiction in
Native American Literature

EDITED BY SIMON J. ORTIZ

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work shoes. He kneels for a long time. His fingers move slowly. They are not talking to him. They are talking about the other woman. The red chili stew she makes is runny and pale. They pay no attention to him. He goes back to hoeing weeds. Their voices sift away in the wind. Occasionally he stops to wipe his forehead on his sleeve. He looks up at the sky or over the sand hills. Off in the distance there is a man on foot. He is crossing the big sand dune above the river. He is dragging a rope. The horses are grazing on yellow rice grass at the foot of the dune. They are down wind from him. He inches along, straining to crouch over his own stomach. The big white horse whirls suddenly, holding its tail high. The gray half-circles and joins it, blowing loudly through its nostrils. The little sorrel mare bolts to the top of the next dune before she turns.

Etta awakens and the yard is full of horses. The gray chews a hollyhock. Red petals stream from its mouth. The sorrel mare watches her come out the door. The white horse charges away, rolling his eyes at her nightgown. Etta throws a piece of juniper from the woodpile. The gray horse presses hard against the white one. They tremble in the corner of the fence, strings of blue morning glories trampled under their hooves. Etta yells and the sorrel mare startles, crowding against the gray. They heave forward against the fence, and the posts make slow cracking sounds. The wire whines and squeaks. It gives way suddenly and the white horse stumbles ahead tangled in wire. The sorrel and the gray bolt past, and for an instant the white horse hesitates, shivering at the wire caught around its forelegs and neck. Then the white horse leaps forward, rusty wire and fence posts trailing behind like a broken necklace.

# *Reservation Café: The Origins of American Indian Instant Coffee*

Gerald Vizenor

SHAMAN TRUTH LIES, tribal trickster and mixedblood master of socioacupuncture, interrupted an academic assessorization conference to proclaim a modest reservation economic development scheme that would corner and control international coffee markets.

The college deans at the conference were neither surprised nor displeased with the unusual proclamation. Tricksters were well known in high education circles for exploiting familiar forums of instruction, revealing unnatural visions and banal dreams.

The shaman trickster earned his nickname from a television interview: "Truth lies in tribal dreams," he said, emphasizing the word *lies,* and then he concluded that "white histories are nothing more than word piles," emphasizing the last word. Reminded of these ironies, he allows that it is "better to be known as Truth Lies than as Word Piles."

Truth Lies told the assessorization conferees that "great spirits offered coffee to the tribes, and now we have the first proud word and the best beans, enough to take back the world markets from the word pilers." The deans sat in neat rows, stout fingers bound over their stomachs, like woodchucks waiting at the roadside for the racial traffic to clear before making a move.

The trickster had been invited to the conference to express a short

tribal benediction, not a diatribe on coffee fascism. The invitation was a throw back to frontier mission romances and racial overcompensations, but the urban shaman was not a native speaker of a tribal language so he told a few short stories, seven in all, about the mythic world in the tribal mind where the white man is tricked from his illusions of power and dominance and then taught to walk backwards in dreams, backwards right out of the country.

Truth Lies unfurled a small birch bark scroll. He gestured with his lips, in the tribal manner, toward the scroll, while he circled his right fist, which held seven dark red coffee beans, around the microphone, an uncommon benediction. The trickster consulted the scroll from time to time as he told stories to the deans about the tribal origin of coffee, and as he talked he pinched the seven red beans into a fine instant powder over a cup of hot water.

*First pinch:*

In the beginning there was the word and the first word was coffee, or *makade mashkiki waaboo,* a black medicine drink, in the *anishinaabe* oral tradition. It was a time when *naanabozho,* one of the first humans on the earth, a super trickster who dreamed in different forms and languages, spoke the same tongue as the plants and animals.

Well, several weeks after the famous flood, the first trickster noticed that when his earthdiver friends, the otter and muskrat and beaver, ate some red berries from an evergreen shrub, they danced and sang with such ecstacies that *naanabozho* invented loneliness to protect himself from the shared pleasures of others. He asked the animals to explain but there was no language then for their pleasures. The trickster, an empiricist of sorts, ate some of the red berries, and as he ate he interviewed the evergreen shrub about the meaning of pleasure. The shrub shrugged his inquiries at first, but then, when *naanabozho* began to snap his fingers, roll his head and eyes, and wriggle his enormous toes in the shrubbery, the shrub revealed that she was named coffee, or *makade mashkiki waaboo,* the first word in the creation of the world.



*Second pinch:*

Great spirits created the species *coffea anishinaabica,* the frost tolerant low altitude pinch ground coffee which, until now at this telling, has been a tribal secret. *Coffea anishinaabica* thrives along the shores of Algoma, the Sea of the Algonquin, or Lake Superior. Later, much later, two other important species were created, *coffea arabica* and *coffea robusta,* in other parts of the world, but these species, as you know, are pinchless and sensitive to frost.

There are two simple methods to prepare *coffea anishinaabica* beans. The first and the most traditional method is to do nothing. You heard it right, *nothing.* The shrubs flower in the spring and then red berries appear in summer. Late in winter under a whole moon the berries are harvested by shaking the shrubs. Sometimes the shrubs shake back and tell stories like this one. The berries are stored in birch bark containers with a fresh cedar bough. Some traditionalists tell that one should pick and pinch no more than one bean at a time. Storage, according to the static fundamentalists who talk backwards far enough to lock the past into the present, welcomes evil admirers.

The second method is sacred, a ceremonial preparation shared by some women of the tribe. Vision berries, as the beans are named one at a time, are picked with ritual care from sacred shrubs grown at Michilimackinac, or Turtle Island. Tumbled for several nights in red cedar water, the beans are separated and bound in birch bark balls and suspended in cedar trees over the winter. In the spring, the beans are pinched into a ceremonial brew, and the hallucinogenic alkaloids released from this ritual process cause one to feel the summer in the spring, from tribal coffee no less.

*Third pinch:*

You must wonder how could such a fantastic coffee bean, pinched into a rich nuance without roasting, be held a secret for such a long time? Well, the answer is simple: No one believes in tribal stories. We have hundreds of herbal cures for various diseases but who has listened? What the tribes have told the white man has passed through their ears with little attention; some are impressed with

mythic form but not with content. Few people believe what we have been telling about the earth: Rivers are dead, fish are poisoned, and the air is evil with pollution, evil enough to drive the cockroaches to the mountains for a rest.

Twice, however, we almost lost the secret to enterprising white men. Bishop Frederic Baraga, a small man with compulsive historical missions, tried *makade mashkiki waaboo* on several occasions. Stories are told about how he drank a cedar blend of *coffea anishinaabica* in place of sacramental wine during services.

Bishop Baraga, in one respect at least, became a tribal person: His superiors did not believe his stories about pinch coffee from the woodland lakeshores in the new world. Notes on his experiences with the sacred *miskwaawaak,* cedar blend, disappeared from his memorabilia.

Then, a few years ago, three white shoguns who had cornered the wild rice market, heard about *coffea anishinaabica* and attempted to shake all the shrubs for personal profit. Well, the shrubs shook back and spoke in the voices of their white mothers. The three exploiters were lost in a snow storm, misdirected by the talking shrubs, never returned.

*Fourth pinch:*

Little does the white man know that once we shared the secret of *coffea anishinaabica* with the whole world. It was during the war, the great war, a time when coffee production of the most common species, *arabica* and *robusts,* was cut short and instant coffee appeared for use in the field. Well, we supplied the instant coffee from pinch beans, one more tribal contribution to the white man during his endless wars. Tribal children shook the shrubs during the war and pinched the beans for distribution as instant coffee to the soldiers on the front.

*Fifth pinch:*

You smile, surprised, a mask of derision, no doubt. Well, listen to this: The code talkers during the war spoke in tribal languages over the radios to confuse the enemies at home and overseas. While



winning the word wars, these tribal code talkers maintained an elaborate pinch coffee exchange in military units throughout the world. Now you know why that coffee tasted so good on the front lines.

*Sixth pinch:*

Following the war, we saved our pinch beans and then with new economic schemes in the sixties we traveled with the elders to the International Coffee Conference. But the conferees from coffee producing countries would have nothing to do with our claim to a percentage of the market, even after our efforts during the war. So, with a sense of evertribal humor, we war danced, a dance we created for the moment, at the entrance to the United Nations. While we danced we offered free pinches of coffee to the public, a sort of tribal war dance coffee break. The hippies were impressed, so impressed by the effects of the sacred brew that they promised a brisk sale of our pinch beans to weird friends in communes on the coast.

*Seventh pinch:*

There is a notion that coffee fosters radical political discussions. Well, the world should consider the tribes as one enormous reservation café, more ominous with pinch beans than the Oxford Club in England or the Café Foy in France. The pinch bean *coffea anishinaabica* is the beginning of an international revolution.

Since we were shunned at the conference and denied a place in the international coffee market, we have harvested and stored billions of birch bark bundles of *coffea anishinaabica* on the reservation. More berries are waiting to be shook, and soon, in a few months time, we plan to saturate the world markets with pinch beans, a paraeconomic disruption of coffee supplies.

How, you ask, can we establish these markets? Well, it all started with the hippies, believe it or not, who shared some tribal economic values and introduced new methods of distribution. In the late sixties, like the code talkers during the war, the hippies spoke a peculiar patois and started selling our beans to romantic liberals all

over the world. Europeans became our best customers for secret pinch coffee. Karl May Red Roast, for example, is cut and sold to tourists for more than a thousand times the original value on the frozen shrub.

There you have it, pinch seven *coffea anishinaabica* beans once a day into hot water, drink while looking at a tree, and your delusions of progress and domination through power will dissolve and you will feel a new sense of acceptance with the world.

Shaman Truth Lies pinched his last bean and then he announced a ceremonial coffee break, time enough to sip his cedar brew and dance backwards through the auditorium holding out his cap.

The deans at the conference on academic assessorization were so pleased with the entertaining benediction that they voted to name the trickster an honorary dean of a college of his choice.

The trickster returned the gesture, he named all the deans honorary tricksters, members of an urban reservation of their choice.

# *The Warriors*

Anna L. Walters

IN OUR YOUTH, we saw hobos come and go, sliding by our faded white house like wary cats who did not want us too close. Sister and I waved at the strange procession of passing men and women hobos. Just between ourselves, Sister and I talked of that hobo parade. We guessed at and imagined the places and towns we thought the hobos might have come from or had been. Mostly they were White or Black people. But there were Indian hobos too. It never occurred to Sister and me that this would be Uncle Ralph's end.

Sister and I were little and Uncle Ralph came to visit us. He lifted us over his head and shook us around him like gourd rattles. He was Momma's younger brother and he could have disciplined us if he so desired. That was part of our custom. But he never did. Instead, he taught us Pawnee words. "*Pari'* is Pawnee and *pita* is man," he said. Between the words, he tapped out drumbeats with his fingers on the table top, ghost dance and round dance songs that he suddenly remembered and sang. His melodic voice lilted over us and hung around the corners of the house for days. His stories of life and death were fierce and gentle. Warriors dangled in delicate balance.

He told us his version of the story of *Pahukatawa,* a Skidi Pawnee warrior. He was killed by the Sioux but the animals, feeling compassion for him, brought *Pahukatawa* to life again. "The Evening Star and the Morning Star bore children and some people say that these offspring are who we are," he often said. At times he pointed to those stars and greeted them by their Pawnee names. He liked to pray. He prayed for Sister and me and for everyone and every tiny