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Indigenous Surfboards

Cheryl Alqwu' was born on a roof.

Cheryl Alqwu' was born on a sled beneath a blanket of filthy rags.

Cheryl Alqwu' was born on a picnic table.

Cheryl Alqwu' was born under a calico sky that reflected all six faces at once:
past, present, future; indigenous, Catholic, urban.

Cheryl had a last name because she understood Lushootseed. She would tell everyone who would listen that she learned Lushootseed from a crow.

No one listened.

Sometimes she was glad no one listened because she figured if she taught anyone, they'd give it away.

Cheryl James was born on a fractured slab of corrugated fiber glass that caught the rain in the fall. It broke in half during a storm. So, her brother, Johnny, used it to snowboard down their frozen driveway in December. In the spring Cheryl's uncle nailed the pieces atop two saw horses, table for twelve.

Cheryl James was born on the Tulalip Indian Reservation, but there was no room. So, her dad wandered away. His body washed ashore near Alki off Elliot Bay in Seattle. The authorities could not determine the cause of death because he was face down. So, the elders determined it was shame.

*

Chester George lived at Mission Beach overlooking Tulalip Bay and Hat Island. His two-room wooden home was a few hundred yards from Saint Anne's Mission church, which housed the US government's Tulalip Indian School. Chester's dad attended as a kid as did his aunts and uncles and two older brothers. They cut their hair, wore government issued boots, pants, full-brimmed hats, forgetting all at once how to speak Lushootseed. Chester descended from Patkanim, an Allied Tribes Chief. Chester inherited two weights of equal burden, those of savior and traitor, depending on which side of the consolidated Tulalip Tribes you asked.

Patkanim signed the historic Point Elliot Treaty of 1855. He was a leader of Indian warriors who fought for the whites. It was clear to Patkanim that the whites would ultimately take the land by force, thus rendering his actions as sacrificial to his reputation while achieving sustainable peace for his people. Over the years most tribal land owners were conned into selling their reservation beachfronts, including Tulare, Mission, and Priest Point, leaving a land divided by family history.

When the Tulalip Indian School closed in 1932, the white public school in neighboring Marysville offered to integrate as long as any interested Indians paid tuition. Marysville High School played football. Jim Thorpe played football. Chester George was interested, but he needed to get in shape.

Chester first met Joe Robinson on a beach run. Joe Robinson was the starting fullback and captain for the Tomahawks, Marysville's high school team. He hated the water because he could not run on it, though he was treated like a god. Chester was jogging north towards Spee-Bi-Dah, a newly developed beachfront that was once the

traditional salmon drying grounds, while Joe was running south directly at him. Joe waved. Chester nodded. Ten minutes later, each had reversed his course, another intersection. They stopped.

“You’re a swift runner,” Joe said. He was measured, struggling not to sound out of breath.

“Yeah, you know, I could be famous, enit, like Jim Thorpe.” Chester too kept an even face, no signs of weariness.

“Enit? What’s ‘enit?’”

Chester reshaped his face. “If I told you, you might steal it, you know?” Then, Chester’s face swelled one inch in every direction. Joe chose to believe it was a smile. Joe chose to believe many things.

Chester chose to believe in opportunity, but his coach refused to play an Indian. At night Chester George would build a fire by the shore and inhale his ancestors. When the tide has completely ebbed during the day, the guts of Port Susan decompose in the sun releasing the beautiful stench of the Puget Sound’s soul. Its soul lingers in the night where it fertilizes ideas. Each night Chester’s ideas were ignited, and he imagined the entire Pacific Ocean was filled with gasoline.

For two seasons Chester decomposed on the bench until his coach was discovered in a compromising position with a female student behind the wood shop. The incident and the coach faded away like ideas, and Chester George was named the starting half-back his senior season. He broke his left leg in the first game and never played another down. The Army found a use for him as he held the remnants of the Lushootseed language. Three years and three children after the War, Chester George was killed by a

drunk driver on Marine Drive. His spirit lived for several years atop a sign that reads: *Please Don't Drink and Drive—In Memory of Chester George*. His offspring were haunted by what could have been.

*

In 1975, Johnny James led the Tomahawks to their first football conference title in 35 years. He celebrated by dying.

“Let’s see Chester,” Johnny told his friend, Jimmy Chad. Jimmy Chad was the only Indian teenager with a car, a white 1956 Chevy painted red. They named her *Road Apple*.

“I thought he died in the 40’s,” Jimmy Chad said, rubbing his diabetic stomach, signaling his need for beer.

“He did, but he was buried only three feet deep. He lives on top of a sign.”

Each side of the Rez Road, Marine Drive, is lined with signs like NASCAR fans screaming in black and white capital letters: PLEASE DON’T DRINK & DRIVE: In Memory of twenty-four ancestors, seven mothers and fathers, eighteen brothers and sisters, and forty-two cousins.

“So, you talk to him? What’s he say?”

Johnny paused long enough to steal a case of Rainier from Totem Grocery. There is no totem pole, just a plastic sign that tells its own story.

“I ask him shit like why we all have two first names.”

Two miles and six beers later, Jimmy Chad and Johnny James parked in the middle of Marine Drive fifteen feet away from Chester George who was preaching atop his sign.

“So, what’d he say?” Jimmy’s eyes inflated.

“He says we all forgot how to pronounce our last names when they cut our hair.”

Johnny smiled when he saw Chester recognizing his own words. Johnny wanted to tell Chester about the game, his 217 first half yards and five touchdowns. He took a step towards his grandfather into the path of Spencer David’s ’64 Ford pick-up. A sign on Marine Drive remembers him.

Johnny’s sister, Cheryl, was tired of remembering. So, she swam to Hawaii.

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Clarence

*Why Clarence? Why not something vast and Pacific like *Manu*?*

Clarence Pahukoa was angry, in part due to his name, a hand-me-down from a grandfather he never knew, an Italian boxer named *Clarence*, a man who helped liberate the Marshall Islands, a man who fell in love during a war. Mostly, Clarence was bitter because he was cursed by potential.

At 14, Clarence was six feet four and 240 pounds with two uncles in the NFL. As a freshman, he was selected All-Hawaii second team as a defensive end out of Kameamea High. The following summer, Clarence grew another inch and added fifteen pounds. That’s when the first letter from UCLA arrived. The rest of the Pac-10 followed. Then, in game six of his sophomore season, Clarence tore his right ACL. His junior year he tore his left. Pac-10 interest vanished. Only the University of Hawaii called. But, U.H. spelled *doom*, no flight off the island, away from friends, parasites, oxycodone.

Injury followed Clarence to U.H., where he was awarded a sixth year of eligibility as a medical redshirt. That’s when he got his girlfriend, a swimmer, pregnant for the third

time. She quit swimming. He quit football. They were in love, but he left her anyway. He washed up on the Marshall Islands, but he did not die of shame. He moved in with his ageless grandma where he became an addict.

*

On October 25, 1986 at 5:07 EST, the earth spun on its axis at 1,000 miles per hour. New York Met, Bob Ojeda, pitched a Rawlings baseball 88 miles per hour. One ounce of Bacardi rum hit the back of Clarence Pahukoa's throat at exactly 22 miles per hour, even though he didn't move. And, just as a 67 year-old woman with 25 year-old skin sat alone in her apartment to listen to Vin Scully narrate a baseball game, Cheryl James's water broke at 186,000 miles per second.

Nearly three hours later, the earth continued to spin, but 25,000 miles of sky turned fourteen threatening shades of grey. Cheryl James was dilated to 10, though she would have screamed *15!* The Marshall Islands burst like a cloud celebrating sovereignty with the enforcement of the Compact of Free Association. Clarence mumbled, "Cheers," while the 67 year-old woman heard Vin Scully say, "It's so quiet in New York, you can almost hear Boston." Shea Stadium's scoreboard flashed: *Congratulations Red Sox, 1986 World Champions*. It was an accident, just like Bob Stanley's next pitch, just like Mookie Wilson's last swing, but Cheryl James did not believe in accidents, only signs.

Ten minutes later, the earth stopped. Then, the entire world rolled between Bill Buckner's legs at 10 miles per hour. NBC slowed it to one mile per hour and replayed it 10,000 times. Clarence fell off his bar stool, turned into wood, and drifted with the current to Hawaii, while Okilani Pahukoa stopped breathing: cause of death, loneliness.

Cheryl James yelled for a doctor. She yelled for a nurse. She yelled for anyone as everyone yelled in the staff lounge at the TV, at Bill Buckner and Babe Ruth.

*

At 3:37 pm Hawaiian time on October 25, 1986, a baby girl leapt from Cheryl James's womb at the speed of gravity onto the floor of Kapi'olani Medical Center and landed on her feet. The wind blew outside the window in Samoan and called the little girl *Akenehi*, which means *Heaven Sent*. Cheryl called her *Kennedi*, a good Catholic sounding name with a Polynesian *i*. Vin Scully in a roller coaster voiced explained, "a little roller up along first... BEHIND THE BAG!!! It gets through Buckner. HERE COMES KNIGHT, and the METS WIN IT!!!"

Then, the earth began to rotate in a silent void for the next 180 seconds, broken again by Scully, "If one picture is worth a thousand words, you have seen about a million words. Game 7 tomorrow!"

It rained on tomorrow, Noah rain. It rained so hard no one remembers Game 7 or that it took place the day after tomorrow. It rained so hard that Clarence arrived in Hawaii two days late. It rained so hard no one found Okilani for nearly two weeks. It rained so hard that Island Recycling flooded. A two by five chunk of green corrugated fiberglass washed up on Cheryl's apartment doorstep. She held Kennedi to her breast, stepped atop the fiberglass and surfed along Lunalilo Freeway, past Ala Wai Golf Course, down Kapahulu Avenue, into the Pacific Ocean all the way home to Tulalip.