

# Walk in Beauty, Walk in Fear

by Gregory McNamee

"Step into the shoes of him who lures the enemy to death."

—from the Navajo Enemy Way

**Talking God**  
by Tony Hillerman  
New York: Harper & Row;  
239 pp., \$17.95

On a windswept bluff high above the reddish-brown San Juan River, four states — Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, and Colorado — converge. Visitors to the area come to play a game of twister at the Four Corners Monument, contorting themselves so that each of their limbs touches a different state. Then, remarking upon the windswept, sandy desolation of the place, they hurry off to the greener ground of the Rockies or the populous Grand Canyon. For most of them, there is not much to see, not much reason to linger on this arid plateau. But to the Navajo Indians who inhabit it, the Four Corners country, bounded by four sacred mountains of abalone, white shell, turquoise, and redstone, is a land of peerless beauty, exalted in song and story as "the center of the earth."

The *Diné Bike'yah*, the Navajo nation, is also a terrifying place, populated by millions of mischief-working ghosts, by witches and were-animals; for in death, the Navajo believe, one's soul flies from the body, leaving behind not only the mortal shell but also any good characteristics one may have had in life. Only the newborn and the very old are spared this fate; their souls merely vanish into the void. The rest, victims of alcohol poisoning, of Kit Carson's bullets, of ancient famines and plagues, of poverty and despair and sickness, wander the land, tormenting the living — who in turn practice a complex body of ritual to ward off malevolent spirits, and who until very recently were known to lynch suspected witches. From this en-

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chanted landscape, among the fearful living and the restless dead, novelist and former police-beat reporter Tony Hillerman has drawn the material for a nearly dozen popular mysteries published in the last twenty years — as well as the wherewithal of detective fiction.

Hillerman's fame came slowly. In the middle 1960's, he has said, he was inspired to write about the Diné — "the people," as the Navajo call themselves — after an incident in Chinle Wash, at the mouth of Canyon de Chelly. While sitting on its banks, he heard a whistling sound that made him think of Kokopelli, the hump-backed, flute-playing god of the prehistoric Anasazi who had occupied the country before the invading Navajo arrived from Canada in the 13th century. The whistling turned out to have been the tinkling of bells from a flock of sheep, the sound distorted by the weathered sandstone walls of the canyon. It was epiphany enough. "That day," Hillerman has written, "I decided I would try to communicate my feelings for the Navajo and their sacred land."

For the first few years, this gifted

convert preached to the choir. Hillerman's books enjoyed only cult status, devoured by an eager handful of river-runners and desert rats — and even a few Navajo — in the high country of New Mexico and northern Arizona. These readers spread the word to anyone who would listen; in the late 1970's, one could hear Hillerman touted in Flagstaff bars and Albuquerque sporting-good shops, but could rarely find his novels in bookstores. With such a small audience Hillerman's first mystery, *The Blessing Way* (1970), died a quick death; his second book, *The Fly on the Wall*, was remaindered almost immediately after its release. (Now that the genial Hillerman, in his early 60's and retired from teaching and journalism, has made it to the big time, his entire body of work is in print.) But in the last few years, each of his books — standard police procedurals tempered by ethnological observation — has been released to wider and wider reception, first throughout the West, and lately east of the Hundredth Meridian. His most recent novel, *Talking God*, has occupied a spot on the best-seller list of *The New York Times* since its publication in the spring of 1989, clinching its author's nationwide reputation. Robert Redford, having bought film rights to all the author's books, is now producing *The Dark Wind*, due for release in 1990. But despite his newfound fame, Hillerman still thinks of his fans as a cadre of "desert rats and anthropologists."

*The Blessing Way* is vintage, even archetypal Hillerman; in its pages emerge the fictional patterns and one of the two protagonists that Hillerman has employed ever since. It spins the tale of the seemingly supernatural murder of one Luis Horseman, a Many Ruins Canyon Navajo on the run from a "Navajo Wolf" — that is, a warlock able to metamorphose into any number of animals. Just which animal

varies from one part of the Navajo nation to another, an important fact that leads Joe Leaphorn, Hillerman's Navajo detective hero, to conclude that the suspected wolf is in truth a well-read "Los Angeles Navajo," raised off the reservation and unaware of narrow local custom.

Hillerman abandoned Navajo country for his next book, *The Fly on the Wall*, a political thriller. However, in *Dance Hall of the Dead*, Hillerman returns his readers to the little-known world of the Zuni people of eastern New Mexico, who each year honor the Shalako, a bird spirit who brings messages from their gods. A neighboring Navajo boy, trained to play the ceremonial part of the Shalako, has disappeared at Zuni Pueblo, and it is Leaphorn's task to find him among the thousands of visitors who have streamed in to watch the week-long rituals—among them, again, a Navajo Wolf and an army of stoned hippies. Hillerman's tale touches on many interesting elements, among them being the ancient hatred of Navajo for Zuni. (Many traditionalists still believe that a Zuni has to scalp a Navajo before being admitted into the closed religious fraternities of the Shalako and its allied

kachinas.) And it introduces a theme he will develop in later novels: the clash between living Native Americans and Anglo archaeologists, who, it is widely held in Indian country, are nothing more than glorified grave robbers.

In the middle 1970's, Hillerman introduced a second Navajo policeman hero, Sergeant Jim Chee, who figured in his next three novels: *The Ghost Way*, *The Dark Wind*, and *People of Darkness*. Like Leaphorn, Chee is intensely curious about white people—*belagáana*, from the Navajo approximation for "American"—and their odd customs; at the University of New Mexico, he had "studied anthropology, sociology, and American literature in class. Every waking moment he studied the way white men behaved. All four subjects fascinated him." But Chee, from a rural background, is more traditional than Leaphorn, also trained in anthropology and literature at Arizona State University; along with his academic courses, Chee has for years studied to become a *hatathali*, a singer of the Blessing Way and other purifying rites. Leaphorn is an assimilationist, seemingly content to live in two worlds, white and red; Chee's aim

is to bring what he can learn from the alien world into his quest for the Navajo ideal—*hozro*, or internal and external harmony with one's surroundings. When Leaphorn witnesses a death, he may unplug the telephone and take a drink or two; when Chee sees the horrors of his time—for instance, Navajo drunks "sprawled in Gallup alleys, frozen in the sagebrush beside the road to Shiprock, mangled like jackrabbits on the asphalt of US Highway 666"—he goes to a medicine man for catharsis, for, as Changing Woman taught the Diné, "returning to beauty require[s] a cure."

Despite their fictive differences, however, Leaphorn and Chee behave almost identically in the tales of their respective series; one senses that Hillerman introduced the second character only to avoid wearing out Leaphorn's welcome. Nowhere is this more clear than in *Skinwalkers* (1987), Hillerman's first novel after a long silence in the early and middle 1980's, in which Leaphorn and Chee are brought together for the first time.

Again, the subject is witchcraft. Chee, who has been undergoing initiation rites to become a shaman of his clan, is ambushed while asleep in his *hogan*—the traditional octagonal hut of the Navajo, its door always facing east to the sunrise—by a shotgun-wielding, unseen assailant. Investigating the wreckage after the assault, Chee stumbles upon a small bead of worked bone, the unmistakable weapon of one bewitched, a "skinwalker," who uses it to inject his or her "corpse sickness" into someone else and thereby be freed of the curse. Chee turns to Leaphorn for help in solving the case, and Leaphorn is only too happy to oblige, for he harbors a deep hatred of witchcraft, which he considers to be a foreign aberration introduced to the Navajo by Indians from the Great Plains. Leaphorn, a technician who obsessively keeps track of crimes on the Navajo reservation with colored map pins—red for alcohol-related arrests, black for complaints of sorcery, and the like—soon determines that the attack on Chee is part of a larger, geometric pattern of seemingly supernatural murders.

*Skinwalkers* showcases Hillerman's many virtues as a writer of detective fiction, chief among them being his

#### BRIEF MENTIONS

##### YES, LET'S: NEW AND SELECTED POEMS by Tom Disch Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 112 pp., \$8.95 (paper)

Not yet 50 years old, Tom Disch has already had a remarkably varied career as a successful author of science fiction, theater critic of *The Nation*, and as a poet who has managed to create interesting work in an age of dullness. His newest volume, *Yes, Let's*, is distinguished neither by its bulk nor by its range, but within his own special groove, Disch moves with the agility and force of a kick-boxer.

Disch's groove lies somewhere between irony and whimsy, near the point where both converge on the metaphysical. Some of his poems begin in a deceptively light vein, only to deliver a surprise punch. More than once his sci-fi interest breaks through, never more memorable than in "A Vacation on Earth": "It is hard to believe / we have our source in this nightmare / tangle of vegetable matter and stone, / that this hell is where / it all began."

Disch is quirky, unpredictable, and irreverent with a satire that is savage in its restraint. He is equally "unkind" to society's losers and to the winners who alternately despise and patronize them. He says of a derelict, "Not even the angels who gather / Over the doorway of Citibank / To bathe in their tears—not even they / Can make you behave," and portrays a blindman's fantasy revenge on the sighted: "I would kick / you when you weren't looking / more than once I would be *hideous* / if you could see me / you would be so terrified / that you would be glad you were blind."

There is a tradition of this sort of writing in America among poets of an anarchist bent. One thinks of e.e. cummings and even more of Kenneth Patchen, but unlike Patchen (and like cummings) Disch is technically competent as a versifier. His sense of phrasing in his relatively free verse is flawless, and his experiments in rhyme and rhythm put him in the first class of the so-called "new formalists." (TF)