

The Smoke That Is Not Fire

Bruce Holbert



The Smoke That Is Not Fire

1

Coyote—Sinkalip is his Salish moniker—possesses a reputation constructed upon irony. In search of wisdom, he defecates and asks his feces for advice. He once slept with his mother-in-law after a long conversation with his sexual member over ethics. The most prominent character in the Native American mythological pantheon, Coyote remains omnipresent among most North American tribes. Coyote slays monsters but moments later the raccoons trick him into cooking and eating his own asshole. He sleeps with the other Animal People and ejaculates semen clouds over their children to assist his escape. Why do you think they wake up rubbing that mucus from their eyes? He brings the

Columbia people salmon, but erects waterfalls on each tributary where tribes refuse him a maiden. Often Coyote dies in these stories only to be resurrected by the other Animal People who find him too amusing to do without.

Though my grandparents' faith was likely ashes in the stove long before I was born, they at least drank like good Catholics. My mother, a drive-by Catholic at best, registered us for morning Catechism and occasional stints at private schools. We all managed first communion, but only I sat confession and none of us were confirmed. We attended masses periodically.

On the reservation, though, old men recounted Sinkalip, while they spit tobacco into a coffee can or sipped from bottles, more often water or coffee than alcohol, winking at us where the swearing would otherwise go. The old men say Coyote named the thickets in creek bottoms Woods of Her Private Hairs because water is desirable, but to retrieve it without tearing yourself on the brambles, well, it is beyond even Sinkalip. In the meadows are Just Flowers, called so because they are neither food nor medicine: Hummingbird Meal, Salmon Eyes, Falling Star, Indian Paintbrush, Deer's Perfume and Curlew's Beak. Beneath them in the earth is Camas and Indian Carrot, which the people bury in tulle-woven pots beneath their fires. Cooked with black moss, they taste candied. Gooseberries, serviceberries, chokecherries, and huckleberries ripen in their seasons and with a strip of venison or a chukar breast and a paste of tubers make fine victuals.

They are Coyote's gifts to the people and the people are grateful, though the old men muse over why jimson and nightshade and belladonna resemble so closely their edible cousins. Was this to rub out those who refused to hear Coyote—he who has ears let him listen, is that not what Christ taught?—or was it to relieve the people the burden of those who possessed such porous minds they could not recall the color of one flower over another or separate the diamond-shaped leaves from those that resemble a heart?

But diamonds were not yet in this world, nor hearts, at least the mouse-eared loops junior high girls employed as punctuation. When Coyote informed the people of these leaves, did he speak in veiled terms like the great prophets and did people fail to recognize the descriptions because he had peered forward and seen diamonds and hearts while the people recognized only color and smell and stems and roots: what a plant is, not what it appears to be. Would these wise and careful observers, these scientists and lawyers and shaman not die along with the addle-minded and attention debtors?

2

My maternal grandparents migrated to Washington State from "back east". Rumors of a great dam and work in the Grand Coulee filtered their direction, and the youngest and most adventurous and most desperate packed and loaded automobiles for the dam where they indeed found steady employment. They purchased a converted boarding house, with rooms to get lost in. When the neighboring house came open they purchased it for my Great Grandpa and Grandma Tschaeffer. My Grandma T's house was candle-lit; inside everything was yellow as the newspaper lining her dresser drawers. In such light she appeared ethereal and translucent, part of the ancient magic that drew animals no one was likely to see inside their black caves. Each visit, she loaded my hands with religious icons that signified saints or heroes or sacred events, a strange combination of Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodox, and the upstart Lutherans.

Her husband was a giant man contracted to the railroad, who drank and squandered his off time in a porch swing, waving at passing cars, still amazed cars existed. As a young man, he drank and howled at the night and broke furniture. But by the time I came along, he was cowed: the world went too fast for him.

Grandma T delivered ice water to his porch swing and he dammed the glass's edge then emptied a portion for room for the liquor. Later, she would serve his meal and he forked pre-cut portions with his palsied hands toward his mouth. Dark, after he'd fallen asleep, Grandma T would mop his spattered overalls.

Though my mother and grandmother's sympathies remained with Grandma T, I could not help but pity my great grandpa. I recall instances when those same quaking hands lifted from his lap as Grandma T passed, pawing her skirts in an attempt to slow her down, along with the rest of the spinning planet.

All he desired was sense and I know what it is to be without it.

3

John Wayne was the face of the mythology in which I was reared. *The Searchers*, *Red River Valley*, films in which violence and reticence isolates Wayne's characters into bloody manias, despite the falsely redemptive closures, are ingenious insights by Ford and Hawkes into the contorted nature of western heroes. But they are too complex for Saturday afternoon fare. Instead, the favorites—now available at WalMart, three DVDs for ten dollars—are *Chishum* or *Big Jake* or *The Son's of Katie Elder* or *Rio Bravo* where Wayne's characters appear as profane angels from a purer time, crack shots with good mounts battling the inequities that parallel progress, the same way his older films battled Indians and nature. These westerns slowly discarded geographical and historical reference points for those more suitable to the abstract ends of easy tales and allegories. Liberated, the West became less a physical place than a mythological compass point.

This might describe the life cycle of a thousand epics, but for one exception: the truth anchoring the West's stories never existed as reality. Less is known about William Bonney, Wyatt Earp or Butch Cassidy than of William Wallace or Arthur and Lancelot, though the latter never lived to see the printing press.

Stories of the West rose faster than word of mouth could press them, fertilized by telegraphs, newspapers, dime novels invented to sell stories of Billy the Kid and Bat Masterson, and eventually recorded music, radio cinema and television, myths new *Miracle Grow*.

But their stories are not refined by a thousand accountings over hundreds of years through generations of shifting consciousnesses. *The Iliad* or *Aeneid* or *The Song of Roland* are buoyed by the resounding echoes of inference, which requires reverberation which in turn requires minutes remain minutes and years.

And now cable television and YouTube have rendered time, the seed of narrative, hapless. Years disappear, and we are everywhere at once. They offer instead repetition and reruns, which trap moments naked as when they were born and robbed of the robes metaphor can offer. They provide the comfort of the familiar but nothing beyond.

Perhaps video recordings will soon fill our libraries and memory will fall from our minds like primordial tails from our asses when we were monkeys no more. Every prophecy will be recorded and analyzed for its wording and vagaries as a lawyer cross-examines witnesses. And gods will either have to submit to a screen test or they will cease to be.

4

Growing up I lived in Chelan Falls, Chelan, Cheney, East Wenatchee, Wenatchee, Electric City, Ephrata, Soap Lake, Grand Coulee, Coulee Dam, Pasco, Mattawa, Moses Lake, Priest Rapids, Pateros, Pomeroy, Starbuck, Spokane, Spokane Valley, Colfax, Del Rio-Rex, Alameda, Roosevelt, McGinnis Lake, some several times and all before I reached twenty.

Jeff, my nearest brother, is the most admirable of us; Kelly, the youngest, the most interesting. I am tallest. Pre-school, my mother would coerce us to nap in the trailer. Kelly was still in the crib, and Jeff and I, left in the same room, would bomb each other with socks, so she planted me in our room and Jeff in hers. Isolated and bored, Jeff would kick walls until my mother whipped him with a wooden spoon. A few minutes after, I booted my wall. My mother stormed again into her bedroom and laid the spoon on Jeff. He howled but didn't give me up. That night at dinner he stabbed me with a fork in order to eat my hand.

Kelly contracted a paper route. Easily bored, as well, he lobbed papers into windows to wake his clients and bombed dogs and cats in their yards. One dog, a German shepherd unhinged whenever Kelly approached. The owner chained him. Kelly figured the length and hijacked German sausage from the fridge, which he waved until the dog barreled toward the meat then hit the chain's end and spun 360 degrees by his stout neck. Then Kelly would whack it with a paper. This lasted several weeks, until the dog's owner procured a longer chain and the dog leaped into the middle of Kelly's chest and tore his face and ear and, finally, chomped the sausage. Upon his return, my mother lifted the phone for the police or animal control or my father who would shoot the dog despite his affection for animals, but Kelly was having none of it. It was a fair fight, he said.

Where would a man find better brothers? Yet we weren't close. A sociologist could give you plenty of reasons, but unless he or she is from here, I'd be skeptical. Here, about the time boy siblings appreciate one another is also about the time they recognize their fathers don't say much and are uncomfortable with that they do. In order to be TV close, brothers would have to doctor each other's childhood wounds, but they are at the same time learning not to squawk, especially about one's emotions. So brothers became only competitors, intimidating and imitating one another.

My brothers and I are divided by another factor. Tinker Toys and Legos and Lincoln Logs were our typical Christmas gifts. Both my brothers spent hours referring to the directions then back to the pieces, but the exercise soon grew tedious for me. I was inclined to arrange my green army men in ambush formation and the unsuspecting grey Germans lined between two cushions. I also liked crab apple wars and storming the neighbor kids' forts with a garbage can lid as shield.

5

The years following, I was raised by my mother. Masculinity to me was schooling a mean dog to guard your truck or skipping the engine spark past a bad solenoid to fire the points: subjects in which I remain barely literate. By then, religion seemed meaningless repetition and its adherents struck me as a long way from Christ with little interest in closing the distance. Sinkalip's thoughts turned only an amusing, dirty joke.

After the divorce, my mother played her life like a poker hand. She would fold good hands, which bored her, then draw to inside straights and push all-in anyway, whether her card arrived or not. When she lost she doubled her bet. She'd picked a tough table.

Now, she rewrites her history narrating herself into hero or victim. If anyone objects to her edits, she turns combative, so no one brings it up. She is forgiving herself, whether the rest of us do or not is our business. I admire her for that most of all. At some point I had to quit being her fault anyway. Her parenting may have left a string or two hanging out those days, but I let myself stay unstrung.

6

Once, when my own kids were little, I grew impatient with Jackson, the youngest, and spanked his diapered butt. Luke the oldest boy, no more than four, stood in front of me. "No" he said. "Not fair."

The children waddled up the stairs. When they noticed me in the doorway of their bedroom, they scurried forward and wrapped themselves around each of my legs. "I sorry," Jackson said.

"Me, too," I said.

"Me, too," said Luke.

And we repeated it until we believed one another, though we could never have made it so. I have no room to judge.

7

During my adolescence, my father was diligent about his custodial visits and even negotiated extra time summers. He resided in the same town as did both sets of our grandparents, so the visit was always a joy for my brothers and me. For him, it was a release of sorts: he has great fondness for children and animals. He bends to meet their eyes where he find and revels in their simplicity. It also permits him an acceptable tool to limit interaction with the adults in the room who are less interesting and more trouble to keep on the right side of. I have the same compunction myself.

My lack of interest in building with toys turned a rift between my nature and the trappings of manhood and finally between myself and my father. My brothers scooted under rigs with my father from the time they could twist a wrench, intoxicated by the complicated machine a car was. They soon recognized each part served the whole and a failure of one betrayed the entire machine. They learned their fractions with wrenches and algebra determining a piston's TDC.

When my father would insist I join him under the chassis of his truck, I was awkward fitting wrenches onto bolts and nuts and too often twisted the wrong direction despite the righty-tighty, lefty-loosey rule. Right of what? I encountered my surroundings with abstractions and daydream, which makes for a sloppy mechanic. My father would direct me to fetch tools and I consistently delivered the wrong one. Chastised and dispatched once more, I retrieved the whole box, which he considered a surrender to stupidity rather than a practical solution.

Part of his anger was with himself, I realize now. As I passed points where he had acquired skills and I still had not; he became afraid he was failing me. He wasn't. My father himself was fatherless—his own great grandfather in our family's founding tragedy. No man left, he was compelled to maintain the ranch equipment. He eventually employed these skills to escape the ranch. The work bored and mystified me at the same time. My father and brothers found satisfaction in a freshly humming motor. I was only relieved when the work was done.

But the language of machines was also that of men. Consequently, I acquired it. I learned to value Holly manufactured carburetors and Hurst gear shifts, though I could not relate what each did and why these brands surpassed others. I could identify a carburetor but couldn't repair a stuck float. I procured what the rituals required of me and responded as fittingly as I could manage, yet I did so with a self-consciousness that left me constantly on the precipice of being found out.

8

Meanwhile, enduring an abusive stepfather my mother had determined to convert from a coyote to a Labrador. I barely passed seventh grade. I am smart, yet no one worried over my report card. My malaise built into my eighth grade year. I was a good distance runner, but after my presence at a cross-country practice drew no notice, I slipped into that hole middle-schoolers do when others lose track of them. I didn't have drugs, which was a shame. Daryl Ledbetter commandeered the seat behind me in math class and stung my neck with rubber bands twenty times a day. I was bigger than him and likely as strong, but that was not the size I was on the inside. Instead, I saw it another way: I was disjointed from the universe. I never considered it might sometime be the universe's mistake, or some of the people around me. I just figured it was fate. I spent hours lost in daydreams. My grades cratered further. I never ate with the family, which seemed to appease my troubled mother and incendiary stepfather.

I can't say the world abandoned me: an English teacher, Ms. Schneider, made me her TA despite my lack of effort. My social studies teacher offered me a weeklong scholarship to an academic camp, but my mother scrambled to maintain a day-to-day existence for the family and could not look past that to summer and an application deadline.

9

Fall was the pearl of our father's custody. In the basement of his house in a spare bedroom called the gunroom, deer rifles lined two walnut cases, straight-backed, wooden stocks and blue-black metal reflecting the lamp light. I lugged my father's .30-30 into the bathroom and stared at the mirror to see if a gun in my hand changed me.

At the dump, we practiced shooting targets and bottles and beer cans lined on scrap timbers across construction blocks. I was not a good shot. I'd been instructed on the mechanics—how to ease onto the trigger and press the stock butt against my shoulder to reduce recoil; it was what I experienced with a gun in my hand that distracted me. The thrust of the butt held my attention, not where the bullet landed. I could not see the end past the means. My father's shots circled the target's black or burst each beer bottle; mine too often off passed the target entirely or rattled in the rocks and garbage, the bottles untouched.

"Take a breath," my father whispered. "Hold it." If I missed again, which was common, I grew impatient and shot the air full of lead. The plank splintered and the masonry bricks exploded in gritty clouds and then my dad would relegate me to the single shot .22. I didn't have the temperament of a hunter he told me.

Early mornings, bleary eyes, my long underwear's weight under my levis, the relentless wind that scoured any open skin; they all irritated me but they were not why I surrendered the ritual. In the wheat and rocks, walking too loudly, smelling scents I couldn't identify but was certain I should, certain others could, left me feeling at the boundary of a mystery I couldn't solve. My failure was less one of skill or talent than one of character. I wondered if the stork had made some great mistake and delivered my dad me in place of his own flesh and blood.

10

High school, I was transplanted to my father's house. He, at one time or another, nicknames anyone he knows past casual acquaintance. Pickup trucks get the same treatment, though cars don't. We children, of course, possessed many. My stepbrother, Steve was The Coyote.

Growing up, Steve once bombed the fireworks stand and once fell from a pickup traveling fast enough the pavement sheered half his ear from his head. Attending school, keeping steady work, or remaining otherwise inside the law conflicted with the time and effort necessary to exist as a country and western song. Recently he suffered a heart attack. I sat with him through a catheter procedure. He didn't have insurance and the doctor asked what he did to make ends meet.

"He's a character in a story," I told him. "The other characters help him."

But my brother owns none of Coyote's magic; he has no Turd sisters to advise him; no one will step over his body three times and awaken him after his death.

11

In my high school U.S. History classes, the Western myth, if it was referred to at all, was taught in the context of Christianity: Manifest Destiny. Many mistakenly identify the West with Christianity. There is reason I suppose; both ideas survived largely word of mouth for many years. The gospels passing muster at the Council of Nicea, in which the Catholic church drew rein upon the wandering theological rumor Christianity had become, sixty vastly different versions of Christ's life existed then, advocating everything from orgies to self mutilation. Read enough dime novels and the western seems

to require some reigning in itself. The gospels that made the cut were by men who had never heard Jesus of Nazareth speak. The Dalton Gang and Billy the Kid could probably make similar claims, of their biographers and our tendency to inflate their characters certainly applies to John Wayne and Clint Eastwood as well as the Christ that emerged from Nicea. The most significant consistency within the selected gospels was the concept of Christ as the unique Son of God and, paralleling it, a reminder that Christians are not. The Gnostic gospel of Thomas, though popular and beautifully rendered, maintains that Christians are as Christ, but that theology was incongruous to the plans of Constantine's bishops who desired a church clergy correlative to the Emperor. The personal route to heaven Thomas provides offers no avenues to political power.

The western served similar purposes for its masters. Populating the west was necessary to garner its wealth, so the first narratives sold adventure and the promise of prosperity. The enemies of this exodus became dangerous savages.

In 1884, before Theodore Roosevelt was anything other than a New York State Assemblyman, he went west to a ranch in the Dakota badlands. Roosevelt's personal perspective was romantic as the rest of the country's: natural simplicity would return him to the ivory-halls clear-eyed and regenerated. Yet he was tough on the original denizens, as well:

Give each Indian his little claim; if ... he declines this... let him, like these whites, who will not work, perish from the earth he cumpers.

But the Indians were virtually rubbed out, so Roosevelt turned his concern to those that followed:

The great free ranches mark a primitive stage of existence ... and (must) pass away before the onward march of our people. The doctrine seems merciless, and so it is, but it does not do to be merciful to the few at the cost of justice to the many....

Finally, even the small ranchers like those in Owens Valley became obstacles of progress when their water turned necessary to quench Los Angeles' thirst. This hypocrisy didn't keep Roosevelt from admiring the character of these primitives; indeed, he often imitated it without a hint of irony or cynicism. He was astute enough, though, to recognize that the value of any archetype is in its simplicity and that heroic narrative collapses against the confusion of a storyless present.

Dividing Christ from Christians has had ramifications beyond the political or theological. Dismissing the possibility that Christians can emulate Christ releases its adherents from the responsibility to act heroically. Christians don't deny their moral atrocities; they simply regard them as inevitable and unconnected with the present. This is where the two stories meet. Killing is wrong but we're all sinners so why not kill those who oppose us, because, if we are Christians they are opposing Christ. The blood and violence of the American West is sweeping and holy with such thinking.

Unconditional love has made forgiveness a foregone conclusion for Christians which releases them from accountability for their sins, even as they occur. Guilt becomes obsolete. Atonement, both the word and concept—the rationale for Christ's life and death—have been stricken from the contemporary Christian vocabulary. Billy the Kid never apologized that I can recall.

The New Testament contains no Book of Lamentations, no Job, no Babylonian Exile. Christ, as he is now depicted, blunts God's Old Testament anger and, along with it, the reflection that evokes truths

that transcend the political and theological to illuminate the root of human experience: in a word, humility. Modern Christians leap from sin to forgiveness without traveling the valley of atonement between. They bypass reflection, and, therefore, their consciences. In exchange for his or her exoneration, the Christian values his status as a Christian, distinctly separate from the world, which permits them to act with bloody vehemence when it advances their pursuits. The Wild Bunch, preaches the same ethic, as does Shane or Josie Wales.

12

I possessed no Animal Person name, yet I was student enough of human nature by high school to apprehend a person's vanities and reflect a flattering likeness. It roped me to my peers. I had not expected that possible. I laughed often and learned to draw the same from others.

I flourished those years, it would seem, but the assurance that can only anchor itself in identity evaded me and that extended to romance, as well. I attended the obligatory annual homecoming dances, a prom when a senior girl's college date cancelled, though we merely exchanged the same questions and endured clumsy ridiculous pauses and finally shared an awkward kiss having more to do with duty than passion.

I did eventually date girls in what I would call relationships. Though chaste, as many high school relationships are, they packed an emotional wallop that ran the gamut from abject despair to what it feels like to fly in dreams. However, both extremes convinced me there was no middle, at least not for me.

13

Many years later, writing my first novel, which takes place at the edge of the reservation where I was reared, I revisited Sinkalip's tales. By then I was a heathen of a different sort: I admired religion as cultural artifacts and literary invention. *The King James Bible*, though it defies my Catholic upbringing, is the most beautiful epic poem I have read. However Coyote's tales were never poetry. They did not rhyme and turn hymns; they did not speak dogma or offer lessons in right and wrong. They were contradictory, varied and odd, restrained and hyperbolic and just plain strange. Like living.

His tales strike me as a depiction of a reality beyond ethics and morality and the simple binary logic of Western religion. When I was in grade school, we studied New Math, a communist plot according to the GOP. However, I did learn about base two number systems. 1 is one. 10 is two. 11 is three. 100 is four. There is no such thing as 2 or any of the numbers following. A thing either is or is not: Western morality in a nutshell. Coyote appears to have no base numeral: halves and quarters and squares of squares and a morass of infinite numbers beyond and between. The simpler one exists as religion and the complex as a tangential fairy tale.

14

The clumsy stitches I employed to bind myself to manhood and story, came undone when I killed my college roommate in 1982. He offered me a pistol to examine, property of the Okanogan County Police Department with whom he was interning. Someone from elsewhere would have had the good manners to examine the weapon and the good sense to keep it holstered; someone from here would be required to perform a more thorough inspection to demonstrate appropriate admiration. That person, however, would be no more likely to mishandle a pistol than he would his own arm or leg.

When the gun fired, my friend coughed, then collapsed through his open car door. Another friend, on the passenger side, bolted for the house and the phone. Across the road was an orchard. Yet, when the siren's and tumbling lights approached and a police sergeant asked who was responsible, I patted my chest and put my hands behind me for the handcuffs. The pistol's report in the little car rang in my head for days after.

— — —

My roommate's parents demanded I be released from jail and threatened to actively campaign against the prosecutor if I were to be charged. Later someone asked how they could do this after I had killed their son. They were Christians, they answered. They are the finest people I have ever known. So much for walking the valley between. No one forced them to. They did it because that's what they felt good people did.

I was eviscerated by my own incompetence inside one story and rescued by the benevolence within another.

15

Two months after the shooting, my father invited me home for my birthday. Friday night, we drank root beer floats and toasted my birth. Saturday morning, he woke me before light and deposited a package of long underwear and an orange cap on the nightstand. We drove to the family ranch in silence. He lugged his rifle to a knob with a vista of the entire canyon. I chose a crevice below a rockslide protected from the wind. Basalt and shale made up three sides of the canyon, spindly birch scattered amongst them. Sagebrush and Russian Thistle and cheatweed pocked what the opening between. Locusts a hundred years old led from the house to the barn. Their wood was for fence posts. Up top the ground was flat, easier to plow; there was less to abandon to rocks and the coyotes and deer. But I imagine up above, my great-grandfather felt in the middle of an open room when he preferred the closeness of two walls and a corner to back him. Even choosing this place, he'd thought like a criminal.

Light continued to break over the horizon. I heard rock and weeds. My father had surrendered his promontory. He sat next to me to dodge the wind then hunted his pocket until he found a pair of cigars. They nearly fell apart as he opened them. He and my mother, while they were still married, once had a tremendous row over who should go to the grocery to buy cigarettes. Neither would go; they both quit smoking for the next thirty years.

He lit the cigar and puffed then laid into the land and grass that was his father's and his grandfather's and before that belonged to the Indians, who would argue it really was no one's. He reminded me he had bought two dozen when I was born and had to run to the store for two dozen more to celebrate my birth. He puffed and stared into the sky and so did I. It was deep and blue and I felt lost in it, but when I closed my eyes I could sense the earth moving beneath me, concocting time and memory.

16

Perhaps the universe offers grace, as well. One winter, Holly, who would become my wife, a woman I had known and liked for some time, crossed a room and asked if I'd take her for a walk. I would worry later pity was behind her request or that she found the chase exasperating enough to settle on a horse clearly not up to much of a trot, but, at the time, I was happy to be next to someone as kind as she was pretty.

I suppose someone might argue this is the point where story starts to make sense. I prefer to think of it as the sort of good fortune that defies sense, the kind of story Sinkalip would tell.

17

We in the West – like people everywhere, I suppose – are left to navigate our lives not through stories but between them, averting our personal Scylla and Charybdis to choose our course and pilot the narrative with stories required to be a mother or daughter or father or son, reminding ourselves the necessity to remain aware of the deceptions of the larger currents and eddies and the siren songs that tug us toward the rocks.

As for myself, I no longer consciously summon my past, but when it does intrude upon my thinking, too often it delivers me humiliation and shame. Is this why the gods forget? Is it the fear of memory that lifts our arms and drives fence posts into this country and strings the wire stakes into narrow portions we call our own ground to pursue the illusion of certainty, a pretext of the kind that leads an otherwise sound mind to think Jesus' imminent return will be with a Colt holstered upon his hip, cleaning up the infidels with buckshot, all the while chomping a thin cigar.

I believe Christ perished to forgive the sins of the Father not those of Man. Like every parent, the Good Lord had been mean and selfish and difficult with his flock, and he was heartbroken over it. I know a little of how he feels. I beg my own children's forgiveness often. Like most people, I tell them, I am wrong more than I am right, but unlike those people, I am their father, and a father, like nations and religions and epic stories, possesses a capacity to defy ethics and common sense and convince their own flesh and blood that the fault lies within them. It is too much power for a man or a god or a story to possess.

Contemporary West and The New York Times.

Holbert grew up in the Grand Coulee near the Columbia River. His family was among the and among the first settlers of the country. His first novel, *Lonesome Animals* was a top ten pick in 2012 for *The Seattle Times*; it was followed by *The Hour of Lead* in 2014 (both Counterpoint), which won the Washington State Book Award 2015 and was named by Kirkus as a top 100 pick for 2014. Holbert's most recent novel, *Whiskey* is with MCD and Farrar Straus & Giroux.

