

Light on Wounded Knee

On our way to Wounded Knee, the car choked. I drove an automatic for the first time in my life and the dying engine left us standing right in the middle of the, thankfully deserted, reservation road. “It was the car, it wasn't me” I said a little lamely. I had tried a turnaround and the motor had choked during the maneuver.

“I'll push us off the road, is what.” said my young and, as it turned out, very fit companion. Got out, started pushing and had the car off the asphalt in no time. Uphill, mind you. “I didn't know riding motorcycles provides you with *that* kind of strength.” I said, feeling both embarrassed and grateful at the same time.

I tried to reciprocate the effort by giving him a thorough if slightly emotional introduction on the history of the place we intended to visit: Wounded Knee, Pine Ridge reservation, in South Dakota. The place, where the Lakota people experienced some of the most grueling attacks in their history: The first one in 1890, marking a massacre of immense symbolic dimensions which now stands for the end of the Indian Wars; the second being the violent ending of the Wounded Knee Siege in 1975, when members of the American Indian Movement were attacked and chased on the same grounds where their ancestors had suffered 85 years ago.

I stumbled through a rough account of the place's haunted history, drawing from knowledge acquired on the subject since childhood. We were still sitting in the car at the bottom of the hill, waiting for the rain tapping softly on our windshield to subside. On the hill, some movement occurred – a man, a kid and a dog, running back and fourth between the small chapel and the grave. After a while, when we didn't make any visible effort to climb the hill, the figures, possibly the guard and his kid, disappeared again inside the chapel. The bad weather had provided us with an unexpected reward: We would – for at least a few moments – have the place to ourselves.

It was an evening ripe with the tension preceding an upcoming rainstorm. Later that night, it would turn into a full grown South Dakota tornado, with the hail coming down in pieces the size of tennis balls. By the next morning, our shiny, rented four-wheel-drive would have acquired the look of a proper “Rez-car”, spotted with dents where the ice balls had hit all through the night: Instant initiation.

For now, there was only the still, dark sky with its looming clouds and the view of the hill leading up to the grave and chapel at Wounded Knee. Suddenly, I was mute with humbleness. The place itself breathed so much history and I only now realized with a jolt that I had finally made it here. Now, I was the one that choked. I grabbed my sage bundle and we slowly ascended the hill towards the gate. Knowing that we would have only a few minutes by ourselves if at all, we quickly strode on to the grave site. I opened the small iron gate to approach the memorial stone naming the victims of that horrible day. The day, when the small remaining band of a few hundred around chief Spotted Elk, weakened by hunger and snow, had found their death while running from merciless bullets, shot by soldiers blind with rage and revenge; not blind enough though to spare those they were hunting down on horseback one by one, long after the hotchkins guns had subsided.

Not for the first time during my trip, I felt like someone had took me and placed me right here, rooted in front of the memorial stone, numbly reading up on the names. Laying down my sage, I observed that what I saw around me, was transformation. All the little gifts and offers that people had left together with their prayers, fluttering from the fence and lying on the ground; all the respect having been paid through the years, day by day, seemed to have changed the grave. We proceeded to say our own prayers before our quiet moment was disrupted by the first vendor. Even the arrival of our small party of two had been spotted from the community down below. Politely rejecting the

dream-catchers and jewelery, we slowly made our way back to the car.

The dark clouds had ripped open right above the chapel and a glory of evening sunlight came down in rays, touching the earth with gentle pools of warmth. The pulsing energy inside the earth of that hill, that day at Wounded Knee, had been palpable throughout our visit and it breathed. It breathed history, and it breathed hope.



the author in 2015