

# UNENDING ROOMS

*stories*

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*“Another man traveled with them.  
He walked behind them leading their donkeys.”*

Zohar Vol. 1

for Sasha

*My sister, my bride!*

**ONE**

## JOHN BOYD'S STORY

*Preguntáis: Y dónde están las lilas?  
Y la metafísica cubierta de amapolas?*

Neruda

**J**ohn Boyd wrote a story that pissed off the white people in our writing group. He was a skin off the same rez as Sherman Alexie. He was already in his thirties when he came to us, a recovering alcoholic. One time we were hanging out at a party that the group had thrown, at the place of some white liberal, and we were the only brown people there. I was drinking beer, and John, who didn't drink, was smoking cigarettes, one after another. We were both watching the people, like we were watching an unfunny sitcom. Suddenly, he leaned into me, and he pulled something out of his inside coat pocket. "Look what I brought," he said, and handed it to me.

It was a cassette tape of Hank Williams, Sr.

"All right," I said. "Hank."

"Damn right," he said.

He didn't ask the white Rastafarian host if he could change the Bob Marley, he just went up to the stereo and put in the tape. Hank's desperate voice and the pain of his guitar blew into the room like ghosts. Anyone who has felt drunken despair knows that Hank was not a phony. He was poor white trash, and had he been a Mexican, he would have sung mariachi music. You could tell that some of the white people felt uncomfortable listening to country music, but we were the only brown people there, and they were happy to have us in the group — more diversity and all — so they let Hank sing. They were hating it, waiting for the end of it.

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“They don’t even know what’s good about their own culture,” John said.

Suddenly a young Rastafarian white guy stormed into the room yelling, “What is this Okie shit?”

They told him that me, a Chicano, and John, an Indian (although they would use the term “Native American”), brought the tape.

“Oh, sorry,” he said, bowing to John, and he sat on the couch, and everyone listened.

At that same party, a young woman named Emma, a white woman from Vermont, asked John how far was his reservation from Seattle. Close and far, he answered. Then she started on about how much she loved Seattle, especially Pike Market, she said, saying how much she loved watching the fish vendors throw the salmon back and forth. If I recall her correctly, she was pretty, very New Englandly, and she wrote stories that aspired to be like Pam Houston.

John listened to her talk of Pike, and he shook his head, as if he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Everyone else at the party was looking at Emma, and they liked watching her, as if pink fish were flying from her mouth.

Suddenly John blurted out, “How would you like it if we threw your Jesus around like dead fish?”

I thought it was funny, and I started laughing, and he turned to me and laughed with me, but the others didn’t get it.

But this story (my story) is about a story John wrote. We were the only brown people in a graduate seminar in fiction writing at the University of Oregon.

The program was hard to get into, and John was accepted because he was a good fiction writer who could have been great. He wrote language-driven stories, so

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beautiful, I'd even say poetic, about natives walking along rivers, landscapes so vivid that you forget you're reading. You could enter his world, you could hear the sound of the streams, and you could feel the sun streaming through the trees. White people in our group loved his stuff and thought that he could be the next James Welch.

But then he wrote a story that they didn't think was any good. After that, maybe some of them began to think he wasn't such a great writer. He would eventually drop out of the program, although I don't think it was because of the story he wrote. It was and it wasn't. It was more complex than that.

John Boyd's story was about a guy who lives alone in a trailer on the rez, somewhere in Washington. One day he hears a knock at his door, which surprises him, because no one ever came to his door. He opens it and there's this white guy standing there, a young man carrying a clipboard. The young man smiles all dumbly, like he's happy to be there.

"Hello?" he says, a little too eagerly and cheerfully for John's character, who looks over the guy's shoulders and sees a new white truck parked in front.

"What do you want?"

The guy explains that he's a graduate student at the university, and he's doing his dissertation about life on the reservation. He's very eager, and he says, "I want to know what it's like to be a Native American. What is it like? Please tell me. I have money."

John Boyd's character says something like, "You really want to know what it's like?"

The guy nods his head and says, "Yes! Please, teach me!"

John's character looks around. Then he says, "Let's see the money." The visitor pulls out a wad of bills and

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hands it to Boyd's character, who pockets it, steps back, and tells the white guy to come in.

"Oh, thank you! Thank you!"

They go into the trailer.

The Indian isn't what you would call neat. There's stuff everywhere, dishes, clothes, TV blaring. The white guy pulls up his clipboard and starts writing notes.

"Put that down," says the Indian. "Follow me."

"Where are we going?"

"You said you wanted to know what it's like being a Native American on the rez, right?"

"Yes, yes! So much!"

I got the impression as I read the story that the guy living in the trailer was John Boyd at an earlier age. There are empty whisky bottles all over. The character clears a spot on the counter, knocking all the stuff to the floor, breaking bottles. The white guy pulls up his clipboard to write a note.

"Put the clipboard down," John says (or rather, John's character says), and the white guy looks around for a place to put it.

The Indian grabs the clipboard and throws it across the room.

The student looks a little disconcerted, as if he needs to take notes in order for the experience to be real.

"Put your hand here," says the Indian, indicating the empty spot he has cleared on the counter.

So the guy, happy to be learning what it's like, puts his hand on the counter.

John's character grabs a large kitchen knife. "Spread out your fingers," he says.

The student seems a little more reluctant now, so the Indian yells, "Do it!"

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The guy says, "O.K.," and he spreads out his fingers, maybe thinking that the Indian is going to play that game where you poke a knife real fast between the digits, maybe meaning that being a Native American was scary, uncertain, dangerous at times. He wants to take notes.

But the Indian takes the knife and whacks off three of the white guy's fingers, who screams bloody murder, and blood spurts everywhere, like in a Monty Python movie. He holds his hand up, screaming, blood squirting from where the fingers used to be.

John's character grabs a beer, walks to the living room, plops on his couch and says, "That's what it's like."

We workshopped the story, and when it was time to talk about it, the people in our group were silent, not sure how to react.

Then they started.

Emma went first:

"John," she said, as if she were very concerned. "What happened to those beautiful stories you used to write? Where are your trees and mystical rivers and schools of metaphorical salmon, slipping between the rocks? Where are the rainbows reflecting in the water?"

And everyone agreed. "You're such a good writer," said a white Rastafarian boy, the one from the party. "But this. It's so angry. Why is it so angry?"