

PANTHER IN THE SKY

JAMES ALEXANDER THOM



BALLANTINE BOOKS

**“Oh, what a man this will be,
with such a sign as that!”**

In 1768, when Turtle Mother gave birth to a strong baby boy in the heart of the Shawnee nation, a yellow-green shooting star streaked across the heavens. Hard Striker saw the *unsoma*, the bird sign, and named his son Tecumseh, meaning Panther in the Sky....

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~~By James Alexander Thom~~

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PANTHER IN THE SKY

LONG KNIFE

FOLLOW THE RIVER

FROM SEA TO SHINING SEA

STAYING OUT OF HELL

THE CHILDREN OF FIRST MAN

THE RED HEART

WARRIOR WOMAN (with Dark Rain)

SIGN-TALKER

SAINT PATRICK'S BATTALION

PANTHER IN THE SKY

James Alexander Thom

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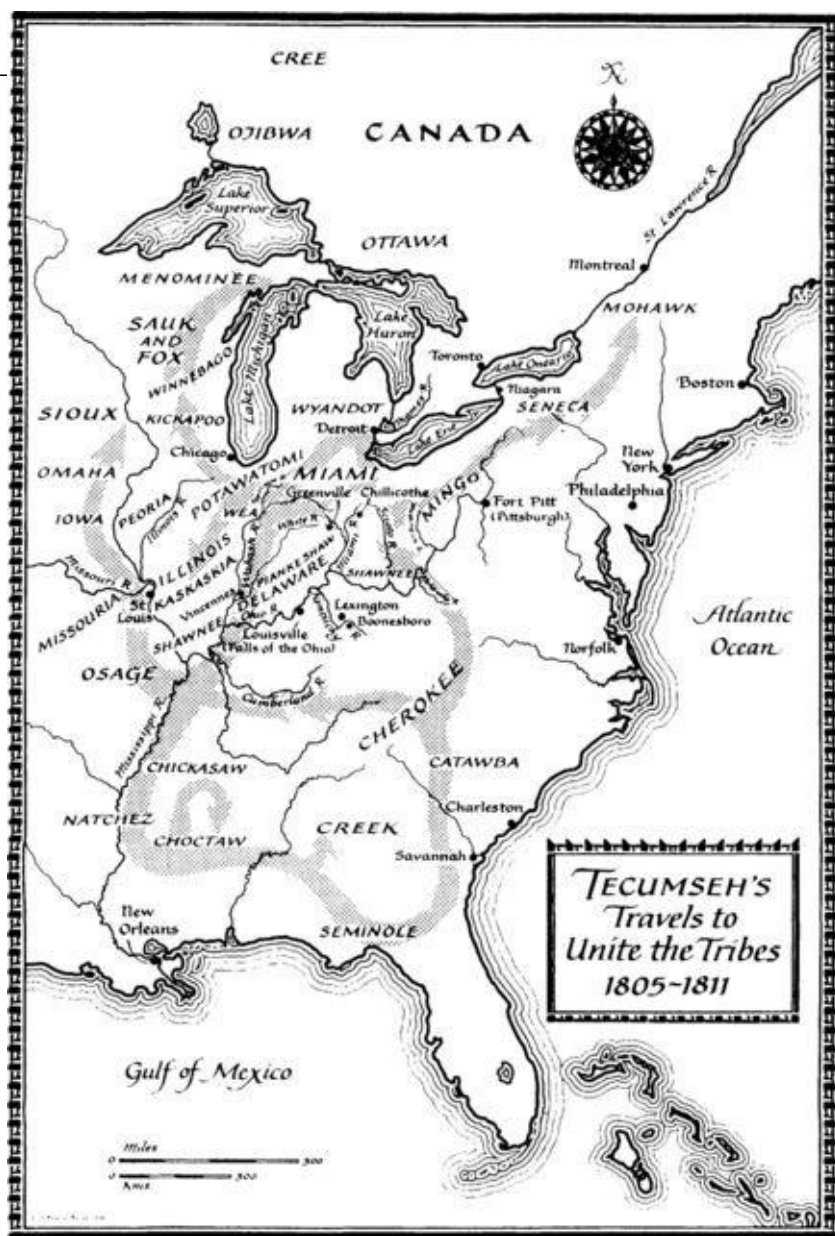
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Whenever I begin work on a new book I am reborn into a new world. This time it was more so than ever. Entering the round world of this splendid people, sharing their bittersweet heritage, learning and retelling the story of their beloved leader, has enriched my life.

James Alexander Thomsen
Bloomington, Indiana





Prologue

ON THIS SIDE OF THE CIRCLE OF TIME THAMES RIVER, ONTARIO October 5, 1813

ONCE AGAIN THE PEOPLE WERE FLEEING ON A ROAD OF hunger.

Through the foggy autumn woods a brown river flowed westward, and along its south bank the gaunt families slogged eastward. Their voices murmured in a dozen Algonquian tongues, though mostly they were silent, turned inward upon their misery and fear. They numbered more than two hundred, women and coughing children and ancients, most afoot, a few on horseback and travois strung out more than two miles along the mud-clogged road. Their feet slithered and sucked in the cold muck.

So many times Tecumapese, whose name meant Watcher of the Shooting Star, had fled like this with her people ahead of the armies of the Long Knives. The first time she had been a young woman not yet a mother. Now she was fifty-five summers of age, and in her own memory this was the seventh flight. It always happened in the autumn. The American armies always drove them out at harvesttime making them face winter without food or shelter.

Cold rain had fallen for six days while the Redcoat army of their allies the British retreated along the lakeshore and then up this river road. The wheels of their cannons and baggage wagons and the hooves of their horses and beef cattle had churned the dirt road into ruts of mud. And now the Indian refugees came following, carrying sodden bundles, their blankets and clothes ragged, drenched, and soiled, their leggings soaked through and clotted with mud. Half were barefoot; the mire had swallowed their moccasins.

Through the murmur and hush of their slow passage purred the crying of hungry babies, and that was the sound that most tormented Star Watcher.

The leaves of the big oaks, elms, and beeches all around were gold, the maples and sumacs were vermilion to livid. When a gust of cold wind stirred the fog, showers of rainwater and yellow leaves would come down. It was the time of year when a woman's heart was meant to be absorbed in the harvest and the yield of the hunt, in corn parching and bean shelling, in acorn gathering and walnut breaking, in drying venison and buffalo meat over smoky fires, in rendering bear oil and tanning hides.

But the autumn colors were not in the heart now, only in the eyes. The leaves that had fallen had been mashed and trampled into the mud with the blackened old leaves of other years. Once again because of the Long Knives there would be no harvest.

Star Watcher sat on her mare in the chilly morning air looking back for stragglers as her people stumbled by. Her brother Tecumseh had put upon her the burden of keeping the people together and hurrying them on. Upon the shoulders of their younger brother, the Prophet, he had put the task of leading them to the town of the Jesus Indians, where they might find food and shelter. And upon himself Tecumseh had taken the warrior's task of defending the rear, of harassing and delaying the Long Knife army like wolf pack around bison herd, to give the helpless ones and the ponderous Redcoat army time to move ahead up the river to a defensible place. With less than a thousand warriors he had slowed the advance of General Harrison's four thousand Long Knives. But still the Americans came on and were perhaps not more than five miles behind now, and the people could not be allowed to fall behind or sit and rest. But some had strayed aside or fallen down and gotten lost.

and one of the lost ones was her own grandnephew.

Star Watcher was a strong, erect woman whose graying hair hung down her back to her waist in one thick braid. On each russet cheekbone was the thumbprint of red paint with which the Shawnee women of all ages marked their faces. She wore a beaded deerskin dress and leggings, with a damp red wool English blanket drawn around her shoulders. She was handsome, queenly looking, mother of many: the children of her own loins, of her little brothers whom her mother had left with her, and of many more whose mothers and fathers had died by the guns and diseases and whiskey of the American white men. And now she was also the mother, as Tecumseh had joked grimly to her yesterday, of all these exhausted and homeless ones, the families of his warriors.

“Go on, old Grandmother,” she coaxed. “Go on, sister. Hurry on. The town of the Jesus Delawares is near ahead. Hurry on. Be strong!” Her searching gaze fell upon a Peckuwe Shawnee woman she knew. “Sister,” she called. “Have you seen today the little boy of Nehaaemo?”

The Peckuwe woman, who was leading a small child with each hand, shook her head, scowling, and called back: “I have my own to take care of on this hard way we go! Am I to look out also for half-bloods whose mother lets them stray?”

Star Watcher’s dark eyes flashed, and her lips set firm. She kned her mare and rode as skillfully as a warrior in among the people and halted the horse in the woman’s way, stopping her. She leaned down close to the woman’s startled face. Her breath came in white puffs in the dank air as she spoke in a voice quick and low: “Listen to me with all the power of your attention. We speak of a good little boy whose mother goes mad in her head with worry, a woman who has too many children to hold one by each hand like you. Nehaaemo is of my own blood. Do not speak with a knife tongue of her or of her lost boy. When the road is hard we must say soft words to each other. Did not Our Grandmother Kokomthena, the Creator, give us this as one of the Rules of Living?”

The woman, now looking at the ground, nodded. “I swallow my bad words.”

“*Weh-sah*, good,” said Star Watcher. “Now, go along. I know you are tired and your little ones have short legs, but you must hurry on.”

“Yes,” said the woman, who now looked up with tears in her eyes. “And I pray the little boy will be found. I shall watch for him with my own eyes.”

Star Watcher smiled at her and nodded, then turned her mare and rode back among the stragglers, shepherding them. How many had strayed off to lie down and rest? What would happen to them when the Long Knives found them? From nearly thirty years ago she could remember seeing a Kentucky horse soldier with a sword chase and hack seven women who had fallen behind in their flight from Maykujay Town. She gazed back down the river and shuddered with fear and hatred. It was quiet back there now, the frightening quiet the prey listens to when it knows it is being hunted. This quiet was a way more fearsome than the battle thunder of yesterday, when Tecumseh and his warriors had fought the Americans all morning at the Chatham bridges on the Forks of the river Thames.

For thirty years her brother had been fighting to save his people’s world, and though this now seemed a hopeless time, so had the many other times when he had turned like a trapped panther and torn his pursuers apart. He had come to be the chief of chiefs, loved and trusted by many peoples, the last free chief, the one who would not sign treaties with the Americans, the one who saw far ahead.

It was now just as it had been most of her life, the People fleeing, the war chiefs protecting them—except that now they were not in their homeland anymore. Now this river alongside the retreat was not the Scioto-se-pe or the Miami-se-pe, or the Wabash-se-pe or the Maumee-se-pe, those clear green rivers of the Shawnee homelands, but a muddy river with a British name, in a northern land, home to Wyandots, Ottawas, Ojibways, Potawatomes, not of Shawnees.

Suddenly, above the drone of voices, shouting arose and cries of “Tenskwatawa! Father!” Star Watcher turned and looked upstream and saw her younger brother, the Prophet, riding back toward her.

from the front of the column. She reined her mare around and stood waiting for him, dreading that he was bringing word of some new trouble ahead.

Tenskwatawa, whose name meant He-Opens-the-Door, rode close to her, a long cloak draped behind him, his many-colored turban pulled down as usual on the right side to hide his blind eye. The cold wet weather was making his nostrils leak mucus onto the silver ring in his nose and into his mustache. Open Door was not a good rider, and Star Watcher sighed with fond pity as the great shaman of the Shawnee nation hauled at the reins and conducted a grunting struggle to guide his horse, while people scurried to get out of his way. Everything he did had always been like this. He was a legend of awkwardness. Considering what a blundering fool he was, it was a miracle how much he had done for the People.

“Sister,” he panted, “we in front saw the smoke from the Jesus town! We are almost there!”

“*Weh-sah!* That will give the People strength of heart. But you, brother, you should have ridden ahead into the town, to prepare for us, and sent a rider back to tell me.”

“Ah ... yes.” He squinted his good eye, realizing that he had made a typical error of judgment. Then he said, as if to justify himself, “I came to tell you, Nehaaemo is in the worst of grief for her little son George. She wails and dirties her face with mourning, and will listen to no word of hope—”

“Listen!” Star Watcher interrupted him, turning to look toward the rear. People down the road were shouting. Her face brightened when she heard the name they were calling.

Around a bend far down the road Tecumseh came riding into view surrounded by people on foot and followed by a horde of mounted warriors. She first discerned him at this distance by the great curve of his white plume in his headdress. Some of the people on the road in front of him were women and gray-haired. Some children and feeble elders were being helped along, even carried, by warriors. Star Watcher knew what this meant. Tecumseh and his fighting men had been gathering up the stragglers and lost ones as they came along. Star Watcher remembered one of the teachings she had given him over and over when he was a boy growing to warrior’s age: “Always protect the People. That is all a warrior is for.” And he had lived by that.

Now Tecumseh had seen her, and he raised a hand and called out in his mighty voice that could be heard over multitudes and distances. He rode out from the others and came ahead at a canter on his muddy white horse.

It was then as he drew closer that Star Watcher saw two things at once, one of which gave her joy and the other terror.

He held a child on the saddle in front of him: the little lost boy, son of Nehaaemo.

But Tecumseh’s face was painted as she had never seen it before, red on one side, black on the other. War and death. She felt a chill pass down from her scalp through her neck and bosom, and her heartbeat quickened, aching. She kicked the mare’s flanks and hurried down the road to meet him. Open Door followed. Many people were shouting, some wailing. When she was close to him she saw the whiteness of his beloved smile, shining through the terrible red and black. How all the People loved this brother of hers and depended upon his strength and vision! But she was bound to him as no one else was. She had been as much mother as sister to him; her very name had been changed at his birth to show that she was a watcher over his life.

He reined in and reached and squeezed her hand, then Open Door’s hand. Then he dismounted and lifted the dirty, frightened little half-breed boy down from the saddle, grimacing with pain. She saw that there was a bloody bandage on her brother’s left arm. “Here is this little one,” he said. “He was beside the road, crying and hungry. Take him to Nehaaemo and tell her to guard her children better than she has done.”

Star Watcher slid down from her saddle, drew the sniffling child close to her hip, and sheltered him in her blanket. She looked at Tecumseh’s slit, bloodstained left sleeve and the seeping poultice on

bound around his upper arm, then at his face, half red, half black, her eyes asking questions. But he said nothing about that. He was tense with haste, like a drawn bow. "We will meet the Long Knives today in the way I have yearned to meet them," he said. "The British general can run no farther and has promised to stand with us this time and fight them with all his power. We will have his cannons and his Redcoats to help us, and this time we will draw back no more. Here today we will defeat the army of my great enemy Harrison, or here we will leave our bones. I told General Procter that if he puts his tail between his legs and runs away again, my warriors will walk away from him and leave him to the bayonets of the Blue-Coats.

"My brother, my sister, here is what you must do about the Sacred Bundle, and about our grain seeds...."

As he instructed them about those irreplaceable belongings of the tribe, his chieftains and warriors began riding up. Star Watcher looked first for her husband, Wasegoboah, Stands Firm. He was a gray hair, but still brawny and quick and always near Tecumseh, one of the thirty longtime followers who had designated themselves the protectors of his life.

Her husband dismounted and came to stand near her, looking at her intently. She smiled at him, but he did not smile. In the intensity of his eyes there was something so terrible, so full of pain, that she wondered if he had a wound somewhere. He stood beside her, his arm touching hers, but did not touch her anything, even when she probed his face with her eyes. His look and silence filled her with such dread as her brother's red and black war paint had done. As a gust of cold wind blew more yellow leaves down all around, there seemed to be a mournful death-moan inside her head.

Tecumseh was saying now, his eyes gleaming with passion:

"Today every breath I draw will give me strength to kill Harrison. Weshemoneto, the Master of Life, will put into my hands the fate of this evil man who has done more than anyone to ruin our People!" He turned to mount his white horse, but then paused and returned to Star Watcher. He gripped her wrist in his hand, which, for the first time in her memory, felt cold. He looked straight and deep into her eyes, and his hard face went soft. The lines of the angry frown vanished from between his brows for a moment, and she could see his eyes again as she had seen them long ago before they had ever been angry: large eyes, eyes that had seemed to try to draw forth the meaning of everything they saw, eyes of a hazel color flecked with green and brown, unlike any others ever seen in this dark-eyed family. Old Change-of-Feathers, who had been the principal Shawnee shaman when Tecumseh was born, had explained that the child's eyes contained the light of the Eye of the Panther, the shooting star that had gone over when he was born, and how well she could remember that, the greatest omen she had ever seen. Now Tecumseh murmured, so softly that only the familiar movements of his lips told her what he was saying, one of the rules of Kokomthena, Our Grandmother that Star Watcher herself had taught him over and over when he was a boy: "*Weshecat-welo k'wesh-laweh-pah.*"

"May we be strong by doing what is right," she repeated.

Then he mounted, without even seeming to favor his wounded arm, and rode off up the road toward the fording place, not looking back.

Stands Firm was turning away to his horse, to follow Tecumseh. Star Watcher grabbed his arm fiercely and made him look at her. She said, "I do not see Thick Water with him. Is he killed?" Thick Water was Tecumseh's most tenacious bodyguard, always so close by him that Tecumseh now seemed like a man without his shadow; Thick Water's absence seemed an omen, as if Weshemoneto had withdrawn his cloak of protection from around her brother.

Stands Firm replied: "No. Tecumseh sent him away."

She shuddered. Somehow this sounded even more ominous than if the bodyguard had been killed in the battle yesterday. "Why did he send him away? *Wahsiu*, my husband! What do you think?"

“He told him to go bring back some Wyandots who had deserted us. He tried also to send me away from him, to send me to stay by you and help you with these people.”

She hung tight to his sleeve. “*Wahsiu*,” she hissed at him, her eyes wild with doubt, “what is the bad thing that you are not saying out loud?”

He drew his arm out of her grasp. “My wife, I must go....”

She remembered her brother’s war paint, the red and the black, and she guessed. Her eyes drilling into her husband’s, she demanded:

“He had a sign?” She was thinking of the foreknowledge of death that her father and her old brother had taken into battle with them on their last days. “*He had a sign?*” She almost squealed the question at him, leaning forward and starting to tremble. The little boy beside her whimpered.

“By our fire last night a red leaf fell upon him from a tree. All of us with him heard the noise of a bullet, though no gun was shot anywhere. Then he told us that he will fall today. Yes, *neewa*,” Stands Firm groaned, his lips drawn in a grimace, his eyes wet and squinting, “he had a sign, yes!”

She recoiled as if she had been shot. Then she lashed out with her work-hardened hand and clouted the side of his head, screaming at him, “Say no!” Passing warriors turned to look.

He tasted blood, and his ear rang from the impact. She had never struck him before, nor anyone, not even children. He grabbed her wrist before she could slap him again and forced her trembling arm down to her side. His heart was quaking, as was her whole body.

“Forgive me, *wahsiu*,” she groaned. “I want you to say he had no sign.”

“That I know you want. But he did. Now you must let me go on. When we fight the Long Knives today he wants me beside him in Thick Water’s place.”

“Now you lie! You said before that he tried to send you away!”

“He did try to. But then he had the sign and saw in it that I might save him if he falls.”

She tried to find hope in this, but hope was faint. She struggled to make herself calm. “Then go, my husband. Be strong. Do what you can if it happens. I pray for your safety as I always have done. Your heart and mine are one heart.” She could hardly speak but had to tell him these things before he went into battle. He was as good a husband as any woman had ever married, though he had spent most of the years of their marriage in the farthest corners of the land, helping Tecumseh try to unite the tribes. Star Watcher and Stands Firm gripped their right hands together almost until they hurt, and he pressed his forehead against her temple. She shut her eyes, and the eyelids stung with salt.

Then he was gone from her side, and when she opened her eyes he was swinging onto his horse’s back as nimbly as a young warrior, and the horse was already kicking up mud, surging into a gallop up the road, her old husband going off with a hope of protecting her brother, while she, fearing that there was not a hope, put her hands under the little boy’s arms and lifted him onto the pommel of her saddle. She swung on behind him, saying, “Come, now. Your mother wants you so much.” She saw the Open Door riding far ahead already, going toward the missionary town, knowing nothing of Tecumseh’s sign. The little boy at last spoke:

“Ai, I am cold!”

“Yes, you are cold. But do you know there is a secret way to make yourself never feel cold again? You can learn it when you get a little older. The warriors and grandfathers know the secret, but you have to be old enough to learn.” She talked to the child to keep from flying out of her head. She remembered when the boy Tecumseh had learned the secret on the coldest day in anyone’s memory, and how his body and hands had always given off warmth after he learned it. How will such good secrets be taught, she wondered, if the Long Knives win? When you have no home, you forget everything, even who you are.

Then she remembered that Tecumseh’s hand had been cold today, and her hope grew smaller still.

She rode through the column of hundreds of warriors of many tribes who were following her.

doomed brother up the road to ford the river to the battleground, the Shawnees, Miamis, Wyandot, Potawatomies, Ottawas, Ojibways, Menominees, Delawares, Sauks, Foxes, Kickapoos, Winnebagoes, Senecas, even Sioux and Creeks from places far west and south, the broadest brotherhood of nations any chief had ever united for any cause, those who had been with him for many seasons and those who had come to join him after he had proven he could shake the world. They rode and trotted along toward a battle in which they all could expect to die, their weapons rattling, their bone and quill and silver ornaments chattering and jingling, their faces painted with stripes and dots and circles, robes and leathers flapping, following her brother to go and fight still again the American army of Harrison, the land stealer.

Star Watcher talked to the little boy as she rode past the warriors to catch up with the refugees, the mothers and wives and sisters and children of all these warriors who might die today. "We must be with our families," she told the boy. "We must live on, and not forget the good things we know. Weshemoneto the Great Good Spirit favors our People. Though the white man's God is strong, the Master of Life knows we are right, and gives us Tecumseh to save us."

"I am *cold*," groaned the little boy.

She held the blanket tight around him and hugged him closer to her belly. "Did you know, I was holding my mother when Tecumseh was born? Did you know, I first saw the shooting star that went over when he was born? Oh, yes," she groaned, "he was like my own little boy, and Our Grandmother the Creator told me what to teach him to make him good and kind.... For when the Panther's Eye shined through the sky, it was foretold that he would be good and full of vision, and the strongest of all our leaders." She bit her upper lip and breathed deep breaths. And then she said, in a voice that sounded softer in her own head:

"That was in the ending of the Time Before. Yes, when the Long Knives were still on the other side of the Beautiful River. Yes! Yes, what a happy people we were in the Time Before! Sometime we will be happy again, for everything comes back around.... Oh, let me try to tell you how beautiful and terrible was the Panther Star on that night...."

She was remembering the first time she had seen the life that was Tecumseh, remembering because now she believed that she had seen him alive for the last time. And through the blur of her tears as she rode and talked, everything was muddy brown and gray, and the falling leaves were little drifting smears of gold and red.

In her mind she saw Tecumseh's red-and-black face. And his white smile, like light through clouds. *Everything comes back around.* He is still alive and believes that he can win this day, she thought. He believes that he can kill our greatest enemy on this day. He means to do this even though he expects to die!

"The shooting star," she said to the little boy, "was the color of his eyes. The color of a panther's eyes, when a panther crosses your path and turns to look at you...."

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE CIRCLE OF TIME OLD PIQUA TOWN
March 9, 1768

TURTLE MOTHER SQUATTED, NAKED AND SWEATY, IN THE center of the birth hut. Her daughter knelt at her right and an old midwife at her left.

The pain returned with its rushing sound. The light of the little campfire outside the hut blurred in Turtle Mother's sight and became two campfires, moving apart from each other and then together again. She gripped the center post of the hut and groaned, and pushed down with all the strength of her torso. Her breathing was fast and hard. She pressed as if she must turn herself inside out. She felt as if she would die of this. But with her first two she had felt as if she would die, too, and had not, so she was not afraid. Still, even knowing she would not die of this, she felt as if she would.

Then the pain drew back a little way, and Turtle Mother squatted there with her hands still on the post and drew slow breaths. Sweat was coursing down her cheeks, growing cool in the night air, and the coolness felt good. She was aware of her daughter's hands as they pressed and stroked her flank and eased the pain. The girl's hands were gentle and cool, but strong.

As the rushing sound of the pain lessened, the sounds of the night came to her ears again. She heard the piping of the little tree frogs. She heard Wind Spirit whispering high in the treetops outside the shelter, the spring trickling through its rocks nearby, and in the distance the quickening beats of a drumming grouse. She heard the voice of her husband, Pucsinwah, Hard Striker, who was talking with their son Chiksika beside the campfire outside the hut.

Her daughter's hand now stroked her brow and wiped sweat out of her eyes. The girl had moved closer around in front of her. The girl's eye reflected firelight for a moment as she moved, then her thick hair shadowed it. She was only ten years old, but already she was like a woman in the wisdom of her heart, and she understood, the way an animal understands, without word teaching, the coming of life. Thus she knew how to help and soothe her mother in the labor of birth instead of being afraid and helpless. For a moment, Turtle Mother was able to smile at her daughter. Then the mighty coming down began again, and her smile turned to a grimace, and she turned her head aside, and again the firelight shimmered and divided. This time the pain was greater and longer, and it forced noises from her throat, awful noises.

Hard Striker by the fire outside heard his wife's pain and feared for her. Though he was the principal war chief of all the Shawnees, he was a man who felt the pain in others. Turtle Mother was the perfect wife for a man, but birth was always uncommonly hard for her, and each time she gave him a child he was afraid he would lose her. Looking toward the shelter, he said to his son Chiksika, "A man cannot know how that feels."

It was not the kind of thing that a father would have tried to express to an ordinary boy of twelve. But Chiksika, like his sister, was wise and good beyond his age. His name meant "the Chickasaw," for he had been born while his parents traveled through the lands of that nation, down in the southern lands beyond the hunting grounds of Kain-tuck-ee. Chiksika was as near manhood and ready to become a warrior as most boys were at sixteen or seventeen. He listened well to everything his father said and tried to understand it all.

Now Hard Striker said to him, "I have felt the hurt of a musket ball in my body, and of the tomahawk several times. But surely a woman's pain is worse than those." He squinted and looked toward the shelter. When he spoke again his voice was thick with feeling. "Sometimes you will hear men and boys make mockery of women, saying they are weak and silly. My son, never let your lip

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