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Lincoln, Kenneth

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## Allogan Slagle, 1951–2002

### KENNETH LINCOLN

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*There is hope; and it is in hope that we have written The Good Red Road for the children, as the Elders who have spoken to us have asked. We have delivered ourselves of a burden writing these things, that the people may be free, and live.*

—Allogan Slagle, Keetoowah Cherokee

He reminded me of the great white rabbit *Wakdjungkaga*, a Winnebago creator divinely tricky and amicably randy—always a bit frumpy, a cotton plaid shirt and baggy jeans before grunge was in, squeaky tennis shoes. He had a turned-in, tip-toey walk, as though on eggs or ice, and a wild bright alertness to edges and corners. I thought of a bird's quickness to spot danger, a mouse curiously scurrying. Logan walked right out of *The Hobbit* with a shuffle and mutter to himself, wrinkling his nose, squinting behind seriously thick glasses, and looking down at the ground like Wordsworth's leech-gatherer. Only this boy was an advanced high school student in my first freshman honors class at UCLA, winter 1970. Eyesight grounded, he found playing cards, jokes, tarot images, stones, bits of wood, bones, and all matter of debris that proved interesting. Think of a blackbird gathering flotsam for a nest.

Logan had deep dark eyes behind coke-bottle lenses, thick black eyebrows, and curly cobalt hair always disheveled. His skin was powdery, rice paper gentle with a disarming humility. No roughness about him, no calloused knuckles—he had artist's hands, a doctor's touch. He moved with his elbows turned in, his knees bent like a slow-motion jogger, a slightly forward tip to his walk. All this made sense when he told me he had minus 1400 visu-

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Kenneth Lincoln has taught contemporary and Native American literature at UCLA since 1969. He has published *Native American Renaissance*, *The Good Red Road*, *Indian Humor*, and *Sing with the Heart of a Bear*. Currently he is writing fiction.



*Allogan Slagle*

al myopia and deteriorating retinas. Doctors said he would go blind by twenty-five. There was no time to lose. *If I could see this thing, if I knew where it was*, a Southern Cheyenne warrior said of cholera, *I would go there and kill it.*

Logan drew on a fierce energy when needed. He could bench-press three hundred pounds in his heyday at UC Berkeley. He out-jogged me across North Dakota and would work for days without sleeping. He was brilliant, eccentric, lovable, absolutely dedicated to human needs, and one of the truest voices of clarity, and hilarity, in the land. I miss him deep in my soul. This is a grief piece, a

howl and ache, blues for a dear lost friend parted too soon. A bone in my throat, singing.

That honors class thirty-three years ago was an eye-opener. Some of the most promising minds I've yet encountered in teaching, and Logan was the best of them, eight years my junior. Not that he was the most vocal, or even the most impressive as a critical writer, but he was the most arresting. He brought me oil paintings of Lear and Cordelia, a live dragonfly perched on his hand, a raven at the office window peering in, magic stones, healing bones, bird feathers of all kinds, and of course the endless, raucous tales. He loved shaggy dog stories, puns, quips, satires, parodies, and off-color slander. He would drag in newspaper pieces about global catastrophes, Charlie Brown cartoons, federal policy howlers, the Far Side drawings, recipes, poems, and obituaries. Logan was complex, a sixteen-year-old genius, and I grew to trust him. He was blessed with a finely tuned bull-crap detector. Not one of his outrageous stories ever turned out to be untrue, swear to God. The world truly was a marvelous place through Logan's eyes.

On December 4, 2002, my UCLA e-mail registered a typically cryptic message from my friend. Descartes goes into a restaurant, Logan wrote, and orders a hamburger. The waitress asks if he wants fries with that. "I think not," Descartes says, and promptly disappears. I e-mailed back, "Therefore . . . I am . . . Not."

Two hours later I got an e-mail from Logan's sister that he had died on Sunday, December 1, of a massive heart attack. He would be buried in North Carolina on Saturday.

This was Wednesday, four days after Logan died.

If anyone could e-mail me from the other side, and make me laugh in the face of tragedy, it was Logan. Death is the biggest joke of all, his old nemesis Carlos Castaneda used to say, that's why they save it for last.

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*This is a time when we need a world full of healers and healing, where not just the martyred Gandhis, not just the heroic Mother Teresas, but everyday people realize the healing power they carry in their hands.*

—Allogan Slagle, *The Good Red Road*

Logan took a gaggle of classes with me, and I learned more from him than he from me. He brought me the *Book of Tao* when I was going through a gut-wrenching divorce, and it calmed my spirit, as did his stories and silences, his unassuming and clairvoyantly funny presence. In the spring of 1975 he joined me, seven other UCLA students, and my four-year-old daughter on a four-month Native trek through Nebraska and the Dakotas. Logan became our point man, spirit guide, barrow pit teacher, town clown, and confidante. My daughter saw him as an uncle, about the same age as my youngest brother Michael, and the other students regarded him as quirky and dear and eccentrically perceptive. On that maiden trip Logan completed a vision quest in the Black Hills, with a moment of groundhog epiphany on Bear Butte, and helped me drive my old Volvo and daughter home to Los Angeles. We wrote a book together about these travels, which extended into the 1980s with other Native American field research on substance abuse and medicinal healing, *The Good Red Road: Travels into Native America*. I rewrote that book every year for twelve years, submitted it three times to Harper & Row, the only major publishing house interested in literary Indian affairs, and only got the thing half right when I folded Logan's master's thesis, *Somebody Did Medicine*, into the narrative. It is the best part of the book.

Instead of going on in English literature, Logan got a law degree from Loyola University, specializing in federal Indian policy and tribal sovereignty. His degree was something of an anomaly before the advent of cash cow casinos, water rights gold rush, uranium grabs, coal scams, and the hustle to be born again as an Indian. His lineage was runaway Cherokee in the Allegheny region, those most civilized of "real peoples" who chose not to remove to Oklahoma under Andrew Jackson's order, but stayed home in the Great Smoky Mountains, the original tribal refuseniks. The Blue Ridge Mountains ribbed this traditional Cherokee homeland. Logan was born August 31, 1951, in Shelby, North Carolina, close to Xualla or today's Qualla, the core of the Eastern Cherokee Nation.

Logan had a sister Brenda, and their mixed-blood parents ran a road-house restaurant where the children helped cook, clean, and wait tables. One day somebody threw a dead skunk down their well to make an ethnic statement, the Removal still contended, *savage* hurled as a genocidal epithet. So the family kept their hell-no-we-won't-go-Indian ancestry to themselves, though a maternal aunt was a Granny healer in the old ways. And yet the Cherokee genius for diplomacy and negotiation—"universal brotherhood" among clan mothers and "beloved men" born of empowering women—the penchant for civilizing and working things out and keeping the peace, was a tribal attribute that Logan used discretely and wisely. *Though we are red, and you are white*, a 1730 Cherokee delegation told the Lords Commissioners in London, *yet our hands and hearts are joined together*.

He was my only student ever to join the faculty at UC Berkeley, our institutional arch rival. At that distance he still phoned regularly, dropped gnomonic postcards, and came by Quito Lane for dinner whenever he could. He did the cooking. He taught me that any boy who wanted to be a man needed to learn to cook and to sew. He was a regular at Thanksgiving, or Christmas, or

Easter, or whenever the occasion called for good spirits, offbeat stories, compassion, healing, or sideways advice. His phone calls were long, hilarious, rambling monologues and attentive silences (an acute listener), always ending, “Well, keep it in the road.” Maybe it was a reference to my teaching him how to shift gears in the Dakotas.

The man was functionally paranoid, and I mean functionally. He had things to worry about, from the Vietnam War to killer bees and earthquakes—shadows of holocausts of Indians and Jews and all other Others dispossessed in the world—rabies and mad cow disease, cancer and diabetes, smallpox and napalm. He was skittishly alert with the peripheral attention of survivors who know forced entrances and speedy exits. He told me early on that Buddhist monks could meditate at the brain frequency of paranoid schizophrenics, only they could go in and out of a trance at will. It was worth thinking about. Logan worked tirelessly, seven days a week, for over thirty years, often on little or no sleep. He had a near photographic memory (no need for tape recorders, though he always carried one as backup). He was obsessive about detail (*the passion of the scientist*, Nabokov said, *the precision of the artist*). Logan had a poet’s originality, a lawyer’s edge, a healer’s compassion—an offbeat genius that I will never forget. I would call his paranormal quickness a normative pivot for the intelligence of difference, a calling card of Native American genius, from Lawrence Antoine and Dawson No Horse in the Dakotas, to Alfonso Ortiz and Vine Deloria in academic circles, to James Welch and Linda Hogan among Native writers.

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*And he knew they knew, and he took them with him to the fields and they cut  
open the earth and touched the corn and ate sweet melons in the sun.*

*—House Made of Dawn*

Logan was always making things. After our Dakota adventure in 1975, he gave me a hollowed-out avocado shell, painted black with the four-wind colors and prayer flag images and corresponding animal totems painted on the inside. He made me a Sun Dance stick with tobacco ties for a vision quest, which I am still trying to complete. He helped me carve a medicine pipe on my father’s lathe in the basement, a pipestone image of Bear Butte. He made things out of things and made things up, genuinely, gathering the world around him to collate his vision of the native elegance and truth of natural beings. He was the closest thing to a Native American Buddhist I have ever met. And a good Christian in the largest sense. And a devout Cherokee healer. *Help the suffering of others*, the Dalai Lama says, *and if you can’t, try not to hurt them*. Logan did this for a lifetime.

He loved silly brilliance with an edge—Monty Python movies, the Marx Brothers, W. C. Fields and Mae West (*I used to be Snow White but I drifted*), Laurel and Hardy, Steve Martin, Zero Mostel, even stupid silliness like bad cartoons or awful puns. “How ’r doing?” he would ask over the phone from Berkeley or Washington, D.C., or somewhere in southern Arizona. He reminded me of Bud Cort in *Harold and Maud* or Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate*, more

recently of Tobey Maguire in *The Ciderhouse Rules*. Back in the good old days he radiated an innocence in perpetual New World shock. A young man slightly out of it, disoriented, shambling and searching for a fixed center, only to find all is peripheral vision. *It is only in isolate flecks that / something / is given off*, the doctor-poet William Carlos Williams says.

Warding off the grim grinders and reapers of the world's hurt, Logan would *maken melodye and merrye*, delighting in the sheer joy and hilarity of being alive, thinking and creating, making things take shape and doing good work around him. He was absolutely dedicated to public service and humanity. And he was my true, lifelong friend.

\* \* \* \* \*

*This is what the old men told me when I was a boy.*

—James Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokee*

The spirit world was as real to Logan as a lily pad to a frog. The skeletons of human suffering and tragedies haunted him. His ancestral guardians calmed him. Animal totems, like the Black Hills bison and visionary white crow or Bear Butte groundhog, grounded him. His family dog, a stray cat, a passing sparrow, or errant house finch all caught his loving and discerning eye. He was not conventionally observant (no eagle or bear, he found on Bear Butte in 1975), but a slant acolyte of significant differences in the world. A Native angle of perception, I would venture, sovereign rights. He saw things sideways, as Emily Dickinson says, *a certain Slant of light*. Low to the earth, hibernating during winter, warm-blooded and furry, inquisitive and prophetic, myopic and questioning, weather predicting seasonally and reborn in the spring—the groundhog watched over his close-vision generosity with a great good sense of humor. He was constantly on the lookout for danger and a break in bad weather and fresh new life. He split a rain cloud in Flagstaff in 1977 at a Modern Language Association gathering of budding Native scholars so we could take medicine up one of the four corners of the Navajo-Hopi world, San Francisco Peak. “Logan, this is a hell of a way to get up a sacred mountain,” I grouched, riding up the ski lift with our bundles. “Get there any way you can,” he said with a straight face.

He soaked up Blake and Shakespeare, *Black Elk Speaks* and *House Made of Dawn*, Carlos Castaneda and Martin Buber, Carl Jung and Nostradamus (he did grow out of some of these early teachings). He taught himself the Cherokee syllabary by reading Sequoia's texts in the research library and meticulously going over James Mooney's early work in the Carolinas. He made ceremonial visits to Oklahoma and North Carolina and Congress and Lakota sweats in the Great Plains and northern California Shaker meetings. He talked to everybody. He was an omnivorous and pluralist seeker of knowledge.

He would doodle and scribble and mutter to himself as we drove along through the Southwest or across the Northern Plains or around California. The next thing I knew, we would be talking about how to tackle Indian poverty or a way to address substance abuse—where to collect medicine plants like

willow bark for aspirin tea or turnip root palliatives from cutbanks—or when to sit down for power and peace (*going to water* was a standard on our adventures, once dropping everything when he drove my old Volvo through a back road stop sign coming out of Pine Ridge, and we lit out for the Niobrara River, Crazy Horse’s watering stream, to pray and collect our thoughts). Traveling with Logan was never “Leave It to Beaver.” Always an adventure, a surprise, a chortling delight, a learning tree.

Though handicapped with abysmal vision, he pushed himself and his eyes mercilessly, sometimes going for weeks on adrenalin and sheer courage and persistence. *Maybe academic background only goes so far*, Leslie Silko wrote James Wright in 1978, *then everything boils down to guts and heart*. Every thought was critical to Logan, every project on the line, every piece of writing perhaps the last word. And jokes were precious barter. *Every man loves the smell of his own farts*, the Inuit say. I was fond of quoting it to him. He would just smile wryly.

\* \* \* \* \*

*We’re gonna make it as we go along, generation to generation, addin’ on an’ addin’ on.*

—Dawson No Horse, Oglala Lakota, Wakpamni Lake,  
Pine Ridge, 1981

My young friend was a pack rat, a legal rights bagman of Indian genius. He drove around the west in a little green Ford station wagon crammed full of legal documents, copies of cases and citations and newspaper accounts a hundred years old, in case of house fire. His Concord apartment did catch fire once. Maybe it was set on fire. More than once he feared for his life because of the maggots he found under BIA road pies and dead fish in federal Indian leach fields. The stakes got higher when gambling proceeds entered reservation rights in the 1990s. Documents were the smoking guns of federal-Indian foul play, and there were mountainous dung piles of spent casings. Logan had a fetish for recording everything, thousands of hours of tapes, carloads of Xeroxed notes and dog-eared journals, literally. As early as our 1975 trek to the heartland, he was armed with full medical supplies, artist’s brushes and paints and styluses, healing chants and funny stories and blues songs, plus a tape recorder. Driving across the plains, he recorded hundreds of hours of conversations as we researched substance abuse and Native healing in the early 1980s. I never quite knew why, since he had near perfect recall—of any and everything, when he chose—maybe he just wanted to encourage me to keep posterity in mind, or ease the burden of driving.

We talked a lot about vision, near and far—limited eyesight, the invisible world of power and enlightenment, things right in front of the nose or on the horizon, the cursed blessing of visual handicaps. When I struggled for over twenty years with eye strain and chronic diplopia, he reminded me that Aztec seers used nose dividers to double their vision, in the belief that split images allowed them to see into things. It was typical Logan—finding an historical oddity left out of mainstream thinking to roll a debit over into an asset. We

spoke of Homer's singing blindness, of Milton's deepening clarity in old age, of Yeats and Joyce writing all the more passionately in the shadows of visual acuity, of Luis Borges's "blessed" gift of ancestral blindness at fifty-nine (the Argentine poet learned Anglo-Saxon by touch and hearing, rocking blissfully to his wife chanting his verse). Logan's retinal degeneration reversed after our 1975 journey among healers, and he did not go blind. My own strained eyesight stopped doubling not long after, when at Logan's suggestion, I tried Toric soft contact lenses.

\* \* \* \* \*

*The sky goes on living it goes  
on living the sky  
with all the barbed wire of the west  
in its veins  
and the sun goes down  
driving a stake  
through the black heart of Andrew Jackson*

—W. S. Merwin, "Homeland"

Logan feared everything—disease, intolerance, war, racism, pettiness, ignorance, indifference, the end of the world—and his fear made him quick to life. Fear becomes an ally to be respected, a cutting edge for the mind's blade, a reason to roll up the sleeves and get cracking. Any culture that does not believe in the *windigo* cannibal monster, the Cree say, is crazy. Things out there will get you. Buffalo Bird Woman recalled her nineteenth-century Hidatsa childhood: *In the shadows I seem again to see our Indian village, with smoke curling upward from the earth lodges and in the river's roar I hear the yells of the warriors, the laughter of little children as of old. It is but an old woman's dream. Again I see but shadows and hear only the roar of the river; and tears come into my eyes. Our Indian life, I know, is gone forever.*

Logan gave me things that last a lifetime. He gave my mother a Lakota star blanket when she was bed-ridden, and now that she is dead, I sleep under its six-colored star. He gave my grandson Gabriel a Cherokee quilt when he was born. He gave my Lakota brother Mark legal and medicinal advice and much good cheer in the local wars for survival and human dignity. He gave my daughter the life-long consideration of a compassionate tribal elder, a guardian in the wings, never crowding in, available when needed. Logan *helped out* when asked, as they say back on the rez. He gave that kind of love to tens of thousands of people, Indian and otherwise. As a mixed-blood Cherokee, he knew that you can't write off *any* side. *One of these mornings you're gonna rise up singing, child,* Janis Joplin belted in "Summertime." *You'll take to the sky. Don't you cry.*

\* \* \* \* \*

*You talk of the law of nature and the law of nations, and they are both against you.*  
—Corn Tassel, Cherokee, 1785



Logan died from caring for the world, perhaps too much. Can this be possible? *Students are sheep in wolves clothing*, Marianne Moore says, *not that they feel too little, but that they feel too much*. So live it with *gusto*, the poet says. This man was a Native caretaker, a true student of humankind, both wolf and sheep, warrior and healer, intellectual hero and trusted friend. How a lawyer could be these things I do not quite know. Maybe we should reexamine things legal from an Indian point of view.

When I remember some of the things Logan taught me, by example more than by precept, I take time to slow down and to care more carefully and to do things thoroughly, as best I can, forgiving and trusting myself at the same time, and then weigh the consequences. Much of my writing has filtered through Logan's model of intelligence and good humor (not all, sadly, I am an academic). When I do not follow his example, I get into what Logan would call deep doodoo.

Considering our last communiqué from the other side, something like *Cogito non ergo absum*, I think of Ben Franklin's 1781 "A Letter to a Royal Academy." *What Comfort can the Vortices of Descartes give to a Man who has Whirlwinds in his Bowels!* Logan always got there before the rest of us on our journeys, and his final words were timely. Use it or lose it, the old timers advise us. I will be in the up-trail grass under your feet, Whitman said from the grave.

\* \* \* \* \*

*They would have wept to step barefoot into Reality.*

—Wallace Stevens, "Large Red Man Reading"

Logan's sense of tragic heroism and humanitarian love was razor critical. Lear's heart "burst smilingly" at the end of that devastating play, the poor fool dead, his daughter hanged. Yeats died of an enlarged heart, and my Pueblo friend Alfonso Ortiz died at fifty-nine of congenital heart defect, a broken heart. Logan passed over at fifty-one through a massive heart attack. He was buried in Brevard, North Carolina, on the sixty-first anniversary of Pearl Harbor, and the Appalachian heavens broke open to pour an ice storm over the Pisgah National Forest. I tell myself these Native friends gave all to their lives, and to us. They risked everything to live fully, and they died smilingly. They are models to learn and to live by, men in the best sense of courage, vision, humor, dedication, and fortunate flaw. *The best of days are the first to go*, Annie Wright wrote Leslie Silko of her husband's death. *The best of men has gone too*.

Logan's last Christmas card came the day after Thanksgiving, that annual observance of Indians and whites treating at the forest's edge five hundred years back. *Peace*, the card said in one word raised on a polar blue mat, with thirteen white doves bearing golden sprigs of the earth's renewal. "Hope you're seeing better & Next year's a better Year. Allogan." It will be, my friend, I promise you, and you will be with us. I dedicate this year to your Native legacy of true heart and mind. We just have to listen a little hard-

er, close our eyes and feel our way to peace, trust our hearts to guide over-anxious minds.

*Dok-shá, kola*, save a place among our friends and relatives.

Brother Ken.

### IN MEMORIAM

Allogan Slagle was a UCLA English major, 1970–1974, and the first American Indian Studies Master’s graduate in 1978. He wrote a thesis, “Somebody Did Medicine,” that became part of *The Good Red Road: Passages into Native America* (Harper & Row, 1987). Allogan went to Loyola Law School and taught Native American law at UC Berkeley, then joined the Association of American Indian Affairs to serve as an attorney for federal recognition of California Indian tribes and pro bono advocate in Native legal matters. For more than twenty years he wrote a column on federal Indian policies for *News from Native California*, “Groundhog Day,” a totemic guardian he discovered on our Dakotas field research in 1975.

Allogan died on December 1, 2002, from a massive heart attack. He is buried in North Carolina Cherokee land where he began life. A UCLA scholarship in his name will be offered annually to an American Indian graduate student. If you knew Allogan and can contribute, please call Ken Lincoln at 310.825.7420 or e-mail [lincoln@humnet.ucla.edu](mailto:lincoln@humnet.ucla.edu).

*The best days are the first to go. The best of men has gone too.*

Kenneth Lincoln  
Mato Arroyo  
La Cieneguilla, New Mexico