

“There is so much brutal, raw, and beautiful power in these stories. I kept wanting to read and know more about these characters’ lives, how they ended up where they ended up, how they would get out, how they wouldn’t. It is difficult to be so honest, and funny, and sad, at once, in any kind of work. Reading this book, I literally laughed and cried.”

—**TOMMY ORANGE**, author of *There There*

“Morgan Talty’s *Night of the Living Rez* is a beautifully crafted, raw and intimate book about youth, friendship, and family on the reservation. These stories are profoundly moving and essential, rendered with precision and intimacy. Talty is a powerful new voice in Native American fiction.”

—**BRANDON HOBSON**, author of *The Removed*

“*Night of the Living Rez* is an indelible portrait of a family in crisis, and an incisive exploration of the myriad ways in which the past persists in haunting the present. I loved these sharply atmospheric, daring, and intensely moving stories, each one dense with peril and tenderness. Morgan Talty is a thrilling new talent.”

—**LAURA VAN DEN BERG**, author of *I Hold a Wolf by the Ears*

“*Night of the Living Rez* is a fiercely intelligent and beautifully written set of stories—a spectacularly visceral and moving account of the experience of a member of the Penobscot Nation in today’s America—as well as a wrenching meditation on family and familial dysfunction. Morgan Talty is a master of the way dependency and pain transition from one body to another; the way both separating and refusing to separate become modes of saving ourselves; and the way, for all of our failures, we never stop doing what we can to provide each other hope.”

—**JIM SHEPARD**, author of *Phase Six*

"*Night of the Living Rez* is true storytelling. It's a book so funny, so real, so spirited and vivid it brought me back to my own rez life and the people who made me."

—**TERESE MARIE MAILHOT**, author of *Heart Berries*

"I am not predicting literary success for Morgan Talty, I am guaranteeing it. He is a fascinating and powerful and singular writer."

—**RICK BASS**, author of *For a Little While*

"*Night of the Living Rez* delivers stories that combine the otherworldly with the everyday in ways that startle and sing. Morgan Talty portrays Maine and his Penobscot characters in language and images both beautiful and inventive. With equal parts humor and haunting, this book will linger."

—**TONI JENSEN**, author of *Carry*

"Morgan Talty's *Night of the Living Rez* is a marvel. The experience of diving into that work was like first picking up a novel by Marguerite Duras, or like reading Denis Johnson's *Jesus' Son*. The prose is masterful. It's brutal and funny and smart and has a genuine warmth that's rare, especially in contemporary fiction. Talty's book has done a lot to restore my faith in the future of literature."

—**CARA HOFFMAN**, author of *Running*

"While soaked in pain and broken promises, *Night of The Living Rez* delivers with a grace and dignity on par with the writings of Craig Lesley, Dawn Dumont, James Welch and Joseph Dandurand. Morgan Talty delivers on so many levels and proves that this is why Indigenous Literature continues to be its own unique and sacred blessing. I loved this book. Loved it. And I can't wait to see what Morgan Talty does next. I am a fan for life!"

—**RICHARD VAN CAMP**, author of
The Lesser Blessed and Moccasin Square Gardens

NIGHT OF THE LIVING REZ

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**NIGHT
OF THE
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REZ**

MORGAN TALTY



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CONTENTS

BURN / 1

IN A JAR / 7

GET ME SOME MEDICINE / 35

FOOD FOR THE COMMON COLD / 61

IN A FIELD OF STRAY CATERPILLARS / 87

THE BLESSING TOBACCO / 107

SAFE HARBOR / 127

SMOKES LAST / 141

HALF-LIFE / 171

EARTH, SPEAK / 199

NIGHT OF THE LIVING REZ / 227

THE NAME MEANS THUNDER / 257

A NOTE ON PENOBSCOT SPELLING / 281

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS / 282

For Mom (1959-2021)
And for all the women who raised me

BURN

Winter, and I walked the sidewalk at night along banks of hard snow. I'd come from Rab's apartment off the reservation. Rab—this white guy with a wide mouth and eyes that closed up when he laughed—sold pot. He was all no-bullshit too. I had asked for a gram, and after he weighed it and put it in a plastic baggie and held it out to me, I reached into my pants and jacket pockets looking for the cash among the cigarette wrappers and pocketknife, and he didn't believe me as I acted the part and kept saying, "Shit shit shit, it must've fell out on the walk over here." He shook his head, took the weed out of the baggie, and put it back into his mason jar. "I ain't smokin' you up," he said, and so then I said, "Fuck you, Rab, I really did lose the money, you'll see, watch when I come back here in thirty minutes with the money I dropped, you'll feel stupid then." He shrugged a *Sorry, man*, and I slammed his door shut as I left.

At the bridge to the reservation, the river was still frozen, ice shining white-blue under a full moon. The sidewalk on the bridge hadn't been shoveled since the last nor'easter crapped snow in November, and I walked in the boot prints everyone made who walked the walk to Overtown to get pot or catch the

bus to wherever it was us skeejins had to go, which wasn't anywhere because everything we needed—except pot—was on the rez. Well, except Best Buy or Bed Bath & Beyond, but those Natives who bought 4K Ultra DVDs or fresh white doilies had cars, wouldn't be taking the bus like me or Fellis did each day to the methadone clinic. That was another thing the rez didn't have: a methadone clinic. But we had sacred grounds where sweats and peyote ceremonies happened once a month, except since I had chosen to take methadone, I was ineligible to participate in Native spiritual practice, according to the doc on the rez.

Natives damning Natives.

The roads on the rez were quiet, trees bending under the weight of snow, and when I passed the frozen swamp a voice moaned out. I stopped walking. Nothing, so I kept on going on the sparkling road until I heard it again.

“Who's that?” I yelled. The moan came again. It was a man, somewhere in the swamp. I got closer, listening. There it was: a low and breathy noise, and with my cold ear I followed it.

The swamp was frozen solid, the snow blown in piles, and so I slid over the ice, looking for the source of the noise. Moonlight through bare tree limbs lit the swamp, and caught among the tree stumps and solid snow was a person sprawled out on the ground. He was trying to sit up but kept falling back, like he'd just done one thousand crunches and was too sore to do just one more.

It was Fellis.

“Fellis?” I said, standing over him.

He tried to sit up, but something pulled him back down. “Fuck you,” Fellis said. “Help me.” He groaned, shivered.

NIGHT OF THE LIVING REZ

He didn't say how to help him, so I had to squat down to get a better look. I flicked my lighter and his purple lip quivered.

"Hurry," he said.

"Fellis, I can't help you if I don't know what's a matter with you."

"My hair," he said.

I looked at it with the lighter's flame. "Holy," I said, and I laughed. Instead of the tight braid that shined, Fellis's hair had come undone, and it was frozen into the snow.

"Get me out, Dee," he said. "Dee, get me out."

At first I tried to pull the hair out from the snow, tried to chip the snow away. But his hair wouldn't come loose, so I yanked, and Fellis screamed.

"Lift your head up," I said. I opened my pocketknife, and at the click of the blade Fellis spoke.

"Wait, wait," he said. "Don't cut it."

"What do you want me to do? Tell the ice to let go?"

Fellis spit. "Go to my house and get boiling water."

I closed the pocketknife. "Fellis, by the time I got back here the water would be chilled."

He was quiet. As if something walked around or among us, the ice cracked and echoed somewhere in the swamp. The moon shone bright, and I looked. There was nobody but us.

"I have to cut it," I said. "You ain't getting out if I don't."

Fellis asked if I had a cigarette, and when I told him no, he cursed. "Fucking bullshit, fucking goddamn winter, what the fuck."

I laughed.

"It ain't funny, Dee."

“Look,” I said. “You want me to cut my braid too?”

Fellis took a deep breath, and he coughed and gagged. “No,” he said. “Just cut it. I gotta get home. I’m sick.”

I opened the pocketknife again, grabbed his hair in a fistful, and cut. When I got through the last bit of hair, Fellis rolled over and away from where he’d been stuck. He rubbed his head like he just woke up.

I helped him stand, and we slipped all over the ice on our way out of the swamp. Through dry heaves, Fellis said he’d missed the bus this morning to the methadone clinic—“No shit,” I said, because I didn’t see him on the bus or at the clinic—and he thought some booze would be good before he got sick from not having any methadone. He’d had a bit of booze left that afternoon when he decided to go see Rab to get some pot, and on the way he’d stopped off in the swamp to feel the quiet that came with too much drinking, and when he plopped down in the snow he’d dozed right off. When he woke up, his hair was frozen in the snow.

I got him to his mom’s, Beth’s, where he still lived. He walked fine by himself to the door, but I walked with him up the steps.

“I never thought I’d scalp a fellow tribal member,” I said.

“Fuck off,” he said. He fumbled in his pocket for his house key.

“You wanna smoke?” I said.

“Didn’t you listen? I didn’t make it to Rab’s.” He unlocked the door.

“I’ll go for you,” I said. “Give me the cash.”

Fellis looked at me.

“Twenty minutes,” I said. “I’ll run there and back while you warm up your pretty bald head.”

NIGHT OF THE LIVING REZ

He gave me thirty bucks, and I didn't ask where he got it from. Yesterday he said he didn't have any money.

"Twenty bag," Fellis said. "And stop at Jim's and get some tall boys and a bag of chips. Any kind but Humpty Dumpty chips."

Down Fellis's driveway I imagined the look on Rab's face when I gave him the money. What I tell you? How about that gram?

"Dee!" Fellis yelled. "One more thing. Bring me my hair, so we can burn it. Don't want spirits after us."

"We're damned anyway," I said. "But I guess I'll get your hair."

I kept going, wondering, Hair or pot first? Pot made the most sense. It would look strange having to set the hair and ice down like a soaked mop on the counter at Jim's while I reached in my pocket for Fellis's money. Jim—that old wood booger—would say, "We don't take those anymore." I'd look him square in his sagging face and say, "I ain't trading no hair, you old fucker," and I'd smack down on the counter a ten-dollar bill for the tall boys and chips. With the change jingling in my pocket, I'd walk to Rab's and he'd say, "Get that hair out of here, it's dripping on my floor," and I'd have to plop the hair on the muddy white floor in the hallway while Rab reweighed the same nugs he'd weighed for me earlier.

No. I'd grab Fellis's hair from the swamp on my way home. With Fellis on his unmade bed, me on a torn beanbag in the corner, each of us with a tall boy and the pot smoke hazing gray the room, we'd keep poking and squeezing the hair, waiting for it to dry, waiting to burn it.