

WANDERING

STARS

TOMMY

ORANGE

A novel

New York Times best-selling author of There There

Also by Tommy Orange
There There

Wandering Stars

Tommy Orange



Alfred A. Knopf
NEW YORK 2024

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www.aaknopf.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Orange, Tommy, [date] author.

Title: Wandering stars / Tommy Orange.

Description: First edition. | New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 2024.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023016049 (print) | LCCN 2023016050 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593318256 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593318263 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593802366 (open market)

Subjects: LCSH: Indians of North America—Fiction. | LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3615.R32 W36 2024 (print) | LCC PS3615.R32 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20230501

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023016049>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023016050>

Ebook ISBN 9780593318263

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Cover design by Linda Huang

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Also by Tommy Orange

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Acknowledgments

A Note About the Author

*For anyone surviving and not surviving this thing called and not called
addiction*

Prologue

In Indian civilization I am a Baptist, because I believe in immersing the Indians in our civilization, and when we get them under holding them there until they are thoroughly soaked.

—RICHARD HENRY PRATT

There were children, and then there were the children of Indians, because the merciless savage inhabitants of these American lands did not make children but nits, and nits make lice, or so it was said by the man who meant to make a massacre feel like killing bugs at Sand Creek, when seven hundred drunken men came at dawn with cannons, and then again four years later almost to the day the same way at the Washita River, where afterward, seven hundred Indian horses were rounded up and shot in the head.

These kinds of events were called battles, then later—sometimes—massacres, in America's longest war. More years at war with Indians than as a nation. Three hundred and thirteen. After all the killing and removing, scattering and rounding up of Indian people to put them on reservations, and after the buffalo population was reduced from about thirty million to a few hundred in the wild, the thinking being "Every buffalo dead is an Indian gone," there came another campaign-style slogan directed at the Indian problem: "Kill the Indian, Save the Man."

When the Indian wars began to go cold, the theft of land and tribal sovereignty bureaucratic, they came for Indian children, forcing them into boarding schools, where if they did not die of what they called consumption even while they regularly were starved; if they were not buried in duty,

training for agricultural or industrial labor, or indentured servitude; were they not buried in children's cemeteries, or in unmarked graves, not lost somewhere between the school and home having run away, unburied, unbound, lost to time, or lost between exile and refuge, between school, tribal homelands, reservation, and city; if they made it through routine beatings and rape, if they survived, made lives and families and homes, it was because of this and only this: Such Indian children were made to carry more than they were made to carry.

But before the boarding schools, in 1875, seventy-one Indian men and one Indian woman were taken as prisoners of war in Oklahoma and put on a train to St. Augustine, Florida, where they were jailed in a star-shaped prison-castle—a star fort. It was the oldest masonry fort in the country, and the first European settlement in the continental United States, built on the backs of Indian people under Spanish order in the late 1600s out of coquina—a kind of ancient shell formed into rock over time. The star fort built to defend the Atlantic trade route was named Castillo de San Marcos by the Spanish, after Saint Mark, patron saint of, among other things, prisoners, then under U.S. rule it became Fort Marion, named after the American Revolutionary War hero Francis Marion, who'd been nicknamed the Swamp Fox, and was known to have raped his slaves and hunted Indians for sport.

Their jailer, Richard Henry Pratt, ordered that their hair be cut and that they be given military uniforms. Pratt also ordered that the Indian prisoners of war at Fort Marion be given ledger books to draw in. One Southern Cheyenne man named Howling Wolf took to it best because he'd been doing the same thing on buffalo hides to tell stories long before that. In the ledger books, he drew things from way back and high up. A bird's-eye view. That hadn't happened before the same way on the hides. It was only after that long train ride from Oklahoma to Florida with iron chains around his wrists and ankles that Howling Wolf began to draw from where birds saw things. Birds see the best of any creature with a spine, are sacred because they soar the heavens, and with just one of their feathers, and some smoke, prayers make it to God.

The Indians were allowed to sell their drawings to white people who came to witness the prisoners of war, these Kiowa, Comanche, Southern Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Caddo people, to see them dance and dress up Indian, see the vanishing race before it was gone, and take home a drawing, a polished sea bean, or a bow and arrow, curios they were called, as if a souvenir from an amusement park, or human zoo—which were popular at the time, and tended to include Indians. Drawings of Indian life as depicted by Indians, on pages made to keep track of transactions, were sold as some of the first Indian art. Pratt drew from his experience at the prison-castle as if it were a blueprint for the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, which opened just a year after the prisoners were released.

Starting in 1879, Indian parents were encouraged and coerced, and threatened with jail time if they refused to send their children to school. In one case, Hopi parents from Arizona who had refused such orders were sent to California, to Alcatraz for nine months as punishment. The prisoners were stripped of their clothes and given military uniforms, told they'd be there until they learned beyond a shadow of a doubt the error of their evil ways. They were held in wooden boxes smaller than solitary confinement cells built later for the famously draconian prison. During the day they were made to saw large logs into smaller ones like some cartoon's dream of sleeping. When they were released and taken back to Arizona, they continued to resist having their children put into schools, and continued to spend time in prison.

Some Indian parents understood that their children were hostages kept to encourage better behavior from the more problematic Indian tribes. Others were forcefully taken from their homes, on what some Indians then called the iron horse, on loud trains across unknown lands, to a school where they were subjected to disease and starvation, and taught that everything about being Indian was wrong. It became law that Indian children attend these schools, just as Indian medicines and ceremonies, rites and rituals were being outlawed.

At Carlisle, they were taught that they were to become Carlisle Indians. A new tribe of Indians made up of many tribes but belonging to

none, belonging to the school, which belonged to and was funded by the U.S. government.

As soon as they arrived at the school their long hair was cut, their clothes were taken, and new names were handed out along with military uniforms—which is to say the war began immediately. Each day they did military drills and marched as if against themselves in daily battles happening first from the outside in, and then from the inside out like a disease. If Indian children spoke English instead of their Native tongues, they were rewarded at first, but being rewarded for not doing Indian things was not where it ended. Beatings and jail time and countless other kinds of abuse became routine. You were supposed to kill the entire Indian if they were to be saved. Later it was said that Indian children in boarding schools had the same chance of dying as soldiers in one of the world wars.

All the Indian children who were ever Indian children never stopped being Indian children, and went on to have not nits but Indian children, whose Indian children went on to have Indian children, whose Indian children became American Indians, whose American Indian children became Native Americans, whose Native American children would call themselves Natives, or Indigenous, or NDNS, or the names of their sovereign nations, or the names of their tribes, and all too often would be told they weren't the right kind of Indians to be considered real ones by too many Americans taught in schools their whole lives that the only real kinds of Indians were those long-gone Thanksgiving Indians who loved the Pilgrims as if to death.

Boarding schools like Carlisle existed all over the country, and for almost a hundred years operated with the same principles as Carlisle. For decades, the Native dropout rate has been one of the highest in the country. Today it's twice the national average.

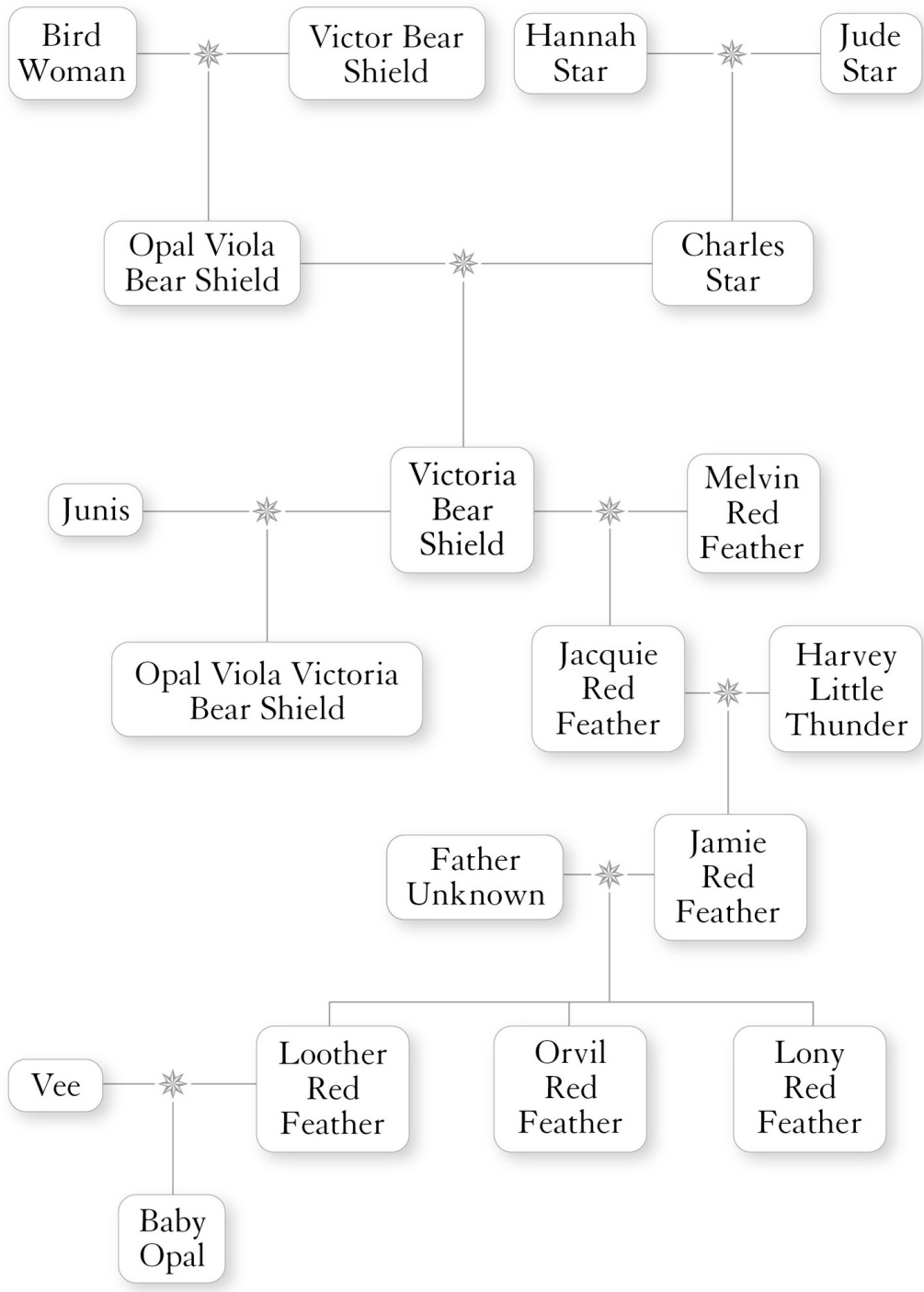
To become not-Indian the way they meant it at Carlisle meant you killed the Indian to save the man, as was said by the man who made the school, which meant the Indian children would have to do all of the dying.

Beware of the man who does not talk and the dog who does not bark.

—CHEYENNE PROVERB

The so-called Chivington or Sand Creek Massacre, in spite of certain most objectionable details, was on the whole as righteous and beneficial a deed as ever took place on the frontier.

—THEODORE ROOSEVELT



PART ONE

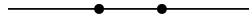


Before

1924

Jude Star ✨ Winter

CHAPTER ONE



Young Ghosts

I thought I heard birds that morning time just before the morning light, after I shot up scared of men so white they were blue. I'd been having dreams of blue men with blue breath, and the sound of birds was the slow squeaking of wheels, the rolling of mountain howitzers approaching our camp at dawn.

The bad dreams had been coming for weeks leading up to that morning, so I'd taken to sleeping with my grandmother, Spotted Hawk. She'd prayed for me before I closed my eyes to sleep, blew smoke in my face after rolling up some tobacco in a corn husk, then sang me the song that slowed my breath and made my eyelids heavy.

From inside the tipi I thought it was thunder, or buffalo, then I saw the purple-orange dawn light through the holes made by bullets in the walls of the tipi.

People outside ran or they died there having been picked off running.

Looking back, everything that happened before Sand Creek seemed to belong to someone else, someone I once knew, as I once knew my mother's perfect smile, my father's crooked one, the way both of their eyes looked to the ground when I made them proud, or cut into me when I made them mad, my brothers' and sisters' way of teasing me about my big ears by pulling on my earlobes, or the way they tickled my ribs and made me laugh until I almost cried in that way that made me hate it and love it, but hate it. Our

camp with our animal companions and the big fires we made, the rivers and creeks we played in during summers, or kept away from winters; the hunts I watched the older ones prepare for, how they laughed themselves free when they got back, relieved to have food for everyone, then made fire and prayed and sang in earnest to the animal and to our Creator God, Maheo.

Everything that had been before what happened at Sand Creek went back inside the earth, deep into that singular stillness of land and death.

At the massacre, while it was happening, the bullets and the screaming, bodies down everywhere, Spotted Hawk shoved a boy at me like: Take him too. I was a young man then, barely not a boy myself. The boy my grandmother pushed at me had freckles spattered around his eyes that looked like blood. If someone had freckles, it usually meant white people had become intimately involved in the lives of one of our people, made some mess. One time, one of my uncles got shot dead right in front of me, some loose white man come to exact revenge shot my uncle in the back of the head, and there splattered on Spotted Hawk's face was blood patterned just like this boy's freckles, this boy whose cheeks were full like he'd been saving up spit, like he'd been too afraid to swallow it.

As ever, Spotted Hawk's face kept whatever she felt behind it. She pointed her lips at a horse, and once we were on, slapped the thing and we were off. When I looked back I saw Spotted Hawk's body go down. I wouldn't ever know if it was from a bullet, to take cover, or to play dead. I'd known spiders to do this, had seen a black one with a bright red mark on its belly play dead. I'd hidden and waited, waited and watched, then seen it come back to life just before I came down hard on it with my foot. Years later in Florida, when I first saw the shape of an hourglass, and understood it meant time as the delicate falling of sand through a narrow glass passage, I was reminded of the spider's mark, and that there were ways to play dead, and come back to life.

A dog had managed to follow us away from the camp. The dog was all black but for a patch of white on its chest, with long legs, scruffy fur, and sun-yellow eyes. Just after I noticed the dog I felt a sharp pain and jumped off the horse thinking I got bit by something. I found a wet wound on my

lower back when I reached for it. I looked at the blood and felt as if I were falling through the air. Then I took off my leggings and wrapped them around my midsection, hoping to stop the bleeding. The boy helped me get wrapped, then did his little best to help me back up on the horse as I was too weak to get up myself. I slept after that, and when I woke up, saw that it was night.

Me and the boy bundled up in a pile of blankets my grandmother had somehow managed to pack for us. In the morning we found the dog nestled between us. Where the bullet had gone in still stung, but the bleeding had stopped. I thought it must not have gone too deep, and wanted to find the bullet with my fingers, take it out if I could.

When the sun sank behind us in the west again, it brought with its absence a biting cold. We slept beneath the standing horse.

I felt that my grandmother had *prayed* that horse what to do. She could run, like some current carried her. We went along the old water lines, down the dry creek, the massacre farther and farther behind us, with the memory of it still on top of my skin, the sounds still in my ears, ringing high and sharp. We moved through the trees and fields like young ghosts.

Before we slept that night we stared at each other without saying anything. I knew then that I couldn't speak if I wanted to. I couldn't say anything and couldn't tell if I ever had before. I believed I had memories of speaking, but the more time passed the less certain I became that I'd ever made a sound with my voice. And then I didn't know if the boy wasn't speaking for the same reason, or if it was because he already knew I was one of these rare people who didn't know how to speak.

How far will we go? the boy seemed to say with his chin and his lips pointing the way we were headed.

Until soldiers shoot us dead, I said by looking all around, then miming holding a rifle, then closing one eye to aim, then throwing my head back like I'd been shot.

Will we fight this time? the boy said by putting up his fists.

Did you think we should have stayed to fight before? I asked by pointing my lips back where we'd come from.

It would have been better dying than this, the boy seemed to say about our hunger, by rubbing his stomach.

That dog over there, he'd help us make it longer, I said by pointing at the dog and lifting my eyebrows.

No, the boy said. No dog, he said by looking down and shaking his head hard.

We went for what seemed a long time, letting the horse take us. When I felt too weak to stay awake, and the boy began to whimper, I could no longer ignore the horse's meat beneath us.

Winter's night was here, so I would need to move if I was going to do it. I tied the horse to a tree with a slipknot I'd been taught for just this occasion. If you had to eat a horse, this was how you first tied them down. But I didn't kill the horse, because out came a foal from behind her. It landed on its side, a wet thud, and at first tried to get up, but couldn't, then stayed down, then went still. The boy just watched, unable to stand anymore, sitting a ways off with his mouth hung wide open. The dog barked while the mother tried to nudge her young alive with her muzzle. I walked nearer to the foal to see if there was life. A string of unwanted questions came to me then: *If the foal was dead, would we eat it? And in which order would I kill its mother and eat her too? Would we have to fight the dog for the meat, and if we fought and killed the dog, would we then eat him?* I was too hungry. The wind got stronger and the dog came running over but then fell on his side as if struck by a bullet. I looked around to see if there were bullets coming, shielding my eyes from dirt that had picked up in the wind, which was now so loud I couldn't hear anything else. The boy's head was tucked into his knees, and I thought I heard him screaming, but it might have been the wind. I looked up and saw a thin cloud in front of the moon. There was dark light coming down through the cloud, falling down from the sky like rain in the distance. I ran to the boy, pulling him up by the arm, and we went under our blankets to hide.

The next morning I woke up and saw the mother horse still lying there, dead now, and the dog making its mouth like it was barking, but with no sound coming from him, and then he started coughing and vomited bright

green grass. I went to the dead horse and looked around for the foal but saw none there, nor a trace of its birth. I'd heard of mothers eating their stillborn, and wondered if she'd done that, and if that was what had killed her.

I sharpened a branch on a rock, then made a fire. I needed to move before the horse's meat went bad. I ate half the horse's liver right away and handed the rest to the boy, who took it hungrily, then cut meat from wherever it came off easiest. We stayed where we were, eating off and on all day, and dared not look at what was left of the horse behind us when we were done.

In the morning our mouths were stained with blood when we came to a stream where the water was bitter. I don't know how long it was that we walked after that, when I saw a young man on a black horse. That was Bear Shield.

Bear Shield took us to a camp where the oldest Cheyenne woman I had ever seen told the boy to take my name. My name had been Bird before. She gave me a new name by pointing up at the sky where the night's first star had appeared, then pointing at me.

The dog stayed with us for a while. But when there was nothing left to hunt, and the hunger hurt too much, the dog—like so many other dogs—was eaten.

Even though I would never respond, Bear Shield liked to talk, and would talk to me, at first in Cheyenne and then in English when he realized I wasn't going to say anything back. He'd learned English from his father, who'd been a scout and had traveled with the U.S. Army for a time, before leaving that work and swearing himself to the Cheyenne Warrior Society, the dog soldiers.

One day Bear Shield said we should go out on our own, not stay to die in the camp. I told the boy to stay with the old woman who'd told us to trade names, and Bear Shield and I set out the next morning on Bear Shield's horse.

Winters alone seemed to pass. Sometimes it felt like the world had ended, and we were waiting for the next one to come. More often it felt like

I was waiting for the sounds of war to come back again, for the first light of the sun to bring with it blue men come to kill and scatter us again, thin us out across the land like the buffalo, chase and starve and round us up like I'd heard by then they were doing to Indian people everywhere.

We saw and ate many strange things going around together looking for our people, looking for a place we could stay. There was no home to return to, and so we wandered. Caught and ate rabbits and turkey and snakes. We raided wagons and camps when we found them, whether they were white people or other Indians didn't matter, so long as we knew we could get away unscathed. Hunger seemed to be keeping us alive while also threatening to kill us. I couldn't tell you where we were those years because we were never anywhere for long. One of the first things I stole was a horse, and we were never good to each other, she didn't want me riding her, and I didn't blame her. I set her free as soon as I found another horse to steal. I didn't mind living that way, but it wore you out. And when we ended up having to hurt people in order to stay safe, I knew we needed to find a better way.

Whenever we stayed anywhere long enough, Bear Shield would put together his drum. He taught me how to, too. With hide, stones, a rope, an antler to pull the rope to make the hide taut, and a little bit of water at the bottom of an iron kettle. We kept seven stones at the bottom of the drum representing the seven stars in the night sky that seemed to surround the moon. I never knew why they were called dog soldiers, or why we had that story about the girl giving birth to dogs that then became stars. One thing about not speaking is that it's hard to ask specific questions, so most things I didn't understand I just had to accept.

The drum was loud, so we always went off to play it, far enough to where we knew no one would hear us, near water if we could find it. The drum had a deep, sorrowful sound, and I'd have to adjust how tight I pulled the hide to get the tone brighter, to make it feel less like it might pull me into it. When I got it the way I wanted it to sound, something that had been set loose from me got called back as I played. So I kept playing whenever I could. Sometimes Bear Shield would sing along, picking out what sounded

good with the tone of the drum, with my rhythm. I didn't know if Bear Shield had heard those songs before, or if he was just making them up there and then. There was unspeakable pain and loss all about us wherever we went. So much hunger and suffering, but with the drum between us, and the singing, there was made something new. We pounded, and sang, and out came this brutal kind of beauty lifting everything up in song.

The place we settled the longest was near Fort Reno. We were pretty worn out by then and had heard we could turn ourselves in there, and would be fed and given shelter. But shortly after getting there, we were told there had been countless crimes committed by Southern Cheyennes against the U.S. Army, and one particularly gruesome murder of a family called the Germans, and that we were to be taken in to pay for those crimes. Thirty-three of us were taken to Fort Sill, shackled in iron chains, then put on a train to Florida.