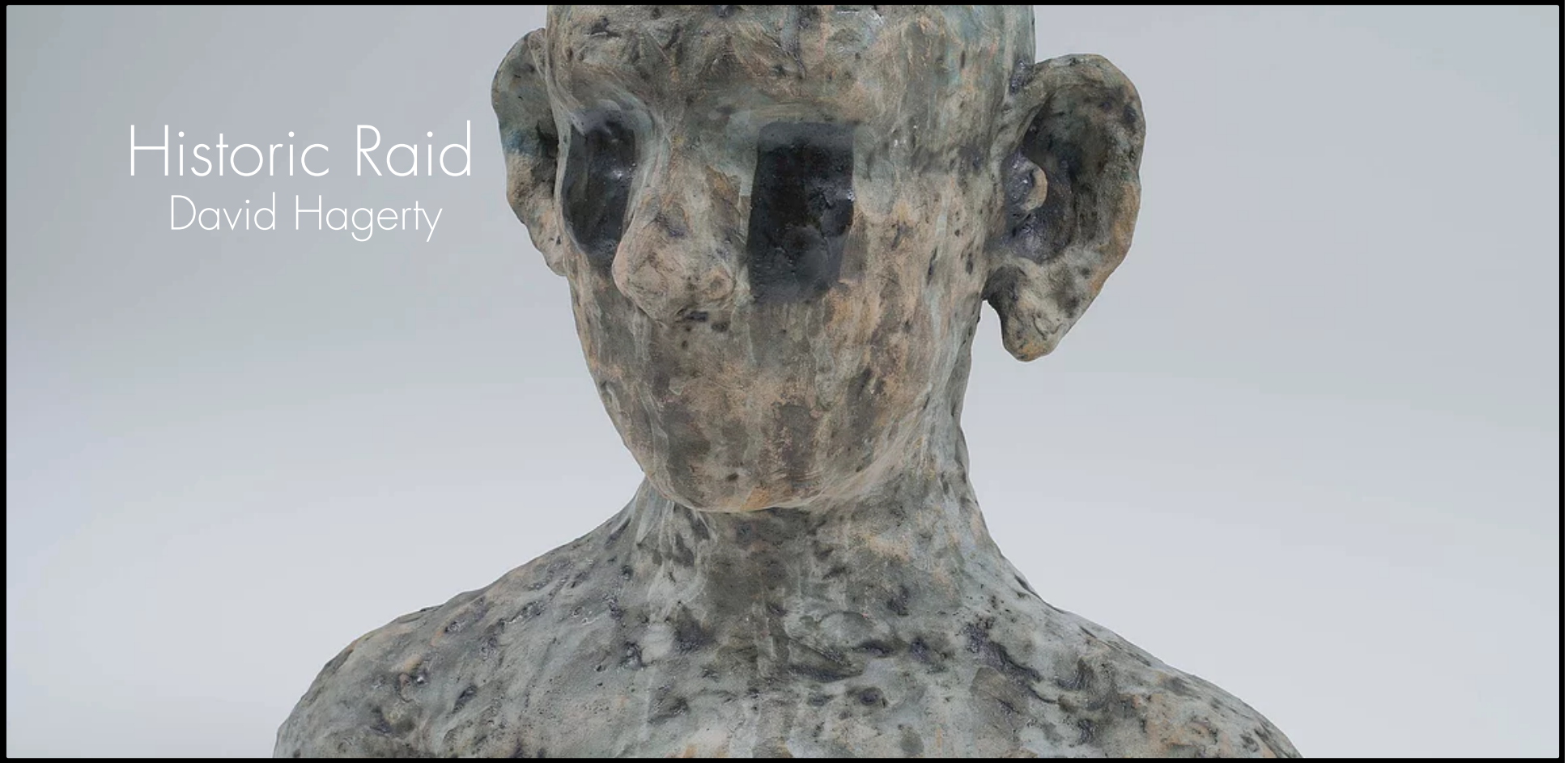

Historic Raid

Nine years into the Great Depression, no wage work remained on or off the Diné reservation, so when Aditsan heard about jobs available in Tsé Bii' Ndzisgaii, and that Indians were welcomed, he walked for three days through canyons and mesas to reach the Valley of the Rocks. The night winds had calmed, leaving a thin blanket of snow and the smell of sagebrush, as he navigated the great

sandstone buttes. A village of canvas tents speckled the dirt road into the monument, with dozens of white men mousing between them. When Aditsan asked one how to apply, he pointed toward Mr. Keefe, a grey-haired bilagáana in a grey suit and a grey cap that shaded his eyes.

"You speak English?" Keefe said, as he shuffled papers in that same language.

Aditsan nodded but kept quiet, unwilling to betray his fluency.

"Thank the Lord there's one Indian who does."

Keefe extended his hand, which Aditsan touched only lightly with his own palm."Never mind," Keefe said. "I forgot you Navajo don't believe in handshakes." Rather than correct him on the name of the tribe, Aditsan awaited instructions. The other man studied his face for an uncomfortable time before saying, "Let down your hair."

Though it violated Diné custom, Aditsan untied his bun and shook loose his long tresses.
Again Keefe stared at him, then nodded. "You've got a good look—tall and strapping—but you have to meet with the director before I can cast you."

Although unclear what that meant, Aditsan followed Keefe inside the largest of the tents, where two dozen other Indians stood and sat in clusters. None he knew, but several he recognized as Apache from their wide faces and hooked noses, so he stood in a corner opposite them. At the Christian boarding school where he'd been incarcerated for eight years with many enemy tribes, he'd learned that the safest strategy around strangers was to keep quiet, so he eavesdropped on two other Diné standing nearby. One kept the calm expression of a wooden Indian, staring contentedly in the distance until the other asked him in their own language what they would be doing.

"Digging, building, cleaning, doesn't matter," said the man. "As long as they're paying."

They waited. After the sun had begun to warm the tent, another bilagáana drew back its flap and surveyed the troupe. He stood half a head taller than Mr. Keefe, with a pipe and black rimmed sunglasses. His clothes mixed the boots and hat of a cowboy with suit pants and a shirt as white as clouds. His gait suggested leadership, so the men all stood and awaited instruction.

"My name's John Ford," he said. "I'm the director of this picture, and I need a dozen extras. I assume you all can ride and shoot?"

Since few of them spoke English, the men looked to each other for translation until Aditsan nodded. "Come outside so I can see your faces in the light."

They trailed behind uncertainly, then queued up for inspection like cavalry. Aditsan stood fourth in line, so he could observe as the director stepped from one man to the next, his face less than a hand's width from theirs, sometimes nodding, other times making no gesture. At his turn, Aditsan offered a half smile—a trick he'd learned from the missionaries—but received only a stare in return.

Keefe stood silent next to Ford and made notes on a tablet like a school boy. After appraising all the men, the two bilagáana walked a dozen paces away and spoke confidentially, leaving the Indians to contemplate a pair of buttes thrusting out of the flat desert like hands with opposable thumbs.

Without looking at the Americans, Aditsan strained to hear their conversation, which included many words foreign to him like "cinematic" and "naturalistic." Finally, the director returned and said, "If Mr. Keefe points at you, follow him."

Aditsan's throat pinched shut so that he had to hold his breath to keep from choking. Years had passed since his last paying job, and he'd begun to despair of ever working again outside of the fields. Back at his home in Ch'ínílį, he scratched the dry earth to coax a few sprouts of corn while his two children led their small herd of sheep and goats deep into Canyon de Chelly in search of forage. To obtain staples like flour and coffee, his wife wove rugs and he hammered out silver jewelry, but traders now offered starvation prices for them. They said no one could afford Indian curios anymore.

When the grey man finally touched Aditsan's chest, it felt as heavy as a punch.

Led by Keefe, the dozen who'd been chosen moved to a smaller tent, which held a single table stacked with papers that read "U.S. Department of Labor" at the top and overflowed with neat type. At the bottom of the pages, Keefe pointed to a blank line and said, "Sign here."

The Indians looked at each other but did not move. When Keefe extended a pen to one of the younger braves, he only stared.

"What is it?" Aditsan said. After years of such exchanges, he was accustomed to negotiating with the bilagáana.

"F.D.R. wants us all to pay more taxes," Keefe said, "so he can give our money back to us when we get old."

The explanation made no sense to the Indians, who remained inert. Then one of the Diné turned to the others and asked in his own tongue, "You think it's a trick?" They exchanged puzzled looks until Aditsan picked up the paper and attempted to read it. The language proved more ornate and obscure than the Bible verses he'd learned in school, mentioning "Congress" and "the Social Security Act of 1935."

"You've got to sign, or we can't hire you," Keefe said.

Silently, Aditsan scanned the page, but he found no references to land swaps or trades involving livestock. When he looked up, the others stared at him questioningly.

"It's like the books at the trading post," he told them. "Meaningless."

The men responded with looks mixing admiration and mistrust, a familiar reaction to his ability to converse with the Americans, until, grudgingly, the eldest led them. Some scribbled their native names, but Aditsan used Abe, after President Lincoln, as he'd been christened by the missionaries who'd taught him to read.

Thus bound, Keefe led the party to yet another tent that bulged with clothes hanging from metal racks. Inside stood a petite woman with dark hair cut short and thick-framed glasses; quickly, she manipulated the men into a line. For each one she picked out a new set of clothes, held it before him admiringly, then handed it off like a gift. To Aditsan she gave a breechcloth, leather leggings, a suede vest, and a cotton shirt with buttons from neck to navel. The garments all smelled as clean as new, though some showed the scuffs of use. Once all the men had received uniforms, she stepped to the door and told them to come outside after they'd dressed.

The men had never experienced anything like her and stared in amazement once Aditsan translated, yet they immediately stripped the cowboy gear they typically wore—leather vests and boots, overalls and embroidered shirts—and replaced them with the attire of their ancestors. Reluctantly, Aditsan removed his worn chief's blanket, woven by his wife in better times, and hid it among the costumes. The new top fit snugly, but with only the leather flap of the breechcloth to cover his genitals, he felt bare and chilled. What sort of job required such historic raiment?

Now a cohesive tribe, the men moved as one outside, waiting stolidly to hide their unease. Next the little woman handed them each two bandanas and told them to tie one around their necks and the other over their foreheads to hold back their long hair. Then she opened a jar of damp goop and painted stripes of red across their foreheads and down their noses.

"This is for ceremonies," said an old Indian with the knobby legs of a bird.

"Then pretend you're having a pow wow," said the woman.

A few men frowned as she made them up, but none refused the war paint. All would have walked naked through the Valley of the Rocks for a few pieces of turquoise.

After completing the makeup, she led the men to a bluff overlooking the buttes where Ford stood behind a black box on slender metal legs with a cone of shiny glass in one end.

"We're making a movie called 'Stagecoach.' Any of you seen a movie before?" When none of the men spoke, he said, "Not a lot of theaters near here." He smiled and stared admiringly at the vast colony of rabbit brush around them before speaking again. "It's a Western set in 1885 about a ragtag bunch that's trying to cross the Southwest. Geronimo is on the warpath, and you all are the Apache plotting to attack the wagon."

Again the men stared at one another until Aditsan translated.

"We're Diné," said Bird Legs. He appeared old enough to recall when the two tribes would steal each other's horses, and he spoke with the authority of experience.

"Doesn't matter." Ford sucked on his pipe with satisfaction, though it remained unlit. "You look the part."

"No Apache thief," mumbled a young Diné wearing the tunic of a soldier.

The eldest of the three rival tribesmen turned to him and stared with contempt. "I rode with Geronimo," he said in their language. "He was no thief. He fought the soldiers while you all walked in shame."

"Bushwa!" Ford slapped his own thigh so loudly it echoed. "It doesn't matter what tribes you all claim. I want authentic Indians, not white men in wigs and red face." He moved to the cliff's edge

and surveyed the view of the monuments. "You three," he pointed to the Apaches, "in front here. The rest of you line up behind." After arranging them, the director stepped to the box on stilts, pointed it toward them, and said, "Look there." The box began to click and whir. After a few seconds, Ford yelled, "Stop." He shook his head with irritation. "I want you to look fierce. I want your faces to show how much you hate the white men who've invaded your territory and stolen your lands."

On his second call to action, Aditsan thought of all the indignities he'd endured—the beatings from the Christian missionaries intent on saving him, the thin sacks of flour from traders for days of silver smithing. Moments later, Ford yelled stop again.

He turned to Mr. Keefe. "Too much. We'll scare the women and children."

"What if we gave them some dialogue?"

Ford chewed his pipe, then smiled. "That's novel. Let the Indians speak for themselves."

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They moved to another plateau where the tall leader positioned them in a circle and asked them to converse in their own language. The men conferred quietly but didn't understand, so Aditsan spoke for them. "What should we say?"

"Doesn't matter. Just look angry." Ford pointed to Bird Legs. "You're chief."

The sání nodded and struck a noble pose. When the director called action, Bird Legs raised his head and spoke to the sun: "These bilagáana smell bad, and they eat foods that give them gas. We should pierce them with arrows to release the fumes."

The other men struggled to contain smirks and smiles, but they held their laughter until Ford called stop again.

Keefe looked up to him and asked, "What do you think?"

After surveying the tribe, he said, "It is well."

"But no one will understand them speaking Indian."

"People don't go to Westerns expecting poetry."

*

While the sun hung high overhead, the Indians stood idle, awaiting further direction. The dresser woman told them only not to sit so that the dirt wouldn't stain their costumes, as though the wind did not carry it as well. With no trees or buttes to block the gusts, Aditsan longed for his wife's blanket, hidden back in the tent, but he did not want to miss any of the action. He studied the director to glean what he would ask of them next. In conference with his workers, he'd point to the buttes, then to the sun, tracking its arc, then suck on his pipe and nod in tandem with the others, both awed and puzzled by the monuments.

Meanwhile, the American crew waited also, talking and smoking, seemingly at ease with idleness. Perhaps that was all this job required. To be paid for doing nothing would be a blessing, as the nuns at school said, a relief from many hours of laboring in the fields for a few small squash or peaches. Soon a bilagáana in a soldier's tunic, suspenders, and a broad-brimmed hat sidled past. He exceeded all the others in height and weight, but he moved slow and awkward, with the cockeyed stance of lasting injury. When he reached the Diné, he tipped his hat and said, "You lot are the best looking Indians I've laid eyes on." As he turned and left, two of the camera operators stared after him.

"You believe they gave the part to that hamateur?" said one.

"The studio wanted Gary Cooper, but Ford refused," said his companion.

"Probably wouldn't take it. Since talkies, nobody makes Westerns."

"Nobody lives in the desert, either. Just us and the lizards and the savages."

*

By midday, boredom overtook the Indians, so they began snatching at each other's loin cloths and whipping each other with bandanas. Even Aditsan broke his usual silence, sharing his nickname for Bird Legs, who stared in dismay at his bony knees. As they laughed and jibed, Aditsan noticed the two cameramen watching them with distaste. Recalling the one's comment about savages, he turned to the old man and, in their own language, dared him to scare them.

Bird Legs contemplated the challenge, then used English to excuse himself so he could find a private rock. He walked a wide circle around a boulder where the two bilagáana stood idle, then snuck up behind his victim clutching a flat rock. Stealthily, he reached for the man's hair with his left hand while readying his rough blade with the other. The Americans idled, oblivious, until his palm grazed the target's forehead, at which the man screamed and ran like a cowardly dog. As the other Indians watched stone faced, Bird Legs glowered at the remaining white man, whose hands shook until he noticed the blunt weapon.

"Do not fear," said Bird Legs. "Only Apache savages believe in scalping."

At this, even the Apache laughed until the stagehand began shouting about termination and prosecution, his face showing both anger and shame. Bird Legs quickly lost his smile, and he looked to Aditsan to translate. The American reminded him of BIA officers who acted cool and aloof to Indians until provoked, then struck back with vengeance. He stepped to the angry man and offered his open palm. "Understand," he said. "Jokes are our way of welcoming strangers." The other man stood solemn and still, but his face showed indecision, so Aditsan left his palm extended. After an uncomfortable time, the man accepted a handshake, but in contrast to the Diné's soft touch, his grip felt crushingly strong.

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Finally, as the sun descended toward the horizon, burning the land red, the director gathered the Indians in a circle. His pipe smoke blew into their faces, earthy and sweet, reminding Aditsan how long it had been since he could afford tobacco.

"You'll need weapons," Ford said and led them to a tent stacked with bows, arrows, and rifles. For himself, Aditsan chose a spear with feathers tied near its soft tip. Then they selected horses. Aditsan favored a white mare, one of the cleanest and strongest animals he'd ever seen, with a hand-tooled saddle covering a Pendleton blanket. Its hide felt smooth as lambskin, yet beneath it lay all muscle. Mounted on its back, he imagined himself a chief of all men.

They walked the animals to a cliff overlooking the broad valley, where the wind had warped the sand into ripples. The stagecoach waited below with its own team of six thoroughbreds. Atop it lay the tall cowboy, a Winchester in hand.

"This time, I want you to gallop down this hill full tilt," said Ford. "You're going to chase that stagecoach like you haven't eaten in weeks, and it's a meaty buffalo."

Unsure what this last word meant, the men looked to each other until Aditsan translated. He'd read in school about the great herds that once populated the north country although he'd never seen one live. "Why?" said the Diné brave wearing a soldier's tunic.

"Because you're at war. They burned your villages and raped your women, and now you want revenge. Geronimo is leading your revolt, and you're attacking every sodbuster you find."

The men conferred in their own languages until they all knew what to do, then looked to Ford, who in this scenario was the invader.

"Don't stop till I say so, and don't look at the camera. We'll get close-ups later."

On the director's call, they charged toward the valley as unified as any war party. Aditsan's horse moved with the grace of a dancer, its strides so fluid he hardly felt the buck of the saddle, yet carrying the spear he felt clumsy. If he held it overhead, his arm quickly tired. If he kept it at shoulder level, the butt whacked him in the neck. If he clutched it to his side, the shaft chaffed him. When he glanced to the other men, they looked equally awkward, fighting to hold their shotguns steady and clutching their bows in such a way that it would be impossible to load or fire them. No one hunted like this.

From atop the wagon, Wayne cocked his rifle and pointed it toward each of them, firing off plumes of smoke without the explosion of a bullet. He looked to enjoy the fighting, leering at the Indians with malevolent glee. Soon the director called stop, but Soldier Tunic kept riding, galloping over the plateau until he disappeared behind a butte.

"Blast it," screamed the director, "I thought you all knew what to do."

The others shared a look of confusion and guilt, then turned to Aditsan, who as their spokesman also became a proxy for all blame. In response, he only shrugged and watched the Indian flee, wondering if he planned to steal the horse. Later, he learned that the man had bolted at the sight of Wayne's gun, thinking he aimed to kill them, yet Aditsan still felt responsible.

*

After their first rush, the director called the Indians back to their starting point and asked them to charge again, then again. Five times they rode down that hill until their horses panted moist breath. Then they rode parallel to the wagon, whooping and menacing the stagecoach with their eyes. With them rode several bilagáana made up as Indians whose job was to fall from their horses. On one pass, a tumbler landed so hard he could not speak for minutes. The tall leader said only, "It is well." When the action resumed, the men acted more enthusiastic than ever, hooting and brandishing their weapons like in days past. Aditsan imagined himself joining his grandfather in the assault on Fort Defiance, plunging his spear into the soldiers who converted their grazing lands into an army outpost, then riding into Canyon de Chelly and defying Kit Carson to pursue him. He recalled many boyhood fantasies he'd long ago forgotten—but which lay fallow in his memory awaiting some spring rain—and thought of his own son playing back at their hogan. Simultaneously, he felt the ache in his legs from riding all out and the chafe in his throat from the dust and the war cries. The horses exhaled a funk of stress like they were in a real battle, their flanks wet with exertion, their sides heaving for air. It all made Aditsan wonder: was this how the Diné lived before the trading posts and the tourists, before the Indian schools and the BIA?

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They sustained the attack until all of them slumped in their saddles, too tired to hold the reins. As the long shadows of the monuments gave way to blue twilight, the wind picked up, chilling Aditsan's bare legs. Even the horses sagged and shivered.

After the tall leader called an end to the battle, the men walked their stock back to camp, moving with the exhaustion and solemnity of true combat. They smelled of leather and horse sweat, and dust clung to them so thickly it erased their war paint. Bird Legs said in their own language, "You think they could catch us if we fled?" recalling the time when the tribe prospered through thievery. The others said nothing, but their expressions told Aditsan that they shared his desire to recapture that era. Reluctantly, they corralled the herd, stroking and brushing them with the pride of ownership. Then they stripped their garments, all the while talking like children returned from a great adventure, boasting and arguing about who had killed the most white men.

*

Once they had outfitted themselves in their old clothes and identities, the men returned to the big tent where Keefe began counting out greenbacks; none of the Indians stepped forward to accept the currency.

"Don't you want to get paid?" said the grey assistant.

The men exchanged glances but remained silent until Aditsan explained, "Those are worthless here."

"Well, what do you want?"

Aditsan pointed to his belt, which bore silver dollars stitched onto the leather.

Keefe put his hand atop his head and left it there as though to blunt some pain. Then he gestured for the Indians to wait and left the tent. In his absence, the men spoke quietly, agreeing not to accept paper money.

When Ford returned, he brought a cloth sack containing dozens of coins. "This do?"

Without hesitation, the men divided the silver, then shook hands with the director, offering him the gentle grasp that was their custom. Aditsan waited for the others to go before stepping forward. He wanted to express his thanks in the best way he knew: with the firm handshake he'd learned from other bilagáana.

David Hagerty is working on a group of short stories starring Aditsan and set on the Navajo Nation in the first half of the twentieth century. He has also published two novels in a series of political murder mysteries, *They Tell Me You Are Wicked* and *They Tell Me You Are Crooked*, available from Evolved Publishing. For more information, see his website: www.davidhagertyauthor.net.