CHAPTER 12

Sherman Alexie’s Transformation of “Ten Little Indians”

When Sherman Alexie titled his 2003 collection of stories Ten Little Indians, he was actually using a phrase he had employed several times in his earlier writings, notably in The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven (1993). In one story in this collection, “The Only Traffic Signal on the Reservation Doesn’t Flash Red Anymore,” Victor describes a group of Indian boys walking by: “I’d like to think there were ten of them. But there were actually only four or five.” For Victor—as for Alexie—ten Indians seems to be a particularly meaningful entity, suggesting more than, say, a large number. The significance becomes clear in another story, “The Approximate Size of My Favorite Tumor,” when, in the middle of James Many Horses’s wedding, the drunken Raymond stands and tells his memories of James:

“I remember once when he and I were drinking at the Powwow Tavern when all of a sudden Lester FallsApart comes running in and says that ten Indians just got killed in a car wreck on Ford Canyon Road. Ten Skins? I asked Lester, and he said, Yeah, ten. And then Jimmy starts up singing, One little, two little, three little