could no longer swallow food. I summoned all the people of the village together and asked them to hold a song-feast, as is our custom, because we believe that all evil will shun a place where people are happy. And when the song-feast began, I went out alone into the night. They laughed at me, and my wife was later on able to tell me how they mocked me, because I would not do tricks to entertain everybody. But I kept away in lonely places, far from the village, for five days, thinking unintentionally of the sick man and wishing him health. He got better, and since then nobody at that village has mocked me.

Lame Deer
NORTH AMERICAN SIoux

John Fire Lame Deer, a full-blooded Lakota born on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota, did many things during his long life. He painted signs and picked spuds. He was a soldier, a tribal policeman, and a prisoner. He sang, was a radio clown and a bootlegger, and herded sheep. Behind this extraordinary range of professions and misfortunes was the fruit of a great vision he attained during the traditional vision quest he undertook as a young man, the vision that brought him to his true vocation, that of healer—shaman—medicine-man. Lame Deer once said, "The find-out, it has left me my whole life. In a way I was always hopping back and forth across the boundary line of the mind." Lame Deer is now dead. But his humor and wise heart seem to have brought him a long and incredibly rich and courageous life. His face, a rugged reflection of the Badlands, and his eyes, shining like those of an eagle, have been memorialized by his close friend, photographer Richard Edesio.

Lame Deer told Edesio one day: "I believe that being a medicine man, more than anything else, is a state of mind, a way of looking at and understanding this earth, a sense of what it is all about. Am I wise? What can I do? I have no answer. I see in my patch-up, faded shirt, with my down-at-the-heel cowboy boots, the hearing aid whistling in my ear, looking at the flimsy shack with its bad-smelling outhouse which I call my home—it all doesn't add up to a white man's idea of a holy man. You've seen me drunk and broke. You've heard me curse or tell a sexy joke. You know I'm not better or wiser than other men. But I've been to the hilltop, got my vision and power; the rest is just the trimmings."

I was all alone on the hilltop. I sat there in the vision pit, a hole dug into the hill, my arms hugging my knees as I watched old man Chest, the medicine man who had brought me there, disappear far down in the valley. He was just a moving black dot among the pines, and soon he was gone altogether.

Now I was all by myself, left on the hilltop for four days and nights without food or water until he came back for me. And by grandparents, Uncles, cousins, relatives of all kinds, who fondle the kids, sing to them, tell them stories. If the parents go somewhere, the kids go along.

But here I was, crouched in my vision pit, left alone by myself for the first time in my life. I was sixteen then, still had my boy's name, and let me tell you, I was scared. I was shivering and not away, and four days and nights is a long, long time. Of course it was all over, I would no longer be a boy, but a man. I would have had my vision. I would be given a man's name. Sioux men are not afraid to endure hunger, thirst, and loneliness, and I was only ninety-six hours away from being a man. The thought was comforting. Comforting, too, was the warmth of the star blanket which old man Chest had wrapped around me to this, my first blanket, my first vision-seeking. It was a beautifully designed quilt, white with a large shining star made of many pieces of brightly colored cloth. That star was so big it covered the whole blanket. If Waká Tanka, the Great Spirit, would give me the vision and the power, I would become a medicine man and perform many ceremonies wrapped in that quilt. I am an old man now and many times a grandfather, but I still have that star blanket my grandmother made for me. I treasure it; some day I shall be buried in it.

The medicine man had also left a peace pipe with me, together with a bag of niókíkínnik—our kind of tobacco made of red willow bark. This pipe was even more of a friend to me than my star
For us Indians there is just the pipe, the earth we sit on and the open sky. The spirit is everywhere. Sometimes it shows itself through an animal, a bird or some trees and hills. Sometimes it speaks from the Badlands, a stone, or even from the water. That smoke from the peace pipe, it goes straight up to the spirit world. But this is a two-way thing. Power flows down to us through that smoke, through the pipe stem. You feel that power as you hold your pipe; it moves from the pipe right into your body. It makes your hair stand up. That pipe is not just a thing; it is alive. Smoking this pipe would make me feel good and help me get rid of my fears.

As I ran my fingers along its bowl of smooth red pipestone, red like the blood of my people, I no longer felt scared. That pipe had belonged to my father and to his father before him. It would someday pass to my son and, through him, to my grandchildren. As long as we had the pipe there would be a Sioux nation. As I fingered the pipe, touched it, felt its smoothness that came from long use, I started to understand my forefathers who had once smoked this pipe with me on the hill, right in the vision pit. I was no longer alone. Besides the pipe the medicine man had also given me a gourd. In it were fifty small squares of flesh which my grandmother had cut from her arm with a razor blade. I had seen her do it. Blood had been streaming down from her shoulder to her elbow as she carefully put down each piece of skin on a hardkerchief, anxious not to lose a single one. It would have made those anthropologists mad. Imagine, performing such an ancient ceremony with a razor blade instead of a flint knife! To me it did not matter. Someone dear to me had undergone pain, given me something of herself, part of her body, to help me pray and make me stronger. How could I be afraid with so many people—living and dead—helping me?

One thing still worried me. I wanted to become a medicine man, a wakan, a healer carrying on the ancient ways of the Sioux nation. But you cannot learn to be a medicine man like a white man going to medical school. An old holy man can teach you about herbs and the right ways to perform a ceremony where everything must be in its proper place, where every move, every word has its own, special meaning. Those things you can learn—like spelling, like training a horse. But by themselves these things mean nothing. Without the vision and the power this learning will do me good. It would not make me a medicine man.

What if I failed, if I had no vision? Or if I dreamed of the Thunder Beings, or lightning struck the hill? That would make me at once into a holotyp, a contrariwise, an upside-down man, a clown. "You'll know it, if you get the power," my Uncle Chief had told me. "If you are not given it, you won't lie about it, you won't pretend. That would kill you, or kill somebody close to you, somebody you love."

Night was coming on. I was still light-headed and dizzy from my first sweat bath in which I had purified myself before going up the hill. I had never been in a sweat lodge before. I had sat in the little beehive-shaped hut made of bent willow branches and covered with blankets to keep the heat in. Old Chief and three other medicine men had been in the lodge with me. I had my back against the wall, edging as far away as I could from the red-hot stones glowing in the center. As Chief poured water over the rocks, hissing white steam enveloped me and filled my lungs. I thought the heat would kill me, burn the eyelids off my face! But right in the middle of this swirling steam I heard Chief singing. So it couldn't be all that bad, I did not cry out. "All my relatives"—which would have made him open the flap of the sweat lodge to let in some cool air—and I was proud of this. I heard him praying for me: "Oh, holy rocks, we receive your white breath, the steam. It is the breath of life. Let this young boy inhale it. Make him strong."

The sweat bath had prepared me for my vision-seeking. Even now, an hour later, my skin still tingled. But it seemed to have made my brain empty. Maybe that was good, plenty of room for new insights.

Darkness had fallen upon the hill. I knew that hemlock had risen, the night sun, which is what we call the moon. Huddled in my narrow cave, I did not see it. Blackness was wrapped around me like a velvet cloth. It seemed to cut me off from the outside world, even from my own body. It made me listen to the voices within me. I thought of my forefathers who had crouched on this hill before me, because the medicine men in my family had chosen this spot for a place of meditation and vision-seeking ever since.
the day they had crossed the Missouri to hunt for buffalo in the White River country some two hundred years ago. I thought that I could sense their presence right through the earth. I was leaning against. I could feel them entering my body, feel them stirring in my mind and heart.

Sounds came to me through the darkness: the cries of the wind, the whisper of the trees, the voices of nature, animal sounds, the howling of an owl. Suddenly I felt an overwhelming presence. Down there with me in my cramped hole was a big bird. The sky was only as wide as myself, and I was a skinny boy, but that huge bird was flying around me as if he had the whole sky to himself. I could hear his cries, sometimes near and sometimes far away. I felt feathers or a wing touching my back and head. This feeling was so overwhelming that it was just too much for me, I trembled and my knees turned to ice. I grasped the rattle with the forty pieces of my grandmother's flesh. It also had many little stones in it, tiny fossils picked up from an ant heap. Ants collect them. Nobody knows why. These little stones are supposed to have a power in them. I shook the rattle and it made a soothing sound, like rain falling on rock. It was talking to me, but it did not calm my fears. I took the sacred pipe in my other hand and began to sing and pray: "Tunkashila, grandfather spirit, help me." But this did not help. I don't know what got into me, but I was no longer myself. I started to cry. Crying, even my voice was different. I sounded like an older man, I couldn't even recognize this strange voice. I used long ago words in my prayer, words I no longer used nowadays. I tried to wipe away my tears, but they wouldn't stop. In the end I just pulled that quilt over me, rolled myself up in it. Still I felt the bird wings touching me.

Slowly I perceived that a voice was trying to tell me something. It was a bird cry, but I told you, I began to understand some of it. That happens sometimes. I know a lady who had a butterfly sitting on her shoulder. That butterfly told her things. This made her become a great medicine woman.

I heard a human voice too, strange and high-pitched, a voice which could not come from an ordinary, living being. All at once I was way up there with the birds. The hill with the vision pit was way above everything. I could look down even on the stars, and the moon was close to my left side. It seemed as though the earth and the stars were moving below me. A voice said, "You are sacrificing yourself here to be a medicine man. In time you will be one. You will teach other medicine men. We are the fowl people, the winged ones, the eagles and the owls. We are a nation and you shall be our brother. You will never kill or harm any one of us. You are going to understand us whenever you come to seek a vision here on this hill. You will learn about herbs and roots, and you will heal people. You will ask them for nothing in return. A man's life is short. Make yours a worthy one."

I felt that these voices were good, and slowly my fear left me. I had lost all sense of time. I did not know whether it was day or night. I was asleep, yet wide awake. Then I saw a shape before me. It rose from the darkness and the swirling fog which penetrated my earth hole. I saw that this was my great-grandfather, Tahcha Ushne, Lame Deer, old man chief of the Minnieconjou. I could see the blood dripping from my great-grandfather's chest where a white soldier had shot him. I understood that my great-grandfather wished me to take his name. This made me glad beyond words.

We Sioux believe that there is something within us that controls us, something like a second person almost. We call it the soul of another. We say that other people might call soul, spirit or essence. One can't see it, feel it or taste it, but that time on the hill—and that once only—I knew it was there inside of me. Then I felt the power surge through me like a flood. I cannot describe it, but it filled all of me. Now I knew for sure that I would become a medicine man. Again I wept, this time with happiness.

I didn't know how long I had been up there on that hill—one minute or a lifetime. I felt a hand on my shoulder gently shaking me. It was old man Chest, who had come up. He told me that I had been in the vision pit four days and four nights and that it was time to come down. He would give me something to eat and water to drink and then I was to tell him everything that had happened to me during my halchica. He would interpret my visions for me. He told me that the vision pit had changed me in a way that I would not be able to understand at that time. He told me also that I was no longer a boy, that I was a man now. I was Lame Deer.