

**BENEATH THE SHADOW OF THE RED ROCK: A NOVEL WITH A
CRITICAL INTRODUCTION AND AN AFTERWORD**

A Dissertation

by

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ABSTRACT

This scholarly-creative dissertation uses a decolonizing storytelling methodology to investigate the 1979 Church Rock uranium spill near Gallup, New Mexico, where an open-air uranium waste pond breached its earth dam, releasing over 1,000 tons of radioactive mill waste and 93 tons of tailings into the Río Puerco. Contaminants traveled over eighty miles downstream, poisoning ground water, livestock, and sacred land primarily on Navajo-Diné lands. In the decades since, a full waste cleanup has never been conducted, families have remained on their poisoned homelands, and the spill's health effects have claimed many lives. A scholarly introduction disrupts a singular American ecocritical genealogy by disentangling the linkages between settler colonialism, gender, spatiality, and race among those affected by uranium mining along the northwestern corridor of New Mexico. This introduction also presents postcolonial ecology and alternative cartography as well as characteristics of Indigenous and Chicana literary production, and affect theory in its abilities to re-member the spectral, racialized female subject.

The creative portion of the dissertation is a novel, which deploys a decolonizing storytelling methodology to focus on the wellbeing of an Indigenous-Chicano family and its community, in particular its Chicana-Indigenous narrator, through an enactment of slow violence that leads up to the uranium spill, documents the dissolution of the family, and points to the spill's (after)effects. The novel elevates community and kinship,

communal ties to the land, and tradition-based knowledge as central tenets of environmental justice movements. The novel also challenges concepts of Latin familism such as collectivism and interdependence that typically constitute an ethics of care and caring. An afterword presents my own process as a novelist.

Finally, a creative nonfiction essay presents my own process as a novelist and offers some pedagogical implications for classroom discussions about the novel. It also discusses shared similarities with the more traditionally defined area of literary cartography, specifically the prevailing notion of the story as a cartography of discovery. Rather, I argue that alternative cartographies are less about discovery and more about excavating the stories already sedimented within disenfranchised communities, the land itself, and the re-member bodies of formerly spectral, racialized female characters.

DEDICATION

For my parents, Lucy and the late Carl Bartlett, who made all things possible

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Uranium mining is once again on the rise.

In 2013, the three main producers of uranium ore—Kazakhstan, Canada, and Australia—produced over sixty-four percent of the world’s uranium (World Nuclear Association). After experiencing a decline in production since 1993, the uranium mining industry has since expanded and now accounts for ninety percent of power generation internationally (Ibid). Nearly half the uranium is extracted through in-situ leaching. Since 2003, as a result of steadily rising prices and increased demand, many countries, such as Namibia, Tanzania, and Niger, are expected to open new mines (Ibid). Even with these new ventures, the World Nuclear Association estimates that demand for uranium will exceed its production.

Uranium is the heaviest element found in nature; ninety-two protons are packed into its nucleus. “The heart of uranium, its nucleus, is an aching knot held together with electrical coils that are as fragile as sewing thread—more fragile than in any other atom that occurs in nature” (Zoellner viii). An invading neutron can shatter the nucleus of a uranium atom, forcing it to “sling off a missile of two protons and two neutrons at a velocity fast enough to whip around the circumference of the earth in roughly two seconds” (Ibid viii). This loss of its center (as protons and neutrons are sloughed off) forces uranium to change shape (from radium to radon and finally to polonium), “a

lycanthropic cascade that involves thirteen heavy metals before the stuff finally comes to permanent rest as lead” (Ibid viii).

Shampa Biswas has attributed this surge in uranium production to the promise of nuclear fission itself (1). The “order” and “disorder” that characterizes the nuclear world is made manifest in nuclear fission, the splitting of the center of an atom. When fission occurs, the slamming together of “two lumps of enriched uranium” (Zoellner xii), the simplistic makings of the atomic bomb are realized. Both scientifically and morally, such nuclear reactions and their offspring have challenged us to think and act more critically since uranium, “[o]nce dug up...can never be reburied (Ibid xii). The process of sustaining this chain reaction has led to a dual response toward nuclear power: it is either seen as the orderly deliverance from “the environmental limits of relentless capital accumulation and consumerism,” or, in its “dystopian incarnation,” as a “form of uncontrolled destruction inflicted on hapless innocents” (Biswas1).

Recognition of the potential of nuclear power for energy production, as well as the dangers associated with its proliferation, has resulted in the creation of a “nuclear global order,” of which New Mexico is one locus (Biswas 1). The state is second only to Wyoming in recognized uranium ore reserves in the U.S. In northern New Mexico, Los Alamos National Laboratories housed the Manhattan Project, which produced the atomic weaponry used to bomb Nagasaki and Hiroshima during World War II. Much of the uranium ore harvested in New Mexico, used during the 1940s-1980s for the U.S.’s nuclear weapons program, came from mines located in the northwestern corridor of the state, home to the Navajo-Diné nation. This harvesting process involved retrieving the

ore from the ground and then transporting it to a uranium mill, where it was then crushed and soaked in sulfuric acid to extract the uranium (Arnold A47). This extraction process created a “radioactive slurry” that was stored in open-air, “unlined ponds” (Ibid A47).

An increased demand for uranium on the world market has reinvigorated the nuclear industry’s pursuit of uranium mining in New Mexico. At the same time, and despite a five-year federal multiagency effort begun in 2007 to clean up nuclear waste produced from these abandoned mines, the deleterious effects of uranium toxicity are ever present (MacMillan). Although some venues have publicized the plight of uranium workers, the public remains largely unaware of the array of health, social, and economic hardships endured by Navajos and others as a result of uranium toxicity. The disruption to social mores and ways of life has been under-examined. Moreover, as of this writing, only one major epidemiological study has been conducted to determine the health costs of uranium mining on Navajos despite over sixty years of uranium development on their lands. Preliminary data about health in particular, while anecdotal in nature, suggest that lung disease and kidney disease may have occurred as a result of exposure to uranium toxicity (Shuey vii).

One galvanizing and instructive case study on the costs and benefits of uranium mining, and the focus of this dissertation, centers on an open-air uranium waste pond that breached its earthen dam near Gallup, New Mexico on July 16, 1979.

Approximately 1,100 tons of radioactive mill waste and 93 tons of tailings were released into the Río Puerco. Contaminants traveled over eighty miles downstream, poisoning ground water, livestock, and sacred land primarily on Navajo-Diné lands. In the decades

since, a full waste cleanup has never been conducted, families have remained on their poisoned homelands, and the spill's health effects have claimed many lives.

I argue foremost that the ongoing effects of the 1979 spill provide clear evidence of environmental and spatial injustice. By disentangling the linkages between settler colonialism, spatiality, and environmental histories, I seek to illuminate the social, economic, and health effects of uranium mining on those most affected along the northwestern corridor in New Mexico. As Ana Tsing argues in *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*, the metaphorical friction of the title reminds us that the productive results of the clash between the local and the global, these “heterogeneous and unequal encounters,” pave the way for “new arrangements of culture and power” (5). Further, Jodi A. Byrd challenges us—settler, native, and arrivant—“[to] acknowledge [our] own positions within empire and then reconceptualize space and history to make visible what imperialism with its resultant settler colonialism and diasporas has sought to obscure” (xxxix). I endeavor to both illustrate and acknowledge this positionality—mine and others’—and thereby make transparent an agenda for responsibility and change.

My work also offers a deeper understanding of the role of community organizing in mitigating negative consequences that derive from uranium mining and its attendant toxicity. Indigenous and Chicana feminists have long battled for environmental justice within global contexts, of which New Mexico is one locus. The novel's embodiment as a decolonizing story joins with these movements and other works of environmental justice literatures to counteract a “singular American ecocritical genealogy” through a critical

understanding of settler colonialism, gender, and race in a New Mexico town. In its focus on decolonizing strategies and reclamatory narratives, the novel contributes to a larger decolonizing literature, both creative and scholarly, interdisciplinary in its scope and which, by its positionality and content, makes claims for global solidarity. The critical introduction grounds my argument in its explicit engagement with the fields of environmental justice, spatiality justice, Indigenous studies, Chican@ studies, and feminist theories to disrupt established discourses about the land and its inhabitants. An afterword presents my own process as a novelist.

Storytelling serves as an internationally recognized decolonizing methodology in ongoing battles for sovereignty. In using storytelling as a critical methodology, my dissertation focuses scholarly-creative lenses on the struggles faced by traumatized communities who experience environmental injustice. This dissertation both embraces and critiques the “spatial turn” through a discussion of literary cartography, delineates characteristics of Indigenous and Chicana literary production, and, in the afterword, offers a more pointed discussion of the role of the writer-cartographer.

Although uranium mining has been the subject of numerous nonfictional accounts, few have focused exclusively on the Churchrock tailings spill. A recent entrant, Tom Zoellner’s *Uranium: The Rock that Moved the World*, gives a scant three pages to Navajo-Diné uranium mining within its three-hundred pages. One exception, Myrrhia Gomez’s dissertation, provides a decolonizing story about the dislocations and dispossession of Nuevomexicano communities most deeply affected by the creation of the Los Alamos National Labs. Mine, however, is the first novel to situate the

Churchrock incident as a site of creative investigation, focusing on the wellbeing of an Indigenous-Chicano family and its community by placing them at the center of the uranium spill and its (after)effects. The novel elevates community and kinship, communal ties to the land, and tradition-based knowledge as central tenets of environmental justice movements. The novel also challenges concepts of Latin@ familism such as collectivism and interdependence that typically constitute an ethics of care and caring. Through my fiction, I follow in the tradition of other Chicana and Indigenous writers whose work highlights multiple genres for telling stories, such as poetry, magazine writing, and illness narratives. This usage allows me to recover communal memory and reimagine alternative cartographies. Finally, I draw parallels with other global uranium disasters, including the nuclear bombing of Japan, placing the entire work within a transhistorical and transnational context.

Ecocriticism, Postcolonial Ecologies, and Chicana and Indigenous Feminist Theories, Or, The Struggle is Real

In 1995, the *New York Times* published Jay Parini's "The Greening of the Humanities," which celebrated the rise of a critical body of scholarship about the environment, signaling "a re-engagement with realism, with the actual universe of rocks, trees and rivers that lies behind the wilderness of signs" (52.) Ecocriticism, as this new field came to be called, was defined as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty 2). Moreover, it positioned itself as a site for social activism and social responsibility in response to apolitical poststructural theories that, in the view of some of the new field's "founders," had tended toward solipsism

(Ibid 2). Ecocriticism since then has done much to invigorate activism within English departments in the US by providing a critical methodology and a “poetics of place in the wake of globalization” (DeLoughrey and Handley 9).

Yet for many scholars, the ecocritical turn, despite its ongoing significant contributions, has been marked in the intervening years by “a narrow and nationalistic genealogy” centered primarily within the United States (DeLoughrey and Handley 10). The concerns of ecocriticism, when it has tended to “become uncoupled from worldly concerns,” have drifted toward a “historically indifferent formalism that treats the study of aesthetics as the literary scholar’s definitive calling” (Nixon 31). Andrea Smith similarly contends that “mainstream environmentalists” often deploy rhetoric—“usually the concern for the well-being of the planet”—to obfuscate settler colonialism and racism (62). This uncritical practice, both within the environmental movement and ecocritical thought, allows questions of “difference, power, and privilege” to be sidestepped, their obfuscation made possible largely through settler colonial logics and the universalizing discourse of nature itself (DeLoughrey and Handley 14).

This uncoupling has occurred in part through a predominant ecocritical discourse that reifies the “cult of wilderness,” typified by The Sierra Club in its focus on the protection of an “immaculate Nature” from economic encroachment that might sully its “sacredness” (Martinez-Alier 1-3). Another ecocritical discourse, “the gospel of eco-efficiency,” concerns itself with the “effects of economic growth” as a result of urbanization and industrialization, churning out “a religion of utility and technical efficiency without a notion of the sacred” (Ibid 5).

However, a third ecocritical discourse, an environmentalism of the poor, whittles away at ecocriticism's narrowly defined intellectual parameters as a field that generally has resisted, ignored, or marginalized ongoing engagements with postcolonial ecological methodologies in the wake of global environmental crises forged through settler colonialism and empire building (Martinez-Alier 10). In seeking to "become a powerful factor in forcing the economy into ecological adjustment and social justice" (Ibid xi), an environmentalism of the poor recognizes the "mutually constitutive histories of settler colonialism and environmentalism," and more specifically, the critical role of land appropriation and extraction of natural resources that operate as central tenets of empire building (DeLoughrey and Handley 10). Such an activist discourse posits that economic growth relies on the displacement and dispossession of much of the world's population from their originary land bases (Martinez-Atelier 10).

With its focus on land as a "primary site of postcolonial recuperation, sustainability, and dignity" (DeHoughrey and Handley 3), an environmentalism of the poor shares a common thread—the landscape as sacred, as "the most essential value, because the most concrete" (Fanon 9), as "a participant in this historical process rather than a bystander to human experience" (Ibid 4)—with postcolonial ecologies, as well as Chicana and Indigenous feminist theories. An environmentalism of the poor, as does postcolonial ecological discourse, understands postcolonial writing ecologically as a "process of recovery, identification, and historical mythmaking" made possible through the land and foregrounds "a spatial imagination made possible by the experience of place" (DeLoughrey and Handley 3-4).

These discourses seek to attenuate the logics of settler colonialism—narratives of modernization, the moral and intellectual superiority of the “settlers,” and the teleological inevitability of political democracies and nation-states—that have been (and continue to be) deployed to justify national expansion into “virgin” or “empty” territories and, not least, the annihilation of Chican@ and indigenous peoples. The subjugation of indigenous land(s) and the violence that marks such acquisition becomes obscured discursively and materially through the “policies of exclusion and segregation” that disappeared indigenous peoples (Jacobs 4). Patrick Wolfe, in distilling settler colonialism to its essence remarks, “Territoriality is settler colonialism’s specific, irreducible element” (388). As Bateman and Pilkington further remind us:

While settlers view the land’s potential as the basis for exploitation..., and this is supported by law, the indigenes’ relationship with the land tends to take the form of connection, often incomprehensible to the colonizer, which is spiritual and cultural, as well as economic. Indigenous people, assumed to be backward, lacking in culture and civilization, and incapable of owning land were treated as animals, either herded to inferior land or systematically eliminated, so that a civilized population could be ‘planted’ or ‘settled’ on the territory (2).

The centrality of land and the interdependence of all life are centuries-old concepts to Indigenous peoples and scholars who have engaged continuously with the nonhuman as part of their origins cosmology and who have resisted settler colonialism since first contact. Jodi A. Byrd and Michael Rothberg, for instance, consider indigenous critical theory as the study of colonization and peoples “who define themselves in terms

of relation to land, kinship communities, native languages, traditional knowledges, and ceremonial practices,” to be foundational to the maintenance of what Alfred and Corntassel have theorized as ‘oppositional, place-based existence’” (597). In terms of homeland, “[f]or indigenous peoples, place, land, sovereignty, and memory matter,” Byrd argues (xiii). Similarly, Dennis Martinez, Enrique Salmón, and Melissa K. Nelson offer a “kincentric” model that stresses equality and a “practical reciprocity” (89). They eschew the view that this Native model is “a moral universe in the Western sense,” but rather a commitment. “We agree to do certain things and the animals and plants agree to do other things...; we honor that contract” (Ibid 89). Byrd argues that, while much critical attention has been paid to “the role of frontiers and Manifest Destiny” in the creation of U.S. Empire, less has been given to the ways American Indians are evoked as past-tense presences, spectral entities as well as lamentable casualties, and “melancholic citizens dissatisfied with the conditions of inclusion (xx). Rarely are they theorized as the field through which US empire became possible. Nor is current multiculturalism understood as the colonization of indigenous lands and people by force, but rather a form of melting pot exclusion that erases indigeneity while simultaneously celebrating its inclusion (Ibid xx). Rob Nixon calls this the stripping of the “landscape of multiple generations” (18).

Nixon further complicates colonialist appropriations of land and its desecration by training a temporal lens specifically on the Global South but with similarities that cross transnational borders. Nixon defines “slow violence” as something “that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time

and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2). Whereas conventional definitions of environmental violence rely on the immediate, the spectacular, and the “explosive” for impact, slow violence travels across time and space as many “long dyings” of the type exemplified environmentally, for instance, in deforestation and uranium toxicity (Ibid 2). Environmental disasters such as these are cataclysmic in nature but lack the “visceral, eye-catching and page-turning power” of those sensational (and sensationalized) ones that capture our imaginations and are made instantaneously available through ubiquitous media technologies such as the internet and cell phones. Within an international neoliberal context, environmental disaster also can be rendered “ungrievable, anachronistic, and spectacular deficient” in this “age of turbo-capitalism” (Nixon 4). The catastrophic consequences of these disasters, which unfold over long arcs of time, contrast with our obsession with speed, diminishing the importance of ‘uneventful’ violence while we search insatiably and ceaselessly for a “quicker sensation” (Ibid 8). Thus, Nixon asserts, slow violence, especially environmental violence, must be considered as a “contest not only over space, or bodies, or labor, or resources, but over time” (8).

Mapping Geographies of the Imagination

As a product of individual and collective imagination, storytelling serves the interests of both imperial and decolonizing efforts; in the first instance, to maintain dominance over the cultural stories about “space” legitimized by nation states, and, in the second, to offer alternative cartographies that recuperate the cultural ontologies and epistemologies of those “othered” in the colonizing process. The question of whose

stories have been given more cultural credence is, of course, obvious. “Imperialism after all,” as Edward Said notes, “is an act of geographic violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control” (*Culture and Imperialism* 77). All storytelling therefore is not equal, as Aurora Levins Morales argues, nor is it “neutral” (*Medicine Stories* 25). The purpose of imperial narratives about spatiality, or “status-quo” stories, as AnaLouise Keating terms them, is to stifle change, to constrict our imaginations, to prevent us from crafting “alternative stories” (23). Empire flexes its discursive muscle to justify global expansion into other territories or “spaces,” taking cover beneath the teleological umbrella of modernity, using narratives of “progress” and “development” to maintain discursive imperial control in said territories.

Spatiality, as Robert J. Tally argues in his book of the same name, has overtaken nineteenth century discourses about “time, history and teleological development” within literary and cultural studies (3). Edward W. Soja similarly conjectures that “space more than time [may hide] the consequences from us, the ‘making of geography’ more than the ‘making of history’ that provides the most revealing tactical and theoretical world” (*Postmodern Geographies* 1). This “spatial turn” has given greater credence to the “mapping of social spaces,” as well as to the relationship between cartography and narrative discourse (Tally 4). In other words, narratives are a form of cartography, and identifying their mutual points of intersection in the process of metaphorical mapmaking is what Tally and others term literary cartography. “[S]torytelling involves mapping, but a map also tells a story, and the interrelations between space and writing tend to generate

new places and new narratives” (Ibid 46). In literary cartography, much emphasis is placed on the writer as cartographer, a discussion to which I will return in the afterword. Decolonizing storytelling as a form of alternative mapping (or mapmaking), or as an alternative map itself, serves as a central organizing tactic, and concomitantly, “spatial imagination” is deployed to counteract the “geographical violence” by which land and its inhabitants are colonized (DeLoughery and Handley 3).

Mary Pat Brady also contends that alternative cartographies attend to the manner by which “the naturalization of spatial production hides its power” (7). This “formative power,” according to Soja, involves mutually shaping relations between the spatial and the social, or the “socio-spatial dialectic” (*Seeking Spatial Justice* 4), shaping as well the power differential instantiated within these interactions, hiding power by casting space as an inert “setting, rich and interesting, but not in any sense interactive or formative” (Brady 8). The settler colonial urge to dehistoricize space contrasts sharply with Brady’s assertions that space, far from being “inert and transparent,” (7), is “performative and processual” (5). Settings are “interanimating” spaces that shape subject formation, including “how [people] conceptualize themselves, each other, and the world” (Ibid 8).

Chicana literature, since its inception, has “contested the terms of capitalist spatial formation, including attempts to regulate the meanings and uses of spaces to naturalize violent racial, gender, sexual, and class ideologies” (Brady 6). Chicana literature and the “theoretics of space” is rooted in one hundred and fifty years of colonization, making explicit the need for Chicanos to contest violent “racial, gender, sexual, and class ideologies,” as well as processes that transformed the physical and

psychosocial landscape from “lived, embodied space to the abstract space of capitalism” (Ibid 5-6).

For indigenous peoples, mapmaking forged through an “oral landscape” was “perceived and experienced through one’s history, traditions, and kin, in relationships with the animal and natural resources that one depended upon, and in union with the spirits, ancestors, and religious forces with whom one shared existence” (Warhus 3). Taken together, these “original instructions,” according to Melissa K. Nelson, teach each of us “how to be a good human being living in reciprocal relation with all of our seen and unseen relatives. They are natural laws that, when ignored, have natural consequences” (3). Native peoples have been engaged in a shifting relationship with “embodied, storied spaces,” (Cobos 80), and their maps, often temporarily created in the snow or dirt, reflect “a much larger interconnected mental map” that relies less on permanence than on interdependence, less on the written or graphic than on the “oral landscape” (Warhus 3). To understand an indigenous cartography, then, is to “suspend western preconceptions of what makes a map...the conventions of scale, longitude, latitude, direction, and relative location” whose end product is a “static landscape” (Ibid 3). Casie Cobos challenges us to rethink mapping based on indigenous mapping practices, invoking Michel de Certeau’s argument that spaces are sites of lived experiences rather than merely colonial mappings (or places) created as forms of abstracted space even as “explorers” sought to find their way around “new worlds” (79). These “vernacular maps,” as Nixon terms them, are those “that communities have devised over generations, maps replete with names and routes, maps alive to significant

ecological and surface geological features” (17). These differed significantly from “official landscapes” construed “in a bureaucratic, externalizing, and extraction-driven manner that [was] often pitilessly instrumental” and which “[severed] webs of accumulated cultural meaning and [treated] landscape as if it were uninhabited by the living, the unborn, and the animate deceased” (Ibid 17).

I draw from these cartographic frameworks, tilting them as well toward an “alternative cartography” imbued with Chicana and indigenous relationships with landscapes that continue to be targeted for, as Winona LaDuke contends, “the most invasive industrial interventions imaginable” (*All Our Relations* 2). To be clear, and in concert with Mishauna Goeman’s assertion in *Mark My Words: Native Women Mapping Our Nations*, I am not arguing that the restoration of Native lands to their rightful owners should be undertaken as a romanticized recuperation of the past, though the idea of “recovery has a certain saliency in Native American studies,” but rather that “(re)mapping is...understanding the processes that have defined our current spatialities in order to sustain vibrant Native futures” (3).

Alternative cartographies, as literary disruptions of colonial discourses about space, bring into play critical aspects of imagination and geographies. “Imaginative geographies” are those spaces created through discourses, images, and texts that inculcate “different conceptualizations, traditions, myths, and meanings” in relation to space (Brady 8). Literature in particular “thrives on the intersections between the shaping powers of language and the productive powers of space,” which includes the naming of places and the “grammatical structures that regulate their production” (Ibid 8).

The power of literature in using space metaphorically to highlight emotion, character, and concepts is especially critical for literature's dependence on "the discursiveness of space" and on "cultural mediation" in shaping narrative (Ibid 8). Writers imaginatively mapping geographical and historical complexities, treating "spatial expression," as Soja argues, "[as] more than just a background reflection or set of physical attributes to be descriptively mapped" (*Seeking Spatial Justice* 1). Feminist rhetoricians also have identified "critical imagination" as a "critical term of engagement" that asks writers to use their own creative imaginations "to see what's not there, what's missing, to view the possible, as well as to think through what constitutes knowledge formation and valuation" (Royster and Kirsch 20). (The spaces of absence to which Royster and Kirsch refer are critical to decolonizing stories and space, and I will return to them in the afterword.)

Moreover, telling stories to make sense of historical changes, both permanent and temporary, and to cull an understanding of the irreparable effects of time and space, short- and long-term, is crucial to the cultural work of rendering the slow violence of environmentalism as spectacular. Postcolonial ecology theorists further argue that a "historical model of ecology and an epistemology of time and space" requires a 'profound dialogue with the landscape' because the decoupling of nature and history has helped to mystify colonialism's histories of forced migration, suffering, and human violence (DeLoughrey and Handley 4). Indigenous and Chicana feminist scholars (and others) therefore challenge the logics of settler colonialism and neoliberalism by interrogating Euro-American ideologies, which have historically been used to erase

indigenous perspectives. Especially at this juncture, “when imposed displacements and diasporas, volatile borders, and coerced exiles confuse and obliterate human perspectives, ‘indigeneity’ holds the promise of rearticulating and reframing questions of place, space, movement and belonging” (Byrd and Rothberg 3).

Creating Alternative Cartographies through a Decolonizing Storytelling

Methodology

“This is a story.”

So begins Malea Powell in “Listening to Ghosts: An Alternative (Non) Argument.” Powell makes visible in her essay those “ghosts who appear in the stories we tell each other here in the academy... “both the stories of material colonization and the webs and wisps of narrative that are woven around, under, beneath, behind, inside, and against the dominant narratives of ‘scholarly discourse’” (12). Chicana feminists too offer their own testimonios—“stories of our lives”—that “[bear] witness and [inscribe] into history those lived realities that would otherwise succumb to the alchemy of erasure” (The Latina Feminist Group 2). For Gerald Vizenor and other Native writers, such stories are forms of “Native survivance,” defined as “an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion...renunciations of dominance, detractions, obtrusions, the unbearable sentiment of tragedies, and the legacy of victimry” (Powell 1). Stories, argues Powell, uncover ghosts “rooted in other knowledges, other ways of knowing, other ways of being and becoming [and] that frequently go unheard and unsaid in scholarly work” (12).

In using a decolonizing storytelling methodology, I bind bodies and space(s) to create *Beneath the Shadow of the Red Rock* as an alternative cartography that retrieves collective histories and homelands, recoups minds and bodies, and roots itself within local and transnational movements. As my novel seeks to illuminate, decolonizing storytelling contravenes colonial discourses through spatialized narratives that reassemble an equitable cartography, even if only metaphorically, while simultaneously revealing the inequities of imperial mapping. The novel also makes visible the material and cultural conditions of empire that render the colonized as immutable, impure, and spectral. My work, as one such remapping of space, disrupts colonial narratives, which themselves conflate women's bodies and land as territories to be invaded. Mine is a story that joins with other stories in hopefully restoring at least some measure of "bodily integrity," to use Andrea Smith's phrasing, to women of color, indigenous women in particular, whose lives have been lessened or disappeared in the face of settler colonial narratives about space (10). Bodies and land forced into the service of empire as disposable labor, or construed literally and metaphorically as impurities or territories to be invaded, can be re-membered through storytelling during an age when environmental injustices are flourishing unapologetically in land, air, and sea.

Theories of Affect and the Re-Membering of the Chicana and/or Indigenous

Female Body

One central concern of my novel is the relationship between the racialized female body, "feeling," and spatiality. This concern has necessitated a deeper understanding of two other theoretical spheres (in addition to those about spatiality); namely, theories of

affect, or the affective turn, in cultural criticism, with a focus on the “affective economies” of “bad” or “ugly” emotions via Sara Ahmed. The second arrives via Sharon Holland’s understanding of social death of the female racialized body in its relationship to a process of textual re-membering of Chicana and Indigenous women’s bodies.

Theories of Affect and Affective Economies, Or, We Are Not All in This Together

Based on a variety of theoretical insights, the most widely known having emerged from Deleuzian philosophy, theories of affect represent an entangled set of often competing discourses that resist easy categorization and whose terminologies (affect, emotion, feeling) are at times used interchangeably despite their critically differing definitions. Generally, affect has been regarded as “force, intensity, or the capacity to move or be moved” (Cvetkovich 4). Similarly, Seigworth and Gregg view affect as a state of “in-between-ness” for its “capacities to act and be acted upon” (1). Cvetkovich delineates affect as “precognitive sensory experience and the relation to surroundings,” and emotions as “cultural constructs and conscious processes that emerge from them, such as anger, fear, or joy” (4). Of these many entry points and theoretics, I gravitate toward Ann Cvetkovitch’s perspective when she writes,

I tend to use affect in a generic sense, rather than in the more specific Deleuzian sense, as a category that encompasses affect, emotion, and feeling, and that includes impulses, desires, and feelings that get historically constructed in a range of ways...I also like to use feeling as a generic term that does some of the same work: naming the undifferentiated ‘stuff’ of feeling; spanning the distinctions between emotion and affect central to some theories; acknowledging

the somatic or sensory nature of feelings as experiences that aren't just cognitive concepts or constructions (4).

The imprecision of the term “feeling,” which occupies the “ambiguous” terrain between “embodied sensations and feelings as psychic or cognitive experiences,” appeals to Cvetkovich because it allows feelings to be explored as an integration of mind and body (4). Moreover, Sara Ahmed refuses the affect/emotion binary by maintaining that “the distinction between affect/emotion can under-describe the work of emotions, which *involve* forms of intensity, bodily orientation, and direction that are not simply about ‘subjective content’ or qualification of intensity. Emotions are not “‘after-thoughts’ but shape how bodies are moved by the worlds they inhabit” (qtd in Rand 162; italics in the original). Gregg and Seigworth suggest as well that within “this ever-gathering accretion of force-relations (or, conversely, in the peeling or wearing away of such sedimentations) lie the real powers of affect: affect as potential: a body’s *capacity* to affect and to be affected” (2; emphasis in the original).

I find the term “feeling” similarly appealing in the spirit of its “vernacular” qualities (Cvetkovich 4) and also because I will circle back to Indigenous and Chicana feminist theories of affect, especially Felt Theory, momentarily to elucidate points of solidarity and critique. Yet, rather than rehash the entire history and rise of theories of affect, a much too complex and circuitous route for this critical introduction (indeed, a dissertation in itself), I primarily seek to place two specific aspects of affect theory briefly on the same virtual map with decolonizing storytelling insofar as the latter puts theoretical flesh on the body and twines it with responses to politically charged, affective

experiences of violence and trauma that materialize within especially racialized female bodies. This discussion, then, centers on Sara Ahmed's affective economies that produce objects of emotion such as fear, and Sharon Holland's social death of the body and its relation to present-day affect through Indigenous and Chicana feminist theoretical writings about trauma, bodies, memory and imagination that both embrace and critique theories of affect. These writers welcome and at times reconfigure these "ugly" feelings, venturing well beyond the admonition against sharing such "bad feelings" in public discourse (Rand 163).

The way(s) that "bodies are moved in the worlds they inhabit," to return to Ahmed (qtd in Rand 162), is a central concern both to a "theory in the flesh," and to the racialized female body that often is consigned to living within a narrowly constricted space (Moraga and Anzaldúa 23). Ahmed clarifies this concern through her discussion of the affective economies of emotions such as pain, fear, and hatred. These emotions, she contends, do not reside "in" individuals or the social space, but they "produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they were objects" (10). Ahmed focuses not on the emotions themselves but on how they become objects that circulate, gaining increasing affective value as part of an affective economy. "The objects of emotion take shape as effects of circulation," not contagion, à la Silvan Tomkins, Ahmed argues, wherein "emotional contagion" risks transforming emotions into properties (10). The objects of emotion circulate rather than the emotions themselves, transforming others into "objects of feeling" (Ibid 11).

This circulation produces its own “stickiness,” such that certain objects of emotion attach to different bodies, or “objects of feeling” (Ahmed 11). Of particular import to Ahmed’s argument is her contention that emotions do not inhabit “anyone or anything” (46). In that respect, they are “one nodal point” rather than the “origin and destination” of the emotion itself (Ibid 46). The circulation of an emotion like hate or fear, for example, “works to materialise the very ‘surface’ of collective bodies” (Ibid 46). This materialization creates a “stickiness” that attaches to various bodies through repetition and “sticky words and language” (Ahmed 46). Ahmed stresses emphatically that an emotion like hate or fear cannot be reduced to a single body, allowing the feeling to circulate “in an economic sense” and resulting in a differentiation from others that is never ‘over’ (Ibid 47). For example, political officials and citizens typically construe undocumented workers from Mexico as a national threat that is overrunning U.S. borders. As figures of hate, the emotions attached to them circulate, creating and maintaining a difference between citizens and “illegal aliens,” which gains in affective value as citizens maintain a vigilance (at times armed) for others who arrive and are at risk of deportation or death. As a threat to the national body and imaginary, their mobility, especially that of women, is circumscribed while others’ is not. “Fear works to contain bodies within social space through the way it shrinks the body, or constitutes the bodily surface through an expectant withdrawal from a world that might yet present itself as dangerous” (Ahmed 70). Public space, a “fear of the world,” can be shaped as such because it is nearly impossible to “secure an undisputed right to occupy that space” (Ibid 70).

Personal testimonies of survivance recall the importance of “nonwritten forms of personal narrative” for Native women’s understandings of self and community (Wong 5). To shift an understanding of autobiography and memoir from “writing” to “language,” as Hertha D. Wong contends, opens up the scope of autobiographical work to include “speech and signs” (18). Speech within Native communities, unlike writing, is tied to breath and creates “personal and tribal meaning” (Ibid 19). “To speak, then, is to reveal, to make manifest one’s spirit. To speak one’s life is to give forth the spirit of one’s life, and if others join in the telling, the result is a mingling of breaths, of lives, of spirits” (Ibid 19). Holland furthers Hong’s argument by acknowledging the power of speech and breath to create change. “[T]his is not because of the speaker’s ‘force of argument’ or ‘clarity of presentation,’ much praised in Western oratory, but because of the power of words to manifest being in the world at large” (Holland 72-3).

Indigenous peoples have had experience with a theory of affect and emotion via genocide and removal (and its ongoing aftereffects) centuries before it became faddish. For instance, Dian Million, in calling it “Felt Theory,” demonstrates how Canadian First-Nation women’s personal narratives about “genocidal child abuse” in boarding schools implicated “objective” settler colonial narratives in the subjugation of Native peoples, revealing “one of colonialism’s nastiest ‘domestic secrets’ and undermining governmental “belief in the benign nature of their child education-assimilation policies” (54). Their stories also framed First-Nation women’s struggle to speak and their stories to be heard: poverty, discrimination, challenges within families, and “sex discrimination” (Ibid 54). The fact that First-Nation women encountered opposition both

within and without their communities underscores the tensions that threaten to fracture communities. Million argues that their stories, in highlighting the differences between writing and speech

[insist] on the inclusion of our lived experience, rich with emotional knowledges, of what pain and grief and hope meant or mean now in our pasts and futures. It is also to underline again the importance of felt experiences as community knowledges that interactively inform our positions as Native scholars, particularly as Native women scholars. Our felt scholarship continues to be segregated as a “feminine” experience, as polemic, or at worst as not knowledge at all (54).

That Million identifies First-Nation’s women’s testimony as “emotional knowledges” worth sharing is telling. She argues that such knowledges bring together communities in lived experience; they cannot be truncated or separated or excised. The telling of stories is a liberatory speech act and a shaming of the Canadian government. Ahmed contends that national shaming, one of what Silvan S. Tomkins describes as “the primary ‘negative affects,’” (qtd in Ahmed 103), requires a witness who “can return the subject to itself” and who has failed in some way to “live up to an ego ideal” (Ibid 106, 108). The Canadian government serves as the witness for those women brave enough to “explode” the myth of child education and recoup themselves in the process of naming and shaming. As Ahmed argues, national shaming can work to propel the nation to do its duty by fulfilling the ideals to which it has expressed commitment. However, as often

happens, this kind of acknowledgement can also serve as a way of saying “that we mean well,” thus allowing for the nation to be reproduced as “an ideal” (Ahmed 109).

What is striking about the First-Nation women’s testimonies is their power in defining self and community. After noting that the Canadian government denied culpability, Million refused to consider this a failure of the people but rather an opportunity for their “own felt knowledge [to] speak itself,” a process that allowed the boarding school history to be presented as one of abuse and not victimology, a healing that can be “felt and moved beyond” (73).

Chicana and Indigenous Feminist, Embodied Story-Making Tactics, Or, How I Wrote My Novel

My novel binds time, bodies, and space(s) into a fictional story about the 1979 uranium spill, when an open-air uranium waste pond breached its earthen dam near Gallup, New Mexico. Approximately 1,100 tons of radioactive mill waste and 93 tons of tailings were released into the Río Puerco. Contaminants traveled over eighty miles downstream, poisoning ground water, livestock, and sacred land primarily on Navajo-Diné lands. In the decades since, a full waste cleanup has never been conducted, families have remained on their poisoned homelands, and the spill’s health effects have claimed many lives.

Beneath the Shadow of the Red Rock tells the story of this environmental disaster through the eyes of first-person narrator Rogelia James, a mixed-race daughter whose search for homeland and identity occurs as her family disintegrates because of family secrets, addiction, and broken relationships. This familial dissolution is further hastened

by their and the town's mixed reaction to both the uranium boom economy and the socioeconomic and health impacts of uranium contamination of land and water. Her parents, Boogie and Isabella James, have separated as a result of her father's gambling addiction, and her older brother Julio, a failed boxer, becomes a miner with no qualms or political consciousness. Her isolation within the family leads Rogelia to befriend a Japanese physician, an unlikely pairing that paves the way for Rogelia's politicization around uranium mining.

My novel explores themes such as the search for home and homeland; the complex relationship of land to Indigenous peoples, environmental movements and postcolonial ecologies; the socioeconomic and psychological relationship between a town and its residents in relationship to uranium mining; and Chicana-Indigenous identity formation. Chicana and Indigenous feminist activist-writers have intervened decisively in similar colonial discourses about space(s) using several decolonizing tactics within creative and scholarly narratives. *Beneath the Shadow of the Red Rock* seeks to embody many of these feminist story-making tactics, as well as to enact the theories presented earlier, delivering an alternative cartography that makes visible the need for healing lands, bodies, and minds. These tactics, discussed below, include critical witnessing; the entangled relationship between the transnational arrivant and indigenous peoples; recuperation of cultural memory; and the use of multiple genres to tell the stories of genocide, political awakening, and environmental justice.

Critical Witnessing

Beneath the Shadow of the Red Rock is primarily a novel of critical witnessing. Both my novel and its first-person narrator bear narrative and corporeal witness to the

personal and communal trauma surrounding uranium toxicity in 1979 in the greater Gallup area. If one definition of critical witnessing is the need to be seen and heard (Aldama, Sandoval, and García 10), then my novel, as material artifact and testimonio, asks for such acknowledgment. But bearing witness alone is not enough. My novel seeks to engage readers in a pedagogy of social justice whereby, according to Tiffany Ana López, “the story instructs in order to reconstruct..., [provoking] questions about agency and subjectivity in a way that causes audience members to leave with a sense of responsibility for either participating in the problem or creating a path for changing it” (Ibid 301-2).

Rogelia’s story invites readers on her journey of deepening subjectivity and political agency as she becomes further educated about the uranium mining situation and its impact on multiple communities. Her fictional journey from uninformed individual to political activist demonstrates, in its most explicit moments, how liberation occurs through a transformative relationship between ‘inner work’ and public acts (Aldama, Sandoval, and García 8). The expression of this human need becomes ‘performance’ and the basis for challenging the colonial construction of self through a heroic reconstruction of being” (Ibid 10). Thus, Rogelia’s literal reconstruction of self is heroic in her own awakening, but the novel also deliberately denies individual heroism in its quest to validate community-based action. Rogelia does not therefore singlehandedly sabotage the mine or change the hearts of uranium corporate executives through her plucky,

tenacious personality à la Erin Brokovich. Rather, a growing sense of justice and homeland nurtured through a community-based effort propels Rogelia beyond her own individualism, allowing for alliance-building and transformative change. Her sense of belonging, and the political activism that ensues, create the conditions for her decolonizing story to be told and for Rogelia to release “the pain and trauma, terror and anxiety and agoraphobia” of uranium mining’s impact among fellow activists and their families (López 301-2). Rogelia, and the novel’s readers, are freed through this decolonizing storytelling to recount the story as another form of healing and political action.

Moreover, Rogelia as the novel’s protagonist is called upon to bear witness to an environmental disaster, the uranium tailings spill, whose slow violence has rendered it invisible. As a critical witness then, her narrative works “from a story’s impact as much as from its intention to spotlight the very conditions that brought the story into being, actively insisting that an event is pivotal and in need of expanded context and critical address” (López 301). This act of critical witnessing therefore is not passive either in its construction or its execution.

Arrivants as Transnational Female Subjects

Rogelia James and Lindy Matsuda in *Beneath the Shadow of the Red Rock* are first and foremost arrivants, which I understand through Byrd’s definition, borrowed from African Caribbean poet Kamau Brathwaite, as a term to “signify those people forced into the Americas through the violence of European and Anglo-American colonialism and imperialism around the globe” (xix). Rogelia’s family is indigenous in origin, a secret

that has shaped her existence around a Chicana identity instead, and which, when revealed, throws her into confusion and anger at her father's betrayal. Lindy, the daughter of Japanese parents, relocates to the United States after her mother dies because of the Hiroshima bombing during World War II. Their emerging friendship forms the core of the novel.

Rogelia's journey in particular leads her to view herself as an arrivant whose responsibility is not necessarily to "save the Indians" from this environmental disaster but to understand her role in how the United States' settler colonial ideology have extolled the virtues of "human rights" through the propagation of "the dispossession of indigenous peoples for the common good of the world" (Byrd xix). This occurs through the locus of the uranium mining debacle and its defining results. Rogelia, of course, doesn't characterize this maturation process in those theoretical terms; rather, she witnesses the disparaging treatment of the Diné voiced through friends and family. Rogelia comes to recognize her own internalized dominance as she traverses the physical and internal landscapes that reveal themselves within her and through her community throughout the novel.

As importantly, and perhaps controversially, Rogelia's political and identity-based awakening functions as a critique of "the excessive recursiveness of indigenismo, mestizaje, and nationalism" that forms the basis of Chican@ identity formation (Guidotti-Hernández 24). The celebration of indigeneity within Chican@ nationalist discourses and ideologies, according to Nicole Guidotti-Hernández, can disguise the violence that Chicanx have enacted against particularly indigenous communities.

Rogelia does not adopt a nationalist identity but sees herself as a Chicana, even though she still does not have the language to attach to her newly constructed identity. Of profound interest is that Rogelia constructs herself anew through a deepening alliance with another woman of color whose own personal and national history is directly tied to the catastrophic effects of the nuclear industry in wartime.

Lindy embodies the diasporic dislocations that accompany and often define global settler colonialisms. Her orphaned status reflects the violence that set her in transit in the first place. The psychological aftereffects of her loss and dislocation send Lindy into battle against uranium mining interests, but the traces of violence follow her. The connection with Rogelia serves as a balm to her, even though Lindy is supposed to mentor Rogelia as an emerging activist. The racialized subjectivities of the two women in the novel are formed in response to the atrocities that they have endured or the legacies of violence whose traces are evident in their daily behavior. It is through their friendship and struggle that the beginnings of a profound healing take place.

“Theory in the Flesh”: Re-memembering Indigenous and Chicana Bodies by Embracing Affect and Refusing Spectrality

Chicana and Indigenous feminist theorists and writers understand violence resulting from genocide as one foundation for the inextricable bonding of affect and female bodies. Such violence foregrounds a critical genealogy of the effect(s) of the somatic on those living with short- and long-term legacies of genocidal trauma. Feminists of color have taken issue with these theoretical approaches for their lack of attention to how bodies of women of color historically have been brutalized and how

colonial discourses and theories have justified this colonization. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa term this focus on the body a “theory in the flesh,” defined as “one where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity” (23). Other feminist of color theorists similarly contend that “...theorizing must come from the everyday lives and bodies of people and not from abstract and detached perspectives” (Royster and Kirsch 256-57). Royster and Kirsch consider rhetoric as well to be “lived experience” since “life is material, not abstract” (94). “[W]e recognize the senses (sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, intuition) as sources of information in rhetorical performance and in the analysis of performance” (Ibid 94). In addition, with “sharpened senses,” we readers “learn to produce, consume, and take into account texts, variously defined, the material conditions and circumstances that surround those texts—cognitively and affectively—and the impact and consequence of them in the world” (Ibid 94).

The racialized female body functions as another kind of text, a visual map that bears the markings or “hieroglyphics of the flesh,” both seen and unseen, of colonialism and its violence (Spillers 260). The linkage of racialized female bodies with “gross unthinking physicality” (Price and Shildrick 3) or sexualization and forbidden desire further codified these bodies as something to be feared and therefore controlled. Additionally, emotions have been derided as “reactive rather than active, dependent rather than autonomous” (Ahmed 3). Their linkage to women as closer to nature and ruled by appetite has required continued subordination of emotions as well as “the

feminine and the body” (Price and Shildrick 3). Such discourses about the body and emotions mark the female as the “excluded other” (a “fixed biological entity”) that merits virtually no consideration in connection with the male-coded pursuit of “the elevation of mind or spirit” (Ibid 2).

I further understand the racialized body in this context through Alexander Weheliye’s lens of race, construed “not as a biological or cultural classification but as a set of sociopolitical processes that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and non-humans” (3). These sociopolitical processes, or “racializing assemblages,” discipline the bodies of black females (and other women of color) as non-human (Ibid 4). Yet, in distinguishing between body (habeas corpus) and flesh (habeas viscus), Weheliye reclaims “the atrocity of flesh” as a form of “social (after)life”; the flesh “represents racializing assemblages of subjection that can never annihilate the lines of flight, freedom dreams, practices of liberation, and possibilities of other worlds” (2). Weheliye disallows, through habeas viscus, the “barring of nonwhite subjects from the category of human as it is performed in the modern west” without also reconstituting them through the problematic “lexicons of resistance and agency” (3). The use of this lexicography assumes “full, self-present, and coherent subjects” within a social structure and disciplining social practices that strip them of their own humanity (Ibid 3). This “enfleshment” allows Weheliye to investigate “an articulated assemblage of the human (viscus/flesh) borne of political violence” by searching the “breaks, crevices, movements, languages, and such found in the zones between the flesh and the law” (11).

The denial of one's humanity by foregrounding race through hierarchy, exclusion, and social death, as argued by Weheliye, resonates in Holland's persuasive argument about the "social death" of the racialized body in her discussions of blackness and indigeneity in the U.S. This complex interconnection between the body and the social, the conscious and the unconscious, finds expression as the social death of the racialized body. In deploying Michael Taussig's definition of social death as "a threshold that allows for illumination as well as extinction," Holland does not necessarily restrict her focus to the dead per se but rather on death "as a cultural and national phenomenon or discourse, as a figurative silencing or process of erasure, and as embodied entity or subject capable of transgression" (5). Placing attention on "the subjectivity of death" creates space for "marginalized people to speak about the unspoken—to name the places within and without their cultural milieu where...they have slipped between the cracks of language" (Ibid 4-5).

Beneath the Shadow of the Red Rock seeks to intertwine spatiality and "feeling" to narratively re-member the racialized female body left for dead or traumatized into spectrality. The novel accomplishes this first by being a story about racialized female violence and its legacies. It offers a fictional rebuke to these legacies through the power of storytelling and/about genocide. Holland argues that "Genocide is the act of expunging people (along with their histories and memories) from the planet; it is counter to all forms of procreation, human or otherwise; and it is an act of systematic rage and blind contempt, beyond the scope of any theory of rationality" (79). This novel serves as

an act of “procreation,” an embodied response that refuses spectrality, that adds its voice to the body of decolonizing texts that seek similar outcomes.

The second narrative re-membrance occurs through the character of Rogelia James herself. In attempting to retrieve her sacred homeland and create herself anew, Rogelia, the novel’s protagonist, also experiences this denial of her humanity, to return to Weheliye, when she is cast in the role of the post-human. Weheliye, in his critique of Agamben’s “bare life” and Foucault’s biopolitics, contends that the post-human contains the impossibility of the representation of subjectivity (3). Additionally, because “their presence is almost unspeakable, like the subject of death, black subjects share the space the dead inhabit” (Weheliye 6). The enforced silence of its marginalized peoples allows the nation to exist, since rising up and “[speaking] for themselves would threaten the state with the loss of “all rights to their borrowed and/or stolen language” (Holland 28). The social death of the subject is an ongoing requirement to maintain hegemonic control over lands and dominant narratives.

Yet Rogelia refuses social death by voicing her story and using her body both to critique racist policies toward Indigenous peoples and ally herself with Indigenous women by remaining a visible racialized female arrivant body in the face of the threat of settler colonial sexual violence. During a trek down one of the major thoroughfares of Gallup, for example, Rogelia is targeted as an Indigenous woman on the basis of her skin and hair color, as well as her body size. This leads to a precarious situation of potential sexual violence as a result. Her identification as an Indigenous woman invokes Ahmed’s theory of affective economies. The “stickiness” of indigeneity attaches to Rogelia as her

body becomes part of an affective economy. When she eventually discovers her indigeneity from her mother and fragments of letters that her father sent his parents from boarding school as a boy, Rogelia feels the weight of that betrayal and the subsequent confusion about her own identity. In a separate incident, Rogelia becomes fetishized and sexualized for a white man who views her body as both disposable and interchangeable among her age group. It is only when Lindy Matsuda, the physician charged with mentoring Rogelia, educates and values her that Rogelia finally finds the courage to remember (and re-member) herself as an Indigenous woman and a Chicana.

Finally, the novel incorporates poems about indigenous, Japanese, and white residents of Gallup whose own experiences with uranium toxicity both foreground and resist spectrality and silence. The high language of poetry is often criticized for its anesthetizing effects in relation to violence. But this poetry, through its more highly stylized language, calls greater attention to the racialized violence enacted on female bodies. It also creates a lived, communal space that contrasts with the post-capitalist urge to dehistoricize “space,” especially in relation the uranium mine.

In these ways, the novel endeavors to ameliorate or contravene the effects of social death, the circumscription of bodies within contained space (both literal and psychic), and the blistering dominant narratives that threaten to keep them muted and disconnected. This intertwining allows for biotic, political ecologies and poetics to foreground the settler colonial and neoliberal logics of “ecological imperialism” that work against the sovereignty of those most affected, making visible environmental

violence and its impact on displaced communities and lands (DeLoughrey and Handley 13).

Memory and Imagination as Narrative Propellents: Calling Out the Past as a Lived Present

The novel focuses on the recuperation of cultural memory, recognizing especially the need for arrivant-characters to face their internalized dominance as well as their positionality as unwitting participants within a settler colonial dynamic, and the need to retell stories from a decolonizing perspective. The novel is told from the perspective of arrivants, Rogelia as a Chicana-Indigenous woman and Lindy as a Japanese woman, in order to make this dynamic transparent, placing those intertwined histories in conversation since Chican@s and Indigenous peoples alike have been targeted by genocide. By doing so, the novel hopes to recuperate both the stories shamed into silence and the replanting of “a beleaguered contemporary landscape” (Holland 70). This retelling of the worst environmental disaster in U.S. history allows the past to remain alive in the imagination of those in the present, reconstructing a stolen history and relocating indigenous bodies within the narrative space (Ibid 73). “If the past is a hodgepodge of memory and imagination,” as Holland argues, “then the narrative that propels a people forward is a narrative that maintains an essence, a memory over a period of time” (74). In terms of psychic and bodily pain made manifest as a result of the inheritance of genocide, Ahmed argues for the remembrance of a living past that occurs through recovering traumas of the past. “Pain is not simply an effect of a history of harm; it is the *bodily life of that history*” (Ahmed 34; italics in the original). Memory,

then, becomes a tactic of recovery for communities and a bodily instantiation of those who have suffered erasure or delegitimation.

Beneath the Shadow of the Red Rock revives the Churchrock uranium tailings spill as a cultural memory of the arrivants who lived there, and especially through the character of Rogelia, voices the resistance to erasure and silence that had been complete almost from the instant the incident occurred. By its very existence, the novel serves both as material memory and as a narrative within a present-tense moment that has been cast as an ossified history. This hopefully guarantees that readers will understand these ongoing effects as current trends rather than as an instance of unspectacular slow violence that fades from memory. This novel seeks as well to shift readers' viewpoint of indigenous peoples as what Kate Shanley has termed "permanent present absences" within the national imaginary to living beings (qtd in Smith 9). In drawing attention to this environmental catastrophe, and in telling those stories delegitimated within U.S. dominant narratives, an alternative cartography is reimagined; the narrative itself becomes a landscape that creates space for bodies and stories otherwise bounded by affective economies of fear and hatred. The narrative is a tonic for the peripheral existence of a people and the marginal spaces they inhabit while remaining conscious of its role as an arrivant narrative rather than attempting to become one that speaks for Diné peoples. This confinement, a "living death" (Holland 17), is released through the narrative, an embodied memory that is constituted through the act of telling. The racialized female body as another type of text undergoes similar development and is a site too for such embodiment of memory.

This decolonizing storytelling, as Leslie Marmon Silko views it among Laguna family and clan members, is “a group rehearsal of survival strategies” that have relied on “human memory” for millennia (xviii). These strategies are “part of an ancient continuous story composed of innumerable bundles of other stories” (Ibid xix). Such stories form the basis for Native belief systems: “the relationship of peoples to their sacred lands, to relatives with fins or hooves, to the plant and animal foods that anchor a way of life” (LaDuke *Recovering the Sacred* 12). They are embedded in what Melissa Nelson terms Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), or native science, which contains indigenous understandings of the natural laws and which are often “encoded” in stories, songs, and rituals (12). According to Nelson, “[t]he bones and blood of our ancestors have become the soil, the soil grows our food, the food nourishes our bodies, and we become one, literally and metaphorically, with our homelands and territories” (10).

Multi-generic Storytelling as a Decolonizing Tactic

My novel follows in the tradition of other Chicana and Indigenous writers whose work, as part of a decolonizing storytelling methodology, encompasses multiple genres such as poetry, magazine writing, and illness narratives. This incorporation within my literary-scholarly production is, like theirs, influenced by the borderlands’ geopolitical power imbalances that have resulted since the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo after the Mexican-American War in 1848. La Frontera (the border), as both material and metaphoric concept, has preoccupied Chicana authors not least because its presence serves as both an “abjection machine” and a “state-sponsored aesthetic project”

that invites both crossing and double-crossing (Brady 11). The spatiality of the border hinges on negotiating its “multiple and slippery meanings and symbologies,” as well as in juggling “contradictory and ambivalent historical narratives, family memories, desires, and national(ist) fantasies” (Ibid 83). The ubiquity and popularity of the border as a ‘paradigm of transcultural experience’ (Fregoso 65), as well as its figurative and literal grip on the imaginations and material lives of its residents, is made manifest in the constellation of theoretical projects it has engendered: border theories, border feminisms, border pedagogies, and border writing.

I turn to these border projects for their continued productivity, both theoretically and creatively, for writers and scholars who inhabit the Borderlands, which “are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy” (Anzaldúa 19). This hybridity is expanded through Borderlands Performance Studies in proposing “an alter-Native cultural engineering, technologies identified as “decolonizing performatics,” and “the mestizaje, the hybridity, the bricolage, the rasquache interventions organized around de-colonization playfully [called] ‘perform-antics’” (Aldama, Sandoval, and García 1). Border performatics expands the definitions of text to include multiple ephemeral and performative modes that have deep “intercultural, psychic, social and transnational effects” through the forms of “US Latina and Latino testimonio, theater, ceremony, ritual, storytelling, music, dance, improvisation, play, nagualisma-o, call-and-response, spoken-word, visual, body, digital, and sculptural enactments” (Ibid 1). What

emerges in Chicana literatures is a physical, affective world that acknowledges an understanding that temporal spatial production, abstracted materially and metaphorically, privileges dominant narratives and “neutered” landscapes” (Brady 5).

Indigenous feminists also have told stories of survivance that connect female bodies with land sovereignty among their nations. More specifically, these survivance stories identify sexual violence as the “primary tool of genocide” that has allowed Native women’s bodies to be metaphorically transformed into “a pollution of which the colonial body must constantly purify itself,” bodies considered to be stained with “sexual sin” and “sexual perversity” (Smith 3, 10). Their polluted bodies position Native women as “rapable” bodies whose impurity and filth make them invisible and lacking in “bodily integrity” (Ibid 10). According to Smith, Tadiar views this colonial relationship as a “prevailing mode of heterosexual relations,” underscoring for Smith the idea that Native women’s subjugation, as “bearers of a counter-imperial order,” is “critical to the success of economic, cultural, and political colonization” (14-15). As tangible evidence, one need only take into account the more than 1,000 missing First Nations women who have disappeared since 1980 or, similarly, the femicides that have claimed hundreds of Mexican women’s lives since the early 1990s and which also remain unsolved and forgotten.

I use this multi-generic approach in my novel to work against the abstracted space of turbo-capitalism, to recover and re-map Chicana and indigenous women’s bodies, and to argue for inclusive postcolonial and indigenous ecologies. The different genres primarily operate as both textual reflections and rebukes of hegemonic culture.

For instance, the opening magazine article of the novel reflects an idealized New Mexico as the “Land of Enchantment,” a rhetoric of empire that obfuscates the violence and erasure that made possible these pristine landscapes and quaint past-tense presences of Indians through romanticized depictions. Near the end of the novel, Rogelia pens a manifesto for the environmental group she has joined. This revolutionary document functions as an anticolonial response to this idealization of New Mexico and its barbarous treatment of Native peoples.

Additionally, I deploy multigeneric responses to settler colonialism in an effort to capture an Anzaldúan borderlands hybridity that illustrates “how it feels and provide an analysis of why and how its feelings are produced by social forces” (Cvetkovich 14-15) and which has parallels to testimonies of the First-Nation women of whom Million writes, as well as other Indigenous and Chicana writers of hybrid texts. This nepantlera state, of being inbetween, also provides the foundation for much of Chicana writing since Anzaldúa published *Borderlands: La Frontera* nearly thirty years ago. The novel tells the story of the in-between-ness of Rogelia James as her identity becomes more complex, and as her Japanese mentor opens her eyes to the atrocities being committed within a landscape that Rogelia had once considered barren. Rogelia’s own romanticized past-tense notions of homeland, made visible in her longing for her abuela and the world the elder woman represented, which Rogelia experienced as a place free of strife where she could be taken care of, without being mindful of the politics of caretaking of either self, community, or the land. Her politicization process anchors Rogelia within a

landscape and among diverse peoples, as she begins to discover what it means to belong to a cause larger than herself.

The health effects of uranium mining are felt most deeply through the poems about illness within families. Voiced through different ethnic personae, these poems serve as narratives about illness and loss. Narrative-based medicine as a genre has gained increasing mainstream visibility and popularity as a decolonizing supplement to evidence-based medicine, which relies on facts, figures, and medical testing to tell the story of a patient's illness. Medical narratives are first-person accounts of illness (and often of recovery) and counterbalance the numbing, routinized effects of neoliberalism and settler colonial-based medical procedures and narratives, as well as the rhetorics and material conditions that derive from colonization. Aurora Levins Morales' *Kindling: Writings on the Body* is itself a medical narrative and one manifesto within a larger disability movement. Within its pages, Levins Morales chronicles the desperation, financial struggle, and isolation with which many women of color confronted with illness must contend. Hers is a call to action and a plea for community in opposition to individualized notions of medical care and the abhorrent state of medical care in the U.S. in general. Medical narratives play a critical role in expressing bodily and emotional responses to uranium toxicity for characters within the novel.

Conclusion

Storytelling plays a critical role in the recuperation of space, communities, and culture. As a decolonizing strategy, storytelling works to re-member communities by using narrative as its own alternative cartography. These alternative cartographies and

epistemologies are both physical and emotional, geographical and embodied. They recover communal histories and cultural memory, give voice to the ghosts that shadow our lives, and provide counternarratives about complex questions of ontology, cultural violence, and cosmological origins. *Beneath the Shadow of the Red Rock*, a novel about uranium mining in Gallup, New Mexico, investigates the impact of settler colonialism on arrivants in the town, the spectrality of racialized female bodies, and the importance of the multi-genre novel in weaving the story of a community. Through this investigation, the novel imagines life “around, under, beneath, behind, inside, and against” the colonial matrix (Powell 12), and cannot therefore be dismissed as simply daydreaming or nostalgia. Through the experiences of Rogelia, the novel becomes a reimagined world that recoups and re-members different ways of being and knowing, offering hope for a more collective, relational future. Counternarratives complicate traditional narratives while simultaneously celebrating the survivance perform-antics of decolonizing stories. Storytelling as a decolonizing methodology intervenes therefore in neoliberal ideologies that privilege the individual over the collective; division over connection; commodification over reclamation and respectful maintenance of the land; and turbo capitalism over a more inclusive, cooperative sharing of resources.

Chicana and Indigenous women’s stories serve to put flesh back on the body. They act as ways to repair the damage, in my novel, as a result of extractive natural resource “management.” Decolonizing stories like *Beneath the Shadow of the Red Rock* are lifesaving because “...if you do not have the ability to sustain yourself on your land, you do not have the ability to sustain yourself...” (Ibid 147). Rogelia James finally

comes to understand herself and to know that home is more than just a place. She comes to learn, as Winona LaDuke suggests, that “[i]t is the land to which we belong” (Ibid 147).

CHAPTER II
OF HOMELANDS AND MIGRATORY BODIES*

Land of Enchantment: A Magazine Article

Travel New Mexico Magazine

Issue 1, Volume 1, Summer 1976

by Rogelia James

New Mexico truly is the “Land of Enchantment.” From its majestic peaks, such as Mount Taylor near Grants, to its rivers and lakes, there is something for every visitor to our 47th state. When you arrive in any of our major destination cities—Albuquerque, Santa Fe, or Taos—it’s as if you’ve stepped into a timeless world. The sky is bluer and more pristine, the people are humble and welcoming, and you can feel the city stress rolling off your back the moment you breathe the clean air. No skyscraper, no matter how shiny and modern, can match the breathtaking beauty of the Sandia Mountains outside Albuquerque or Mt. Wheeler near Taos.

Ski to your heart’s content at any of our resorts in northern New Mexico or spelunk in hundreds of caves at Carlsbad Caverns in the southeastern part of the state. Just make sure and steer clear of the Mexican free-tail bats at sunset. They whirl like a black tornado from the cavern’s interior in search of insect food. You can hike and fish, visit our nineteen Indian pueblos, or travel to Ojo Caliente, a natural hot springs and hotel, and let its waters wash away your cares after a long day of sightseeing. There are

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old silver mines to visit near Silver City and horse racing at Santa Fe Downs or Ruidoso Downs. Or join the thousands who arise at dawn for the official launch of the International Balloon Fiesta each October in Albuquerque.

Jagged red rocks outside Gallup appear as ancient as the Indians who hawk their silver and turquoise wares at the town's trading posts. If you're in Santa Fe, negotiate a good deal on Indian jewelry, sand paintings, and Kachinas from vendors at the historic Inn of the Governors Plaza. Charming bookstores and museums offer specialized books and exhibits about the history of Spanish settlement and the harmony that has resulted between all the races here. There are religious miracles, such as the Loretto Chapel in Santa Fe, which features a floating staircase whose construction materials and design remain a mystery. On any given weekend at the plaza, you might catch a performance of mariachi musicians, as well as the colorful señoritas and the chivalrous caballeros who lead them.

It's a short drive from Santa Fe to Los Alamos, home of Los Alamos National Laboratory, where the Manhattan Project was housed and the first atom bomb was built. White Sands National Monument in Tularosa Basin, near Las Cruces, is one of only a handful of gypsum dunefields in the world.

When your day is done, relax and sample our world-famous New Mexican-style cuisine: enchiladas, stuffed sopapillas, and chile rellenos. The only question that really matters in our state, the one that threatens to divide families and friends, is, "Red or green or Christmas"? Chile, that is.

What are you waiting for? Come to New Mexico and be enchanted.

A New Journey for Rogelia James

The reason I did it, the way this whole uranium thing began, was simple: I wanted to go home to Colorado. I wanted to plant myself on tierra sagrada, tierra de nuestra familia, tierra de mis antepasados.

And I had a plan. As a member of a traveling family, as the daughter of an enlisted, now retired, father, and a mother who dutifully followed him, I knew how to rise before the sun, pack my clothes and shoes in a tiny suitcase, and stuff Dad's military rations—pound cake and beef stew, crackers and peanut butter—into a backpack. I knew how to leave a place, in other words, without emotion. That all changed when we moved from the town where my abuelita lived and came here. On a wintry March morning, two months before high school graduation, I had everything I needed to leave Gallup, New Mexico, except the thing I needed most.

I had a plan for that too.

I snuck into the garage while my parents slept and my brother toiled underground in the uranium mines, hot-wired my dad's Monte Carlo, and zoomed east. A measly six-hour drive and a manmade border were the only impediments standing between me and my abuela, between me and our land.

Back then, as any Gallupian will tell you, there was this sweet spot of an onramp that eased you onto Interstate 40, and instantly, you're five hundred miles into a 2500-mile trip from Barstow to Wilmington, where the interstate ended and the shores of the Atlantic Ocean awaited. I'd make a left long before that, and head north. But the onramp beckoned, and beyond the red rocks, the horizon, endlessly cerulean and swirled in burnt

orange.

I never made it to the city limits. Twenty-five feet from the exit, I was arrested for Grand Theft Auto.

Okay, it wasn't a well thought out plan. But that wasn't the most important part. The most important part was that this stupid act turned out to be the smartest thing I ever did.

Dad let me stew in the holding cell for eight hours. By then, the vomit had dried on my tee-shirt, and I smelled like the rest of the drunk Indians in the holding tank. I emerged with bloodshot eyes and an unrepentant heart. Nowadays, Twitter and Facebook users would write, "hashtag, sorry/not sorry." But there was no Internet in 1979, only carbon copies, and Dad had to sign a stack of them to get me released. He didn't hug me, even after I'd changed into the shirt that I'd asked him to bring, after he'd tossed one of Julio's jackets at me because March was breath-rattling cold. I told my dejected self that he was just trying to preserve his bad-cop image in front of his other bad-cop friends, that he was just an embarrassed father trying to be cool. Maybe he was in shock. He'd expect this kind of stunt from errant son Julio, not straight-A daughter Rogelia. "WTF," they also say nowadays. Back then, Dad didn't say a thing. And Mom and Julio, thankfully, hadn't come.

"I just spent your college tuition," he said, once we were out of the police station and piling into his prized Chevy truck.

"Julio will pitch in," I countered, throwing out a promise my brother had made long ago, amazing myself at my continued defiance.

Dad was backing up the truck. "I already talked to your brother about that."

I picked at the lettering on the tee-shirt as he made the left onto Boardman and headed to the turquoise house.

"Don't even think about leaving the house either," he said.

"How would you know if I did?" I said. "You don't even live there anymore."

Dad made a quick right turn into the parking lot of the high school. The truck jostled us both until he came to a stop. He kept the truck running while we both stared out the window at the red brick building. Maybe he was regretting what he'd done, who he'd done it with, all the lies, all the money. I regretted nothing and told him so.

"You're better than that," he said. "You're better than all this."

That's when the regret flowed from me. I turned toward the window so he couldn't see those giant, ugly tears but mostly because I couldn't bear to see the disappointment clouding his eyes.

*

We lived in a house the color of turquoise in a small valley among many small valleys in a town built on hills. Our neighborhood didn't have a cool name like Sky City, Viro Circle, Ford Canyon, or Chiwawita. Our neighborhood had no name at all, and so we too came to see ourselves as nameless, spectral people who inhabited the in-between spaces of Gallup. You might find us somewhere between fields of yellow daisies and pawn shops, between rattlers thick as pine branches and BIA boarding schools, between state-line truck stops and McGaffey Lake. This was before the summer of 1979 when uranium tailings seeped into the dusty land, the bones of the dead, the air we breathed,

the water we drank. This was when my biggest problem was my mother who was waiting for me on the front porch of the turquoise house.

I slid out of the truck, hardening myself against the inevitable recriminations: weeks of being grounded, loss of television privileges, the inability to see my best and only friends, Byron and Marta, outside school. No abuelita, no true home. Trudging up the sidewalk, I saw my life as one long confinement and thought then that I might as well consign myself to a convent with all the other women with nowhere to go but to God.

Then a miracle happened. Mom took one look at Dad, and I ceased to exist. They hugged, and she gurgled, and he circled her as if she was the sun and he, a lonely minor planet like Pluto. You'd never know that they were having problems, that the infamous family meeting had happened, their heads tipped toward each other as they murmured. And though they were conferring about my punishment, and though soon enough I would feel the weight of their decree, I felt a jolt of happiness at seeing them together again, like the old days, which hadn't been all that long ago.

As they were huddling and whispering on the front porch, I tiptoed past them faster than you could say Tiny Tim and Miss Vicki, or, nowadays, Selena Gomez and Justin Bieber. I didn't want to be seen, singled out, the brunt of their anger. I'd had enough of my own back then.

Later, after dinner, with only the barest mention of my escapade, and with Julio on his best behavior, Mom gave no lecture, offered no retorts or what-were-you-thinkings, said nothing. She did not ground me, at least not in the way I thought she would. It was

unbearable to have your mother be so nice in the face of your worst criminal offense.

Finally, when she spoke of it, her only words were, “You need a job.”

Only a pendeja would’ve disagreed.

The Obituary Girl

One day you’re seventeen and in trouble with the law, and the next day, you have a job. Don’t get me wrong: the court date still loomed. Hotwiring a car and eluding las chotas were troubles that didn’t fade away, even if that souped-up Monte Carlo, the color of Granny Smith apples, belonged to my father, even if I would’ve felt bien bright and crisp driving to Colorado to be reunited with my abuelita. While awaiting my fate, in the midst of a dusting of snow in March, I comforted myself with thoughts of sitting at her kitchen table, sipping café con leche, nibbling biscochitos, and calming her: *No se preocupe, abuela. I left mom and dad a note that said, I’m fine. Ay, hijita*, she would’ve said, shaking her head, as if confirming that I was the biggest mentirosa ever to walk the earth. Meantime, mom had been pulling her strings, and that’s how I got a job at the local newspaper.

Not just any job.

I was the obituary girl.

But first things first.

Judge what’s-his-name told my parents to rein me in, as if I was a wild filly trapped in a canyon, as if that verb alone both explained and solved the mystery of how Rogelia Elizabeth James, dutiful daughter of Bernard and Isabella James, had fallen so far so fast. I needed abuelita standing with me, squeezing my hand and calming my

worries, when the judge sentenced me to probation and assigned me a mentor from their new juvenile adjudication program until I turned eighteen in August. After that, he said, wagging his finger at me, “It’s up to you what you do with your life.”

Mom nudged me. “Thank you, your honor,” I said.

Afterward, mom said, “People don’t get second chances like this, Ro.”

“I know, Mom.”

“Do you?” she said.

I didn’t know anything, of course, except the number bouncing around my brain—eighteen—that magic age when I’d be an adult, free to leave this prison of a town, this suffocating family. I zoomed ahead of mom, practically skipping to the car, as if five months already had passed and my prison term was complete. That future day in August kept me afloat, kept at bay my fear of never living with abuelita again, of never returning to the land that grounded me in myself, our family history, our land.

By the time we arrived at the turquoise house, the excitement had worn off, replaced by an anger so ancient and combustible that I could do nothing but let it consume me. I rushed at her once we got inside the house. “What kind of parents press charges against their only daughter?”

“Ro, not now,” she said. “Let’s just be thankful.”

“I should be thankful that my own parents jailed me?”

“It’s more complicated than that, honey,” she said.

“Complicated like how?” I said. “It’s not like I’m that rich chick who knocked off a bank after swearing allegiance to the Symbionese Liberation Army. Gimme a break.”

“It was for your own good,” she said.

“Enough with the platitudes,” I said.

“Do you think stealing is something to be proud of, Ro?”

“You’re the one who ratted me out,” I said. “It’s always you.”

I locked myself in my bedroom. Mom implored me from the hallway: *Please, Ro. I made enchiladas rojas, your favorite.* The invitation was tough to resist, but I’d become an expert at the silent treatment, having been tutored by the best, and anyway, the mere mention of enchiladas sent me spiraling into homesickness for abuelita. There was also that little thing about dad not showing up. Julio was forgiven since he had to work. So, I staged my own little hunger strike.

The next day, still sullen and starving, still chilled by April winds, I stared out the window while mom drove, trying not to salivate when we passed the Lotaburger on State Road 32 and were engulfed by the delicious aroma of their green chile cheeseburgers.

Mom dropped me off and said, “Good luck.”

“I owe it all to you,” I said and never looked back as I marched into the building.

The first thing my new boss Barbara said was, “So you’re the girl who got her tire shot out.”

“Better the tire than my brains,” I said, still simmering from my mother’s betrayal. I couldn’t tell Barbara that I’d hit the gas while the patrol car’s sirens, those two angry, bloated faces, wailed behind me, or that, after the car hobbled to a stop and before the officer walked toward me with the same swagger I recognized in my father’s gait, I’d opened the door, put my hands in the air, and tried to exit the vehicle. But it was too late.

Vomit splattered the side door, nearly matching the green color of the Monte. So much for being another forgettable teenager rebelling against the establishment.

Barbara, who was holding a sheath of papers, shoved them into my hands. Then she laughed so loud that the water cooler shook and my new coworkers looked up from their desks.

“You’ll be a perfect fit,” she said. “Have a seat.”

She taught me how to rifle through the stack of submissions, type them up, and place the completed forms in her inbox. It was also my job to greet family members who requested obituary forms or handed me completed ones.

“Say the same thing each time,” Barbara told me. “*I’m sorry for your loss*. They’ll say thank you, and you’ll move on.”

That was the job. And that’s what I did.

What Barbara didn’t tell me, what prevented me from moving on as quickly as she’d asked, was this:

-Behind the thank-yous were mourners, glassy-eyed or tired, often brusque or talkative. They were brothers, fathers, sisters, mothers, aunts, uncles, grandfathers, grandmothers, friends. Sometimes their submissions were smeared with tears. Sometimes they stared past me as if their loved one had appeared from behind the painting of cowboys riding the range that hung on the wall behind my desk. I offered each one a pen or pencil and other small kindnesses: a glass of water, a chair, a smile, a lulling voice. How could that be enough? After reading obits, I sometimes walked to the water fountain and gulped down my grief. Sometimes, after watching them leave, and

especially if a child had died, I choked back the sobs because, after all, I was a professional.

-Two hours a day, five days a week, I would be drenched in death. Gestures, language, body, heart; all were in supplication to it. My pores expanded as I read every word of every obituary. I made lists of causes of death: car accidents on U.S. Highway 666 or I-40, train-track deaths, drownings, electrocutions, broken necks, murders by gunshot, cancers of every kind, suicide, heart disease, kidney failure, complications from diabetes, murders by strangulation, natural deaths.

-I would wrap myself in the weightiness of grief, as if it were my own Pendleton blanket. I would learn to bear it because, as I also would come to learn, there were no boundaries between the mourners' grief and my body. My neck hurt when I read about broken necks, my body ached after transcribing deaths by blunt force trauma from trains, cars, hammers. I refused to eat after deaths by strangulation, and my body craved sugar when it was a suicide.

-The fear of death, which had accompanied me always, would ease. Still, despite my best efforts, I could erect no boundaries between me and the dead person or the memories of them that I constructed in my head. We are both corpses, I would think, and this thought terrified me. I longed to share these fears with someone in the office. But Josephine was always tittering, and I had come to think of her as a parakeet with a pretty coat of feathers who babbled and strutted and not much more. There was Norman who couldn't be bothered with anything but sports: high school, college, the pros. Marguerite made no secret of her disdain for me. She never offered me her homemade cookies and I

once overheard her tell Josephine: *Rogelia is a juvenile delinquent, a sin verguenza, a malcriada and probably a puta.*

-Two weeks into the job, the last Friday in March, would become the “first day of the rest of my life,” as the chintzy saying went. On that day, near closing, a Navajo couple came in and completed a form for a relative whose cause of death was listed as “respiratory ailment.” This was not a common occurrence, as I would soon learn. He was young, the couple were his parents, possibly his grandparents, and I surmised that he’d blackened his lungs from a pack-a-day habit. Marlboros, I thought, because I smoked them too, or maybe Kools, because someone told me each cigarette, even with its filter, contained microscopic shards of glass that slowly shredded your lungs. I typed up the form, passed it on to Barbara, and then forgot about it.

Outside, waiting for mom, I lit a smoke, thinking about the tattered lungs that’d finally conked out on him. Mine would too someday, I thought, and I dragged on the cigarette. After all, the lungs are spongy and fragile, and like the heart, vulnerable. No one wants to die, but sometimes we cannot choose the thing that kills us. Except this guy. He knew full well what killed him. It was five-thirty, and mom drove into the parking lot. I crushed the cigarette and hopped into the car. She never asked about the job, and Dad had disappeared again. But it didn’t matter whether I liked it, was good at it, got along with my coworkers. It only mattered that every weekday I was held captive, told what to do and when to do it, and that this pleased my mother to no end. I didn’t mention the smoker who had died. But I thought about his lungs, and I crossed my arms, pressing them into my chest. I still had my lungs and my heart, they were mine to do

with as I pleased, and in that moment my body felt as if it was whole.

Benton Yazzie, My Father

That trading post, in-between the Commercial and the American,
used to be Douglas Drygoods. Same place Jake and Betty sold
mining supplies to us dusted miners who yellowed the linoleum
with our bootprints while shelling out dollars and more dollars.

Goggles. Longjohns. Flannel shirts. Steel-toed boots.

We fools believed that these were all we needed
to ward off wet, biting winters spent underground.

Now the place is a Route 66 landmark.

My father used to browse the plaids after work,
buy a shovel, slide a carton of Kools across the glass counter
toward the pretty girl whose eyes shone when she saw him. I followed
him each time so I could visit my marble, half blue
half green, color of earth and water, unnaturally opaque.
Dad didn't want to spend money on some things, I guess.

The marble, steadfast in its own way, lounged between two
lime jello-colored goblets. A white card rested against it,
its words, *Made Of Uraneum*, misspelled in cursive.
I cupped it in my hands, making a tiny pinhole for light,

trying to understand its opacity or at least be loaned some of it,
unaware of anyone around me, even on that day when the bills
slipped from my father's wallet into the hands of the pretty clerk
who each time retrieved the marble from the glass case
so that I might marvel at it, who retrieved it that day
and placed it in my hands forever.

Years later, the boots now emptied, I ask myself,
If I swallow this marble, will I light up the sky?
Will a star explode inside me?
How many half-lives will I live?

Perhaps I will watch the yellow powder shrink
my legs as they did my father's until, like him,
I can no longer slip my feet into the boots.
The marble might roll around inside me,
a ghost-father haunting me each day after work,
as I once again cup the uranium marble in my hands,
hoping for a different answer.

A Narrow Escape

I lingered in front of the Public Health Service Hospital, called PHS by the
locals, after Julio dropped me off on the way to his cook's job at Tio Sam's. I was

supposed to go inside, ask for Dr. Matsuda, and, once she arrived, strategize about my future. At least, that's what her letter said. Instead, I plunked myself on the sidewalk by Nizhoni Boulevard and smoked a cigarette. Why not? It was a Saturday in April, and this was the last place I wanted to be on my days off from school and work. Half a cigarette later, a petite woman emerged amid a stream of patients leaving the hospital. She appeared to be looking for someone, and spotting me, strode toward me, her white coat billowing behind her, her hand grasping a stethoscope so as not to lose it to the wind. I backed up, looking over my shoulder in hopes that she was heading toward someone else, a patient perhaps, or another doctor. There was no one behind me. I must have looked as panicked as I felt, eyeballing an exit, trying to figure out what to say, all the while moving backward, away from this woman and toward invisibility.

I spied a Chevy truck that bore the painted likeness of Pluto the dog on its tailgate and made a beeline for it. If I pretended that the truck was mine, maybe then she'd leave me alone. I'd nearly made it to the passenger door when she caught up to me, wheezing and pulling a piece of paper from her coat pocket, "Are you," she said, catching her breath. "Rogelia?" I towered over her as she squinted at the piece of paper. "Rogelia James?"

I clutched the cigarette between my fingers. *Well, here goes nothing*, I thought, crushing the cigarette. "Guilty as charged," I said, raising my hand as if I were a student in the classroom who'd been called on to give an answer.

"Good," she said, slipping the sheet of paper back into her pocket. "I'm Dr. Matsuda."

Crap. This was the lady that Mom had complained about to dad in casual conversation at home. At least she didn't look like the shriveled bruja mom had described, and she wasn't as old as her fancy doctor words made her out to be in the introductory letter. No crow's lines, no wrinkles, no blotchy skin. Her demeanor was calm but not aloof. She didn't say much, just enough to get the point across. The sun was heating the pavement beneath us, and I was beginning to perspire.

She must have noticed my discomfort because she said, "Shall we?", extending her hand toward the tallest building in Gallup with a sweeping grace that made me both fear and like her.

Why was she being so nice to someone who clearly went to great pains to avoid meeting her?

"Where are your parents?" she asked, as we entered the hospital.

"They'll be coming soon," I said. "They said to get started without them."

"I see," she said. I couldn't tell if she was angry at them or me.

We reached her office, a nondescript room with a desk and two chairs, one for her and another across from the desk, a couple of bookcases filled with medical books and a poster of the human body's muscular system. I sat in the chair across from her and said nothing.

She pulled out a stack of papers. "I'll call your parents and let them know we're awaiting their arrival." Dr. Matsuda used her hand to move a lock of hair from her forehead.

"They won't mind if we get started," I said, eyeballing the muscle poster and

wondering what else I could do to get out of this meeting.

“I’m sure they won’t,” Dr. Matsuda said as she flipped through the paperwork with one hand. “But the court will.” She placed the paperwork on the desk and pointed to the clause. “At least one parent must be present.”

Damn. I didn’t want to be surrounded by three adults, all of them lecturing me about the qualities of an upstanding citizen, an obedient daughter, a model student. Dr. Matsuda had been all of these herself. How else would she have become a physician or a juvenile adjudication monitor?

Dr. Matsuda was dialing the phone as I started to tell her that I’d return later. But she held her hand up as the phone rang. Mom would be on her way to work here and Dad was probably on patrol. Julio was always at Tio Sam’s or with his bros. I didn’t wait for Matsuda to replace the phone receiver in the cradle. I ran from the room and raced to the nearest exit and bolted down the stairs.

I emerged into the parking lot behind PHS. Disoriented, overcome by sunlight, I stumbled first toward Boardman Drive, but soon realized that this route would return me to Gallup High and then to Route 66. I wanted out of this town but not by hitchhiking, and I had to leave this hospital before mom arrived for work or dad came barreling up Nizhoni Boulevard. Where to go? I didn’t know, but there was no time to waste, so I made my way over to Nizhoni Boulevard and began my descent down the steep hill. There was no sidewalk, only a thin dirt path edging the road, a few feet from trucks and automobiles, each one dusting me until my dressy pantsuit became caked with dirt on a sticky-hot day. Each vehicle sped past PHS, a honeycombed fortress, where Mom

plumped pillows for Indians with bad hearts or toxic livers, handed out tiny paper cups with yellow and white pills, and hooked up IV tubes to leukemia patients or those wracked by delirium tremens. I had no idea where I was going.

Hewing close to the mesquite, I stepped gingerly so as not to crunch a rattlesnake's tubular body or sprain my ankle. My foot wobbled when stepping on the occasional stone, making me wish that I'd stayed with Dr. Matsuda or at least hadn't lied to her. Vehicles hurtled down the hill, any of the drivers at risk of losing control at any point and smashing me. How many times had I read about a pedestrian being struck down by some jerk who'd taken his eyes off the road to reach for an eight-track tape? The victims were usually Navajos, another Begay or Nez or Yazzie, which meant that no one cared here in the "Indian Capital of the World."

"Hey, baby," a man yelled.

The voice sounded like Julio's, and I jogged toward the truck, overlooking his stupid words, probably my brother's dumb joke, relieved that maybe he'd picked up the phone and Dr. Matsuda had asked him to come over and give me a ride home. But the truck zoomed by, and I cursed the guy for being a jerk and myself for thinking that Julio miraculously would have surfaced.

The next jerk, wearing a cowboy hat and hanging out the window of a half-ton pickup, heaved a can of Dr. Pepper at me. My hands flew to my head as I ducked. But its contents sprayed me, sticking to my hair and skin and clothes, its syrupy scent nauseating me. I flipped the bird at the truck's occupants and kicked the can, raising a cloud of dust. I hated that I had no one to call. I blamed God and everyone else for the

sun's heat and the dusty path, for turning me into a first-time pedestrian in a town with few sidewalks, in a town where anyone on foot was presumed to be Indian and therefore drunk. I blamed God and everyone else for everything that had happened. These feelings clogged my throat like the reddish dust stirred up as I walked.

At the bottom of the hill, I turned right onto State Road 32, a busy thoroughfare that snaked its way downtown. I jogged past Tobe Turpen's Trading Post, the Cedar Hills low-income apartments, a strip mall with a bar named Pal Joey's, and my own neighborhood. At Trademart, I marched to the pay phone at the entrance, hoping to reach someone. But the pay phone had been ripped from its slot, nothing but frayed cords hanging from it. I found another one at the liquor store and placed the receiver to my ear. Nothing. I thought about giving up and going home. But, unwilling to be a captive of justice, unwilling to listen to my parents' or my mentor's ire, I kept walking. I'd hang out at Tio Sam's; maybe one of Julio's friends would take me cruising on 66.

I lurched toward State Road 32 again, my feet aching and the sticky-sweet goop smelling like rotting candied apples. I trudged another quarter mile to the parking lot of Lotaburger, a local hamburger joint. I circled the lot, gathering my courage, reminding myself that my dream to be a physician was still within reach and that my grandmother would live to see me graduate. My hand trembled as I checked my watch. Then I returned to the road and stood there, awkward and embarrassed. After looking skyward for a moment, I stuck out my thumb.

Before long, someone pulled into the parking lot. The car was a dark soggy green, the color of a wet, wilted stem of a flower, and the man inside was soggy too. He

wore a drab, plaid shirt and khaki pants. He was balding, and his eyes drooped, and his cheeks, though red and puffy, drooped too, like the jowls of a hound dog. "Thank you," I murmured as I slid into the seat. I pressed myself against the car door, but fearing I would fall out, pushed down the lock without once looking at the driver.

"Where you headed?" he said.

I looked at him for the first time and wondered if I should have kept the door unlocked. It was nothing the man did, just a feeling. He seems nice enough, I convinced myself within minutes, and I chided myself for being so unkind.

"Tio Sam's," I said and clutched my purse closer. The shop was near the Hut, so close enough. "But you can drop me anywhere between here and 66."

"No problem," he said.

"Breaking Up is Hard to Do," played on the eight-track tape player. Noemi had always liked the song and the singer, Neil Sedaka, and nothing I said could change her mind. I wished that Noemi was with me, because there would be strength in numbers and because she had attitude to spare. When he dropped us off, we could compare notes about a man who liked songs that featured tinkling piano keys, do-be-do's, and the singer's sad, reedy voice. I felt beholden to the driver for stopping to pick me up. I almost complimented him on his resemblance to Neil Sedaka, but that seemed weird so instead I said, "Great song."

The man reached for the knob and turned up the volume. His hands were scrubbed and white, his nails as shiny and smooth as small opals, as if he'd applied a topcoat with a clear fingernail polish, the same kind me and Noemi used on those

evenings when we'd listen to Roberto Griego records and paint each other's fingernails. I breathed in, trying to relax, trying not to worry about the interview or this man or what my parents would say about me accepting this ride, trying to still my body and deflect the man's attention, trying to focus instead on the tinkling of the piano keys and the singer's melancholic lyrics.

But I'd never seen such a car and stole glimpses of its interior while he drove. Like its driver, it too was pristine, as it had been driven straight off the showroom floor. The white seats reminded me of a polar bear rug whose picture I'd run across once in a travel magazine. The car's knobs and detailing were chrome, something I'd learned to spot from hanging out with Lefty at the auto shop. The silver color glowed like disco balls showering splintered mirrored light on guests at a wedding reception I'd attended a year ago. Glancing at the floorboard, and seeing that the floor mats were white as well, I instinctively lifted my feet.

The car glided to a stop at the light.

"Don't worry about that," the man said, reaching over the length of the seat and brushing her leg in the process.

I must've gasped because the man quickly withdrew his hand. He seemed hurt, and I wondered how many people had feared him because he was weird and clean, too clean, which was weird, and I wished I had a best friend, and together we could make fun of and then feel sorry for him. But those thoughts left me feeling guilty, and all that put together softened me, so that I felt sorry for him like I had the Indian patients lying in that hospital on the hill. This man and the Indians, both in strange ways, were keeping

a mother from her daughter who needed to hear that everything would be okay, and not just with the money. I should hate these interlopers, and I did. Then, somewhere along the way—it happened at a different point every time—that feeling gave way to this terrible compassion, and I found myself sort of liking the Navajo patients and now Mr. Soggy, the Sedaka lookalike.

“There’s paper towels in the glove box,” he said.

“I don’t want to touch anything,” I said and held up her sticky, grimy hands.

“Go ahead,” he said.

Inside, paper towels were folded and stacked like bath towels in mom’s linen closet. A packaged bar of soap, a jar of water, and more air fresheners rounded out the rest of the glovebox’s contents.

I placed my purse next to me, retrieved a towel, and wiped the soles of my shoes. I used another to wipe grime from my arms and dust from the pantsuit. I then erased the smudged fingerprints from the glovebox. There was not one scrap of paper, no empty cans, nothing crowding the dashboard, no litter bag to hold the towels either. The man kept his eyes on the road, whistling to Sedaka. I didn’t want to pollute the car with my own dirt, especially since he’d been nice enough to give a ride to a dirt-caked girl like me. So I placed the dirty towels in the purse, closed it, and hugged it to my chest.

I leaned back, feeling more comfortable in this car with this man. The interview would go well, now that I was presentable. Even Neil Sedaka sounded good, and I tapped my feet to the music. A tree-shaped air freshener dangled from the rearview mirror, and I recognized its cherry scent as the same one that filled the cab of dad’s

truck. I let my purse fall to my side and rested my head against the seat. We passed the Commercial and the American, bars frequented by Indians, mostly men, people I'd never met and probably never would. They weren't riding in a beautiful car, one so unlike their battered trucks or even her mother's car: no TAB cans strewn across the back seat, no pens and pencils stuffed into the car's nooks and crannies, no blue-grey hospital scrubs heaped on the floor. My mother favored cassette tapes, and their hard plastic sleeves, piled on the front seat, had to be removed each time I rode with her. His car contained no empty bottles of cheap Boone's Farm Strawberry Hill wine, no magnetized St. Christopher statue steering driver and passengers clear of bodily harm, like Julio's truck. This was a beautiful car, as in "Nizhoni," a word that means "beautiful" in Navajo, as in the name of the rutted boulevard that I'd just traveled on foot, a road that carried sick people to and from PHS, one bordered by dingy apartment buildings and ugly storefronts. But also "Beautiful," as in, "This car is Nizhoni," though I had no idea whether I was using it the right way, having never spoken a word of Navajo beyond "Ya-Ta-Hey," which means, "Hello," which anyone could learn by reading the billboards lining Route 66 or listening to KYVA, the local radio station, on Saturday mornings during the Navajo music show. This car was unlike any I'd ever seen, despite its ugly exterior, and as if reading my thoughts, as if he too knew the meaning of "Nizhoni," the man said, "She's a beauty, isn't she?"

"I'd steal it, if I could," I said, imagining myself rolling up to abuelita's little white stucco house in this perfect ride.

The man laughed, throaty and big, in stark contrast to his size. His plaid shirt

undulated in half-waves. He placed his right hand on his stomach as if to smooth those creases, and just as casually laid that same white, manicured hand on the middle of the white leather seat between us.

There was something too big about his laugh, in the same way that his car was too clean. Why would someone be happy to have his car stolen? “What’s so funny?” I said.

“Nothing,” he said and caressed the leather seat.

I studied the man’s hand, which seemed to have no pores or wrinkles, which seemed bloodless and disconnected from his body, like Cousin It’s hand in the Addams Family. I peered out the window. Orange-yellow flames shot across the body of the black truck driving in the lane next to them. “You can let me out at the next light,” I said.

The man smiled.

The car traveled east along Route 66. The man seemed to have slowed down. I thought he was going to pull up to a curb and let me out. But the car kept gliding forward, a boat of a thing heading east toward Albuquerque, or maybe someplace in between—McGaffey Lake or Bluewater Lake or Grants, the next city heading east on Interstate 40. I wanted to be at Bluewater now, camping and fishing with the family. A dread-filled claustrophobia settled into me, and the whiteness of the car’s interior felt suffocating to me. I clutched the door, gasping for breath. The car was in mid motion, and I had to stop myself from opening the door and jumping onto Route 66.

“Really, sir,” I said, fidgeting in the seat. “I can walk from here.”

“No problem,” the man said.

But he speeded up and soon we passed the truck with the fiery rocket stripes, other pickups and other cars. We passed Kristy’s Coffee Shop, Earl’s Restaurant, California Supermarket. The red, hat-shaped roof of the Pizza Hut came into view, up ahead on the right. The man signaled a right turn, and I smoothed my hair and checked my blouse for wrinkles. I was excited to see Lefty, anxious to leave the weird, clean man and his beautiful car. But the man remained in the right lane and drove by the restaurant as if he hadn’t seen it.

“Stop,” I blurted. “That’s where I’m going.”

“I’ll get you there,” he said, looking in the rearview.

“I’ll be late for my meeting.”

“You’ll be okay,” he said. He tried to insert the eight-track back into the player, but it jammed.

I reached for the tape, out of habit, hoping to help him. But the man pushed my hand away and kept jiggling the tape while muttering obscenities. As he worked, I pretended to rummage in my purse while angling myself into the position of jimmying the lock.

“There,” he said, when he finally inserted the tape without a problem. By then, the green boat had glided up to the red light at Boardman Drive. The breaking-up song played while the car idled. The light turned green, but the cars didn’t move. The light turned red almost immediately, the traffic was still stalled, and I wondered aloud what was happening.

He placed his arm over the back of the seat. “Maybe there’s been an accident,” he said.

“Maybe,” I said.

The light turned green, and the car inched forward. The man stroked my hair. I let him while I trembled, the man quiet, the car quiet, everything quiet except for the “come-a, come-a down, doo-be-do, down-down” from the singer’s smooth voice. I thought I might vomit all over his white leather interior. The car limped through the intersection. Renewed by the car’s steady movement, I threw my weight against the door. Nothing happened.

He pulled my arm.

“Don’t touch me,” I said.

None of the cars moved. He shifted the car’s gear into park.

I pulled on the door handle, but it wouldn’t budge. He grabbed my arm, but I shook off that soggy man, his face pinkish and his teeth cracked.

“Pervert,” I yelled and jumped from the vehicle. I landed on both feet, but lost my balance and fell onto both knees. Pain radiated through my legs, but, terrified that he would follow me, I stood up, hands scraped and reddened from the tumble.

Traffic remained at a standstill, though I didn’t know why, just as I didn’t understand why other drivers didn’t help me. I limped to the corner of Boardman Drive and East Route 66, trying my best to get to the McDonald’s and use the phone. A horn blared behind me; more frustration from the highway. But the blare persisted, like a siren from an alternate universe. I turned and flipped the bird to the driver.

I wish my dad had jumped out of the car and rocketed toward me, that I had I hobbled toward him, exhausted and relieved. If only he could have scooped me into his arms, and for the first time since the “Monte Carlo Incident,” made me feel like I was his daughter again. He then would have hoisted me into the cab of the truck, where I’d finally notice the rip in my dress pants and the dark stains of blood on my scraped knees. I would barely be able move my right arm. Dad would’ve locked me inside the cab and then gone into McDonald’s and ordered two Big Macs, two orders of fries and two large cokes. We would’ve feasted while I told Dad the whole story, while we waited out the traffic jam.

A New Friend, A New Project

Lemme break it down for you:

Number 1: I “borrow” my dad’s car.

Number 2: I get busted and end up in juvey court.

Number 3: I ditch my mentor and hop into a stranger’s car.

Number 4: Dad’s mad at Dr. Matsuda, not me.

True story.

His anger surged like one of those flash floods that arrived in spring, filling the arroyos and threatening children. Only the person dad threatened with his “I’m gonna kick your ass” speech was my mentor. He practically ripped the phone off the wall while he was chewing her out the next day. All those, How could you’s and Why did you’s and What were you thinking’s, pierced the air like so many stray bullets. You woulda thought he was the one who’d been assaulted by a creepy clean man in a creepy clean

car. I wanted him to lay off the doc. I wanted him to know that it was my fault, that I was the one who bolted from the meeting. Right when I was about to spill my guts, when I was about to shoulder the blame for what happened, he slammed the phone into the receiver and said, “C’mon. We’re going for a ride.”

The front door of Lefty’s Automotive Shop squeaked open, and the shrill of the tiny bell filled the small office. No one came to greet us. I didn’t know why we were here, so I hid behind dad, a taller and wider me. Like my father, I was tall and dark, with the same hair: black, thick, and straight. Pelo como india, Noemi and others had told me often enough that I had taken to bunching it into a ponytail. But in other, unseen ways, as I would come to learn, I was too much like my father, quiet and closed off from the past, near or distant, and that perhaps explains why I hid.

Standing there, protected, I got a chance to size up the place. It smelled of motor oil. Oddly shaped things hung on the walls. Except for a calendar with a bullfighter and a bull from a local Mexican restaurant, I didn’t recognize most anything else. Paper grocery bags filled with empty Orange Crush bottles were arranged in a half circle near a large metal desk. Mounds of stained paperwork covered the desk, some scattered across the floor. Smashed paper cups and cigarette butts covered the swivel chair. Stale, molding food smells emanated from a bag on the desk, and though this wasn’t my own home or business, I took it upon myself to gather at least some of the rotting food and throw it in the trash can. I was about to place a half-eaten sandwich in a brown paper bag when the side door opened, and the clang of metal against metal surprised me enough that I dropped it on the desk. A man stood in the doorway, leaning against the frame. I

crouched behind my father as he spoke to the guy. Something jabbed my butt, but I didn't dare move and said nothing.

Dad and the guy talked about stuff, and I finally peeked out from behind my father. By then, the man had pulled a rag from his back pocket and was wiping his hands on it. I was mesmerized by the circular motions they made. Finally, the guy said: "Ya, I seen the guy around. Haven't worked on the car but damn, it's a beauty."

"Tell you what," dad said. "You find out for me who does the work."

"Any particular reason why?" the guy said.

"Lefty," dad said. "You don't wanna know."

Their laughter filled the dingy office.

"Gotcha," he said. Then he turned his attention to me and I hid behind dad again.

"Who do we have here?" Lefty said.

"Nobody," I said.

Dad said, moving away from me. "Rogelia, that's no way to act."

I took a step back, heard the crunch of paper and felt the soft give of what likely was another spoiled sandwich. "I'm his daughter."

Dad laughed. "Well, that's about right."

"Good to meet you, daughter," Lefty said.

Behind him, a small stack of papers had begun sliding down the bigger mound that sat on the desk.

Lefty peered at me, and I blushed. Okay, I melted, if you wanna know the truth.

I think he smiled, but dad had stepped between us to shake Lefty's hand, so I

couldn't tell.

I held the door open for dad, though this time the bell didn't sound as jarring.

Lefty told him about some car part and this sent dad racing toward it.

"One more thing," Lefty said.

I turned around. "What?"

"There's a sandwich stuck to your ass."

"I knew that," I said, backing out of the door and wishing I could disappear, my cheeks exploding like cherry bombs. Lefty winked at me. Not a moment later, as the tinkling sound of the bell faded, I heard him cursing, and I imagined the collapse of the mountain of papers. Serves you right, Lefty. I tossed the sandwich into a pile of old tires and caught up to my dad who put his arm around me and told me that everything would be fine.

I think we can all agree that I was in need of redemption. And I found it in Mrs. Crawley, our senior project director. I didn't know this at first. At first, I was annoyed that I had to complete the project at all: the research, the interviews, the writing. I groused about it to Byron and Marta and Tawny, but they didn't share my misery. They were geeks before geeks was a word. Byron was into boxing and wanted to write his paper on Muhammed Ali. Marta was interested in movie stars like Rita Moreno and Westside Story. Tawny wasn't interested in school at all, but she liked art and could draw like nobody's business. Mrs. Crawley would've let us slide by with an easy topic, like our thoughts about Gallup High baseball or football, so we could all graduate on time. I was all in for Mrs. Crawley and the easy senior project.

This brought me to Norm, the sports addict who knew too much about sports for his own good and not enough about life. He was a slight man whose desk overflowed with memorabilia: sports cards, trophies, newspaper clippings. If there was ever a shrine to sports, it was Norm's desk. When I visited him at his desk over those weeks, he ran down the batting averages of all the ball players, knew what a red card meant in soccer, had personally witnessed history being made when Secretariat won the Triple Crown of horseracing. But Norm himself was no slob. He wore a polo shirt and pressed jeans to every event. His hair was shellacked with hair spray, and he smelled as if he'd poured a bottle of lavender on his clothing. For baseball, Norm told me about the players, taught me how the game worked, let me sit in the press box for all the games. I even got to make an announcement. One day, Norm came to me and said, "Ro, you're a great assistant. I couldn't ask for better. If there's one thing I know, it's passion. And you have it."

"Really?" I said, nodding my head.

"Really," he said. "Just not for sports."

We were sitting in the bleachers.

"Look," he said. "you think you want this, but your heart isn't in it."

"How can you tell?" I said.

"Because mine is."

The water sprinklers came on and miniature rainbows flashed in the sunlight.

"You're good at your job, Ro. God knows somebody has to work with grieving families. It's not me or anyone else there. It's you."

Sometimes you think you know people, and then Norm comes along and blows your stereotypes to shit.

“Go back to work and look for an angle.”

Norm swatted at my arm, and I ducked. Then I got him to dash through the sprinklers and mess up his hair. I’d say it was a win-win day.

It took a while for that angle to materialize. But two weeks later, it hit me. I’d seen more respiratory-related deaths than all other categories combined, including hypothermia and trains, the most common. I went to Barbara with my findings after Josephine and Marguerite had hunkered down in the lunchroom, snacking on homemade chocolate chip cookies. Marguerite hadn’t offered me any, but by then I had quit caring about those women. What I was doing, working out at the dojo, jogging up and over the hills of Gallup, completing my senior research project, was more important than their friendship. I’m not gonna lie: rejection stings like a scorpion. But Dr. Matsuda was required to report back to the court about my progress. I had to stay focused.

My supervisor Barbara was kind and round, soft-spoken but direct, her fingernails always perfectly manicured and lacquered in red polish. She tapped them on the desk as I explained that, for my senior project, I wanted to investigate those lung-related deaths. It had started with the three Navajo men, I told her, but there were more involved: white people, Mexicans, men and women, young and old.

“Smoking, of course,” she said. “And genetics.”

I was learning this about Barbara: she had her ideas, and they’d calcified into rocks larger than the red rocks that both heralded and guarded the entrance to Gallup from east

I-40. Also, she was a businesswoman, not a journalist.

“Maybe,” I said. “But what if it’s something else?”

“What else could it be? You worry too much. What about shadowing Norm at the high school football games? You could do a feature on him and the team. A two-fer. That’s the kind of stuff people want.”

“Sure, Barbara. That sounds great.”

I returned to my desk and reread the latest obituary, a young boy whose legs had given out on him from drinking poisoned water. His mother had written “mine” for the cause of death, her quiet anguish laid bare upon paper, a flimsy and cruel container. My small gifts, a ballpoint pen and a clichéd condolence, could make no dent in her loss.

How I would feel if Julio had died? It’d been heartbreaking enough when, in the midst of a heat-blasted summer that parched our hills and rendered our chamiso bushes gaunt, Julio announced that he’d been hired at the uranium mine. The words slid from him as easily as the brown wrapping my mother was removing from yet another decorative plate, this one from Texas. My father questioned Julio’s decision, but mom had already said everything there was to say when it came to Julio. She probably wished that she’d been visiting the Alamo or snapping pictures of fields of bluebonnets. Still, if Julio were dead, I’d be as inconsolable as the boy’s mother, Coralynn Etsitty. I’d refuse my Pendelton-wrapped grief, any comfort I might find in pictures and stories. My loss would run wider than the Rio Puerco that runs through Gallup and deeper than any mine shaft.

I wiped my tears and went to Barbara’s office. “Please let me do this. Let me talk

to one person and if it doesn't work, I'll find another topic."

Barbara tapped her fingernails on the desk for a few seconds. Then she scribbled something on a sheet of paper. "Call this number and ask for Lindy."

I almost hugged her, but Barbara wasn't that kind of person. "See what you find out," she said.

After work, as mom ferried us home, I half listened as she chatted up a storm about the new doctor on her floor, "this Oriental lady." I felt the impossible, that the young boy, Edwin, was my brother just as much as Julio. Maybe more because Julio was grown, whereas Edwin could've been my baby brother. I didn't mention Edwin to mom. I just retreated to my bedroom after dinner and fell into a dreamless sleep.

Edwin Etsitty, My Baby Boy

Sometimes, I pack him up
and drive Ronald to the well,

the one near the pockmarked sign
that bears the company name.

It's only a 400-yard dash, he says,
as if it is still the before-times
and he can sprint over there,
his chubby legs carrying him

over our hills,

past our water well, blued now,
from that company's siphoning,

his bare feet slapping against the dirt,
skin made ragged by rock, punctured more than once
by rattler fangs, the venom sucked from his calf,
while the snake undulated toward the cool rocks

and I rocked my boy until nightfall. In daylight,
I tried not to grunt when his arms wrapped
around my neck. I made myself smile when
his legs flopped like gaping fish thrown
from a river onto a wooden deck or the ground.
Sometimes, as I plopped one leg onto the floorboard,
and then another one, I willed him to hop
out of the cab and scamper among red rocks.

You are a good boy, I told him, and I tell myself
it is good that he will never grow up
never face round-ups for protective custody,
never be labeled another drunken Indian.
His corneas burned out, his whites turned

bloodshot, all shapes became blurry and hazed,
his gait went crooked and suspicious,
and inciting enough to get him tossed
into a police van with the others. Drunk, they'll say.
The next day, bleary-eyed and lonely, far from me,
he'd be released into a line of Navajo men
dumped unceremoniously onto Boardman Drive.

You're a good boy, I told him. And he is.

A Familiar Enemy

You'd think I'd get some relief at school. But Noemi Salazar was always there to remind me that life sucked. Her dad was a foreman at the mine, and rumor had it that she ruled her friends the way he ruled the miners. Father-daughter bonding, I guess. A gaggle of girls and a few guys could be found trailing her down the halls in worshipful adoration.

At the time, I had three friends, Byron and Marta and Tawny, and we slinked ghostlike along the hallways of Gallup High School. On my first day back after the "incident," as mom called it, Byron came up behind me and said, "Hey, jailbird," while Marta crowed and Tawny just shrugged. I swatted at them and they backed up, pretending to be scared. The bell rang and we hewed to the walls, laughing as we made our way, single file, to the lockers. I felt free of mom, the turquoise house, the Monte Carlo, free enough to forget that Noemi's locker was across from mine.

“Hey, Skag,” she said, using a common term whose meaning was similar to that of “bitch.”

I ignored her, pulling books out of my locker. Byron, Tawny, and Marta stood guard. “How was it being with your comadres in la pinta, india?”

Her groupies tittered. “Ya,” they said in unison. “What was it like, india?” They whooped like Indians, putting their hands to their mouths and hopping in a circle.

“Do any of you even have a brain?” Byron said.

I strode toward them, preparing to make like Jesus and part their group as if it was the Red Sea. But unlike Jesus, who was kind, I was gonna ram Noemi into one of the lockers. Maybe my little joy ride had tripped a switch in me. Byron put his hand on my shoulder.

“Don’t waste your breath,” he said as Marta pulled me back.

“Chickenshit,” Noemi said.

“Hijo,” Tawny said, clenching her fists.

Noemi’s followers made clucking sounds as they cruised down the hall.

“You’re not worth our time,” Byron shouted at the group. No one messed with Byron cuz of his muscles, and no one cared enough about Marta to bother her. Tawny didn’t care what anyone thought, and that was her protection. Deflated, we carried our books to our honors class in psychology, and Byron drove us home after school.

The next morning, I asked mom to make me a new hairstyle. A smile lit up her face like those red chile lights you string along your roof for Christmas, and not just because she got to play hair stylist. This marked the first time I’d asked her for anything

since the “incident.”

“You want highlights?” she said. She dyed her own hair, streaking it with honey blonde highlights, which struck me as redundant since she was already blonde.

“No.”

“Let’s make a nice, thick pony tail. Or maybe a chignon.”

Mom had always wanted me to be her own Barbie doll model. She couldn’t wait to rope my hair. “I want braids.”

“Okay, I can coil the braid into a bun.”

“Two braids, mom.”

I sat on a chair in the kitchen while she combed my wet hair.

“How’s school?” mom said.

“Fine.”

“Let’s have lunch on Saturday, and then we’ll go to Sweetbriar’s, and then we’ll get manicures. You’ll be so beautiful.”

Back in the day, Sweetbriar’s used to be the nicest dress shop in Gallup.

“You mean, I’m not beautiful now,” I told her.

“You’re always twisting my words, Ro.”

“I can’t go shopping. I have to meet my juvenile adjudication mentor.”

She continued to plait and twist my hair, smoothing it to make me look like her.

“I’ll have him over for dinner this Saturday. Your father and brother can come as well.”

“Mom, we aren’t friends. His job is to make sure I don’t steal another car, me

entiendes.”

“Speak English, honey. We’re Americans.”

“Si, Señora,” I said.

Mom pulled my hair, and I yelped. “Tell your mentor that we’ll expect her for dinner in a week. That should give me enough time to prepare.”

“This is ridiculous.”

“So was taking someone else’s property.”

“Look who’s talking?”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“The Spanish stole the land from the Indians, and you’re the most Spanish person I know. I’m just following in your footsteps.”

“Who is feeding you these lies?”

“I’ve been reading up on the subject.”

“You’re Spanish, Rogelia. And that’s something to be proud of. Believe me, I’ll be talking to the principal next week.”

“Mom, don’t.”

“In my time, it was enough to wear a nice dress and have a date to a dance on Saturday night.”

Afterward, inspecting the hairdo in the mirror, I said, “You’re right, mom. Someone will ask me to a dance any day now.”

“I never went more than a week without a date.”

“I know, mom.”

I grabbed a slice of toast and made a beeline for her bedroom, where I “borrowed” a beaded cuff, a turquoise and silver necklace. I then paired with my own poncho that had bright red, green, and gold stripes.

When I emerged from my room, mom said, “Take those clothes off now.”

I pulled out the bobby pins until the two braids fell down my shoulders, and then I scrambled out of the house, taking cover behind Julio who never suffered her punishment. She reserved it all for me.

“I’ll be waiting for you when you get home.”

I climbed into his truck before she decided to come barreling down the sidewalk of the turquoise house.

“Why do you rile her up like that?” Julio said.

“Why are you her favorite?” I countered.

At school, I sashayed down the middle of the hallways, linked arm in arm with Marta and Byron on either side of me. People had no choice but to open up space for us, watching us, watching me, some for the first time. Those who snickered or stifled their laughter only boosted my confidence. I was bowled over when a couple students came up to me and said, “You look cool.” But I said nothing, just nodded, afraid that becoming Rogelia again would break the spell, and I would lose my courage.

Predictably, between classes, Noemi came up to me with her entourage in tow. She made sure that my friends weren’t around.

I didn’t cower, and before she could say anything, I held my hand up and said, “How.”

“What the hell is your problem?” Noemi said.

She tried to push me, but I sedimented myself, like the red rocks that guarded the eastern edge of town.

“You wanted an india, didn’t you?” I said.

“You’re loca,” she said.

I bowed to her. “A su orden.”

“People are laughing at you, you freak,” she said.

“Or maybe they’re laughing at you.”

She whirled around, and the girls went straight-faced. She snapped at them to follow her, and they did. But one of the girls, Fabiola, flashed me the thumbs-up sign as she trailed the group.

Noemi’s ass is grass.

Believe me, I didn’t reach this decision lightly. It’s not like I didn’t have a senior project to complete. Also, like my father, I’m a slow burner, patiently tending to every humiliation until one forced me to stoke those embers into an unforgiving fire. That moment was the incident at school.

Naturally, I turned to my brother. His biceps and quads, all bigger than his head, were daily reminders that Julio had a problem being Julio, as if he wasn’t enough as is. When I told him that I needed to corner Noemi and stop her shit once and for all, he said that I had to check out a boxing match first.

That’s how I came to be standing outside a fenced-in yard, just this side of their bruised and bloodied bodies, just out of reach of the group that’d gathered at Julio’s.

Gallup was abuzz about boxing that spring and summer, everyone looking to be the next Jerry Martinez or Rocky Balboa. The smells of sweat and cigarette smoke, the pit fire blazing, the roaring voices when he battered Gustavo or Linden, egged my brother on. His desire for fame lured them closer to Julio, their resident demi-god in a town always in need of one. Back then, if Julio had told those guys to jump off the hogback, a slice of mountain so named for its resemblance to that animal's jagged spine, they'd have scrambled to see who could get there first. Even now, after what happened, he still commands the respeto that my brother believes is his due.

After watching a few of his workouts, I came to believe that he punched every bag as if it were our father's face. This shouldn't have surprised me since our father was to blame for everything bad that happened in Julio's world. You couldn't tell him that to his face without inciting a riot, of course. But once, on a rare occasion when I'd been invited into the inner sanctum of his bedroom, Julio had confided that it was dad's silence, not his brawn, that scared him. He told the story about the stop sign. It hung, trophy-like, on the the bedroom door. "The bastard never said a word about it."

"Did you think he was gonna slap you on the back and say, 'Way to go, son?'" I said.

"I was only borrowing it," Julio said, his voice small and hollowed out. I tried to pat his shoulder, but he jerked away.

I edged near enough for sweat and spit to wet me as Byron entered the makeshift ring made of tree branches.

All eyes were fixed on Julio when Byron boasted that he too would be a famous

boxer.

“No one can stop me,” he said.

“Show us what you got, bro,” Julio said.

Bro. The word signaled brotherhood. But Julio spat it out with a disdain reserved especially for guys who weren't brown and proud like Gustavo and Modesto or homegrown-white like Jack and Linden. His most special dislike he reserved for Byron. Maybe that's why. Or it could've been that his white blonde hair and blonder eyebrows made Byron seem even more of a stranger, an alien. Not to mention that Byron was an Okie, which only signaled that he wasn't from here. We weren't either, I had reminded Julio too many times to count. Byron, after all, was my best friend, and I owed him my loyalty too, didn't I? But Julio brushed me off, content to maintain the fiction that he'd been born and bred Gallup.

Byron moseyed over to the punching bag, which hung like a carcass from a meat hook. He barreled into it, one blow after the other, splitting the bag open from top to bottom, sand spilling from the ugly gash as if it were the entrails of an animal.

“Puro loco,” my brother said.

Byron pummeled the bag. Like all those other guys, my brother included, he was fired up by their own weaknesses, shoving all their physical and emotional pain tight inside them like the sand in those bags. He punched until his knuckles bled and his white skin blistered under the mountain sun.

Julio let Byron use up all his energy, but sidled over to me and whispered that Byron was something special.

“You’ve been boxing for a month and now you’re an expert?” I said. “Gimme a break.”

“He’s special,” he said. “I just can’t let him know.”

“Why not?”

“Do I really have to spell it out?” he said.

We were sitting on two upside-down paint containers. Nearby, Modesto and Jack were shadow boxing. Julio laughed loud enough to drown out their groans. Ever loyal, Julio’s crew joined him, and, in all the time they knew him, Julio’s gang never stopped treating Byron as the outsider he’d always been to them. Afterward, Byron approached me, but I pretended not to see him and called Julio over to me. I shook my head when Julio asked, unable to meet my friend’s gaze. This bad feeling has never left me, though now Byron is far away, and I cannot offer him the apology he deserves.

One day, Mom was working late, and dad had disappeared, something he had started doing after him and mom split. It fell to Julio to make sure I got to work on time. He had an errand to run on 66, some part for his truck, so I sat shotgun and stared out the window. Same buildings, different day. In my mind’s eye, I envisioned abuelita frying hamburger for chile rojo, harvesting verdolagas, watering hollyhocks. My heart drooped. Julio passed a storefront, decked out with yellow balloons and streamers. Cursive writing in bright yellow on the window said: *Karate! Free lesson! 7 pm tonight!*

I turned around in the seat. The seatbelt choked me as I stared until the balloons faded from view, as if an artificial sun had set inside me.

“What was that?” I asked my brother.

“Karate,” he said. “Everyone’s doing it these days.”

This could be the answer to my problems. If I could learn karate, then I could seriously kick Noemi’s ass into the next galaxy. It was better than boxing, which knotted my stomach, sending waves of nausea coursing through me. Being a bad chick meant marking your territory and fighting for it. No matter what. But it didn’t mean I had to purposely get my brains knocked out of my like boxers did. There had to be a better way, and this was it.

“C’mon, Julio.”

“No way, baby sis. I don’t need no Oriental whatever to kick ass. I can do that on my own.”

“Please,” I said.

“Nope,” he said.

We drove in silence, nearing home as we passed Piggly Wiggly, Anthony’s Game Room, and Trademart.

“Next time, baby sis. I won’t go in, but I’ll drop you off.”

“Thank you, brother,”

He swatted at me as if I were a fly.

“I love you too,” I said, and he shook his head.

After days of my nonstop badgering, Julio drove me to the storefront for my first karate class. Since learning about this new form of self-defense, I’d been even more overwhelmed by feelings of revenge toward that skag Noemi.

The storefront window was fogged up, but I could discern shadowy shapes moving

around inside. I opened the door and stood in the foyer. That's as far as I got, feeling awkward and shy, out of my league, while some people stretched and practiced their kicks. Others crouched and punched the air. All of them studied themselves in mirrors that ran the length of both walls.

I stepped back into the heat and walked west toward the shortcut turnoff to State Road 32. I wasn't ready for karate. "Later, people," I said, waving off the imaginary people with my hand.

"Hey."

The wind was whipping hard that day, and I couldn't hear anything. And all I could think about anyway was how the dust would cloud my eyes as I made the two-mile trek home and what I could do to avoid it.

"Hey, you."

His voice rose above the wind, and I turned around. The guy holding the storefront door was big-shouldered and wore the same smirk I'd seen in the shop. He was tall and wore a purple belt around his waist, his hair was sandy but matted from sweat, his eyes full and a deeper green than most pine trees around McGaffey Lake. I'd not had the chance to notice these traits as deeply when we first met at the shop.

"Give it a chance," he said. "This could rehabilitate you."

I shrugged. "I'm uncoordinated."

"So am I."

"I doubt it."

"Then we both have something to prove."

The heat was shrinking me, as was the thought of walking home in it.

“Okay?” I said.

Lefty chuckled and gestured for me to come inside. “It’s cool. And anyway the first lesson is free.”

He held the door open, and I followed him inside.

“Do you work here?” I said, wiping my face with the back of my hand, trying to make out the shapes of those around me. It smelled of sweat and patchouli incense.

“No. But I should. I’m a great recruiter.”

He winked at me.

“I was going to sign up,” I said.

“Sure you were,” he said. “And I’m Muhammed Ali.”

Lefty was there for my second lesson the following week, standing in front of the class and wearing a purple belt. I made my way to the back of the room, through a gauntlet of people dressed in black, each wearing a thick belt of one color—white, yellow, green, purple, or brown, black—each belt tied with the same knot.

I huffed through hamstring stretches and jumping jacks.

“Sit-ups,” Lefty said, and I dropped onto the shaggy carpet.

“Here, let me get you started.” Lefty knelt in front of me.

“You first,” I said.

“Why me?” he said.

“Because this was your idea,” I said.

“Can’t,” he said. “Gotta lead the class. But someone else can help.” Lefty tapped

a young woman on the shoulder and whispered in her ear. She nodded and whirled around.

“Sure,” the girl said.

“I’m not working with her,” I said, backing up, my whole body locked and loaded.

“You have no choice,” he said. “Make it work.”

We scowled at each other.

“Let’s go,” Lefty said, clapping his hands and taking his place in front of the group.

“You first,” Noemi said.

We dropped to the floor, and Noemi held my feet while I completed a set of situps, performing at a furious pace.

“Ten more,” she said.

“What for?” My face glimmered with sweat.

“Because I said so.”

“Screw you, skag,” I said, pulling my feet from beneath her hands.

Before she could respond, another man, older than Lefty, had taken center stage in front of the group. This man, who called himself sensei, asked us line up and taught us how to bow as a sign of respect. Soon we were learning how to drop into a stance, how to find our center of gravity.

“This is the key,” sensei said, “to maintaining your balance.”

Then he moved spider-like from one end of the mirrors to another. He pulled on his pant legs and deepened into his stance, his legs as wide as the arroyo near the

turquoise house. Lefty tried to push him over, but sensei was solid as red rock.

“Build your quads,” he told us. “You’ll need them.”

I dropped into the stance, and my hips and butt ached, my muscles unused and angry. How would I know when I found my center of gravity? I looked to Lefty for guidance. But he was crouching in perfect form. Noemi was no use to me.

Sensei told us that most black belts rarely used their physical power to subdue an opponent. “Use your brains.” He pointed to his own head and then sent a punch flying to Lefty’s head. Lefty parried and moved his upper body back as if he was elastic.

“Always move away from a fight,” the teacher said, “not into it.”

“Remember that,” Noemi said.

I flipped her the bird and made my way to the door. Most everyone had left by then, and the karate teachers were in the back room. Before I opened the door, she grabbed my hair and pulled me back into the dojo. I tripped on the carpet and got carpet burn as I slid across it.

I dragged her down to the floor with me, and we rolled around. We were both pitiful in our attempts to be cool chicks who kicked ass. I had arrived at the dojo with a private longing to feel the pillowy whoosh when my fist collapsed someone’s stomach or grazed the malleable cheek before I pulverized it. I wanted shards of bone to sprinkle beneath the skin like so much pollen alighting on earth. I managed to land a punch to Noemi’s gut, but the soft landing gave me no solace or satisfaction. The same nausea engulfed me, and I fell back on the rug. My eyes watered, and I labored to catch my breath. Noemi did the same, and our chests rose and fell in unison.

“You’re such a bitch,” she said.

“Takes one to know one.”

Lefty came back in and saw us sprawled on the floor of the dojo.

“Come back again,” he said.

Noemi and I burst out laughing.

Lefty looked confused, and, as if we could read each other’s minds, Noemi and I both stood and grabbed Lefty, trying to pin him to the ground. We were doomed to failure from the start, and we both knew it. This sent us into spasms of laughter as Lefty pinned both of us to the ground at the same time. We wriggled and feigned danger, but most of all, I was close enough to see just how deep those green eyes really were until I squirmed and hollered to be let free lest I kissed him right there in the dojo, which would cause me to lose my center of gravity forever.

CHAPTER III

OF HOMELANDS AND STRONG BODIES

A New Mentor

I carried the scrap of paper in my pocket for a week. Occasionally, I'd pull it out and imagine myself dialing and asking for an interview. But with no questions to ask Lindy, and no idea what to ask, I knew I needed to get to the library. I also knew that I didn't want my parents to take me. Wasn't I already prisoner enough?

Even though dad had railed against Dr. Matsuda, and mom had worried at me about every guy I'd ever met, my parents still kept a tight rein on my whereabouts: Home. School. Work. Repeat. I had no choice but to ask Noemi, my new friend, to help me out. Through no fault of their own, Byron and Marta would sooner or later squeal to my brother or my parents—that's just who they are—whereas Noemi claimed that she was past all the b.s. from before. I needed this to be true, so I asked her to take me to the library the following Saturday morning and to keep it a secret. Okay, she said.

Until they separated, my parents had ushered in each day with the same ritual: coffee, quiet conversation, radio voices murmuring in the background, and my mother's incessant smoking. After the separation, the kitchen remained empty at breakfast. On that Saturday morning, when I emerged from my bedroom, ready to bolt out the door and up the hill and into Noemi's waiting car, my whole family had gathered in the kitchen. My mother was leaning against the kitchen counter, smoking a cigarette. My father, uniform pressed and hair stiff with gel, was refilling his coffee cup. Julio, morose as ever around dad, picked at the scrambled eggs my mother undoubtedly prepared for him. He was in need of some kind of tonic because my brother's hair was a mess, his

shirt misbuttoned. Wherever he'd been all night, whatever had happened in the stifling summer heat among the parched hills of this town, Julio announced that he'd been hired at the mines. He let loose a stream of talk about money, his bros, his boxing dreams.

Those words slid from him as easily as the brown wrapping my mother was removing from yet another decorative plate, this one from Texas. The plate would be placed alphabetically between empty spaces on the kitchen wall that would eventually anchor those from Tennessee and Utah. Her goal was to visit all fifty states, and our parents' quick trip to a small town in Texas had brought this one into the fold. It hadn't mattered one speck to my mother that this plate, like the half dozen she'd collected before it, had been made in China. They were proof that she'd been a traveler beyond Gallup, a town as it turned out that she would never leave, as if anyone would accuse my mother of lying.

"How much did you pay them?" I said to Julio. "And who can I thank?"

I crouched in my seat, waiting for my brother to punch my arm or swat at my head. He was older than me by two years, and we'd been friends until he'd graduated from high school, and we were still friends but not like we used to be, not since this boxing thing had happened. Julio didn't do anything, and I began to fear that the summer would be a long, dry one in more ways than one.

"Are you sure that's the best course of action, son?"

Though his voice sounded hollow, there was no mistaking my father's formal tone. My brother and I had learned early on that it meant disapproval, even moreso when he tagged "son" or "daughter" to the end of anything. I was my father's favorite back then,

and neither of my parents, but especially my father, believed that my brother's dream was as important as mine. *Julio is ruining his life*, had become a constant refrain in our house. Despite their broken marriage, my parents could still agree on this.

"It's my life," Julio said.

I gathered the newspapers, the discarded bubble wrap, and the box.

"Save the box," she said. Other than that, my mother said nothing. She'd already said everything there was to say when it came to Julio. Like me, she was probably wishing that she was somewhere in Texas.

My brother tucked into his eggs, chile verde, and papitas.

Dad, coffee cup in hand, ambled toward my mother, his gait tentative, as if stone-stepping across a river, the way I imagined that I'd approach Lefty, the mechanic I'd been thinking about more than a girl should.

My mother had propped herself up, elbows locked, arms straight as two-by-fours, hands clutching the counter. Her body tensed up like those of the wrestlers I'd seen at school. When my father reached to caress her cheek, mom swiveled sideways and craned her neck toward the wrap-around wall of plates. His hands were small for a man his size, almost girlish, though at that moment each one seemed to jut from him like a slag of mountain. My mother had already pushed off from the counter and was making her way to the dining table. Julio remained oblivious, and I pretended I was. Dad's hands remained suspended in mid air. She slowed down, even leaned back a little. When I replay that moment, I see now her longing in the tilt of her head, her sagging shoulders, the shaky fingers as she dragged on the cigarette.

Once he'd finished, Julio stalked toward his bedroom, abandoning us to the reeking odors of cigarette smoke and marijuana. I announced to no one in particular that I was going to take out the trash from the decorative plates. My mother smashed her cigarette into my father's uneaten potatoes. By then my dad, clutching a tortilla, was lumbering toward the door.

"Wait a minute," mom said, and my father stopped mid step at the back door.

The click click click of the cuckoo clock stirred the worry stockpiling inside me. I hoisted the trash, dumped it into the garbage can, and scampered up the hill to meet Noemi.

A Meeting

Following are nicknames for uranium that I knew in 1979: uranium.

This element, its revered history in New Mexico, reignited what had been my somewhat dormant desire to leave Gallup faster than I could put all those vowels in the proper order for a metal named after the planet Uranus. I'd zoom for the last time past liquor stores and slabs of red rock, drive by the Ft. Wingate and Crownpoint exits, cresting the Continental Divide and cruising through Grants, with its sacred volcanic rock and the majestic Mt. Taylor. I'd race past Laguna Pueblo, beyond my family and on to Albuquerque. From there, I'd make my way north and spend the rest of my days farming my abuelita's land, being a custodian of a land grant that had been in our family for generations.

I had to find a way to return to my homeland, but these thoughts burrowed underground once I found myself inside Noemi's musty car, with its fraying seats and a

bobbly beige dog with a cheap velvet hide who stood guard on the dash board. Noemi turned up the eight-track, and the song “Fantasy” filled the car. We sang in our soprano voices, doing our best to imitate the high-note singers of Earth, Wind and Fire. I wiggled my shoulders and made the occasional jabbing motions with my pointer finger, Travolta-like.

I’d snuck out once again, but the act itself had become so mundane as to be inconsequential. What was important was that I was going to meet Lindy. I’d finally called her, giving a fake name, “Maria,” in case my mystery informant, a physician or a nurse, knew my mom. Noemi wasn’t all that interested in my project, but her own mom was always working, and Noemi was always on babysitting duty. Here was a chance to get out from under her mom’s thumb.

“We’re here,” Noemi said as she pulled into the parking lot of Kristy’s.

Lindy said she wanted to meet outside the hospital and had mentioned this popular diner, making me wonder how mysterious she really wanted this rendezvous to be since this was one of the most popular destinations in town. With my suspicions heightened, I told Noemi to park as far behind the restaurant as possible.

We sat in the furthest booth from the door. I faced the door, so I wouldn’t miss Lindy when she came in. We ordered wet fries—crispy golden French fries smothered in the brown gravy—and waited for the mysterious Lindy to make herself known. To pass the time, I tried talking about the project and what I’d learned from my research: how uranium-238 is the most abundant element in nature, how the Manhattan Project in Los Alamos used milled uranium ore, how uranium, the second-heaviest metal in the world,

and has a half-life of 4.6 billion years. I cannot keep that number in my head, I told Noemi, but she was intent on getting the salt shaker to balance atop the pepper one. I had to relearn, amnesiac that I was, how little patience she had for the world around her, how little Noemi cared for conversations that didn't revolve around our lives as girls, young women, stupid stunts. Which is why it came as no surprise when she said, "There should be a universe with 4.6 billion guys." There was no time to take her to task because the door opened, and who should walk through it but Dr. Matsuda and Lefty.

"I gotta get outta here," I told Noemi who turned around in her seat.

"It's just Lefty," she said.

"It's the lady I'm worried about," I said.

Noemi shrugged, got up, and went over to Lefty's table. I felt a pang of heartache for him until I saw Dr. Matsuda walking toward me. I wanted to slide to the floor and crawl away. But I could only sit there, pushing the wet fries around on the plate.

"Rogelia?" she said.

"Hi, Doc," I said.

"I'll be in touch with your father about another meeting," she said.

"I'd meet with you now," I said, "but I'm waiting for someone." Dr. Matsuda needed to know that I was an important person too.

"I'm waiting for someone as well," she said.

In my ongoing attempt to impress Dr. Matsuda with my own self-importance, I said, "You might know her. She works at the hospital."

As the words left my mouth, I knew I'd blown my cover and the confidentiality of

my informant. Crap. I didn't reveal any more than that, but Dr. Matsuda, to her credit, was the consummate professional. She simply asked if she might join me, and once I said yes, called the waitress over and ordered more wet fries and two forks.

Lefty and Noemi were chatting away a few tables away. Lefty only had eyes for her, and Noemi repeatedly swung her hair back over her shoulder. Her laughter drowned out the clattering of plates that busboys removed from the neighboring tables. I tingled with jealousy, felt immediately resentful that I was stuck with this quiet lady who urged me to take the first bite of the wet fries once the waitress set the steaming plate in front of us. We didn't say much more until the check arrived. Dr. Matsuda rummaged in her purse and plunked down a credit card, excusing herself to go to the bathroom. The waitress took the bill and returned it with the slip to sign. As she turned away, she accidentally pushed the tray onto the floor.

"That's okay," I said, bending to pick up the credit card and receipt. I tidied up the mess, but also peering at the name on the credit card. By then, Dr. Matsuda was making her way back, resuming her place in the booth opposite me.

As she picked up her fork, I said, "You're Lindy?"

"Are you disappointed?" she said.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I just wanted..."

Noemi returned to our booth and told me that her mother had been called to work. She had to take care of her siblings and Lefty had agreed to drive her home.

"How will I get home?" I said.

"I'll take you," Dr. Matsuda said. "We have a lot to talk about."

An Interview with Lindy Matsuda

1. What is your name?

Dr. Lindy Matsuda

2. What is your job?

I am a physician who works in internal medicine. I see all patients who need medical assistance, but my clinical specialty is diseases of the lungs. I received my medical training at San Francisco State University Medical School. Before coming to Gallup, I worked in a clinic in San Francisco.

3. Where do you work?

About 2 years ago, I applied to work in a Health Professional Shortage Area. Gallup was identified as one of the sites.

4. How long have you lived here?

2 years

5. Have you had any patients with breathing problems?

Yes. About a year ago, a few Navajo men made appointments. The number continued to rise, and this alarmed me.

6. If so, what are their symptoms?

Shortness of breath. Sputum. Exhaustion. A productive cough. Hoarseness.

7. Do you think those problems are related to the mining aspect? Why or why not?

There is no empirical evidence to prove that there is a relationship between uranium mining and lung disease. However, I am interested in pursuing this

situation.

8. What do you know about uranium in terms of science?

Uranium has 92 protons and 92 electrons. It is a naturally occurring element that is most often found in rock and soil as one of six isotopes. The most common is uranium-238.

9. What can be done to solve this problem, if there is one?

I am not sure yet that there is a problem.

Dr. Matsuda was kind enough to grant the interview, but afterward she still had to take me home. I'm not the kind to skulk around in the shadows, she told me, and so Dr. Matsuda refused to drop me off at the picnic table in the park. Dad had disappeared himself again, and mom often worked swing shift. I could only hope that the house was empty or that only my brother was home. For once, I wouldn't have minded listening to my brother's chanting or putting up with the aroma of stinky patchouli incense that oozed from his bedroom while statues of the Virgin Mary and Jesus and St Jude balance precariously atop his rickety milk crate-altar. When we rolled up to the house, the place was quiet. I was quietly relieved, thanking Dr. Matsuda profusely for the interview, promising to set up a meeting with my parents, thanking her again until finally she said that she had to prepare for work the next day.

I pushed open the car door at the same time that my father drove up in his truck.

"Hurry and leave," I told her. "I'll handle it."

Dr. Matsuda said, "I have nothing to hide."

My father pocketed his keys and held a baton of some sort in his other hand,

waiting.

I managed to jump between them as she extended her hand to my father.

“What are you holding?” I said.

“This is for your protection,” he said, making an effort to stare down Dr. Matsuda as an uncomfortable reminder of her supposed abandonment of me.

“Dad,” I said, “am I supposed to drag this around in my backpack?”

“Mace would be more helpful,” Dr. Matsuda said.

“Too bad you weren’t there when she needed that,” Dad said.

“Mr. James,” Doc said. “This has all been a misunderstanding. Can we start anew? I believe Rogelia is trying her best, and we have a new project that will satisfy the requirements of the adjudication mentoring requirement.”

“What’s the project?”

Dr. Matsuda explained it to dad, after which he said, “I don’t want any negative publicity for our family as a result of this. Your brother has just accepted a job at the mine, and your mother and I don’t want our pictures in the paper.”

“Understood,” Dr. Matsuda said.

Dad handed me the baton, and we all went inside the house.

I know what you’re thinking: Everything was copacetic. The project was coming together, your dad and Dr. Matsuda made nice, and your mom, for once, was out of the picture. You’re one lucky girl, Ro.

It’s true. I rode that wave for a while, and then this happened:

Dr. Matsuda decided to form a small organization to investigate the impact of

uranium on miners' health. We worked on a recruitment flier, and my job was to post them around my neighborhood on the southside. After distributing them in our cul-de-sac neighborhood, I climbed the hill behind our house and began papering the Cedar Hills apartment complex. At the top of the stairs in one of the buildings, I heard my dad's deep voice blaring through an open window and the unmistakable clack of poker chips. You should've seen me hightailing it back down those stairs. I wasn't in trouble, but I didn't want to think about why he was there, about broken promises. Halfway down the stairs, I realized that I also had a job to do; I couldn't return to Dr. Matsuda with a handful of flyers. I had to walk by that apartment, slip a flyer under the door, and skedaddle asap. My dad's exasperated moan, followed by "Fuck" and a slapping sound practically shook the whole building and my heart.

"That's no way to act, kimosabe," someone else said.

"That shit has got to stop," dad said.

"You jacked yourself up," still another voice said.

"Now you gotta tell the wife," the first voice said.

"What wife?" dad said.

The guys cracked up laughing, and I took the opportunity to peek between the window blinds, glimpsing the silhouettes of men, ghost-guys sitting around a table, cigarette smoke wafting above them, the unmistakable click of beer bottles. I leaned against the wall, feeling deflated. That blustery January evening came roaring back, when our family gathered to hear dad's anguished confession delivered from a plaid wing-tip chair, his dark face creased, his thick hands clutching the chair's armrests, the

chair flanked by tall white vases stuffed with white azaleas. Dad promised us that he would turn his life around, replenish the savings account, make everything okay again. I believed him since, until his confession, I'd been awash in the fear that dad had been robbed during a routine traffic stop or forced by an interstate car thief, his pistol jammed into my father's back, to drive to the bank and empty the joint account. Julio blew out of the house like a spring monsoon wind. Mom didn't buy it either. Two weeks later, she kicked dad out of the house for blowing my entire college tuition money on gambling.

The door handle turned. I left several fliers in front of the apartment doors on that floor and then got the heck out of there before my dad busted me, although I'd already busted him.

A New Problem

Our family's problems didn't begin with *The Visible Woman*. But I inevitably conjure her plastic visage when I remember clambering down the hill that May afternoon, as if, even now, I could escape what I'd learned about my father in Cedar Hills and later from mom.

I'd received *The Visible Woman* as a Christmas gift five years earlier, when I was twelve, but she was not a toy. She was a science project, an anatomically correct female body made of hard, clear plastic whose flesh-colored organs—intestines and lungs, heart and pancreas, stomach and spleen—fit neatly within her hollowed out frame. She even came with a protruding plastic stomach within which nestled a seven-month-old fetus. Blue veins and red arteries meandered along the length of her body. She was nameless yet stood tall and uncomplaining, arms relaxed, palms facing outward, someone who

bored me after I'd learned the names of her organs. I breezed past her, perched atop the dresser, after returning on that Saturday morning. My soul was melting, my brain was whirring, and I flopped onto the bed and passed out. Upon awaking, I was disoriented and ran into the hallway, clipping her shoulder. *The Visible Woman* nearly toppled over, while dust from her frame sprinkled the air.

I hurried down the hallway, as if some disaster awaited me, and nearly tripped over Bruiser. Our family dog jumped up, his tags tinkling, his glossy, long-haired coat swaying. I ran my hand across his silky fur and felt his expanding girth. When my father lived with us, it fell upon me to exercise our Shetland Sheepdog during his work hours. Now, it was my full-time job, and I resolved to exercise Bruiser that evening.

In the living room, my mother was hunched over, engulfed in a cloud of smoke. "...but when I find her," she said, crushing her cigarette butt into the ashtray. She stood, stretched, and turned around. We eyed each other, the lines between us already drawn. Anger knotted my veins and arteries. I thought my organs would burst. I knew what she was saying, I knew what she meant.

"I'll call you later, Trudy."

My mother hung up the phone and came toward me, that same forced smile painted on her face. "You're home early, honey. Is everything okay?"

"You tell me," I said.

"Are you hungry?" My mother went to the refrigerator and pulled out plastic bags filled with food.

"No."

I wanted to punch her in the mouth. I wanted to run to Trademart and call Noemi and spill my mother's secrets into the receiver of a pay phone. I was even willing to share with Byron and Marta, the two bigmouths. At least Tawny knew how to keep her mouth shut. I paced the living room floor, moving backward into the hallway, never turning my back to mom, the first rule of police training, as my father had taught me. But, for some unfathomable reason, I also pictured Dr. Matsuda and I sharing a plate of fries even after I'd lied to her. Dr. Matsuda answering all my questions even after I'd misrepresented myself. Dr. Matsuda not once raising her voice or admonishing me in any way for being a *sin verguenza*, though I'd been ashamed of how I'd acted.

"Rogelia," mom said.

Even though mom's voice burned a hole inside me as deep as the gouged-out mines in nearby Churchrock, I tamed my tongue and told myself to try to listen. Just try, I told myself, and see what happens.

"I guess I'll have a sandwich, mom."

This was the best I could do, but it was something.

"Okay," mom said, and I could tell she was relieved. I was too, though the desire to yell at her had not subsided.

I followed her into the kitchen and paced while she slathered mayonnaise on a bologna and cheese sandwich. I thought about Dad, how much he'd done for me, how he made mom the butt of his joke. I asked in as nonchalant a voice as I could muster, which was nothing like Dr. Matsuda's quiet confidence. "So, what does Trudy have to say for herself?"

Mom cut the sandwich in half and pulled a plate from the cupboard. “Not much. Just girl talk. Nothing important.”

“Mom, you seemed really mad.”

She arranged the potato chips in a half circle around the sandwich. “I was mad at her boyfriend. He’s been misbehaving.”

She handed me the plate of food, and I didn’t know whether to believe her.

I bit into the sandwich, and mom fixed herself a cheese sandwich with chips.

We sat at the table, watching through the window as hummingbirds dipped into the sugar water.

“Mom,” I said. “I saw dad today.”

She kept chewing, but she seemed startled, as if I’d said I’d seen a ghost.

“Oh?” Mom was wounded, and I was just the tiniest bit happy, though the surging anger I’d felt only moments earlier had dissipated. Maybe Dr. Matsuda was on to something. I didn’t feel like saying more, but mom egged me on when she said, “How is he doing?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did you talk to him?”

“No. He was playing poker with Hamden and some other guys up in Cedar Hills.”

“Why were you in Cedar Hills?”

“You and Dad said I could hand out fliers for my final project. Remember?”

Mom munched on her sandwich, and I could tell she was guarded, the way her

eyes blinked over and over. It was an irritating habit, and I began pacing again because her anxiety made me anxious too.

“I’m sorry, Ro. I forgot.”

Whoa. This was the first time mom had been so nice in a long time.

“Is there something you want to tell me, mom?”

She laughed, more to herself than anything.

“Well, Ro, until now, all I can say is that your father and I are trying to work it out. We’ve been meeting with a counselor and trying to talk about things. Now you come to me with this information. Did I really need to know that nothing’s changed, that especially my own husband hasn’t’ changed?”

I felt ashamed that my anger had led me to spill my guts and that doing so had led her to do the same. I was angry at her for telling me what I wanted to know. I was angry at her for showing her feelings as if they were strangled irises from her voluminous garden.

“Maybe he never will, mom.”

Mom came toward me, arms outstretched. I couldn’t hug her and backed into the hallway.

“Maybe not. But I have hope because nothing is that simple.”

Scores of pictures lined the walls: my abuelita, prom pictures of me and Jake, Julio’s high school graduation, my parents’ wedding picture.

“Mom, what happened? Why did he lose our money?”

She dragged on her cigarette. “He didn’t lose it, Ro. He gambled it away.”

“Four thousand dollars is a lot of poker games,” I said.

“I’m sorry, Ro. You didn’t deserve that.”

“He said he’d replace it,” I said.

“Nothing is ever that simple.”

“How did you find out about the money...and Dad?”

My mother stood on the opposite end, a shadow person in that poorly lit hallway. She looked small but cruel, the burning cigarette hanging from her fingers like a tiny gun. As she told me the story, her body drooped. Her hair, streaked a burnt red, looked purple in the yellowed light. I’d massaged the dye into her hair a couple months ago, and now I understood why.

At the end of her story, she said, “Your father is dealing with things from long ago. Things I cannot even fathom. I see that now.”

I was shaking my head. “How can you stick up for him when he lied to you, to me, to our whole family?”

It was one thing to hear mom saying nice things about him. She wouldn’t let me speak his name; he’d become spectral to her, as if their life had been a mirage. Since the separation, I’d been his only ally, and now I was the biggest vendida ever for betraying him. I’d visited him when Julio refused. I’d helped him set up his tiny apartment, washing the walls, scrubbing the floors, going grocery shopping with him. I wanted my parents to reconcile even more than mom did, if for no other reason that I was tired of being his maid. We used to live on the highest hill in town. We’d only moved to the turquoise house once they’d separated because they couldn’t afford to keep two full

house. Their separation had gnawed at me for months afterward, triggering my whirlwind chase for a homeland. There was no way for me to have known that then. All I knew in that moment was that my whole world had crashed. My father was my sun, and my mother's brittle smile was not enough light to keep our family spinning on its axis.

“Ro, your father was taken from his family as a young boy and sent to a boarding school for Indians.”

I gazed at our family photographs without being swayed by the smiling faces.

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Maybe nothing. But we all have demons to wrestle, and I think this might be his. This isn't the first time he's had problems.”

The thought that my father had problems like this and that I hadn't known about them pissed me off. “What about you? What about your problems?”

“Those are mine to deal with. No one is bad here, Ro. I'm doing the best I can. I miss him, too.”

I couldn't stand her sadness. “Now I know why he left. Go back to your your pills, mom. Just leave me alone.”

I turned, and Julio was standing at the front door, keys in hand. I marched past him and slammed the bedroom door, my chest rising and falling, my breathing shallow. *The Visible Woman* sat on the dresser, as placid as ever. I knocked her from it; she flew through the air like a missile and thudded to the ground. Her entrails spilled across the rug. I picked her up and heaved her against the wall. She didn't break. I retrieved her

again and noticed the cracks running down the length of her body. I was proud of the damage I'd done. But I couldn't do more. It was enough to know that a plastic woman, no matter how strong, couldn't steel herself against all the pain a family could heap on her.

People Against Mining

The inaugural meeting of People Against Mining, or PAM, was disappointingly small. Maybe five or six people, seven including me and Julio. It didn't begin that way. At first, fifty people crowded into one of the classrooms at the UNM Gallup Branch College. I doled out cookies and pop while Dr. Matsuda spoke about the effects of uranium mining on lung capacity, the decades-long excavation of the ore that was used for the Manhattan Project to the north in Los Alamos. Only those people affected by radiation poisoning before 1972, she said, were eligible for reparations through the federally funded Radiation Exposure Compensation Act. She outlined the organization's future plans for protest, raising awareness about the health dangers of mining, getting medical services to those most affected, and finding alternative ways of bolstering the economy.

This last part is what riled some Gallupians, and they let her have it:

"We're making good money, and we have to feed our families."

"There are no other jobs in this town."

"You're not even from here. You can pick up and leave anytime you want."

"We deserve to be paid even more. Have you ever worked in a mine?"

"I feel fine."

Chairs scraped against the floor as people left, and even Dr. Matsuda, the calmest of all people, couldn't convince people to address people's fears, either about their health or the monetary losses that no one could afford to incur.

After sowing the seeds of distrust, most of them, including my brother, left. Your friend can give you a ride home, can't she? he told me, and he took off with Modesto and Linden, other friends from the mine. Byron had been there too, and he left with them, refusing to speak to me.

Afterward, Dr. Matsuda and I straightened the chairs into rows and threw out empty cans and napkins. We gathered the rest of the cookies and put them in plastic bags. Each of us found a chair and munched on cookies.

"That sucked," I said.

"I thought it went well," she said. "We created a forum for people to share their concerns."

"They aren't interested in our organization," I said.

"Maybe not," she said. "But they know we're here, and we're not going away."

A Father's Absence

While our broken family was packing in January 1979, and for weeks after we'd relocated to the turquoise house, I couldn't stop blaming my mother for dad's absence, the loss of our beautiful home in Ford Canyon, our crumbling family. Months later, when Dr. Matsuda came on the scene for our weekly court-mandated sessions, I tried to turn her against mom with my badmouthing. Mom had never warmed up to her and dad wasn't around to facilitate that connection. But Dr. Matsuda never took the bait,

remaining unperturbed by my accusations. I claimed to hate the good physician to all my friends, but honestly I found respite in her unflappable demeanor.

In our sessions, held while folding leaflets or making tea together, I learned that she had come to Gallup about five years earlier, had an aunt and uncle here, and wasn't married. I told her my dream of becoming a journalist. I mentioned the obituaries when she asked how I'd come to be involved. I told her I felt sorry for them and their families.

“What about your family?” I said. “Are your parents in Gallup?”

No, she told me.

“Do you miss them?” I asked, and she said, “Yes, every day.”

“I miss my dad, too.”

She nodded and placed her hand, lightly and only for a second, on my shoulder.

The warmth of her kind touch radiated inside me, and I found myself telling her that I blamed my mom for our family's lot in life. I'm sorry, I told Dr. Matsuda. I shouldn't feel this way. I understand, she said. It's hard not to blame others when you're in pain, she told me, and those miners are probably blaming the mines too.

This thought had never occurred to me, and I felt less like a monster. Dr. Matsuda understood the miners in ways that were similar to my family, and this made me think better of mom and want to do more to help uranium miners.

Dr. Matsuda's words continued to reverberate when I returned early from our session and caught most of mom's phone conversation with Coralynn. I'd migrated to the backyard, sitting in a patio chair. Curtains covered the sliding glass door but the screen door was open. Sitting outside, I heard mom blaming fat Marjorie, “all a fictional

name of the woman who'd called about their credit card account, for all our problems.

“Marjorie asked to speak to Barnard James,” she said, and a few moments later, “I said, ‘I’m sorry you have the wrong number.’”

Mom and Coralynn got a big laugh out of that since no one called dad by his formal name.

Mom listened for a minute, murmuring, and I hoped that she would not open the patio door anytime soon.

“I wasn’t going to answer the phone at all. I needed to get to work. But I feared the worst--a school bus accident or a routine traffic stop gone wrong, and when I’d lifted the receiver to my ear, my voice had wobbled as I’d said hello.”

It was quiet again. Yellow and orange marigolds lined the backyard fence, and the grass was greener and thicker than ever. Mom’s green thumb was everywhere present, and I lamented the fact that I hardly ever spent time in this backyard oasis.

“I told her it was a mistake. In her fat, husky voice, Marjorie said there wasn’t a mistake, the account had been closed for a few weeks, and people had been trying to call for some time. I slammed that receiver down so hard it almost cracked. I called her a cabrona, which I’m not proud of, and please pardon my French, and then I grabbed the paper bag, squishing the bologna sandwich and crushing the potato chips.”

Outside, I watched the hummingbird feeders sway like small red lanterns.

“And the rest is history, Coralynn.”

A breeze ruffled the fragile, translucent petals of mom’s purple irises. We blame others. Those words from Dr. Matsuda rose up inside me, reminding me that sometimes

it's too difficult to look unflinchingly at ourselves and our loved ones. Like the bumper sticker says, "Shit Happens." And no one knew it better than our family.

A Lesson About Spanish Purity

Julio turned up the volume of the eight track, and Neil Young's nasal voice cut into our winter-like solitude. He roared out of the McDonald's parking lot, hitting the cruise, honking occasionally at a passerby in the opposite lane, usually Byron in his blue Z-28.

"When are you gonna tell me what the hell happened with mom the other night?" Julio said.

We cruised past the new Sonic Drive-In and some Indian jewelry stores. "There's nothing to tell," I said.

"Not to mention that bullshit meeting at the Branch."

Lori's, Talk of the Town, more Indian jewelry stores came into view and we sped by them just as quickly.

"You're like him, you know," Julio said. We both knew he was talking about dad.

"Thank you," I said.

"You always make people dig for answers."

"Maybe that's because, when I say things that matter, I get grief for it."

"I won't give you grief," my brother said.

We passed Pizza Hut, the sight of which made me shudder, and then Baskin-Robbins.

“Promise, baby sis,” he said, using an old nickname.

“This isn’t our old cops and robbers game, when I’d ask if I had to be the bad guy,” I said.

Julio chuckled. “And I’d say that someone had to be or else it wouldn’t work.”

“I’m not that fool who hid behind mesquite bushes and pelted you with pebbles,” I said, clouding the window with my breath.

“Damn, those bullets hurt,” Julio said.

“I’m not that fool who didn’t sleep for a week when she found out we were leaving Colorado either.”

I didn’t tell Julio that I cried in the shower, I cried while crossing the railroad tracks on the way to and from school, I cried with my friends before lighting our cigarettes and bemoaning the cruelty of parents. I cried until mom packed our clothes, when I knew it was real.

Julio made the loop and we headed west on 66, back to the McDonald’s.

“I don’t want you to work at the mines.”

“Oh, baby sis, that crap might work on your do-gooder friends. But it has absolutely no effect on me.”

There was no changing his mind. “Don’t come crying to me when you can’t breathe.”

“That’s cold.”

“I don’t want you to die.”

“I’m not gonna die.”

Julio honked at a blue Camaro, Byron's car. I punched in another eight-track.

"Remember when we stayed out at the school when we moved here?"

"Ya," Julio said. "That damn house in Ford Canyon took forever. Good thing dad had a friend out there."

"That was a boarding school, Julio."

"So what?"

"That's how dad grew up."

"I know. Mom told me."

"Are you kidding me? When was this?"

"I don't know. A couple years or so."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"What difference does it make now? We're Spanish, and that's all that matters."

"Don't you even want to know what happened?"

"No. I can't change it, and neither can the old guy. Chill out, baby sis. You're a real downer these days."

"I can't believe I was the last to know."

"Mom knew you'd freak out."

"She told you that?"

"She didn't have to. We all know how you are."

"Whoa," I said.

We didn't say much more while cruising 66. We'd never spoken of those weeks living in that temporary home twenty miles from town, ten from the nearest trading post.

Dad told us over dinner that the kids at the school were running away. Sometimes in small groups, others times alone. He kept a running count. Thirty, one week, twelve the next.

More than anything, though, I felt betrayed by Julio, my mom, my father. Why even have a family when everyone kept secrets, when no one could tell the truth? I socked Julio in the arm. "That's for lying."

"Do you feel better now?"

"Much," I said.

He veered off 66 and drove the long way home, past our old home above Ford Canyon Park, down Nizhoni Boulevard, and finally into the cul-de-sac where the turquoise house hunkered in darkness.

We sat in the truck even after Julio had wrested the key from the ignition. It felt odd to be motionless after the relentless back-and-forth of the cruise, the familiarity of passing the Shalimar Inn, El Rancho Hotel, and Virgie's.

"We better go in now," Julio said.

"You're right," I said. "I wouldn't want anyone to worry about me freaking out, bro."

Julio flashed me the peace sign as I slid out of the car.

"One more thing, baby sis," he said.

"What?" I said as I was about to shut the door.

"We're Spanish. No matter what anyone says. Don't forget that."

I flipped him the bird and went inside the turquoise house. I tiptoed to the

refrigerator, shushing Bruiser whose tags jingled behind me, and made a sandwich, slipping Bruiser a few slices of roast beef along the way.

No grief, Julio said.

Once, while playing cops and robbers, Julio had tripped over a rotted log. I'd jumped up from behind a bush and yelled, "I win. I win." Julio, clutching his chest, leveled his plastic gun at me, but I'd ducked behind the bush. "Too late," Julio said. I'd staggered over to my brother, reaching out my hand to him. He'd tried to grasp it. But I toppled to the ground. "You got me," I said, holding my belly. "You really got me." Julio slumped next to me. The wind whipped the dirt around us, and the sun baked our backs. Later, our father became a cop, but by then the game had lost its luster.

The Return of Lefty

The Shalimar Inn was a large, windowless dance hall on the west side. Every Saturday night, the place filled with loud music, swirling disco balls, and drunk dancing. Noemi knew the bouncer, some guy who still carried a torch for her, and he promised not to card us if I saved him a dance. Noemi begged me to go with her cuz she was having a fling with a state cop. Her and her loverboy were rendezvousing at the bar, and she didn't want to go alone. Plus, she said, maybe you'd like the bouncer, Ro. Sloppy seconds aren't my thing, I told her. But I was tired of my parents, the uranium mine, the dead men. After mom finished her wine and took her sleeping pills, I slipped out of the house and jogged to the picnic table on the hill, where Noemi sat in her idling car.

We got into the Shalimar, no problem, and soon I was standing at the edge of the dance floor, grooving to the tunes. The bouncer, Sal, was sweaty but okay-looking, and

I'd return to the entrance and chat with him while Noemi made out with the state cop in a corner booth. Sal started getting a little too friendly, trying to pull me to him. I squirmed out of his grasp two or three times, and the final time, after calling me his little Mai Tai, Sal tried to kiss me. His sour breath grossed me out, but I could barely move. Someone wrapped both arms around my waist from behind, and then I thought I was well and truly in serious trouble.

“There you are, babe,” he said, spinning me around and planting a kiss on me, tongue and all.

I pretended to struggle but how could I resist Lefty? I leaned into him, and Lefty held me up. Sal backed off, saying he didn't want any trouble. Lefty led me onto the dance floor, and we slow danced to “Always and Forever” by Heatwave.

Byron had begun to make a name for himself as a boxer, so he was surrounded by a gaggle of girls, all wanting a dance with him. He scowled at them, and this told me all I needed to know, all I'd never known about Byron's feelings toward me. After the dance ended, Lefty steered me toward a bar stool and took off. Byron sauntered up to me, took a swig of beer, and practically slammed the bottle onto the counter.

“What the hell's your problem?” I said during a lull in the music.

“Where you been?” he said.

“I didn't know you cared that much,” I said.

“Who says I care?” he said. A grin spread across his face. “I got other things to do.”

The music started, and Byron said, “Let’s dance.” He walked onto the dance floor, lifted his arm above the crowd, and waved me over. The women turned to see what the fuss was about. They heaved a collective, jealous sigh. I felt like a dog being summoned by its master. Some stupid male display of ownership. I stood up from the bar stool, keeping my arms crossed, one leg bent, my hip jutting. From the corner of my eye, I saw Lefty staring at me, then at Byron, then back at me. He backed away, but I waved to Lefty who was already making his way into the crowd of bodies.

I boogeyed toward him, disco ball spinning, lights dimmed, people sloshing side to side, doing the “Freak” and the “Bump.” I bumped one or two people on my way to Lefty. But I lost him. Byron caught my attention, as if to point out the sea of arms brushing against him, women stroking his arms and who knows what else. I stood across the floor from him, waiting for Lefty to appear and take one step, just one, toward me. But there was only Byron trying to be a boyfriend when I needed a friend.

I headed for the corner of the bar, but Noemi had already disappeared with her cop-man. I counted every step on the way to the door. Sweet, precious Byron yelled “bitch,” a curse word that had never once crossed his lips before that night, not even in jest. The women tittered like magpies.

I cruised through the mass of gyrating bodies and thumping music. I parked myself in a booth at McDonald’s next door, nursing a watery coke. After her own “dreamy” date, Noemi consoled me with all the right platitudes: I was better off without him. Better to find out now. !Qué cabrón! It had never dawned on Noemi to apologize

for leaving me hanging. She had no idea that that was as bad, if not worse, than anything Byron or Lefty could have done.

Lift A Glass To The Brothers

In our glitter-ball world, not the glittering world, we
strutted and preened, fucked and drank. We
threw money at bartenders, stuffed it
in bras and dealers' hands, burnt it
with Bic lighters and chased it underground.

Guys like Joe went to Vegas every weekend, skied Aspen,
got some chick pregnant but didn't marry her.

Gordy bought his mom a house, Modesto
got himself a sweet bike and cruised 66
without a helmet. Steaks at Talk of the Town,
cases of Jack Daniels and Dos Equis, poker nights
and Superbowl XI in Pasadena. We all, all of us,
cruised into the Shalimar and The Inn,
swarmed by women, slow danced or not,
as if we were kings, as if the money
would rain on us forever. For some, it did.

For Jones, who moved himself to another
mine, who swore everyone was healthy. Who

still does. Jones who owns two homes, two cars
and a truck, who retired at 45.

Here's to all the Joneses of the world.

A Reflective Moment

So much for relief.

Noemi's drama, my drama, the family drama.

I was drama'ed out.

Next morning, in the wake of the Shalimar disaster, as the sun rose, before the heat scalded our backs, I took Bruiser for a walk. The dog, eager and under-exercised, pulled on the leash. We jogged jog down the hill from the turquoise house toward the cul-de-sac. Between two of the houses was a hill rutted through its middle. This trail led to Trademart. Bruiser's tags jingled, his tongue lolled, his tail wagged as we made our way. Fresh air and the movement of my body offered much-needed distance between me and my mother's admission, between Julio's directive and my confusion.

When in doubt, eat. That would be my relief.

I tied Bruiser to a post and went inside Trademart, a precursor to every box store imaginable. Trademart sold junk, and lots of it, but they had an in-store restaurant that served the best, greasiest French fries on earth. I ordered some and wandered until I found dog biscuits for Bruiser. Outside, the dog greeted me with more tail-wagging, his soft tail brushing against my calves as he waited for the biscuit. "No need for everyone to be miserable," I told the dog while he chomped the biscuit.

Off we went, up and down the hills. When I was younger, my father and I spent the warm evenings roaming the hilly countryside looking for lizards and garter snakes, butterflies and spiders. I had grown especially fond of butterflies and, under dad's tutelage, had learned to capture the beautiful creatures and mount them behind glass. I can still see us loping up and down the steep hills on Gallup's southside, collecting arrowheads and stones, me chasing butterflies with a net as tall as me, while the dog charged ahead and bobbed back, circling us as if we were sheep. Sometimes, he'd drive me and Julio and our friends to the Rio Puerco, called the "Perky" by Gallupians, and together we'd search for silver coins or the metal backings of old watches that glistened whether the stream bed was dry or the water a brown sludge. Sometimes, it was just me and dad scouring the river's shores for its treasures. During those times, dad never spoke of his life before Gallup, and when I asked, which had become a rare event, his stories came out as fragmented as those watches lying still and shiny beneath the water.

Now I knew why. But knowing hadn't lightened my heart or diminished my anger either. If anything, this newfound knowledge had heightened my confusion, and now, breathless, I found that my ascent seemed steeper as Bruiser and I climbed to the top of the highest hill. Even Bruiser was panting. The sun's heat was crackling, and I felt faint. Still, I didn't want to go home. I tugged on Bruiser's leash, and we inched our way down. I had one more spot in mind, which involved crossing State Road 32. This was no small feat, but Bruiser and I hung out on the curb until traffic slowed, and we jetted across the street.

The cave was still there, a hollowed out formation that had housed generations before me, for sure. I pulled out the jug of water I'd filled up at home, and cleaned out one of the many cups and cans that littered the floor of the cave. After pouring a little for Bruiser, I drank from the jug. Bruiser laid down beside me and rested. I peered out at Ford Canyon, our home before Dad's gambling mess had forced us into the turquoise home.

On the back of this dubious legacy came news about the boarding school. Julio and I had been told our whole lives that we were Spanish, and like mom, I'd nurtured a vision of myself as an explorer in the tradition of other Spanish explorers: Hernan Cortes who conquered Mexico, Francisco Vazquez de Coronado who sought paradise in the Seven Cities of Cibola, or Ponce DeLeon whose insatiable thirst for an antidote to aging led him in search of the Fountain of Youth. My mother had encouraged us, her children, to think of ourselves as the discoverers of the land and its jewels, to continue the legacy of our Spanish ancestors. Hadn't the Spanish brought Catholicism to a godless land and the written word to people without an alphabet? Hadn't those same Spanish explorers tamed this New World and brought hope to the doomed, lawless Indians?

Now I was being told that I was Indian.

Was I lawless? A mongrel? Godless?

As Bruiser slept, I scoured the teachings given me by my own father and mother. But it all came back to the same thing: our family's history had been built on lies. If I wasn't Spanish, then who was I? Was I both? What would abuela do? Had she known?

Bruiser awakened and shook off the leaves and dirt. I gave him another biscuit. During the dog's nap, it was as if the hills had shifted, as if the stories passed to me had become nothing more than a pile of stale historical "facts" or the wishful swashbuckling fantasies of youth.

I gathered my belongings and dusted myself off. Sitting in this cave was the closest I'd been to nature since dissecting stiff, gray frogs in anatomy class earlier that spring. I felt then as mummified as those frogs, our family's history now fossilized in some amber-colored past, our memories now shellacked and unreliable, now only graying artifacts of a past built on lies.

A Ghostly Appearance

Like they say, Once you know something, you can't unknow it. And just like that, my father's secret burden became mine. Everywhere I went—job, school, home—the ghost of my father's boarding school life trailed me. It was as if his childhood self was in need of its own obituary. Yet, how could I write a story that was not mine, for which I had no facts or impressions?

As for me, I needed someone to whom I could unburden myself, someone who would understand that I felt as uprooted as the dying azalea bushes mom yanked from the frozen ground. I couldn't confess my fears to my parents, certainly not to Byron, and Marta and Tawny had become themselves apparitions with whom I communicated only as we floated down the hallways of high school. It took a while, but finally I figured out exactly who my confessor, my helper would be. In the meantime, lost as I was and just

as oblivious to it, I doodled incessantly on the obituary intake sheets or wrote half-assed obituaries for the dead until finally Barbara called me into her office.

“Sit,” she said.

Her office smelled musty, like old carpet, but was otherwise pristine. Paper weights trapped paper beneath them on a desk that came straight out of colonial times with its chiseled if skinny legs and their dark-stained cherry wood. Her collection of tiny silver spoons from different countries and U.S. states were housed in wooden boxes that hung on walls around the room.

“I didn’t want to hire you, you know,” she said, sipping from a coffee cup and placing it back on the coaster. “All I needed was a snot-nosed kid I was sure I had to babysit all the livelong day.”

I squirmed in my chair, counting the spoons, silently begging her not to fire me. The judge wouldn’t be happy.

“But I told your dad I’d help him out. He did a favor for me once upon a—”

“My dad got me this job?”

“You bet your sweet bippy,” Barbara said.

“I thought it was my mom.”

“It’s none of your business anyway. All you need to do is go back to your desk and do your job.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“This is your first and only warning. The next time I have to reprimand you will be your last. Got it?”

“Got it.”

“Good. Now go get the intake sheet on top of the stack and write the best darned obit you’ve ever written.”

I returned to my desk, embarrassed and determined to prove my worth once again. I could only hope that the obituary I’d written and submitted was enough.

Dennis Benally, In Loving Memory

Dennis Benally, 45, died of complications from lung cancer on Saturday, May 26, 1979 at his home in Churchrock.

Mr. Benally is survived by his wife, Coralynn, and their three children, all of Churchrock; his older brother Garland, of Window Rock; his sister, Mary, and two nieces, Bette, 8, and Olivia, 6; his son-in-law George, all of Denver, Colorado. He is preceded in death by his sister Dorothy Benally, 35, and his nephew, Levi, 4.

Mr. Benally was born on February 8, 1934 in Churchrock, New Mexico to Edison Benally and Sandra Perea. He attended Ft. Wingate Elementary school until the age of seven, but eventually graduated high school from Ignacio Indian Boarding School in Ignacio, Colorado in 1951. He returned to Churchrock where he married his wife and worked various jobs in construction and janitorial services. Since 1965, Mr. Benally worked for uranium mine at Churchrock, first as an ore truck driver and later as an underground supervisor.

He was a dedicated family man and loving husband and father. Mr. Benally was especially proud that his older brother Garland had been a Code Talker during World War II. Mr. Benally was a patriotic servant to his country and served in Korea as an airplane mechanic, earning the rank of sergeant. A deeply patriotic man, he believed that his work at the uranium mine helped the national effort to fight those foreign enemies that might invade the USA. He was an active member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. He will always be remembered as a family and community leader, a very funny guy, a nearly lifelong member of the Assembly of God Church, and an avid horseman.

Funeral Services are scheduled for May 31, 1979, at First Assembly of God Church, 716 E. Hill, in Gallup, New Mexico. A reception will follow at the church. In lieu of flowers, the family asks that donations be sent to the American Lung Association.

The Benally family would like to thank all those friends and family who have brought food, told stories, and prayed with us.

A Renewed Acquaintance

Dad picked me up from karate practice the following Saturday. Julio usually did the honors. Lately, though, my brother had been working overtime at the mine because, as he'd told mom and me over spaghetti dinner, and while dad was out on patrol, or, as he called it, "hunting Mexicans and Indians," he'd bought a house across from Red Bluff Trailer Park off Aztec.

"Nothing fancy," he'd said of his new place on the eastside. He claimed that there was no drama surrounding his decision to leave the turquoise house. No violent clash with dad, no banging and storming around, but no apologies or forgiveness either.

Truth be told, dad had done his damage long before Julio descended into the mines, long before my brother's life revolved around fording the yellow muck and bringing home the buck. Julio's new pastimes—flashing wads of cash, travelling to Vegas two or three times a month, and buying expensive vans with solar panels—was his fuck-you to dad. I didn't want him to leave me alone with pill-popping, in-denial mom in the turquoise house, but Julio doled out a bear hug to his “baby sis” and went to sleep for the first time in his own home.

I remained slightly suspicious of the timing of Dad's appearance because, earlier that morning, mom had slipped me a shoebox wrapped in brown paper and asked me to deliver it to him. That box may as well have been a ticking time bomb. Throughout practice, I screwed up my roundhouse kicks, missing the sternum area every other time. I couldn't concentrate enough and got knocked on my ass more than once. Wouldn't you be curious about a box whose contents were hidden, a box that looked like a present but wasn't? All morning, all I could think was that the box held some horrible secret about me, my probation, my job. Maybe mom had lost the turquoise house, and we would be homeless. Maybe the box held divorce papers that dad had to sign to dissolve their marriage.

Before practice ended, Dad roared up to the storefront. Everyone heard him, and a few looked out the window to see who was making a racket.

After practice, I jumped quickly into the truck and put the box between us on the seat. “This is from mom,” I said.

Dad hit the gas, wheels squealing as he merged with the rest of the traffic

heading west on 66 until he turned off Mesa and I could tell we were headed to the turquoise house. I was fearful because mom might be home, and I told dad he could drop me off at the picnic table on the hill behind the house. But he motored down the hill and, cautious man that he was in regards in to mom, parked in front of the house next to ours.

Mom was gone, and dad pulled a heavy box from the back of the pickup. I carried the shoebox, and we snuck into the garage, like two kids looking for trouble. Dad's whole workspace had remained untouched, as if he'd never left, and I hoped he'd rip open the shoebox and reveal its secrets. But dad began opening the bigger box instead, pulling out tray after tray of shiny brass bullets that clearly had already undergone the three-hour tumbling process that turned bullet casings shiny and reusable.

Dad invited me to sit, as if he still lived there, and we both pulled our stools up to the work bench. I got a lump in my throat, both due to my sad anger about the boarding school and the nostalgia stirred up about making bullets with my dad, which had been the centerpiece of father-daughter bonding moments that had sustained me, especially during those times when I'd felt awkward and friendless. Dad was always there, and we learned that we got along best when tackling projects together: hauling wood, washing and waxing the car, walking Bruiser up and down the steep hills on Gallup's southside, collecting arrowheads and stones. Sometimes, while making bullets, my father let slip tidbits of his own life.

Dad, a stickler for safety, handed me a pair of goggles and kept a pair for himself. He'd already rubbed down the bullets with a good amount of oil, and the next step was to check each casing for deep indentations and leftover moisture since dad used

the wet tumbler method for cleaning bullet casings. This inspection process, checking each one and then positioning it back in cases with slots that could fit tubes of lipstick as easily as bullets, produced within us a state of silent reverie, each motion building on the next, the sound of metal clanging against the sides of the carrying case.

Then it was time to use the reloader. I handed dad a spent casing and he loaded it into the machine and pulled the lever. The machine spun the bullet, dad preferring the single-bullet method rather than loading a bunch of bullets at once. My job was to hand him each bullet casing and let him and the machine do the rest. As I said, teamwork was key to our smooth functioning father-daughter team, and, of course, I screwed it up that day by asking the burning question that had overloaded my mind. “Dad,” I said, “are we Spanish?”

His hand trembled slightly, but otherwise dad kept loading bullets into the reloader. “Your mother has always been clear on that matter.”

I handed dad the final bullet casing. “What about you, dad?”

“Start brushing out the gunpowder,” Dad said, handing me a brush.

I picked up a single casing and began cleaning it. We worked in silence for a few more minutes until finally, terror clawing at my throat, I said, “Mom told me about the boarding school.”

Dad liked to measure gunpowder by hand, something I wouldn’t recommend today or probably even then. It required precision, and dad’s steady hands never faltered as he weighed each batch of gunpowder to its exact weight. He stopped in the middle of the weighing process and turned to me. “The past is over,” he said.

I placed a small projectile into his palm. “It’s part of me. I want to know. Tell me what happened, Dad. You’re the only one who can.”

Muffled voices reached us from inside the house. I followed dad into the kitchen where Julio was rummaging through the refrigerator. Lefty stood in the doorway between the kitchen and the living room.

“Don’t those mine bosses pay you enough to feed yourself?” I said.

“Not funny, baby sis,” he said. “Lefty and I were in the neighborhood. We’re just grabbing a bite.”

Dad said nothing, just turned the kitchen faucet on and washed his hands. Finally, he said, “Take your sister with you.”

I thought Julio was gonna lose it all over dad. “We got things to do. She’d just be in the way.”

“Since when is your sister a problem?” Dad said.

I was about to tell Dad that I didn’t want to go when Lefty said, “It’s cool.

Julio shot Lefty a look, but Lefty just grinned.

“That’s more like it,” dad said.

We all spilled out of the house, and dad got in his truck and drove off.

“Catch you later, baby sis,” Julio said.

“Hey, I’m supposed to go with you,” I said.

“Be cool,” Julio said. “He’ll never know.”

“Hey, a promise is a promise,” Lefty said, winking at me.

“We’re parked on the hill, so meet us up there,” Julio said.

I didn't understand why I couldn't go with them—maybe Julio was peeved about dad bossing him around. But my heart was thumping, and I didn't argue. Lefty was the one person I thought could understand me. Dad, who had ruined my life with his secrets and gambling, had unknowingly given me the best present of my whole life.

Beyond the park, where children were spinning on a merry-go-round, three metal caterpillars, insect-like rocking horses, wiggled in the hot wind, and the surrounding projects, duplexes marked by the dull brick and their rectangular sameness, squished themselves into a cul-de-sac, beyond this southside neighborhood, itself a collection of cul-de-sacs, near Trademart and Piggly-Wiggly Grocery, beyond the aluminum roofs of the liquor store and dry cleaners, I spotted the Monte Carlo snaking its way along State Road 32 in July fourth traffic.

“He's almost here guys,” I said to Noemi and Byron who'd been waiting at the picnic table when I'd arrived.

We'd waited there for so long because Julio had scored dad's ride for the party. Well, it used to be dad's ride. After my incident, dad had quietly sold it to Lefty. Because I was the tag-along, Julio was going to drop us at the 'teeny-bopper' party at McGaffey Lake before heading to a cool party up the road.

Plus, now that my parents were separated, my abuela lived alone in Colorado, and the uranium problem was both growing and invisible, I should have wanted to hightail it out of Gallup, as I had earlier in the year; anything to get away from the two houses and the two ghost-people inhabiting them, away from the toxic land and the indifference. Maybe later, when everyone was wasted, I could hotwire this granny-smith

green car and head east, roaring through this border town and flipping Gallup the bird in the rearview, yelling out the window: *Fuck you, Gallup. Fuck your seedy downtown bars and trading posts bulging with turquoise and silver jewelry. Fuck your truck stops and pickup trucks, the whole damned ocean of them, and fuck the pick-up bars too, like The Inn and the Shalimar. Fuck Gallup High School and its Bengals and their shitty record. Fuck the Italians for selling alcohol in their shitty liquor stores and fuck the wobbly line of drunks released from protective custody on Sunday mornings.*

I climbed onto the tabletop and pumped my fist. “I’m getting the hell out of this town.”

“You’re beginning to sound like a broken record,” Noemi said.

“You’re beginning to sound like a jealous friend,” I said, crouching on the table.

“Now, ladies,” Byron said.

He seemed to have gotten over the Shalimar Incident, and I didn’t question it.

“I can’t wait,” I said, before lowering myself onto the tabletop and dangling my legs over the side.

Noemi pressed her cigarette butt into the dirt. “Me either,” she said, dirt pouring from her hand onto the cigarettes’ remains.

All around, on the hill and below in the park, even in their own yards, there were no lawns, not one speck of green, and no leafy trees.

“I’m tired of hearing how much you hate it here,” said Noemi.

“Don’t listen then.” I put my free hand to my ear and twisted it, as if turning a key to lock a door. “Tune me out.”

“You’re gonna miss me,” Noemi said, borrowing Byron’s cigarette to light hers.

“And you don’t even know it.”

I flicked my cigarette butt into the dirt. “You’re right, I guess.”

“About missing me or not knowing?”

“What do you think?”

“By the time I get back,” I said, “you’ll be an old married lady or a drunk.”

“Or an old married drunk,” Noemi said.

We laughed, then pulled on our cigarettes, ash fluttering in the wind.

A car horn honked, and we piled into the back seat. Lefty sat shotgun. I still felt uncomfortable about even being with them, about only being in the car because dad ordered it.

Noemi couldn’t click her seatbelt into its holder, the wearing of seatbelts being a strict practice required of any riders in Julio’s car. She kept trying, while her key chain, an oversized diaper pin, dangled from her back pocket. Its rounded head sported a chunk of turquoise and was identical to mine, ours a special purchase from Navajo vendors on the plaza in Santa Fe, not the knock-offs from Woolworth’s.

Julio was too cool to say anything. Lefty managed to look cooler, his window rolled down, his arm hanging over the side of the car. Thick fingers lifted the cigarette to his lips in sync with the rolling car and the accordion sounds of ranchera music. Julio hated Mexican music, listened only to Jethro Tull or Black Sabbath, sometimes Aerosmith. My brother had never bowed to another person, not even our father, especially not our father. This supplication confused and intrigued me. I’d heard that

Lefty had calmed my brother after our parents separated, preventing Julio from bashing in our dad's head or defacing the turquoise house. At the Shalimar, after saving me from salacious Sal the Bartender, while we slow danced, Lefty confessed that he'd had a few beers before arriving and that, just days earlier, he'd seen his father with another woman. Now, he pretended I was a stranger, but I was just happy to be along for the ride.

"Fuck it," Noemi said about the seatbelt.

"Exactly," I said.

McGaffey Lake offered more picnic tables, a murky lake, an anemic party. I grabbed a beer and sauntered toward Noemi who was leaning against a tree and talking to a guy she'd liked in high school. But Noemi ignored me. I slipped away unnoticed, making my way down the road in search of Lefty. Music blared, and I was flanked on either side by a wall of pine trees. The music bounced off trees, its direction undecipherable. I followed the musical sounds as best I could, heading into a grove of pine trees, smoking as I ambled, preparing questions for Lefty, the first being why Julio did whatever he wanted, the second being what had made him so beautiful.

I called his name. No answer came back, not even an echo. I tried again, and, like a god, he emerged from behind a grove of pine trees.

"Hey," I said. "What's happening?"

Lefty held two bottles of beer and handed one to me. We made our way to the lake and walked around it.

"Gallup is a rest stop," I said. "I'll be gone soon enough."

"That's cool. I get it," he said. "You'll be just another tourist who comes to

Ceremonials every year and buys lots of Indian jewelry.

We reached the Monte Carlo and leaned against it, staring at a star-sodden sky.

“You’re reaching for those stars now,” Lefty said and we toasted to my future successes. Then, he put the bottle down and lifted me toward the sky with the confidence of someone who knew his own place in geography. He lowered me gently and kissed me.

Afterward, having both lit cigarettes, Lefty pointed out Orion with the tip of his cigarette, leaving an red-embered shadow line.

He said, as if to the night sky, as if I wasn’t leaning my body into his, “You’re as combustible as that star.”

“That star,” he repeated while squinting one eye and pointing to one special twinkler in an ocean of twinklers.

My gaze followed the straight line of his arm until it felt as though we were admiring the same star.

We both dragged on our cigarettes.

“How do you know that?” I said.

“I know what your family’s been through.”

“Everything?”

“Ya,” he said.

“Then you know about the board--?”

Before I could finish, Lucky had wrangled out of our embrace and was heading toward the field. “Be right back,” he said. “Wait for me.”

I leaned against the car and lit another smoke.

But Lefty hadn't returned. And I was tired of waiting. Unafraid, I made my way farther into the forest. Light filtered through the pines, a crimson-orange color from the setting sun. I arrived at a clearing with tall grasses and yellow daisies in bloom. I heard what sounded like giggling but realized it had been a mourning dove. I spotted birds flying from one tree to another. The giggle came again, and I froze until it quieted, finishing my cigarette in silence. Lefty had a fucked-up family situation, and I wanted to tell him about the boarding school, sure he'd understand in a way that no one else could. But he was full up with his own problems, and sometimes that's all a body can stand.

I shed my jean jacket and smoothed it over the grass, wondering if Lefty knew how to fix broken families, if he'd ever traced his family tree and found out who he was, or failing that, learned how to survive those dysfunctional moments in families. Julio used to recite the pop psychology slogan of the time, "I'm okay, you're okay," and I wondered if Lefty also placed his trust in Jung or Freud or Gestalt therapy. I hoped that Lefty knew something I didn't, a secret something that could help me move far away from ghost-people, sickly lakes and rivers, and tired parties, far from things that break apart or saturate the land.

There came the giggle again. I made my way toward a clump of tall grass. Crouching, I pulled back the grasses. Lefty's hands were exploring the curve of a girl's hip, her round buttocks, then moving to her breasts, smooth yet firm, the way he polished a favorite car. Something glinted in the fading light, bright like the objects—a watch face, aluminum cans—that three friends gathered from the river's edge. But it

wasn't those things. It was a diaper pin, a real one. I stood, letting the grasses fall into each other. I stepped back, a branch cracked, and the giggling stopped. I ran without looking back. I may have heard the faint voice of Noemi calling to me, or perhaps the thick branches of the pine trees were rustling in the wind.

I stumbled headlong through the dry grasses, the earth hard and baked beneath me, unsure which direction to go, confused by the forest in its aural sameness. The pine trees loomed, wind howling in my ears. Or was it my heart moaning? Gravel crunched as I raced away from this betrayal, stifling the sickening feeling in my stomach. I turned right on the gravel road, hoping that I was heading back to McGaffey Lake and the safety of the stupid party. Maybe that high school guy was still there and could give me a ride home.

I reached a copse of cars nestled among the pines. One vibrated with its apple color. I'd turned the wrong way and was at the cool-kids party. I only hoped Julio was sitting in the front seat, drinking a beer, and could drive me home, Noemi and Lefty be damned. The car was ghostly, and I peered inside the window in hopes of seeing someone. It was empty. But the keys dangled from the ignition, and I slid into the driver's seat. I squealed out of the spot like a demon.

Julio popped up out of nowhere, making a shadowy appearance on the driver's side. "Stop the car, Ro!"

He pounded on the window, but I kept the car moving in reverse. Julio slammed the hood.

I was grinding the gears, trying to shift back into first gear, which gave Julio time

to jump into the passenger seat.

“Get out,” I said, hitting the gas, the car fishtailing in the gravel.

“What the hell are you doing” Julio said.

“Going home,” I said.

I sped along the road, leaving a trail of dust, the surprised shouts of other partygoers muted, their bodies like smudges. I cranked the music, those rancheras that Lefty had insisted on playing on the way to the lake.

“I’m going with you,” Julio said. “Someone has to talk some sense into you.”

I leaned forward, draping my upper body over the steering wheel, my jaw set, the car galloping out of the woods. I neared the lake partyers.

Julio turned and faced me. “What the fuck is going on?” he said.

The car veered toward the lake. One good punch to the gas pedal and we’d be airborne. I didn’t want to die. I only wanted to be weightless, a bird in flight, a breathless and utter freedom from attachment. “Don’t worry, brother.”

“Who said I was worried,” Julio said. “But, anytime you want to turn around or let me drive, I’m all for it.”

I shook my head. “I’m driving now.”

“You’re not going to tell me what happened, are you?”

“No.”

“If I had to guess, it’d be Lefty.”

“Wrong guess,” I said.

The car moved along the dusty, narrow road. But Julio heard the clutch in my

throat, saw my grip tighten on the steering wheel. A sadness poured from me like gravel traveling down the hill along which we were inching.

“Let me drive, Rogelia,” he said. “Please. You don’t want to give dad a heart attack. And you don’t want to incur mom’s wrath.”

I sagged at the thought of having to talk to our mother, and the car crawled to a stop. Up ahead, a cloud of dust moved closer.

Julio stepped out of the car.

I unbuckled the seatbelt and checked the rearview. Something caught my gaze.

“Hurry up,” Julio said.

The dust cloud could come closer for all I cared. I couldn’t take my eyes off the two figures I viewed through the rectangular window of the mirror.

Julio was yelling that the dust cloud was descending on them. But I was fixed on the pair ambling down the road.

“Get. Out,” Julio yelled.

I jumped out of the seat.

Julio was about to climb inside when the dust cloud approached us, a truck filled with partygoers shouting drunken slurs. The truck swerved toward us, and as I flattened myself against the car, my brother’s car rolled down the hill.

“Shit. Did you put it in park?” Julio said.

“I thought I did,” I said.

The car rolled down the embankment. Julio ran alongside it, steering the car, jumping away when it crawled into the water like a green snake. The lake swallowed it

whole. I climbed down the embankment, behind my brother. Voices carried from the road, shadows of people calling to us, Noemi and Lefty and the others, all of them strangers to me from this night forward.

Somehow, we all made it home that evening. I refused to be anywhere near Lefty and Noemi, and Julio was beet-red furious at me, so I hitched a ride with the nice kid from school, the one who'd been romancing Noemi earlier that evening. Second-best again. Before that, Julio had been galloping along the shore, at one point jumping into the lake, only to have Lefty wade in behind him and pull him out. It's not worth it, he told Julio, while Noemi shivered just ten feet from me, and I couldn't have agreed more, if you know what I mean.

I would be taken to jail, and this time, I wouldn't fight it. I'd appear before the judge and agree with everything he said. Yes, your honor, I was the one who failed to put the car in park or neutral. Because of my carelessness, these two gentlemen (Julio and Lefty) have suffered financial hardship. They have every right to have my probation revoked. Sign the paperwork and place the handcuffs on me. I am beyond rehabilitation.

Once inside the turquoise house, I crawled into bed and slept until noon the next day, and then moped around while mom got her hair done. The phone rang incessantly, and once I thought I heard tires screeching outside. But I was in no mood to listen to Julio's ranting or face Lefty after his duplicity. I didn't want to hear more about what I'd done to ruin the car. No one was a harsher critic than me.

My clothes smelled of liquor and cigarette smoke. I had to hide the evidence, given that Julio and I had a shared secret to keep from our parents, at least until Monday,

when Lefty was sure to call dad, and my life would be over. I stuffed the clothes into the washer in the garage, and they'd be clean before mom returned. We'd run out of detergent, and I was hunting for another box in the garage's bowels, most of it dad's workspace. He was due to disappear again, our euphemism for dad's relapses into gambling.

I saw a box on a top shelf and maneuvered a chair to reach it. I stepped on dad's workbench, which was solid enough to hold me but a definite no-no in his fix-it world. I was about to smash a small box with my foot as I reached for the detergent, so I pushed it out of the way. I secured the detergent, measured some into the machine, and started the load. Returning to the workbench, to straighten it up, I recognized it as dad's box, the one mom had asked me to hand deliver to him, the one he'd left when Julio and Lefty had barged into our bullet-making session.

Should I open it? I distracted myself by washing the dishes, folding the clothes in the laundry, hanging out in mom's garden. But I couldn't get the package off my mind. It was wrapped up tight, but, I rationalized, I could wrap it up again and casually drop it off at his apartment. We could both go on with our lives and he'd be none the wiser. Honestly, after all that'd happened, I was pissed at the world, and so I snuck the package into my room. Unsure when mom was returning, I ripped the packaging off and lifted the lid of the shoebox.

To my great disappointment, I found two envelopes written in childlike scrawl and addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Sonny James. The ink was smeared on the envelopes, and the edges were torn, but the return address was from somewhere in Colorado. My heart

leapt at the thought that dad had family up north. The letters were tied together with string, and I had to be delicate in the untying so as not to disturb them. I held the envelope and opened one of the flaps. The letter inside was written on ledger paper:

Dear Mother and Father,

I like school. My hair is shorter now. I have been homesick, but the teachers say I am safer here than back home. I tried to tell them about fishing and horses. But they made me scrub the kitchen tables. I go to the river and repeat the names of trees and birds in this new language. I used to know their names. I have to think hard now to remember them.

Your son,

Bernard

I opened the other letter, holding it as if it were a tape recording of my father's voice:

Dear Mother and Father,

We march. We march to breakfast, lunch, and dinner. We march to our classes.

Why? We are to be orderly and disciplined. This will help us be better citizens.

Why didn't we march at home?

Your son,

Bernard

"Ro?" Mom said. "I need help with the groceries."

My hands shook as I folded the letters and slipped them back into the envelopes.

Mom called me again.

"Coming," I said and slid the box under my bed.

CHAPTER IV

OF VIOLENCE AND BROKEN BODIES

A Broken Family

I wasn't arrested, and Dad disappeared again. The two weren't related, though I thought so at the time. Later, I learned that Lefty had declined to press charges, I hoped out of guilt for being a two-timing jerk, but more than likely because, as the son of a prominent business owner, he wanted to keep his standing in the community. The rumors swirled around me, as I made my way through that summer, but I was too consumed by the betrayals, not least those that had materialized in the form of my father's letters. They haunted my waking hours, and I was surly toward mom, mostly uncommunicative, and my seemingly buried desire to run away to Colorado reared its head again. I'd called abuela every week, and every week, she told me she was fine. I'd lock myself in my room and secretly read my father's letters and what they told me about myself. I'd feel the pain in his scratchy handwriting, and I'd want to ask him all these questions.

But dad was gone.

We understood this to mean that he'd gone on a gambling binge. I labored to understand his problem. One year, he'd taken the whole family to Vegas and never once planted himself in front of a slot machine, much less for hours on end. There'd been no rolling the dice at the craps table until the drinks turned watery, no 'hit me' taps on the cards, and no crowding the blackjack table. Dad ignored the poker tables, and roulette didn't lure him either. In fact, he warned me that the odds of winning were astronomical:

one marble, too many numbers, too many combinations, infinite opportunities to fail. It had been a point of pride that he'd returned home with a full wallet.

I asked her if Dr. Matsuda could come over and visit. Mom bristled at the suggestion, asking me if she could help. "Never mind," I said and retreated again to my bedroom, taking Bruiser with me.

I missed my parents, the way they used to be. Sure, I'd witnessed the detritus of their fights in past: in the scrape of rubber against pavement, in Bruiser's restless pacing from one angry spouse to the other, his eyes pleading and watery. Some evenings, before the separation, Julio and I filled their silences with high-pitched chatter about our lives. The last time had occurred at the dinner table, when Julio was teasing me about being a *vendida* for something I no longer remember. I'd swatted at him, but he'd dodged me. I'd caught my father searching out my mother for her reaction, and together they'd offered each other shy, apologetic smiles. My mother made enchiladas that evening, my father nuzzled her neck, and all was right in our household again.

Those times were lost to me, to our whole family, now. I felt as if I would never recover, as if the world really was flat, and the entire world had lied to me all these years. I hugged Bruiser and smoothed his long, beautiful coat. I was tired of being sad, and I told Bruiser as much. The doorbell rang, and Bruiser barked, and mom said, "Ro, it's for you."

Dr. Matsuda stood in the middle of our living room, clutching her purse and thanking my mother again for calling her. Mom was uptight, which played out in the formal language she used to respond to the doctor. "You are very welcome," she said,

taking her jacket and, with a sweep of her hand, inviting Dr. Matsuda to sit down. As if we lived in a mansion.

“Let’s go for a cup of coffee,” I said.

“We’re going to chat for a while,” mom said from the kitchen.

Dr. Matsuda smiled and pressed her hand into mine. “Are you okay?” she said.

“Of course,” I said, yanking my hand away.

The three of us gathered in the living room, where only the most formal visits were held. Both women exhibited an odd sense of decorum, my mother’s inherited from an aunt who visited her often during childhood and who believed in wearing pearls and gloves to tea yet who owned neither. To the best of my recollection, my mother had never sipped a cup of hot brewed tea. Yet out she came with a serving tray and dainty china cups with pink roses painted on their bodies, a luxurious teapot with a swan-like spout, a bowl of sugar, a cup of milk, spoons for stirring, and shortbread cookies.

Dr. Matsuda thanked mom for her generosity. Mom prepared a cup of tea and Dr. Matsuda nibbled on a shortbread cookie. It was strangely silent until I asked her how the organizing was going.

“We’re having another meeting next week,” she said. “I hope you’ll come.”

Mom brought the cookie plate over to me. “Rogelia’s finished her project, haven’t you, honey?”

I refused the cookie. “I still have some interviews to do. I’m hoping we can spend some time talking about them today.”

“I’d love to hear more,” mom said.

This was a lie. Mom hated everything about this project.

Dr. Matsuda, sensing the tension, said, “We are planning a protest march for late July, early August.”

“That’s just around the corner,” mom said.

They nibbled cookies in silence, and I petted Bruiser until I feared he would shed his thick coat.

“Are you sure that’s the right thing to do?” mom said. “After all, it’s only a few weeks before Ceremonials. People will be coming from all over to watch Indian dances and celebrate the uniqueness of our community.”

“All the more reason,” Dr. M. said. “We need to shed light on a very underserved community.”

“I wouldn’t say they were underserved, Dr. Matsuda. After all, they’ve had everything handed to them: free health care, free schooling, all kinds of government subsidies.”

“There’s a whole history behind those actions.”

“Well, the only history I know is what I see every day. Patients with delirium tremens, poor eating habits, heart disease.”

“We just want to listen to their stories and see what their communities need.”

“I see,” mom said. “Well, it’s not like we haven’t given them chances.”

“Mom,” I said. “I really need to work on my project with Dr. Matsuda. We can work in my room, okay?”

I gave my mom the most pleading look I could muster.

“Of course,” mom finally said. “I wouldn’t want to get in the way of graduation, would I?”

“Thank you,” Dr. Matsuda said. “The cookies and tea were delicious.”

Mom carried the tray into the kitchen.

“Let’s go,” I said, trying to engineer our escape from the turquoise house.

“We shouldn’t act as if we have something to hide,” she said.

“But I do.”

Dr. Matsuda stopped. “Have you discussed this with your mother?”

“You heard what she said. How could I?”

Dr. Matsuda finally said, “I’ll be right back.”

She retreated to the kitchen, where both women conferred for several minutes. I waited, petting Bruiser and promising him all sorts of things I could never fulfill. Mom finally emerged from the kitchen, followed by Dr. Matsuda.

“If you’d like, you may go with Dr. Matsuda for one hour.”

“I’ll make sure she’s back in time,” Dr. Matsuda said.

I went into my room and stuffed the box into my backpack.

I thanked mom, and we trundled out of the house and into the car. We went to the Lotaburger down the street, where we ate their gigantic green chile, cheeseburgers and fries.

During the meal, I pulled the box out, careful to wipe the grease from my hands. I explained everything to her. “I don’t know what to do,” I said when I’d finished the story.

“You’ll need to return these to your father.”

I had to think about this, and finally I agreed.

“I’ll wrap them again and bring them to his house.”

“And tell him how you got them.”

“I can’t do that. He’ll be pissed off.”

“It will be worse if you withhold the truth. Think about how you felt.”

“I’ll never forget it.”

“Exactly. So, you tell your father the truth and then you give him some time to come around and tell his story. Here you are, pounding on a door that has been boarded up for some time, literally. You can’t expect him to be overjoyed that his daughter wants to know about the heartache that forced him from his family, his tribe, his culture and language.”

“I hadn’t thought of it that way.”

“None of us has. That’s the problem. We think we know what’s best, and we think we’re better than them. So, we send them away and take their land. And then we expect them to be grateful.”

“That sucks.”

“Yes,” she said, slurping her coke.

Customers came to window and ordered. I thought of the creepy man who picked me up here.

“My parents told us we were Spanish.”

Dr. Matsuda stopped mid bite. “Why do you suppose they did that?”

“I don’t know.”

“Have you seen how Navajos are treated here?” Dr. Matsuda said.

“Yes,” I said and told her about the remarks hurled at me from the cabs of trucks while I was walking down Nizhoni Boulevard.

“When I first moved here,” Dr. M said, “I enjoyed seeing Navajo women in their beautiful skirts, velvet blouses, and squash blossom necklaces. They were proud and their clothing was very different than the monpe my mother wore, drab pants made from strips of old cloth stitched together because we rationed everything.”

I drank my coke and had another bite of the green chile cheeseburger.

“But it didn’t take long to see that most people didn’t share my sentiments. That the Navajo are hated here, blamed for their poverty, their alcoholism. Even their hairstyle, the way they wrap their hair in buns.”

“My friends called them Chongos,” I said.

“It broke my heart to see something so beautiful become an epithet,” she said.

I was losing my appetite. “I never stopped my friends from saying it.”

“Most of us don’t. Which doesn’t make it right. But it could explain why your parents did what they did.”

“They thought they were protecting us, I guess.”

“It was a warped sense of caring.”

“And, anyway, it didn’t work. In the long run, I mean.”

“It only works if you believe in the purity of Spanish blood and ancestry.”

All the stories about Spanish explorers discovering a new world suddenly made

sense to me. My father's silence, my mother's insistence that we embrace the Spanish. She couldn't bear to be associated with Indians. My father, too ashamed of his past, to disconnected from the truth of his own life, went along with it. They were not alone, and this gave me a sense of relief and anger.

"I'm not all that hungry anymore," I said, dropping the burger into the bag, ashamed at myself for believing a story that wasn't true.

"You're like a history book," I said.

Dr. Matsuda giggled. "No, I'm just a concerned citizen. We all have stories to tell."

"What's yours?" I said.

"It was as if I looked up after ten years had passed, and then I was a physician preparing to meet her first patient in a dingy exam room at PHS. My student loan debt would be forgiven if I came here, plus my aunt and uncle lived here. My mother's only surviving relative besides me. They kept me safe afterward."

"Safe from what?"

Dr. Matsuda became silent, peering out the window as if she'd seen a ghost. Gawd. Speaking of history, how could I not have known this? I felt bad for my selfishness.

"I'm sorry."

Neither of us spoke the names: Nagasaki. Hiroshima.

I crammed the burger into my mouth to keep from crying. Later, I would learn that Japanese families had been herded into internment camps near Santa Fe and Lordsburg during the war. Thirty had been rounded up in Clovis and placed under house arrest for a

month before being transferred to a camp in Lincoln County. Still others had lost their railroading jobs. Gallup was different. The Yellow Scare was in full force across the United States, some some of it in New Mexico, and yet Gallup's citizens had voted not to inter Japanese citizens.

“Is that why uranium mining is so important to you? Because of what happened to your mother?”

“Yes,” she said. “but not right away. At first, I wanted to repay my family. *We were lucky*, my uncle said, and so, on that first day, I smoothed my white jacket and headed toward the exam room and my first patient. I had no idea it would be a man saddled with respiratory problems who worked at the local uranium mine.”

Sometimes, like Dr. Matsuda told mom, it pays to listen. You learn so much more when you keep your mouth shut. This was a new skill for me, and Dr. M's story opened my heart to her and allowed me to feel a sliver of forgiveness for my family.

I reached over and patted her hand. “Sorry for the grease,” I said.

She clasped my hand and said, “We've all lost something, Ro. Even your dad.”

Before I could respond, she said, “Now, let's get you home before your mother sends the national guard, shall we?”

A Somersault in Japanese

Some days, I do not think of my mother.

I do not forget her either.

I am falling, in mid-flight limbo, somersaulting amid the bluish gases.

Some days, I am a daughter, filled with a longing that splits

wails. I crawl to the bathroom, fearful
that another black rain will fall,
and I will join my mother
in the vapor.

A Reunion

Dad picked me up, and we went to wash his cruiser. Like I said, we worked best when we had a common task. He vacuumed the interior, and I polished the body to a sharp shine. We didn't say much. Too many secrets between us. Once he finished, I tossed him the waxing cloth so he could help me.

"How's your project going?" he said.

"Fine," I said.

Dad asked for the turtle wax and I tossed it to him.

"Hey," I said, while rummaging in my backpack.

"Yes," dad said, sticking the cloth in his back pocket.

"I have something for you," I said.

Dad eyed the box, which hadn't been rewrapped. "So, you read them."

"Without my permission."

"Yes. I'm sorry."

Dad lifted the top of the box, caught a glimpse of its contents, and closed it.

"Are you mad at me?"

Dad pointed to the car. "You missed a spot."

I polished the side of the car while silently cursing myself for having brought it

up.

“Well?” I said.

Dad inspected the car. “Good job,” he said.

“Dad?” I said.

“Look, Ro, what do you want me to say? That it’s okay to take other people’s things?”

“No,” I said.

“But the thing is,” he said. “I’m too busy being mad at myself.”

“It’s not your fault,” I said. “What they did—”

Dad slapped the waxing cloth against his thigh. He got into the front seat, and I had no choice but to get in as well. As we left the car wash, he said, “You’ll need them more than I ever will.”

Another Meeting of People Against Mining

Other nicknames for uranium: Yellow Dust. Leetso. Yellow Monster.

Here is what I learned at the next meeting of People Against Mining:

The decaying mother-isotope produces a daughter more radioactive than her parent and whose half life can outlast all of us. A daughter can produce more daughters, all of them burrowing for billions of years within human and animal, plant and bird, red rock and mesquite, sacred people and land.

“Why are women always to blame?” I asked Dr. Matsuda after the presentation.

She shook her head. “They aren’t. Think about who constructed the idea of woman.”

“What?” I said.

“Just think about it.”

People Against Mining: A Manifesto

WE believe that uranium is toxic to people, land, and livestock.

WE believe that disease and dispossession are the progeny of capitalism.

WE believe that the earth is our mother, and every gouge hurts her and us.

WE believe in the beauty of all of living things.

WE want uranium mining to cease on our lands and the U.S. government and corporations.

WE want health studies to be conducted for our people and reparations for this encroachment.

WE want solidarity with all other peoples of the world whose resources have been extracted from the land without their permission.

WE know this to be true because no one should suffer for the greed of others.

WE know this to be true because all people deserve life, water, and respect.

WE know this to be true because we believe in fairness, justice, homeland.

A Confession

I had a secret of my own, and now that I carried my family’s future and its past history, now that I understood the damages, I felt it important to come clean. Dr.

Matsuda didn’t know she was my confessor, and I balked after asking her to stay after

the organizing meeting. I knew she was tired. We'd just made our final plans for the march, which would be held just after the Indian Ceremonials in August. We wouldn't be able to conduct our protest downtown, but the city had issued permits for us to march on the frontage road up to the Red Rock Amphitheater.

She asked me if I was ready for the protest march, if I was worried about anything.

"Just one thing," I said.

"Oh?" she said. "Is there something I need to know?"

"Not about the march," I said. "About my abuela."

Dr. Matsuda had heard enough about my love for abuela. "Is she okay?"

"She's fine. I won't be trying to escape and visit her anymore."

"Well, I'm glad you won't be trying to elude the police."

"No," I said, "but I did try to leave again. It's just that no one knows about it."

Dr. Matsuda sat in one of the chairs, and I pulled one up next to her.

And then I told her something I'd never shared with anyone. Shortly after the Monte Carlo incident, I'd been so intent on leaving that I stole money from my parents and bought a bus ticket to Colorado. But being a jerk and a thief wasn't what made me come back. It was an encounter on the bus.

"What happened?" Dr. Matsuda said.

I told her that a man in uniform whose right arm was missing had boarded the bus and sat next to me. Viet Nam had been over for a while, and I wanted to know what happened. It would have been impolite to ask, but I was glad to be sitting next to him

anyway. I believed that the uniform and this one arm meant that he would be safe, that he would help me if needed. Just in case I was wrong, I leaned far into the window and kept my arms and legs tight and closed.

“Did you get his name,”

“No,” I said. “The man didn’t speak to me during the bus ride.”

I told Dr. M. that I sneaked peeks at him and the sleeve pinned to his uniform, which flapped whenever the bus hit a bump. He probably had a lot on his mind. I spent a lot of time looking out the window at the cattle and trailers and farmland, thinking of all the jobs that required two arms: rancher, farmer, construction worker, baker, cement truck driver, policeman, doctor, organist, priest. I wanted to ask him what he did. But what right did I have to pry? Eventually he dozed off, and his head flopped to the side, and his whiskers brushed his uniform jacket.

The squeak and whoosh of the hydraulic brakes woke him. I pretended to be napping, but saw him shudder and cast around with a wild look that chickens do when they know you’re after them.

We were coming into Grants when he tried to coax a couple bills into my hands. I clenched my fists and tried to ignore him, but he said, “You need it more than I do,” and dropped two fifties onto the seat next to me. He got off the bus. I got off and bought a ticket home.

“You care about people,” Dr. Matsuda said. “And so does he.”

Her hair was black and thick like mine. She didn’t look like me but we were both different. She didn’t ignore me or lecture me or interrupt me like mom or dad,

sometimes Julio, did.

“I felt sorry for him,” I said.

“It’s not the same thing,” she said. “He doesn’t need your pity.”

We talked about other things, more about her family, her desire to be a doctor, and the war. Before I could stop myself, I told her about Mr. Soggy and my beloved Rio Grande, which I’d only known for a short time before coming here. I had so many questions. Why did Mr. Soggy do that? Why was the Rio Puerco nothing more than a trickle of brown-sludge water?

“Rogelia,” she said, pulling her hair from her round face. “Not all men are bad and not all rivers are good.”

I threw my arms around Lindy Matsuda, wishing I could hold tight to her forever.

A Father-Daughter Talk

On a July morning, shortly before the dam belched its tailings into the Rio Puerco, I was groping in the dark for the key to my father’s cramped apartment. Woozy from partying with Tawny and Marta, my newest friends, I hoped to find dad in the kitchen, back from investigating an accident and preparing his famous sunrise breakfast: stacks of thick pancakes, a mountain of bacon, hot, strong coffee, and homemade cinnamon rolls. But nothing stirred inside this square box of a new home: no curtains rustled, no footsteps thudded toward the door, no phlegmy morning cough issued from his throat. Five-thirty in the morning, and he wasn’t home to let me in or ask me why I was late. There would be no epithets or where-have-you-been lectures either. Now that he let me

crash at his pad whenever I wanted, he never questioned my behavior or the hours I kept. Collateral from the break-up, I supposed. As in, spoiling his daughter was repayment for her father's royal fuck-up. He wasn't like mom, who peppered me with questions, or Julio, who said once too often that dad's open invitation was a guilt offering, until I pushed him and said, "You're not the one worrying whether dad is lying dead somewhere on I-40 or blowing his paycheck on a stupid poker game."

"At least I'm not living in the past," he said, grabbing my hand.

"Let go," I said, and he released me.

But my brother's words had done what his hands hadn't. This memory, fresh in my mind as I dug in my purse, fueled my nostalgia for a father who used to demand to know his daughter's whereabouts and a daughter who used to grouse when asked. Dad was probably investigating an accident somewhere on I-40, or nursing a cup of coffee at the restaurant shaped like a barn, which he frequented when his favorite place, Jewel's, was closed.

I found the key in a side pocket, and after a few fumbled attempts, unlocked the door. Once inside, I removed my stinky top and bottoms and dumped them in a pile by the futon couch. Halfway through the summer, and with my savings from the obituary job, I'd saved enough to buy a used car; nothing special, something to haul myself around. I was going to buy it from Lefty, but, at first, I couldn't bear to part with the thousand dollars, even though Lefty had agreed to sell me his jalopy of a truck for half that. Now, I hadn't seen Lefty since McGaffey Lake, or Noemi either. And I never would.

Tawny and Marta picked me up so we could cruise 66, which is how it went the night before the dam burst. We'd gone to eat at Pizza Hut, and Tawny knew the cooks. When the restaurant closed, we cut the lights and settled into the captain's chairs at a table with a checkered tablecloth. We hunched in the dark and downed beers from six-packs that Jorge the cook had smuggled in through the back door. It could have gotten them fired, especially Jorge who was twenty-one, but no one seemed to care. Anyway, if questions, we'd say that we'd piled instead into Tawny's car and cruised down 66. Everyone cruised 66, rain, snow, or shine, and no one, not even the manager, could argue otherwise. I was too busy feeling a part of something to think of that, too busy forgetting to care.

Once inside the apartment, a swamp cooler wheezed warm air into a stuffy room smelling of bleach. I left the door open to air out the place, and then made my way past the flowered sofa hunkering against a wall, skirted the rickety coffee table littered with National Geographic magazines, and circled the bright lime-colored dining room chairs and the round white laminate table. I opened a window but nearly knocked over the TV perched on a foldout chair on her way to the kitchen.

I found a carton of orange juice on the top shelf of the fridge, as Dad had promised. "Humph," I said, this the only food in the refrigerator, this the only promise he'd made good on since blowing his family's lives to shit. I poured a glass and then routed in the cupboard for bread, butter, jelly, cereal. Nothing but a box of salt and a shaker of pepper, some rotted flour, a bag of sugar, jars of instant coffee and Coffeemate. Reaching into the pocket of my crumpled work pants, I retrieved a wad of

money and stuffed it in my purse.

I slumped onto the couch, sipping juice, flipping through the National Geographic, reluctant to credit Mom for tending to Dad all these years. I tossed the magazine onto the couch and glimpsed a package with my name scrawled in dad's handwriting. I placed the glass of juice on the coffee table and opened the package. It held a new pair of jeans, and dad became again the man who knew just what to do and when. I got up and pulled back the blinds whenever a car passed by the apartment.

With nothing to do but wait, I carried the stiff, dark blue jeans to the bathroom. The tub was ringed with dirt the color of silt, the human imprint of previous tenants. I knelt and scrubbed, but those thousands of skin cells clung to the tub. I ran hot water, steam fogging the room while I retrieved that box of salt from the cupboard. In the bathroom, I unfolded the jeans and gently submerged them into the tub and then poured salt over them. I bent over the tub and kneaded the jeans; salt and water softening and pulling the stiffness from them. I continued kneading even when my arms grew tired and sweat beads trickled down my forehead. Later, after catching a few hours' sleep, I'd slide into them when they were still damp and begin teaching them to curve with my hips and waist, the bend in my knee. Their bell-bottom hems would collect dirt as they dragged on the ground, the men's sizes too wide in the waist, but there were no women's sizes. The jeans floated to the surface, and I pushed them down into the navy blue water.

The phone rang, startling me, and I sprayed myself with water. I picked up the phone, thinking it might be dad, and said, "Hello?" The line was quiet, but I heard breathing, not the pervert kind, just something slow, hesitant. The caller hung up. "What

the hell?” I said.

Leaving the jeans to soak, I wandered into dad’s bedroom in search of dirty laundry. I found the clothes hamper and sorted the darks from the lights, rifling through pockets and finding a receipt for gas, a chewing gum wrapper, and a piece of paper folded in quarters and stained with coffee. I stuck the paper in my pocket, threw the rest in the trash, and then placed one pile on top of another, lights then darks, and stuffed them inside the duffle bag lying next to the laundry basket. I’d do him this favor, just once, in return for letting me stay here, for not spilling the beans about my drinking to her mom who would launch into a tirade about the horrible man he’d become. Once, when I’d fired back at her about forgiveness, mom had spat in the dirt near her azaleas, her tone bitter like kale when she said, “Fuck him.”

I’d never heard mom curse her husband and wondered if this was the end of them forever because who could withstand such hatred? How could they mend their broken lives in the midst of such bile, ten times worse than the dry heaves I’d had earlier that summer, when me and Tawny and Marta had guzzled a bottle of Cuervo Gold after convincing ourselves that we deserved the best and who else would give us the best anyway?

“Not your father,” Tawny had bleated, and we’d erupted into a fit of giggles, the tequila sloshing inside my stomach as I smeared lime juice in the crease between my thumb and forefinger, salted it as if it were a burger, then brought it to my mouth, using one sour taste to drown out another.

I dashed off a note to dad, just in case, and hauled the laundry to his car. I’d been

given his spare key, another fatherly indulgence, though I used it more often to bring him money, something I swore I'd never do. But once I'd seen him in a feverish state, as if hit by a tropical disease like malaria, his eyes glazed, his leg pumping like a piston, hunched over the table, clutching a beer can, and it scared me into calming him with the chance to win like he'd never won before, which he claimed could come only from a lucky roll of the dice or deal from the deck, and I wanted to believe that his salvation could be found in those cards, those dice, the everlasting wager, and that once he'd won, this time, this time he'd come home for good. So I drove to Hamden's house in Cedar Hills to deliver the money from his stash, and the next time the stash location would have changed, and it amazed me that such a tiny apartment had so many nooks and crannies.

"He's a junkie," said Tawny, "and when you're a junkie, you'll do anything for the next hit."

The worst thing was dad's lack of shame, I told Tawny, that he would do anything, anything, for the next bet, except come home to his family. So I'd gone to him, the only one in the family to have forgiven him.

"You're lying to yourself," Tawny told me after a couple swigs of tequila that night.

"Sez you," I countered.

"You haven't forgiven a damn thing", Tawny said, "Your forgiveness is bullshit, or me-air-da, as you say in Spanish."

I cursed her in Spanish as I drove to the twenty-four-hour laundry mat to wash

dad's clothes before he returned from the accident investigation, which was the only place he could be at four-thirty in the morning.

The laundry mat was the same as any other: rows of toploading washers on one side and a similar row of one-eyed dryers on the other. I heaved the duffle bag onto the counter, pulled out the load of darks and followed that with the load of lights, then parked myself in one of the hard plastic chairs, waiting for the wash to finish. The place was empty, and I twiddled my thumbs for a while, watching cars glide up and down 66, their headlights bright like fireflies. I strolled around the place, checking the wash, its sudsy spin happening for both loads. I dug my hands into my pockets and felt the piece of paper I'd tucked there earlier. I pulled it out, unfolded it, and read its contents. I raced to the car and then back to the apartment. His black cruiser was parked in front, and I slammed against the front door until Dad unlocked it, saying "Alright, alright, hold on a minute."

I barged past him. "Who the hell is M?" I said.

"Where have you been?"

"Now, all of a sudden, you wanna know what I'm up to? Nice try."

"I don't know who M is," he said. "You tell me."

"Cut the bullshit," I said. "Are you cheating on mom?"

"Lemme make you some pancakes and coffee," he said.

"With what? There's not a crumb in this house," I said.

"I just bought some groceries," he said, gesturing toward the kitchen.

"I don't believe you."

“Look for yourself.”

I pushed past him and stalked into the kitchen. The lights shone in the stark room, a tin of coffee sitting unopened on the counter, the coffee pot and a can opener idling next to it. I opened the refrigerator and saw a carton eggs, a gallon of milk, two cartons of orange juice, a head of lettuce, some tomatoes.

“I can whip up some pancakes,” he said.

“How much did you win?”

“Is that what you think?”

“Why else would you have food or be nice enough to invite me?”

“Because you’re my daughter? I love you?”

I unfolded the note and tossed it on the table. “Someone else loves you too.”

“Let me explain.” He picked up the paper.

“Like I’d believe anything you said.”

“I need support too.”

“Of course you do,” I said. “And I need a dad. And mom needs a husband. And Julio needs a father. Oh, but, how stupid of me to think those things.”

“You don’t understand.”

“I’m sure ‘M’ does. She called this morning. Why don’t you call and ask her for some support?”

His eyes lit up. “Sit and eat.”

“At first, I thought it was something I’d written. You know, as a girl.”

“You’re a good girl.”

I snorted and pulled the wad of money from my purse, mostly dollar bills, a few fives, and a couple tens—tips from the night before, the most I'd ever made as a waitress, thanks to the chaperones of two busloads of hungry church kids, and my father who came with two buddies during their shift and left a good tip after scarfing down a sausage pizza and a pitcher of coke. Mom used to say it was the least he could do, and then I learned to quit talking to her about him.

I threw the bundle at him, the bills floating to the linoleum. “Your clothes are at the Laundromat,” I said, and stepped outside as the sun was rising, closing the door behind me. I stood there, shaking in the morning heat, waiting for dad to open the door and apologize, and feeling like shit for being such a bitch. As usual, he'd made no move to stop me.

I stepped off the porch, preparing to walk across town to the turquoise house, when I remembered the keys. I waited for a car to pass, and then unlocked dad's personal car and slid into the seat. Me and Julio once drove to Kit Carson's cave, just the other side of Churchrock, and I shifted into first gear and began driving east, toward Churchrock and the cave. The beer had worn off, leaving me cruda, hungover, thick-tongued and achy, pissed off at my parents, both of whom had insisted that they were separated—“Not divorced,” mom always stressed—and I felt stupid for believing that my family's world would tilt upright again, stupid for helping my father, not out of some custody arrangement, as there had been, after all, no divorce, stupid for believing I could bring him home. I slammed my hand against the steering wheel.

Red rocks towered above me, as I turned off the 66 frontage road and onto

Churchrock road. I tried to decipher the color and shape of the rocky terrain, the plant life, anything that could help me remember the turnoff to Kit Carson Cave. I curved around the road, which had turned wet, but there was no rain, no threatening rain clouds either. I sped up, eager to be alone in the cave where I could sort through the mess that was my family. I crossed a metal bridge and, feeling shaky, parked on the side of the road. I jumped out and ran down a small hill toward the river. I pulled off my shoes and waded in the gushing water, a drab yellow, the color of a sickly sun, as if the giant orb had deflated and its liquid center had unfurled in silken waves over rock and bush, road and livestock, its toxic sunshine seeping into the dirt, rising like a river. I braked hard and the car sputtered to a stop. Though scared, I felt freer than I had in a long time.

The waves gushed. Mesquite and cattle and red rock seemed unperturbed while yellowed water wove its way downstream. I got out of the car. The water smelled metallic and its unearthly yellow shimmer recalled my father's nightmarish, bleary-eyed face when he returned from those long gambling nights. The sound of rushing water roared, and I slipped off my shoes and waded into the water, my fear misplaced onto my splintered family, as if yellow water had seeped into our hearts long before the dam broke.

The water ebbed, and I turned the car around, speeding back to Gallup, back to my messed-up father, angry mother, absent brother, away from the polluted water, so precious to this part of the country and now deadly.

Where was home?

I stopped the car and watched the water saturate the rocky, unprotected land,

hewing another river, and realizing that it wouldn't subside anytime soon, I drove back the way I came.

A Boxing Match

Julio's first boxing match took place on the day the uranium dam collapsed in Church Rock. I didn't know this at the time. I didn't think much of the yellowed water that I waded before sunrise that morning. Julio wouldn't have cared. This was to be his big star turn, and I knew he felt cheated afterward, when his bout only garnered a short paragraph and a teensy photo stuffed into a corner slot on a forgotten page of the *Gallup Independent*.

That afternoon, dressed in shiny blue boxing shorts, white shoes, with all his buddies cheering him on, my brother looked every inch the star. I sat next to Gustavo and Linden while his coach peered through the ropes, advising Julio about his balance, the tendency to leave his left side open, the need to keep shifting his weight from left foot to right.

Julio soaked in the welcoming crowd, the hot white lights, the crack of the punch. There wouldn't be many more fights; the comparisons to Ali and de la Hoya would diminish almost as quickly as they had been uttered. Julio would circle the same crappy boxing venues, old gyms with grimy mats, fold-out chairs for the audiences. I leaned over to Gustavo and mentioned how far Julio had come since those days in our back yard. Gustavo nodded, but didn't say much else. I followed suit until the end of the bout, when the referee grabbed Julio's hand and lifted it in the air. My brother took his victory walk around the ring, both arms held high, sweat glistening on his body.

Then, I believed that Julio, who'd been clocked my chunks of falling dirt in the mine only a couple days earlier, would make it big.

Gustavo shook his head. He knew.

Sitting on those fold-out chairs, wrapped in the heat of victory, I convinced myself that Gustavo was a liar and the worst friend. My brother would rival any pro boxer, maybe even have a shot at the Olympics. Unsure what to do, I slapped Gustavo's arm and said half jokingly in return that I should wash his mouth out with soap for telling lies. He shrugged as he clapped. Never said another word, not in twenty-five years, and Julio never made it out of the minor leagues.

But that night, Gustavo and Linden lifted Julio onto their shoulders and paraded around the ring. Cameras flashed and reporters rushed him. I made myself forget Gustavo's words and clapped louder than I ever would again. We were together, we were family. A future of greatness and love was only one knockout punch away. None of us yet knew, would not know soon enough, that a boxing career can be over in the snap of a finger, or that the half-life of a uranium isotope is 80,000 years.

A Gathering

Our group swelled, and we zigzagged toward the mine. We sang, carried signs that read, "No More Nukes," and "Keep Our Children Healthy," and filed peacefully past law enforcement personnel who clutched tear gas canisters and wore bulletproof vests. We walked along the road to Churchrock: me, Lindy, the rest of the members of People Against Mining. Marta had shown up too, though she kept her distance. I was so heartened to see her again that I didn't care. Lefty, Byron and Noemi

hadn't come, and I didn't see mom. Julio was working at the mines, and I wanted him to rise up from that pit and join us. But he wouldn't.

That left Dad, the only other person I recognized in a group that had swollen from five to fifty within thirty minutes. But he stood across the road from me, holding a tear gas canister, his pistol holstered, his hand resting lightly on its butt. It broke me to see him there, after I'd begged him not to come, it was heartbreaking to see him bound so tightly to duty, heartbreaking to recall everything that had happened. There was an empty mucky space inside him that I couldn't reach, leftover pain that had created the same murky sadness inside me.

I wanted to cross the line and hug him, refuse the border erected between us, make my way across a road that he couldn't. He felt it too. I saw the lines on his face, the way he gripped the tear gas canister. He wouldn't look at me, the pride I saw in his face, both for him and for me.

I didn't see my old friends, but I had already made new ones, people who saw beyond the borders of time and custom, people who saw what was right and didn't hesitate, as I had, in the beginning. Maybe those borders could be eradicated someday, the visible and invisible lines that we construct to keep ourselves feeling safe at the expense of others. I waved at my father, my heart full of tears, and, though he stoically stood guard, his gaze fixed on the red rock mountains that surrounded us, I carried inside me the hope that someday we would all be walking, arm in arm, on the same road together.

CHAPTER V
OF MEMORY, HEALING, AND BODIES

The Mine, An Ending

The mine is closed now.

You won't see a line of dirt-caked pickups winding along the road that dead-ends at the mine, no more mishaps when an ore truck turns off Churchrock road, spilling its load into the dirt. The Dead Horse Bar shut its doors too, a gas station-convenience store now in its place. No more rowdy drinking nights after swing shift. No more miners with crushed chests or paralyzed legs, no more deaths or yellow-caked lungs.

Red rocks tower above us, sleek and jagged. We are made small in their shadows. The land appears untouched, and the river, a thin whisper, trickles beneath the bridge. Some families still live here, in trailers and homes that dot the countryside.

You'd have to dig deeper beneath the surface of this beautiful land to find evidence of what happened before. Most people never worked at the mine, but the mine worked its way into them, into the town of Gallup, New Mexico, until we couldn't afford to think of that underground place as anything more than a good job or lost wages. Children who needed school supplies and clothes, mortgages and taxes had to be paid. I would rather be broke than live through what we did that summer. Once the summer of 1979 ended, the trouble wasn't over.

What we didn't know, and would not have wanted to believe, was that the trouble was just beginning.

Churchrock Daze

We had to drink.

We had to bathe.

We had to cook.

We had to wash.

We had to eat.

We had to live.

We had to

We had to

We have to

The dam broke, esa.

But we didn't.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The Writer as Cartographer, The Story as Map, Or, Why I Am Not a Discoverer of "New" Lands

The act of writing has been described as one of exploring new worlds, and the writer as a cartographer who discovers the narrative in the process of its creation (Turchi 13). Discoveries made while writing fiction are considered to be “attempts to make sense of the world,” while the story as product gives form to such discoveries and sense-making (Ibid 13). Moreover, even before discoveries can be made, the writer must face the blank page, “a world of possibility” (Ibid 28). Peter Turchi argues that “blanks” are important because “[m]aps are defined by what they include but are more often revealing in what they exclude” (29).

Robert T. Tally and Peter Turchi are among those theorists who have identified similarities, even if overtly metaphorical, between writers and cartographers, stories and maps. These “narrative maps,” Tally contends, “constitute themselves in words,” and may be considered a form of “world-making” as much as they may be of “world-representing” (46, 49). Both writer and readers are engaged in an act of discovery; the writer discovering the world as s/he writes, and the reader opening oneself to the world contained within the narrative. “For readers, this narrative makes possible an image of the world, much like that of a map, and the literary cartography present in one narrative can become a part of future surveys, rhapsodies, and narratives, or of future narrative maps” (Tally 49).

How do these ideas about literary cartography figure into the creation of alternative cartographies? What do they offer when discussing the contributions of *Beneath the Shadow of the Red Rock* to the fields of environmental justice and Chicana@ literatures, as well as Chicana and Indigenous feminisms? While my novel shares similarities with traditionally defined literary cartography, I argue that alternative cartographies are less about discovery and more about excavating the stories already sedimented within disenfranchised communities like those of Gallup, New Mexico, the location of the novel and a character in itself. I contend that the contribution of my novel to these fields and the literary world in general have to do with challenging the prevailing notions of the story as a cartography of discovery by highlighting the embodied knowledges of the protagonist, the land itself, and the reconstitution of formerly spectral, racialized female characters.

Map of Home, Map of Life, Or, Why I Chose to Write This Novel

It is impossible to discuss the contributions of my novel to contemporary literature and literary criticism without acknowledging the process that led to its creation in the first place. In one sense, I can appreciate Turchi's cartographic metaphor for its attempt at encouraging writers to discover a story through its literal and figurative mapping. If my novel can at all be considered a map, however, it is one that places Gallup within a larger map of the U.S. imaginary than its northwestern corner of New Mexico first allows.

Gallup's main claim to fame is its proximity to the Diné reservation and its most famous celebration of indigeneity known as Gallup Indian Ceremonials, held annually in

August. This festival attracts an international tourist clientele and indigenous performers who clog the arteries of Gallup for the four-day festival. Everywhere, the detritus of forced removal (and its erasure from the main population's memory) remains simultaneously visible and spectral in the city's disdain for Diné residents. It is manifested in a constant narrative of blame and hatred heaped on them for high alcoholism and poverty rates, for their perceived laziness and ingratitude. There remains an active attempt to literally expunge Diné peoples from the townspeople's minds and sightlines. I witnessed this on a daily basis during my high school years and the first years of college.

By the time the uranium mining incident occurred, I suppose I had reached my boiling point. As a young adult only a few years older than Rogelia, I had lived in Gallup when the earthen dam collapsed and had struggled to comprehend the tremendous impact of that radioactive slurry on the town's inhabitants. I attended a meeting or two of government health officials, but the demands of college prevented any further action on my part, something I regret to this day. That regret, combined with the desire to make visible something so intentionally hidden, made the decision to write a short story as part of my MFA thesis all the easier since this incident had remained firmly etched in my mind as evidence of the worst kind of injustice. That germinal seed eventually grew into *Beneath the Shadow of the Red Rock*.

Since then, that story and the pain of my inaction have lived inside me. At times, the story has prodded me, the pain has sharpened my memory. I am not therefore a discoverer in the tradition of the imperial conqueror that Turchi and others so vigorously

and uncritically celebrate. The maps of which they speak and write are not the same maps I'm creating. Mine are hewn from cultural memory and ritual, from bodily and psychic harm. Perhaps these alternative cartographies are not maps in the traditional sense at all. Perhaps they are a tender uprooting of knowledges already embodied, of emotion long buried, of bones cracking in anger.

Literary and Pedagogical Implications of the Novel as Alternative Cartography, Or, How an Arrivants' Tale Might Spur Readers to Engage in Difficult Dialogues and Possibly Take Action

Mine is not the first novel whose social justice narrative embodies a “consequential geography” that urges us to understand how justice and injustice are spatially constructed (Soja *Seeking Spatial Justice* 1). It is, however, the first to train a fictional lens on the 1979 Churchrock uranium tailings spill and to traverse the arrivant landscape, so to speak, in terms of Chicana-Indigenous agency and subjectivity. It is also positioned within a matrix of Indigenous, postcolonial, and Chicanx ecologies in its focus on environmental disaster, and, as Daniel Wildcat argues, insists upon a return to a perspective of space as more than a “fixed background,” calling humans to consider ourselves, “without the least hint of romanticism,” a small but important part of “the web of life” (5). Emma Pérez’s “decolonial imaginary,” that “time lag between the colonial and the postcolonial, that interstitial space where differential politics and social dilemmas are negotiated,” can be viewed as a form of spatial justice wherein the imagination can gain a foothold in the “intangible,” that in-between space that is neither colonial nor Othered (6). Imagination, conceived through this novel, and the social

justice actions and narratives that might stem from it, are urgently needed as catastrophic environmental damage threatens the planet.

The implications of this novel as primarily a pedagogical tool revolve around its engagement with environmental justice, Chicana-Indigenous identity formation, and the role of the social activist-writer in creating literary fiction that enjoins readers to become the kind of critical witnesses who take action beyond the page. This kind of decolonizing storytelling keeps alive, as living memory, within and from the decolonial imaginary of which Pérez writes, the truths about the effects of colonization on land and peoples, as well as the colonized's originary stories and epistemologies.

Environmental Justice as Alternative Cartography, Or, How Space is Power

First, in terms of environmental justice, alternative cartographies, as literary disruptions of colonial discourses about space, bring into play critical aspects of imagination and geographies. Edward Said discusses throughout his classic postcolonial tome, *Orientalism* the importance of “imaginative geographies” as that which creates space through discourses, images, and texts, the totality of which is used by imperial powers to maintain control over places and people, and to justify invasion of other lands. Brady builds upon Said's formation by suggesting that narratives inculcate “different conceptualizations, traditions, myths, and meanings” in relation to space (8). Literature in particular “thrives on the intersections between the shaping powers of language and the productive powers of space,” which includes the naming of places and the “grammatical structures that regulate their production” (Ibid 8).

I see my novel's power in its use of space, both physical and metaphorical, to highlight emotion, character, and concepts especially since literature is dependent upon on "the discursiveness of space" and on "cultural mediation" in shaping narrative (Brady 8). In the case of *Beneath the Shadow of the Red Rock*, Rogelia James, my novel's protagonist, must confront her own notions of indigeneity, both externally toward other Indigenous peoples and toward herself as a newly emergent Chicana-Indigenous woman. The negative space, the "space of death," (Holland 4) of the uranium mine forces Rogelia and others to examine their own ethics, especially in relation to the socioeconomic consequences to the land when extractive natural resource "development" occurs. These characters illustrate the difficulties in contending with these consequences of uranium mining for 4.468 billion years, the half-life of Uranium-238. I also take on Nixon's challenge to reframe the disasters that are "slow moving," anonymous, and of "indifferent interest" in the "sensation-driven technologies of our image-world" into stories with the same "sensational" narrative power to stir public sentiment and initiate political interventions in order to tackle the most pressing environmental issues of our time and to ameliorate the poor who remain disposable (3).

An instructive example of the difficulties posed by this kind of urgency in ethics took place when I guest lectured in a colleague's English 203 course on postcolonial literatures during Spring 2015 semester. During my presentation, based on my dissertation's theoretical apparatus, I asked students in small groups to discuss whether they would give up the earth's future in exchange for economic security in the present. Of the roughly twenty-five students in the class, all of them chose the latter. This kind of

moral position no longer suffices for the short term; for the long term, it creates a moral dilemma that would provide a rich discussion about the earth, future generations, indigenous and postcolonial ecologies, and the problematic but key issue of economic survival. While there are no easy answers, such a discussion would emphasize the importance of imagination, and the actions and narratives that stem from it, as resounding and urgent responses to catastrophic environmental damage that threatens the planet. A desire for spatial justice, both material and affective, is critical for dealing with “the array of social and ecological issues we will face across nearly every dimension of the complex life system of Mother Earth” (Wildcat 5).

The Writer as a Recuperative Agent of the Land, Or Why a Storyteller Must Tell the Truth

“How can an author recover land that is already ravaged by the violence of history?”

This question, posed by Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George Handley in *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment* (4), forms the crux of the discussion about my role as an activist-writer about the land. I don’t think we can recuperate the land in its traditional forms. What we can do is show how damage to the environment further threatens those lands and calls us not only to fight for the sustenance of all life but the re-membrance of those lands in our own national and community-based imaginaries as both cultural memory and a blueprint of hope for the future. As a storyteller, I am compelled to recreate those imagined geographies as forms

of resistance against the nation-state as well as a decolonizing methodology that usurps the individual and makes community central.

Ultimately, though, whether this question remains unanswerable or even contested, I believe it is my social responsibility as a writer to (re)create an “imaginative geography” about the Churchrock tailings spill as one example of desecration of the land and its recuperation. Pedagogically as well, the novel proffers a local history with transnational implications. This story invites students and instructors alike to “connect histories of conquest, colonialism, slavery, indigenous rights, imperialism, migration, and globalization...throughout the Americas” (Taylor xvii) and beyond. Readers are encouraged to “think globally, act locally,” to use a phrase from another decade. If knowledge is transmitted through “embodied action, through cultural agency, and by making choices” (xvi), as Diana Taylor argues, then my novel puts both the repertoire and the archive in conversation with each other. The novel is the archival document, and Rogelia is the social actor who commands the stage and whose voice recounts her own story, not as a representative of any group, but as a singular voice within a communal world, a singular voice that I hope in future iterations to merge more seamlessly into the whole.

The Spectral, Racialized Female Subject, Or, How I Became Visible

Though my family has roots in indigeneity, I did not grow up as an indigenous woman. This may sound contradictory, and indeed that represents my experience. The reason for it is tied directly to a family identity borne of the Genízaro experience, which refers to native peoples brought to the state typically by the Lakota or the Comanche

along slave trade routes. Upon arrival, they served their Spanish captors as domestic servants or shepherders, and their indigenous identities, language(s), and customs were suppressed. La india panana (The Pawnee woman) was the ancestral matriarch of our maternal family tree, and her story has circulated among our extended families since I have had memory.

Though central to our familial identity, la india panana circulates as a spectral racialized female subject. She is an indigenous ghost whose presence is always both completely visible through language and invisible as a disembodied subject within the Arellano-Gallegos imaginary. As her descendant, as both an arrivant and an indigenous Chicana, I often felt as if I were just as spectral as the ghost-woman who has hovered above our family. This feeling became even more pronounced once my family moved to Gallup. I am not sure why. Mostly, as I've pondered this while writing the dissertation-novel, it has seemed to me that the racism directed toward the Navajo was (and remains) among the most virulent and completely normalized I've ever witnessed. Even now, when I have returned to visit friends and family, the ease with which my loved ones demonize their Navajo neighbors stuns me as deeply as it did then. Also, our family relocation to Gallup when I was a teenager brought home my own identity as an indigenous woman. But, lacking any information, I struggled to understand my own subjectivity, much less theorize it. This is why and how the theories of spectrality and social death have come to resonate with me now on both a theoretical and personal level. I hope that these understandings have an impact on others who are trying to figure out how to be all of themselves in a world that promotes fragmented subjectivities and

encourages us to forget ourselves through a constant stream of commodification and consumerism.

Next Steps, Or, How to Revise The Novel, Again

This is the fourth iteration of *Beneath the Shadow of the Red Rock* in the past five years. While it has come a long way in a short time, I know there is more to do. A couple of next steps include (1) tightening the narrative to more fully integrate the development of the relationship between Rogelia and Lindy, (2) streamlining the narrative so that Rogelia's development of her activism and her blossoming Chicana-Indigenous identity can become more nuanced and embedded within the narrative, (3) creating more dissonance and conflict between the characters, (4) reconfiguring the plot for greater embodiment of the issues raised in this essay and the critical introduction, and (5) to find a way to more fully realize the Genízaro experience within the novel.

There is much to recommend this novel for classroom use and for its call to move beyond literary reflection. Students can be encouraged to chart their own identity formation, dig more deeply for their familial associations, and create alternative maps of identity and home(lands). It creates opportunities for students to conjoin the experiential, the theoretical, and the literary in courses on environmental justice, Chican@ literatures, and Chican@ and Indigenous feminisms. Course content can include projects in Environmental Justice that either mirror or echo the same kinds of concerns emergent from the novel. Literarily, the novel offers a unique contribution to literatures about the southwest and the environment for its focus on the arrivants of Gallup, New Mexico, and it can provide transnational connections through its focus on the bombing of Hiroshima

and Nagasaki. Finally, the novel serves as a nascent awakening of one young woman's selfhood and her ties and responsibility to a larger community. Just as this dissertation has been a lesson in forbearance and fortitude, so has Rogelia's journey gone. The novel's writing has illuminated my own path, and I hope as well that it will illuminate those who wander and wonder, who want justice for all.

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