NAVÁJO

Owen Seumptewa
GOBERNADOR KNOB
TWO POEMS BY HERSHMAN JOHN

GRANDMOTHER MOON

Tonight is the lunar eclipse
Tonight the moon blooms
Tonight my grandma is home.

The cornfield carpets the canyon’s basin
A Navajo field of colored corn
Red, Yellow, Blue, and White
Grandma Nalniehe whispers to the moon
Her turquoise jewels reflect the evening dinner fire
In the distance the bells of the sheep ring
Overhead the moon begins to glow.

Tonight is the lunar eclipse
Tonight the moon blossoms
Tonight my grandma is home.

Every year, the Crow Fair brings her family back
She holds her sleeping grandchild
In the security of her camp, she sings
Grandma Black Eagle sings for the moon
And the booming drumsbeat create the rhythm
The Little Bighorn river reflects the starlit sky
Through the trees the moon begins to glow.

Tonight is the lunar eclipse
Tonight the moon burns
Tonight my grandma is home.

A Hopi village rests quietly on a mesa
In a rectangular room, she whispers a prayer
As the candlelight shadows of the Kachinas dance on the wall
Grandma Honrantewa prays for the moon
And a lone Kachina points out the window
On the roof, an owl hoots “who?”
Out the window the moon begins to glow.

Tonight is the lunar eclipse
Tonight the moon blooms
Tonight my grandma is home.

Relocated to a house in Oklahoma
She lost her Cherokee homeland
In her rocking chair, a tear drops off her cheek
Grandma Webb cries for the moon
While fanning herself with a beaded Eagle-feather fan
The air is sick as a lead car passes by
And over the buildings the moon begins to glow.

Tonight is the lunar eclipse
Tonight the moon beams
Tonight all my grandmas are home.
Tonight they all see Grandmother Moon
Tonight the moon glows deep red like blood
Tonight the moon is Indian.

—Hershman John, 1992

COYOTE’S EYES
FOR RODDY YELLOWMAN

Location: Crow Bar
Western Australia, October 1991
Mission: Creek War Guam

My brother, Roddy blended into the shrubs and sand
his scanning pupils were like charcoal
The moon reflected liquidly off the black sea
the moon was his watching grandmother
The humid air was hot as he kept his M-16 rifle
close to his sweaty brown body
It was a rule of the Marines
"Your rifle is an extension of your body"
He slowly crawled on his belly like a coyote
ready to pounce a sleeping jackrabbit.

Coyote called out to his brothers
"Brothers, come help, push my rock"
He wanted to play with the lizards
they were sliding down the hill on smooth stones
All the little desert lizards ran up the hill
pushing the great rock with tiny arms
The elder lizard stood at the hill bottom
he shook his head in disapproval
The rock groaned and cracked
Coyote smiled as pebbles rolled down the hill.

Roddy crawled his way up the hill
he was a scout for the military game
With his night-vision goggles he searched for the Aussies
he saw no movement, no fires, nothing
The vision through goggles reminded him of Navajo land
he saw home except the sound of the surf was wrong
His radio crackled like static as he turned it on
"Sir, everything's dead," he whispered
He hid his form next to a great shrub
"Yeah, Yellowman keep your eyes open" said Sergeant Vega
Then Roddy heard pebbles rolling down the hill
it wasn’t him . . .

The rock gave way with a great thundering sound
Coyote went underneath it, rolling down the hill

(cont.)
"There's someone out here!" yelled Roddy into the radio as the sound of crackling leaves came through the shrubs. The shrub exploded, a bomb made of leaves and twigs fear raced through his back as he covered his face. Overhead, a great force of wind knocked him over and he rolled down the hill. With huge eyes like a trout's they watched in awe all the desert lizards saw the rolling fall. They scrambled for safety out of the rolling path and stood watching to see what happens next. As the dancing dust settled.

At the bottom of the hill they couldn't see nothing darkness... they were both blind. Coyote's beautiful blue eyes popped out of his head and rolled into a stream, lost. Roddy's binoculars fell from his brown hand and rolled into night's blanket, lost.


Coyote tried to get up but the rock tore his body apart. One arm went to the East, the other went to the West. One leg went to the North and the other went to the South.

Roddy tried to get up but his back was hurting. "Your rifle is an extension of your body" the phrase flashed through his mind. His rifle was gone to the directions it was like losing his protective arms.

All the lizards laughed until tears came to their eyes. Two crows fell from hands of Grandfather Sky they were trying to breathe, laugh and fly. It was funny to see Coyote fall apart.

At the hilltop the radio called his name. "Corporal Yellowman!, Yellowman!, Yellowman!..." He climbed his way back up the hill. "Sir..." Roddy slowly breathed into the radio. "What happened, Yellowman?!" Sergeant Vega replied. "I don't know?" "The bush next to me exploded and knocked me down."

"A bush... it was a God-damn roof!!" "A roof?"
"A roof... a kangaroo..." Roddy started to laugh until he couldn't breathe. Vega heard an echo of laughter in the distance it sounded like a coyote howling at the moon.

"Come help me my little brother" howled Coyote he had no eyes, arms or legs. "I told you not to play with us" instructed the elder lizard he stood looking at the log. Coyote had become "Help me, brother?" "No!" "Why, brother?"

"Only if you never play with us again"

"I will never play with you again."

Roddy found his rifle as the first rays of the Sun peeked over the blue-black oceans of dawn. The elder lizard instructed the little lizards they ran to the four directions and brought Coyote's limbs. They put his arms and legs crookedly on Coyote finally Coyote stood and said "I can't see..."

His eyes were lost in the stream so the elder lizards whispered to the two crows. They flew to a nearby hogan over the hill at a firepit the two crows picked up charcoal. The elder lizard told Coyote to look up to the sky he looked up and saw nothing. The crows dropped their hot coals it fell into Coyote's eye sockets and he screamed. Everyone saw Coyote running around in circles and they all began to laugh again.

Roddy found his night-vision goggles behind a bush as he stood up to stretch. He blinked his tired charcoal eyes, they felt dry and red and he wondered if the wet youthfulness would ever return. He watched the moon begin to set into the Australian ocean it was his grandmother going home.

In the fading whiteness of the moon he saw the brown face of his grandmother. She spoke in broken English finishing her Coyote story. "That's why when you see a coyote his body is twisted and raggedy as for Coyote's eyes they are black and empty no longer are they beautiful."

—Hersheyan John
PHOTOGRAPHS
BY JASPER TSO

JASPER TSO

CROWN DANCER

YEEI' POWER

OLD CANADO HOSPITAL

TODIK'QZHII
(SALT WATER)
decided to become a photographer because I was tired of outsiders stepping into my community for a few days and supposedly telling "our" story. There is a book recently published that shows a picture of a Navajo woman sitting in an empty hogan. Her baby is wrapped in a cradle board laid across her lap. There was nothing else in the hogan. The photographer was trying to show the geometric beauty of the hogan, yet when I showed this scene to some Navajo friends they all felt pity for her.

Why? Because they saw poverty in the empty hogan.
The photographer had a nice picture. But it was the wrong picture.

Fred Ritchin, a photo critic, wrote one reason photographers seek the exotic is because there is no poetry in the industrial world.

The Navajo world is full of poetry—and a strong draw for photographers hoping for rhyme. But the verses cannot be learned in a weekend; photographers who drop in for a short time miss most of the subtleties. There is much to learn about the Navajo from looking at photographs taken by non-Navajos, there is also much that should be taught.

Take Indian humor for instance. I remember talking with a Navajo woman who joked that white people must think we have no teeth because we never smile in pictures. Humor is probably the most under photographed aspect of being Navajo.

Yet, what other people celebrate a baby's first laugh. From the very first word that is spoken by a Navajo, a baby is taught to appreciate and cherish the sound of laughter. This gentle giggle results in a Navajo being given their spiritual name that connects them to Mother Earth and the Holy People. I have always felt that Navajo laughter closely resembles the rhythms of Navajo prayers and songs.

Navajo culture is alive. Only a dead culture doesn't change and thus, Navajos are changing daily. It is time Navajos begin to tell their own story. We have a voice. It is an eloquent voice filled with poetry and song.

It is not an Indian voice but a Navajo voice. Rather than look for similarities we must emphasize our differences. "Pan-Indian" should be a four letter word. What do I mean by this? Take powwows for instance. It allows Navajos to dress up like Indians. Some young Navajos are growing up believing that a powwow is Navajo religion. We are in jeopardy of trading our Navajo voice for an Indian voice. I remember a college photography student showing me a portfolio of powwow pictures. When I asked him what I was looking at he said, "I want to show traditional Navajo dancing." Powwow is not Navajo.

The Navajo are not a race. An Indian is a Navajo who was either born on the reservation or has at least two Navajo parents. If you come into the Navajo world and treat us like a race, you will probably see it. But if you treat us as a people, we are not a race.

Humor is probably the most under photographed aspect of being Navajo.

There are many answers to be found in Navajo culture. My mother teases me that "racing the sun" as a young boy conditioned me for my photography. "While you can no longer run to race the sun, your race now is to capture its beauty on film before it vanishes."

I have been working on a very personal photography project since the birth of my daughter—eleven years
now. It is a project that has followed my mother, Ruth, teaching my daughter, Jaclyn, the ways of the Navajo.

I remember when she was teaching my daughter about weaving. One morning, Jaclyn and her Nali’ (Father’s mother) left early to gather plants to dye some wool. As they walked across the darkened landscape, Jaclyn stumbled over a small bush. “Nali’ Ruth,” Jaclyn said. “Why do we always do things while it is still dark?” Her Nali’ just laughed and said, “The Holy People taught us that there is wisdom and beauty in the darkness before dawn. If you sleep in, you miss it.”

For the next two hours they shared the beauty that the earth had to offer. As I watched the two of them walk across the wide open land and climb a small painted hill, the sun rose behind them and Jaclyn asked her Nali’ why Navajos weave. My mind drifted to a time 26 years earlier when our family lived in Phoenix and I asked my mom why she was singing as she weaved. The smile, warm and filled with love and knowledge, was the same one she gave my daughter as she answered the same question more than two decades later. “This is who we are, this is what we do,” she said. “The loom connects me with the sacred mountains and the songs connect me with my mother.”

My mother and daughter spent the next week going over the various steps involved in weaving, from carding the wool to stringing the loom. But the real lessons were the stories of The People. “Being Navajo means not only knowing how to weave but also, why we weave,” my mom had said.

By the end of the week, my daughter had a dazed look on her face. There were so many stories, so many tasks to remember. She tried to memorize everything that her Nali’ had told her but it was impossible. Her mind was like a poorly woven rug, there was no order to it. She came to me and said, “There’s no way I can remember all of this, Dad.” My mom must have sensed this because she walked over to Jaclyn and told her, “Don’t worry about remembering everything. It is inside you now. You will remember what to do when you have to.”

“The loom connects me with the sacred mountains and the songs connect me with my mother.”

That is the way of Navajo teaching. It is inside us. When it is time to learn, it is time to teach. A few weeks later my mom visited to see how Jaclyn’s weaving was coming.

When she walked into Jaclyn’s room she saw the weaving tools lying all over her room. She sat next to Jaclyn and asked why she wasn’t taking care of her tools. Jaclyn felt like she had let her Nali’ down, Nali’ Ruth put her arms around her and said, “Let me tell you a story.”

It was now time to learn and time to teach.
"One day a young lady came to Changing Woman and said she wanted to weave. Changing Woman taught her just like I have taught you. After spending days and days before the loom, there was no progress on the rug. She didn’t understand why nothing was happening. Finally, on the fourth day she got so mad she tore the loom down and threw all of her weaving tools away.

"Four days later, she thought she heard a baby crying. She came to the spot where she thought the crying came from and she looked closely at the ground. In front of her, underneath a sagebrush, was her weaving comb. The weaving tools were crying.

"The comb looked at the woman and told her, ‘I am crying because you threw me away. You didn’t appreciate me and the other tools, that is why your rug never grew while you were weaving.

"The young woman felt guilty. She had betrayed not only her tools but her People. Remember this story when you are weaving. Always take care of your tools and they will take care of you.”

After the story they made a buckskin bag for the tools. When I left Jaclyn’s room, they were both sitting in front of a small loom and they were both singing.

"I weave in harmony. With the Earth I weave. The strings are like rain, the rain touches my fingers. There is beauty in my rug. There is beauty all around me. The plants speak to me, Mother Earth colors my rug. I weave in harmony.”

This is the beauty of the Navajo voice. A story comes alive with each telling and retelling. It is also why Navajo storytelling is so important. There is a complexity to the stories that works on different levels for different age groups. The story’s aim is to teach the whole person.

The Navajo have a word for human beings, it is Bilahaashlaii—it means the five finger people. The beauty of its meaning lies in its simplicity and yet there is also a deeper meaning. Like the word suggests, there are many facts to being human: culture, humor, language, religion, as well as others. Being Navajo is more than just putting on a turquoise necklace or weaving a rug. In order to truly understand who you are, you must teach all five fingers—the whole person. This is the challenge for Navajos, to be able to tell their own stories with their own voice.

Photography has allowed me and my family to learn more about being Navajo. A friend of my daughter recently asked her why she wanted to weave. Jaclyn’s smile mirrored my mother’s for its warmth and beauty, and in her own voice said, “that is what we do, that is who we are.”
ROCK POINT COMMUNITY SCHOOL, ROCK POINT, ARIZONA

These are voices from red rock country of Rock Point. These are voices of dry washes and hidden springs in the back of dry canyons and mesas that zigzag blue horizons, all of northern Arizona. These are voices that shake walls of an old BIA building that is more than two decades old, a dormitory turned into a high school. These are voices that bring the Canyon de Chelly to life with echoing laughters at the end of the school year. These are voices that call back the sheep, sing the children to sleep, dance the slip dance at Enemy Way ceremonies, whisper and succeed in classrooms of university and prep school summer programs across the country, all during the summer. These are voices from the beginning. These are voices from the future. These are voices rising today. These are young and powerful voices that do not need interpretation, that do not need a teacher’s explanation. Let them rise. Let them speak. Let them create. Rise. Speak. Create.

—Rex Lee Jim, teacher

SKINWALKER

Once upon a time I fell asleep
on a cold dark night
i walked upon anasazi ruins
fire was burning
hairy creatures were dancing
ritual of the night people
the smell of piss was on the air
i walked closer
scared to see
what was inside the cave
my heart started to beat fast
my shirt was soaked with sweat
i tumbled over a rock i didn’t see
i knew they knew
i turned around
as dark as it was
i ran into the dark
i ran and ran
i fell over
my sides hurting
i was in pain
i was lost in the dark
the only light
was from the stars above
there was silence for awhile though
then the laughter came
the sound of a wicked tongue
almost stopped my heart
it came from all directions
the laughter filled my mind with fear
although it was dark
i could see their eyes

their black figures
moved about in the dark
they had circled me
the smell of fear, hate, death was all about
i had ruined their meeting
now i had to pay
i heard weird sounds again
it was some kind of language
almost like Navajo
i was stiff with fear
what were they gonna do to me
i couldn’t think or talk
i was scared breathless
i felt small pinches all over my body
it was windy
evil wicked laughter
was the last thing i heard
i woke that morning
my bed soaking wet with sweat
i got up around 1000 am
a sharp pain hurt
on the side of my neck
i wondered
i stayed alone that night
unlocked doors and windows
was it all just a dream
or had i just been cured
for not believing

—Anderson Talley

THAT ROCK

The wind blows by,
small grains of sand move
across the rock.
The rain comes down,
and water flows down the side
in a small groove formed from
years gone by.
The rock gives off
the longest and biggest shadow,
the sun has set.
Small animals lay under this rock:
it gives off heat from the day
and chases away the cold weather
of the night.
Morning comes,
and with it
the runner.
He runs up this steep rock,
rests awhile,
then leaves.
The sun comes up slowly,
the beams flash across the smooth surface
of that rock.

—Conrad Boge

BEAUTIFUL LAND

There are no big houses or big
city buildings there, there are
only plants growing. A little ways
away there are two hills
covered with green grass.
From one hill runs a narrow silver
stream with a twinkling, shining glow,
a reflection of the sun. About the
size of Rock Point, there the land is covered
with green grass and wet leaves, and

it seems like it never stops raining. This
untouchable land.
On that land there grows a bunch
of roses and flowers,
having the fun time of their lives, they
are dancing their stems to the sound of the
breeze that goes by. No human or creature
has put their footsteps on the land.
Beautiful sun flowers, attracting.
Honey bees and wasps, jumping from different
flowers to oak trees to juniper trees. These
stand on top of the hills, looking like they are
standing guard. Showing their heights and colors.

The sun tanning in the thick grass.
How wonderful it would be to see the
beautiful land that is covered with bright
attracting colors. The untouchable
land. Wishing that you could be there alone,
thinking that you would like to run through
that grassy land with the wind or breeze swishing
by and feeling the cool air. Beautiful
land is ancient.

—Siimpon Yellowbear

Midget, the only one for me
black, scruffy, very short
no wonder he lived by that name
big, macho dogs that came in gangs would
crowd around him

like
hungry wolves drooling over a lost fawn
Midget would stand there and

wimper...
the wimper that still haunts me today
the time when he was battered
by some many mutes
He didn’t need that kind of
treatment
He didn’t do anything wrong
he was all the friends that I could ever have
those canines didn’t have
anyone to love them
like I did Midget
I’m just sorry that it will never be the same
No one could ever replace him...
my Midget.

—Michael Lee

WONDERLAND

I bump my head against
the dresser
I go into a distant land
where many teddy bears
are dancing, laughing
and having a good time

—Marcellina Traie
THE AUTUMN FEELING

Walking along the cracked sidewalk
The heels on my shoes hum a rusty note.
The pale, gray sky
Like my inner self.
Thunders roll by above.
I truly see that what the weather man
On the T.V., said is to be true.
It's going to rain...
to rain happiness
to rain pride
to rain freedom
to rain the surrounding, cool and damp...

A yellow crispy leaf
Flews down my path,
I step on it and feel and hear
The crunch...
Like my eating a 
"Nestle Crunch" candy bar.
I have the good feeling
That autumn
Will be beautiful.
Beautiful for all of us
to enjoy fond memories of.
The people will be disappointed
to see autumn go...
All those glorious, matching colors...
Autumn bright
Autumn grace
Autumn fresh
Autumn beauty
Autumn...

One night, and not long ago,
a man was asleep, dreaming.
Whether it was good or bad, he dreamt on.
Later he was all sweating and got up.
He was talking and soon he was crying.
Later his wife heard him
And woke him up.
She asked,
"What's wrong? Are you okay?"
The man was scared and had goose bumps.
The man started talking about his dream.
"It was a bad dream. I dreamed that a snake had bitten me on the legs when I was going
After the sheep."
At 3:00 o'clock in the morning husband and wife
Comforted one another.
Then they both hit the sack.
In the morning the man choked on his dream and
Washed it down with morning coffee.
"Go to a medicine man. See what he can do for
You," his wife said.
The medicine man told him seriously,
"When you dream something like that you have
to say a small prayer so it won't happen.
What you need is a dream catcher." The old man
Modal his sleepy head.
The dream catcher only catches good dreams,
Dreams go through the center hole, and the
Bad dreams never know the day."
So he believed, and he hung one around his neck.
Since then bad dreams vanished forever,
The dream catcher triumphantly
And freely danced in the air.
The family lived happily ever after.

—Jason Charley

THE LAST OF YOU

Whistling through the window
The wind
Scattering about
ashes from the fireplace
Bringing on a throbbing pain
The chill
The dead body
Looks alive against the carpet

C.D.

The minute
You touched my hand
You were nice and warm.

Hours later
You were mean to me
But I had the feeling
That you were just playing
With me.

A few days later
You were cold
And couldn't tell
What was being told.

Weeks later
You turned your back
On me
And took advantage
Of everything I bought
For you.

Months later
I had the feeling
That I didn't care for you
Even though we spent
The days together
With everyone at home.

Still it didn't mean
A thing to you.

Now the way you are treating me
Won't change what I used to do for you.

I'll continue changing your litter,
Giving you fresh water,
Pouring you more milk,
And buy you another mouse.

—Sabra Bia

EXCUSES, EXCUSES, EXCUSES

Many Hundred Ancient Minute Moons Ago
A Cowboy went to a Western Dance
During the Central Fair in August.
The stud was asked to Dance
By this beautiful young looking girl.
Of course the girl with the tight pants
Knew how to cut a rug.
But she didn't know the guy couldn't.
Yeah, the guy thought that he could outdo everyone.
Until he got out there.

What an embarrassing moment for the young show-off.
Not even half way through the song
The young lady got tired of the guy
Because he couldn't control his two steps.
Every time the two made their step the guy stepped on the girl's toes.
They even hit their knees together.
So the girl got tired of the 160 pound cowboy ruining her night.
So the guy told the lady that
"It's been a long time"
since he danced to country music.
The girl just took off and didn't want to see the guy again.
The next time the stud was asked to dance,
He told the young ladies that he was already taken.
The next night he just sat on the bleacher,
Wishing he knew how to dance.
Even though he had all those dance tapes of western dances,
He just couldn't do it.

—Verona Begay

YEARNING

A little boy
Trembles in the corner
Waiting for his father
to leave
He watches a young puppy
Sitting beside him being licked by his mother
Yearning for that kind of love
The little boy sighs

—Valeria Jones
THE PLANTING STICK

A planting stick, could be just any stick, could mean a lot to some people. It could do so much for anyone in many ways.

My grandpa, an old man, was out there in the cornfields, hot or raining, never quit planting with a planting stick. It took a lot of time, and he never minded. He wanted to finish something, and he did. Whatever he did, he did it for us. Rain came when he wanted it.

His cornstalks were tall and green. He planted so much that his field expanded. There was so much work, he did it all, and we didn’t have many problems.

Now, just us, without our grandmothers and grandfathers, we are like nothing. We’re too lazy, we didn’t even plant. I always wonder why for old people things worked. They never gave up, no matter how old they were, they believed in everything they did, and it worked for them.

—Geraldine Blueeye

JEALOUS

She sat on his lap he tickled her to make her smile he gave her a teddy bear on her birthday while I got color books and crayons he always takes her to town watch movies and eat out while I stay home and herd sheep Does daddy love her more or am I too young to understand Why is there a burning feeling in my heart that makes me want to cry

—Anita Begay

DREAMS

Upon a star, I wish for life, I wish for happiness I wish for freedom, I wish for love, I wish for many things that I know many people do not have. I wish for them, not me. When I see all the destruction, I feel what they seem to be feeling. How I wonder how lucky I am, to be born in such a safe home. Not many people have that opportunity, opportunity of a life time. I think I wish for World Peace!

—Kathie Tsinic

ANCIENT BISONS RUN

Looking at rugged hills that disappear beyond mountains where ancient bisons roamed, seeing only shadows of great beasts fleeing by, running from white hunters, ancient bisons run. They trample over ones that trip and fall. “Only killed for their tongues and prices of their hides.” Voices are now silent as dead buffalos are left in this valley to rot.” Who would do such a thing? Their numbers dropped from thousands to a few hundreds. Breeding in captivity, only a few may remember the tragedy of their ancestors. What they went through throughout history.

—Leander Begay

BULLRIDER

The bullrider rides the bull with red steamy eyes claps and screams rush by with the eight second buzzer the dusty wrangler but walks away and the white teeth shine in the sun gets the highest score proudly waves his black hat claps and screams zoom by again the bullrider walks away in his dusty wrangler jeans

—Genevieve Begay

THE BLACK CROW

The Black Crow Soars only on the Reservation I hate and love am jealous of The Black Crow I hate because it’s always in your fields eats your corn and eats your melons I try to shoot it down but it always turns in its flight I love because The Black Crow gets rid of Carcinises no Black Crows and the reservation would stink and everyone would be left trying to think I am jealous because I cannot fly like The Black Crow The Black Crow can fly across the sky as if The Black Crow left from a bow doing things I do not know of

—Tyrie Benally

A long time ago two little kids played outside. And this Black car came along and took the little kids in the car and drove away. The following day the little kids were found dead by the river bank. Then the policeman picked them up. They could not find their parents. Later he found out that they were alone and survived all along.

—Regina Nez
FRANK

Diane Willie
[Navaajo/Laguna]

One night while the icy wind whistled through the cracks of Grandma's hogeh, the owl came and sat on the edge of Grandpa's blanket and looked out over the plains. That very night Frank was going to get his first taste of living in the world outside the reservation.

After dancing, he wandered into an arrowy on a moonless cold night. Territorious winds ripped through his cotton cowboy shirt, his new pair of Wranglers, and onto his already numb body. He tried to nestle underneath a juniper tree, shivering for warmth, and clutching the branches for salvation, that his lucky Frank was missing in action, that his grandmother didn't understand a word of English, but she seemed to know exactly what Erica Kane was saying or doing that day.

"Erica, she's doing something mischievous again, she reminds me of coyote," she said in Navajo.

Coyote is a mythical figure in Navajo origin stories, and he always engages in mischievous endeavors when he thinks it will benefit him.

"Maybe you should tell Erica about the coyote," I told her.

She chucked at her as another handful of corn on the griddle stone and she began grilling as if she were doing an aerobics exercise that would probably tone even the biggest bosom.

Grandma was a firm believer in maintaining the Navajo tradition. Her wrinkled face encompassed various aspects of a fulfilled life: humor, beauty, knowledge, wisdom, philosophy, and history. She would recite in great detail the many hardships that our ancestors had encountered during the past three generations.

"My grandfather walked all the way to the Hwelin, then when it was time to come home, he walked until he couldn't walk any further, and that is why we live on this mountain," she would say.

The Navajo people refer to their incarceration of 1864-1868 as the Long Walk, or Hwelin as it is called in Navajo. It was a chaotic time. The Navajos were forced to walk away to an unknown place in the desert. Over four years, a treaty was signed and the people were set free to return home. Most Navajos settled within the boundaries set by the United States government, and after five generations, the people will stay in the same designated area.

The mountains of western New Mexico are diverse, some made up of solid sandstone, and others mottled with an evergreen canopy. It was there, at 10,000 feet, where my grandfather's parents had set. We lived on the reeling end of the northern plateau in the Zuni Mountains. We had no power, no phone, just a little patch of land in the middle.

The range Rudio was the only person who came to visit, but all he wanted was information about the eagles that lived within the canyon.

In the midst of Erica Kane's whining, and corn grilling, the dogs began barking, which alerted us that someone was coming for a visit. My grandmother's attention immediately switched from the fire to preparation for a visitor.

"Get the folded chairs out from behind the door, put the grilling stones outside, turn off the television, and disconnect it, while I just put another pot of coffee on the stove," she instructed. I began running around putting everything away, and I hastily prepared for the visitor.

Moments later, a bouncing maroon Chewy truck slowly made its way up the rocky dirt road. The dogs were excitedly barking alongside the truck, jumping and bowing to proclaim that they were in fact the first to hear the truck coming. From behind the curtains, curious neighbors were positioning themselves to get a better look, and I could see my aunt Yelta moving from window to window trying to be discreet.

The visitor was not a stranger to me. It was Frank's mother, my Laguna grandmother, Ana-Maria. Like my Grandma Rosa, she was full of knowledge and emphasized that the Pueblo people also had their share of misfortunes and hardships. I remember once during a visit to see Frank, Ana told a story about how we got our family name of Tobas.

"We got our name from a Franciscan priest who adopted an orphaned ancestral grandmother," Ana said. "It was when the Puebloans recorded in 1860, and the priest found him wandering about Plains.

I wasn't really sure whether to be excited or shy, for I had never seen someone so tall and to be a Navajo mother, that I was probably going to be sick. That I would need a medicine man to cure me from the evil spirits that would attack my body. Then she told me how the topic of death should never be discussed in a Navajo home, for it was bad luck and it warranted unwanted invocation of evil spirits. Grandma Rosa looked horrified, and I didn't want to hear of me going to a burial ritual.

"A Navajo doesn't want to get me with you.

"You have to come, it's our way," Ana pleaded.

"My grandmother was confusing me. I had been put into a situation where a choice was demanded. So I turned toward my Grandma Rosa, and she understood her language.

"I want to go with Ana," I said. I think I said it because I was curious, and I had Frank in mind when I made the decision.

Grandma Rosa was shocked. But she accepted my decision, and gave me some advice, more like instructions.

"Watch yourself, put ashes on your forehead before you go to sleep, don't leave stones of hair where spirits can get them, and don't clip your finger or toe nails," Rosa instructed.

"Okay," I said.

It was a smooth ride after we left the dirt road. As I looked back at the mountain, it became majestic, and it swirled every creature that was so apparent when I walked on the mountain top. I had already begun to miss my home, and especially my Grandma Rosa.

We headed north on Interstate 40 toward the town of Grants, and I could clearly see Mt. Taylor. Grandma Rosa called it the turquoise mountain, and at a glance it was outlined against the northern horizon. It was then that the top it looked gray and draped in snow. The view from the interstate was still the same; I could recognize some of the
houses etched alongside the mesa at McCartney. It seemed so bare on the eastern side of Mt. Taylor, only valleys filled with sagebrush and cacti. Nothing to hide the village of San Fidel.

The village of Old Laguna was in our view now, and I could see the church on the hill. It was white with a sand ring on the bottom. It seemed to take a lifetime to get seven miles after we got off the interstate, but we finally arrived at Old Laguna, and Ana's house. Grandpa Tobias greeted us with a hug, and led me to the table for something to eat. Many relatives were gathered within the little square adobe home. Some cooking. Some laughing and remembering with joy. It was really a happy and sad time.

I really didn't notice anything around me. When I sat at the table, I glanced up to get the salt shaker. That's when I saw something that scared me half to death.

"Huh."

"Are you okay? What's wrong?" Grandpa Tobias asked.

It was Frank in his coffin. He looked like he was sleeping and dreaming about something that put a smile on his face. Till then I had never seen a dead person before, and I became scared. My heart was beating fast, and I wanted to run out. I wanted to cry. People from the village and relatives were going up to his coffin, sharing their food with him. It was something I had not anticipated. I had not encountered anything like this before, so I believed I was caught behind the line and probably would be a lucky son of a bitch from then on too.

I was frightened. It was my turn to put food in his mouth, and I hesitated for a moment to contemplate whether or not I should or shouldn't. As I approached the coffin with my pasty cornmeal, I thought about my finger prints being held hostage by an evil spirit, and regretted my decision to be a part of this burial ritual. I gently eased the cornmeal in his mouth just as Ana showed me, and softly whispered, "Please don't steal my finger prints."

That night, I vowed that I would not sleep because I was scared of Frank or the body of Frank. But I went to sleep, leaving my fears behind and outside my dream.

A cold draft rolled into the house, and my feet were numb. I tried real hard to cover them with my blanket, but it kept blowing off. I seemed to have been floating, I was dreaming. Then I saw Frank being removed from his coffin onto a Pendleton blanket, where the two masked kachinas began to stitch the edges of the blanket. The shared food was put into a pot that Ana had designed for Frank, and then laid on top of him when he was carried out. I followed the two kachinas because I didn't understand why they wanted to steal Frank's body. And we ended up near a mesa just south of the pueblo.

The kachinas had disappeared and left Frank's body near an entrance to a cave. The wind whirled and whistled as it blew the covers off Frank's face. His face was painted with white circles, yellow dots, and blue zigzags. The wind was blowing harder, and it was trying to move a huge flat rock away from the entrance, but it wouldn't budge. So I got a cane-like branch from a twisted juniper tree, and we teetered the rock away. When I turned around, Frank's body was gone, so I walked around the mesa. Nothing. Then I heard laughter, and felt a rock hit my shoulder. I turned. I saw the ugliest woman I had ever seen. Her hair was made from old corn husks, her tableta torn and backwards. Her body seemed to have been covered with white paint. I noticed her dark circled eyes, and her awful screechy laugh. She stood atop a huge boulder holding Frank's body and laughing like someone was tickling her.

"Why did you take him?" I asked.

"You're not supposed to be here. Now, go back home," she said.

"I see. Why do you have my father?" I asked.

"I need someone to wander with me," the ugly woman said. "Besides, you left him by himself and helped the rock. You're never supposed to let someone be by himself. Not here."

"But I was trying to push the rock away, so I could leave him there," I explained.

"You don't act Laguna. It shows me that you don't believe in traditions. You're scared to be near your father," she said. "So now I can take him."

"No," I pleaded. I ran toward them, but she faded with her laughter, and my father's limp body.

I woke up with sweat running down my temples, and I silently sobbed, knowing that once again my father was a prisoner, his fate decided by others, rather than himself. And I wondered if he would ever go home this time.

A day after the ritual, I returned home. Then I got very sick. I couldn't breathe, and my body was so hot that it felt like I was in Grandma Rosa's barrel fire place. Rosa had taken the opportunity to summon a medicine man, so he could perform a two-day vigil to balance the human spirit again. On the second night, I had a dream.

I was walking near the same mesa where I last saw Frank. The same ugly woman was there. She had that same screechy laugh, and she was holding someone familiar in front of her. It was me. I tried to run, but she was holding me so tight that I couldn't move. "Help me!" I cried. Tears were streaming down my cheeks. Suddenly the ugly woman dropped me, and she fell off the boulder. Someone had pushed her. It was Frank. I was so happy to see him.

"Daddy," I cried. I embraced him so hard that I could feel his ribs in my palms.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Daddy, I'm sorry for not helping you," I cried.

"Hey, look. I'm okay," he said. "I think you stayed here too long the last time, and she took your living spirit."

"Daddy, I'm scared."

"Don't worry about her, she won't bother you anymore," Frank said.

He stroked my hair, trying to ease my crying. He held and rocked me till I realized that I was walking home behind the medicine man. I looked back to see if my dad was with me, but he was walking away into a grayish membrane that separates my reality and my subconscious. He was free. He lives only within me, and I am happy.