

Fort Lewis College

Catching Up to the Dawn

A Memoir of a Reincarnated Navajo Voice

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## Abstract

I have written a creative thesis project, which is a section of a creative non-fiction memoir. The section includes a prologue and the first two chapters about the relationship with my grandmother. This memoir is an expansion of earlier forms that I have written in other course and is titled, *Catching Up to the Dawn*. *Catching Up to the Dawn* is about my earlier childhood to the present and the struggles I had with identity from growing up with an indigenous lifestyle to being exposed to the expanding Western culture. Along with the creative project, I have also written a critical introduction that goes more in depth with my process as a writer and my experiences of being a four-year undergrad college student.

## INTRODUCTION

I once sat next to an uncle who was drunk and drenched in sweat under the New Mexico sun. He talked my ear off about the regrets and hardships of being stuck on the reservation. It is painful as it sounds, especially when all I had was hours with no one else home. When he talked about his regrets and hardships, I looked directly in his eyes and imagined the stories he told. He looked back at me with tears and slurred that I was the only person who listened to him. I wished to tell stories of my own so that someone who had hours to read or nothing else to do could listen or read them. I want to write stories that are true to my own voice and my accepted identity that I have developed over time. I am a reincarnated artist, who is still learning and growing as time goes on, but I still hold on to the values in the memories that linger within my daily life.

That said, for my Honors Thesis, I have written a section of a continuing creative nonfiction memoir about my back and forth childhood between Western and indigenous cultures. This is so that I can ask the questions about the influences of constructing identities to better understand the significance of entering the mainstream as a Native American author. Therefore, I am introducing a project that involves the youth that may struggle with similar experiences. My work would be relevant for those who may be struggling with having to face multiple influences and conflicts of figuring out their identity.

## CONTEXT

The two completed chapters of this project and a prologue are based within the early 2000s to the present. The main setting is the area I grew up, which is Continental Divide, New Mexico. Continental Divide, like other areas on the reservations, is checkerboard land, which makes it hard to say what the reservation is and what it is not as far as geography is concerned. However, I consider the area I grew up to be the reservation because to me, the reservation is the pinion

trees, the cedar trees, the mesas, the village of family members, the hogans, the fire, the smoke, the trailers, the skeleton vehicles, the sheep, the cattle, the barbed-wire fences, and the freedom.

I am writing from a Navajo and Western culture perspectives, which had major influence on the way I grew up and understood the world around me. The Navajo culture that I grew up in consisted of various ceremonies and gatherings that celebrate and heal my people. These ceremonies and gatherings never meant much to me when I was younger, but after leaving to go to college, I looked back on the purpose and uniqueness of the lifestyle and practices that have been passed through generations of oral traditions and, now, written stories. From the Western perspective, I have learned English that I had once thought to be torturous, but now I can admit to some of the values and importance of learning the language. One of my uncles told me that the importance of going to school was to learn the ways of the Western world and use that to give a voice for the older generations who had struggled to keep our culture alive. Thus, I treat what I have learned as a way of making me stronger as a person especially in helping my people battle some of the issues that affect communities. One issue includes the negativity surrounding young people, and I want this memoir to be a start to opening up conversations about identity crises, especially with the wider expansion of Western influences through technology, social media and media.

Going to school, I grew up with other peers who would make fun of “rez” (short for reservation) kids, which made me believe that as a rez kid, the chances of succeeding were low. The chances of succeeding were low, that is, until I met some teachers who supported me and my writing, which gave me hope that I could become a writer someday. In those days, I used to think of writing as fan-fiction and Western voiced. Thus, I doubted myself once again. Even in the first years of college, I was exposed to more Westernized voices than Native American

voices, but I never thought to question it. Then I took a Native American Literature course that opened a new path, full of writers that sounded like me and my family and who were actually published. As much as it surprised me, I discovered new inspirations that helped me develop my voice in a proud manner. Some of the authors who stuck out to me the most were: Luci Tapahonso, Linda Hogan, Louise Erdrich, Dana Lone Hill, Joy Harjo, and Layli Long Soldier. Notice that they are all female authors, which I have found to be more relative to me, because it shows that Native American women are finding ways to get their works out into the mainstream. I want my own work to fit into the long list of Native American women who are writing from their experiences that are navigated through Western techniques, such as writing. Instead of keeping quiet, because I did not believe in myself, I want to step out into the open and start sharing my own voice. I can help younger generations of Native American kids to start realizing that their lives are represented and show that they are capable of being more than they or society consciously or unconsciously tells them.

Tapahonso inspired me the most in developing my voice as a writer, mainly, because as a member of the Navajo Nation, her writing expresses more of the things that I grew up hearing and learning. After reading her poetry works, I learned that the strongest element of her writing is her ability to write shamelessly and proudly about the Navajo teachings/traditions. In an email I received from her, Tapahonso mentions: "It's [knowledge] is still available to us but it takes time and effort to understand but it always makes me realize how fortunate we are to have inherent beliefs and teachings guide our daily lives no matter where we live" (Tapahonso). My uncle, who is a medicine man, told me that the teachings and beliefs will follow me as I go off the reservation because they embody who I am and where I am from. Therefore, I also hope to use my voice as a guidance in remembering the importance of cultural and traditional

teachings/beliefs, but also acknowledging that the shifts and changes can also make us a force against the prejudices, discriminations, ignorance, and misunderstandings that plague many tribes.

The narrative (story) I am creating begins with the innocent view of the reservation, which is expressed with the relationship with my grandmother. I spent a lot of time with my grandmother as a kid and she taught me a variety of different things that I did not learn from my mother or my father. The middle section of the memoir is more about the relationship with the Western school experience and being taught that the movies and TVs are the ideal ways of living. With a mother and father nearly absent every day of the week, and being the oldest girl of the family, no one was there to ask me how I felt or to have open-minded discussions with me. I plan to end the memoir on a hopeful note for my future growth as a person and as a writer because after some time, I am beginning to love myself and accept everything that made me who I am today.

#### REINCARNATED ARTIST/INSPIRATIONS

At first, I considered this project to be a coming of age memoir, but this soon evolved into being a bildungsroman memoir. A bildungsroman is defined as: "...the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist [that] gives us a deep insight into the character, and also helps to understand the conflict in his or her life" (Literary Devices). In addition, the protagonist or the narrator, is conflicted with the values of society. As the narrative progresses, the narrator accepts those values and are accepted by society, thus, ending the dissatisfaction (to some extent). The bildungsroman is also known as a "coming of age" novel/memoir (Literary Devices). This genre befitted the project more because the bildungsroman can also be described as a, "...person's formative years or spiritual education" (Dictionary). Whereas a coming of age text is a generally

about the process of growing up. I want this memoir to be a little more about my own struggles with the values and beliefs of the Navajo and Western cultures while writing about my memories and experiences. I do not of any other Native American authors who may have written a bildungsroman memoir, but there have been some who have written texts that are identified as memoirs. For example, Joy Harjo wrote a memoir titled, *Crazy Brave*, which details her story/journey of becoming a poet. Although my memoir is about my struggle with identity crisis, Harjo's memoir assisted me in getting started with how to start. I especially drew inspiration from her usage of poetry in between the narrative sections, which extends an emotion or feeling.

After I started getting exposed to the Western world and culture, mostly through school, I forcefully pushed away the cultural and traditional part of my identity because I felt shameful and embarrassed. I did not look like the girls/teens on the TV, movies, or even the books, which made me feel like my voice and how I looked did not matter. As I got older and had more exposure to the Western culture, I acted out in many ways and struggled with depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts, because I felt lost. I was more concerned with getting away from the reservation and my family, because I felt trapped and shameful of the life that I was living.

It was not until I came to undergraduate college at Fort Lewis College that I finally had the opportunity to write the memoir with the help of a mentor. I am a first generational college student, and the struggle to figure out the world around me left a lasting impression on me. That feeling of not belonging and being thrown into an unknown environment is relatable to a lot of individuals, but I want younger Native American generations to know that there are opportunities to do more. I did not see the representation that I see now on the campus, and felt near to alone the first couple of weeks in my first year. That feeling remained even when I met other Native American students, who shared the same feelings that I had.

Even the classes for my Writing major had other races and ethnic groups' literature that were required. When I had seen a Native American (NA) Literature course, I avoided it because when I imagined NA literature, I pictured old petroglyphs, writings on rocks, and other ancient writings, which would have been interesting as well. However, I did not see myself sitting in that class and deciphering those old messages, but the course proved me wrong. This course challenged me to think about my stance as a Native American student and writer in some of the issues and concepts that they were writing about. In the course, I was finally able to use my own teachings that I grew up with to use within discussions and to deconstruct what the authors were saying to me.

For the longest time, I did not know that there were contemporary Native American authors or poets that had entered the mainstream such as: Joy Harjo, Luci Tapahonso, Linda Hogan, Louise Erdrich, Dana Lone Hill, Sherman Alexie, and Layli Long Soldier. Before being exposed to NA literature, I struggled a lot with my identity and felt that my own story would not get out there. I just thought that there was only one way of writing that had the structure of other Western works. But when I read works by other Native American authors, such as Luci Tapahonso's, *A Radiant Curve*, and Joy Harjo's, *Crazy Brave*, I related to a lot of what they were saying and their poetic voices pulled me in. In Tapahonso's, *A Radiant Curve*, I reconnected with a lot of the teachings that I had heard growing up, which I had neglected. I remember crying because I reflected back on the moments I would sit in my grandmother's hogan and listen to some of the stories that Tapahonso brings up. From then on out, my voice became more confident and sure of the fact that I could actually write something that included my own life story and the area that I grew up.



I started this memoir without any idea of how to write one and only understood the memoir as a story told by an older person about their lives. Therefore, I thought I had no chance at reaching any audience or anyone in general. That is until I had a great mentor that suggested readings that would familiarize me with the structure of memoir writing in an independent study course. Mary Karr's, *The Art of Memoir*, assisted me along the process of structuring and starting the process of memoir writing.

I appreciated the new voice that I found in Karr's writing, especially in her book, *The Art of Memoir*, that is about memoir writing and she uses her own memoir, *The Liars' Club*, as an example. Her honest voice made me uncomfortable, but in a good way because I found that a lot of what she criticized was what I was doing, such as procrastinating and overthinking. That's where Karr's statement: "To tap in to your deepest talent, you need to seek out a calm, restful state of mind where your head isn't defending your delicate ego and your heart can bloom open a little" (Karr 31) spoke to me directly. Instead of just simply saying, "just write," Karr deepens the necessity of tapping into one's talents and opening up by addressing the fact that there is an ego when writing, which often times gets hurt personally or communally (Karr). I tend to get caught up within my head and drown myself in misery of whether a section is bad or good or whether the audience will like something or not. But Karr is probably the first person who pointed out that being in a restful and open state of mind is what I needed to do to open myself up. I needed to take time to tap into my own talent without worries and be me.

In his book, titled, *On writing: A memoir of the craft*, Stephen King also writes about suggested techniques when it comes to writing. In relation to Karr's statement above, he also states that when it comes to a "writing room" (King) that: "The space can be humble...and it really needs only one thing: a door which you are willing to shut. The closed door is your way of

telling the world and yourself that you mean business; you have made a serious commitment to write and intend to walk the walk as well as talk the talk” (King 155). I especially appreciated how King mentioned that a closed door is a serious commitment to write (King) because it showcases that a writer needs to have dedication to writing, which could mean separating oneself from the world. I realized that for this project, I needed to tap into my talent (Karr), but I also needed to close off the world (King) to memorize and write this portion of my memoir.

Additionally, one of the important techniques that framed the poems and writing in this section of the memoir was descriptions and sensory details. The immersion of the reader adds to the experience, which is why I wanted to focus on adding them in. Descriptions and details also add in the needed means for the reader to see what I am seeing and to hear what I hear. This is further stated by Karr as: “In writing a scene, you must help the reader employ smell and taste and touch as well as image and noise” (Karr 71). This approach is an advantageous way of writing because it challenges the writer to think and analyze in clever ways that draw in readers. Therefore, I have been trying to focus on how to develop my sensory details and descriptions.

Furthermore, I have also learned that adding in vivid sensory details can also help the reader identify with what the writer is trying to portray. This is also stated within the “Afterword” of Terese Marie Mailhot’s, *Heart Berries*, as: “When the individual gets up and tells her story, there’s going to be a detail so real and vivid it places you there, and you identify” (Mailhot 132). Over the course of the years, my voice has grown stronger and more vivid because of the experiences I have had. From those experiences, I have found that the moments when I felt strong emotions have influenced the way I tell and share stories. I want my readers to be immersed in those same emotions as well, which comes with the use of sensory details

because I want the audience/readers to also feel that they can identify with certain emotions and senses, if they do not necessarily connect with some of my experiences.

Overall, the most important addition to this memoir started with my voice. I found myself constantly asking: Who am I writing for? In reality, I realized that I focused too much on everything else other than myself. Furthermore, when I was developing my voice, I read what other contemporary Native American authors were writing about and how they were writing it. Each author had their own flare to their writing, but the main element that stuck out the most to me was their poetic voices, which reminded me of the teachings that my grandmother, uncle, mother, and father all taught me.

One of the important things that Karr brings up is the idea that in constructing a voice, a writer chooses things that makes them stand out as a writer within and outside what they are writing. This also could be stated as: “While an artist consciously constructs a voice, she chooses its elements because they’re natural expressions of character. So above all, a voice has to sound like the person wielding it—the super-most interesting version of that person ever—and grow from her core self” (Karr 36). This example from Karr’s book struck me the hardest because I have had a hard time throughout my years of undergrad trying to figure out my voice as a writer, which came off as forceful. However, after I got exposed to Native American authors, I started to realize that my voice came more naturally.

In his article, “The Man Made of Words,” Native American author, N. Scott Momaday, writes about the significance of words, oral stories, and stories in general. His statement, “Man tells stories in order to understand his experience, whatever it may be. The possibilities of storytelling are precisely those of understanding the human experience” (Momaday 88) which resonated with me when I continued to read other Native American authors and when I started to

write this memoir. I grew up with family members who told oral stories about history or the present. Those stories remind me on a daily basis that my family lived their own lives and have had their own experiences and I want to respect that part of who they are. Therefore, when I continue to write and work on this memoir, their dialogues and stories helped me understand that who I am was influenced by the stories and the manner that my relatives carried themselves.

One author that explicitly adds in oral stories is Luci Tapahonso, who brings in historical references as well as oral stories that are sacred and valued in the Navajo culture. The way she illuminates and sculpts certain descriptions and paradigms of stories and narratives within poetry and prose is what I planned to practice and continue practicing. One example I want to pull is from Tapahonso's collection, *A Radiant Curve*, which is a prose poem titled, "I Remember, She Says":

Each evening, the mountains surrounding us glow gold, / then pink, then purple that deepens into soft black./ The mountains know such evenings will be only memories decades from now./ Memories that will bring the sudden, light ache of waiting tears/ and a gentle pang to the depths of one's chest./ The mountains remember the tenderness with which they were created./ They remember the way the Holy Ones sang with such beauty,/ it compelled them to rise out of the flat desert./ (Tapahonso 22).

Tapahonso weaves the descriptions so elegantly with the additional mention of the Holy Ones, who are deities and the gods that the Navajo tribe pray to. Thus, she brings together the contemporary way of writing and uses them as a way of keeping the oral traditions a part of the daily lifestyle that she writes about.

Another technique that I have learned and practiced is creating a communal identity, which can be seen in the works of Louise Erdrich, especially in her novels, *Love Medicine* and

*Tracks*. In *Love Medicine*, Erdrich uses multiple voices that tie the narrative together. Also stated as: “Erdrich’s novels, in fact, demonstrate how the use of multiple narrators helps alleviate the alienation of individual characters; how stories which are half-told, retold, and left un-told suggest a common base of knowledge that ties characters together and helps individuals and communities adapt to changing times...”(Reid 70). *Love Medicine* uses the family and relatives of the woman named June, who dies in the beginning of the book, to spider web the events leading up to the death of June.

The communal identity is structured by the fragmented chapters of different family members or relatives, which illustrate many different ways of survival, or in this case, love medicine. Erdrich’s work in both novels have inspired me as a writer to delve deeper in to the experiences that I have had with my family members and what they meant to me. I also write in fragments, which is my way of thinking about things because when I try to write linear, the story does not strike me as much as I would like it to. It’s also how my grandmother talks and tells a story, but at some point, she wraps back around and has a reason why she tells a story or sings a song.

Additionally, over the past couple of years and semesters, I have noticed that in Native American poetry, the authors will have a sense of repeated certain phrases, which resembles some of the Navajo songs and prayers that I have heard within ceremonies and gatherings. This is also mentioned in Paula Gunn Allen’s, “Sacred Hoop: A Contemporary Perspective”, which she states that repetition is “... hypnotic, and a hypnotic state of consciousness is the aim of the ceremony. The participants’ attention must become diffused. The distractions of ordinary life must be put to rest and emotions redirected and integrated into a ceremonial context so that the greater awareness can come into full consciousness and functioning” (Allen 70). When Native

American authors incorporate repetition into their texts, it could be their way of getting the audience in a trance-state of mind to become more aware of the emotions that they are trying to portray.

Paula Gunn Allen also goes on to state that: “In some sense repetition operates like the chorus in Western drama, serving to reinforce the theme and to focus the participants’ attention on central concerns while intensifying their involvement with the enactment” (Allen 70). Paula Gunn Allen makes an interesting point that there is understanding of the usage of repetition in different cultures, but the significant is similar. The use of repetition can be effective in getting messages and themes across because instead of stating it once and the chance of it being forgotten, the author exaggerates the importance by re-stating a phrase or a word. I want to practice using repetition when I continue writing, especially in the incorporated poetry.

Joy Harjo uses repetition in her poem, “I Give You Back”, which emphasizes the need to release fear to gain back the person the narrator was before they let the fear run their lives. There are two different lines that are repeated, which are: “I release you” and “I am not afraid to” (Harjo 477). Both lines show a dynamic of saying they will release the fear, but also showcasing that they are not afraid of the things that they were once afraid of. Therefore, by repeating these lines, it could mean certain things to different readers, but I interpreted as being a way for the narrator to convince themselves that they are willing to release the fear and that they are not afraid. I am trying to experiment with the repetition technique because I have always found it to be effective when I am reading because it feels more personal.

Dana Lone Hill’s book, *Pointing with Lips: A Week in the Life of a Rez Chick*, inspired me to talk openly and unapologetically about the “rez”. Her writing pushed me to consider not being afraid of writing about the reservation, even the simple things, like the “rez” dogs, the

drunks, and other things that I found to be embarrassing. Lone Hill's book is not nonfiction, but a fiction work that sounds like a memoir, which I found to be interesting. Although Lone Hill's book is fiction, I found that some of the messages and descriptions of the reservation to be relative to my own experience (Lone Hill). Thus, I figured that my own writing could fit into a similar approach by writing about my own experiences with honesty so that other younger audiences, especially from the reservation can relate to and know that someone is willing to talk about it openly.

I especially appreciated the message she gives in the end when the narrator is starting to write an essay to enter into college and says: "I think of what I want them to know. Maybe I want them to see me. Why I want a better life. I want them to know what it is like for me, and the struggle I have with addiction. I am still crying and wiping tears. I will show them a week in the life of a Rez chick" (Lone Hill 318). Right before these couple of sentences, Lone Hill also writes about how suffering is something that is inflicted by ourselves. Therefore, she decides to make some change in her life, which is similar to the message I want to give my intended Native American youth audience.

#### SUCCESS OF THE PROJECT

For the longest time, I had been jumping back and forth in between projects and trying to expand on them, but nothing captured me as much as this memoir did. The main goal I set was to complete an outline, revise the prologue, to write two new chapters, and write the critical introduction. At first, the completion of each goal seemed to be overwhelming and stressful, but writing up a research plan (a planned out daily list of things to be completed) in the beginning of this Honors course helped me in the process. For each day, I planned to write for about thirty minutes for the memoir alone, which helped me keep on track. I also met often with my mentor,

who has been with me through this process from the start. She had given me notes and suggested revisions that I could use for my memoir and my critical introduction.

In nearing the end of this project, I strongly believe that I did what I set out to do, which was to get two chapters done for my memoir and to complete an outline that I could continue to work with. I found success in the writer I have become through my college journey because I am not the same person I was when I walked into the first writing class of my first year. When I read my writing, I witness the growth in my voice as a writer and the strength that continues to develop in my writing. I am proud of who I am and of the hard work that went into this project, but also my writing career.

#### FUTURE OF THIS PROJECT

My main hope is to continue writing and revising drafts of this memoir because I value the stories that I have to tell and had to live through. I believe that there are some Native American youth that face some of the issues I went through when I struggled, but also may have experienced moments of happiness and content that are similar to my own. In about a year or so, I want to use this project as part of my portfolio in applying for the MFA (Masters of Fine Arts) program at IAIA (Institute of American Indian Arts) located in Santa Fe, New Mexico. In the program, I hope to continue learning about the craft of writing, especially nonfiction and poetry work and to finish working on this memoir and one day, publish it. I am young, but there are certain things that I have gone through that show that younger people do have minds of their own and struggle with things that certain adult figures do not resonate or relate to. Thus, I want this memoir to be a piece of literature for the younger audiences, especially for Native American youths, who are struggling with their identity and the acceptance of their cultural side. Therefore,



I want to delve deeper into the craft of nonfiction—memoir writing and poetry and work harder in completing this project to the best of my ability.

**Prologue**

We all have our own stories.

Ones that dance and sing along to the melodies of memory.

A little happiness and a little darkness shapes who we were, who we wanted to be, and who we are.

My grandmother, my home, my reservation are all my bits of happiness. I used to not like waking up to a reservation or in a home with a yelling mother and a silent father. The reservation once felt like a prison with the same routines and the same goddamn visuals. The measurement of time gradually revealed the hatred, sadness, happiness, and love that the reservation meant to me.

I have stood endless mornings on the withered porch of my childhood while crying out repeated prayers for happiness, good health, and guidance. Home is my reservation on the Continental Divide, New Mexico land, it was neither a town nor city, but a rest stop on the way to Grants, New Mexico, or Gallup, New Mexico, depending on the direction one would be going. Pinion trees and cedar trees checkered the dust brown floor a foot off the man-made, wooden, white porch. The doors of the trailer and hogan face the east, where the sun rises, symbolizing a new start and a new beginning. The red trimmed, light pink trailer screen door screeches when it opens and the windows are covered with blinds or mismatched blankets. My mornings would begin with a half full coffee cup and a dim light of the eastern horizon with silhouettes of the tall pinion trees behind the barbed wire fence across the dirt road. I would send my prayers to be whisked away with the winds and breezes of the dawn.

A lonely trailer with many secrets, hurt, and pain, sat on top of the hill looking down on the homes that we called a village.

TRAILER on the HILL

you stood with melancholy.

Three bedrooms, two bathrooms, a living room, and a kitchen,

your ROOMS of SECRETS.

TRAILER on the HILL

you withered with the brokenness,

NEVER a HOME.

Relive the fond memories

Rise above the horrible

TRAILER on the HILL of my CHILDHOOD

let me enter without crying,

embrace me with comfort.

Please, be more than just a box of hidden secrets.

Please, forgive me—but I hated you.

You're fading

breaking away with time

You're falling

You're sinking.

SOMEWAY, SOMEHOW,

I suddenly GREW to LOVE you.

I glimpse at my bare feet on the edge of the porch that fill the footsteps aligning the memory tracks of my childhood. The pale peach stucco hogan down the hill is my grandmother's

that withheld the dawns and dusks, the winds and rain, and time as the octagon structure continues to stand with prayer to the east.

I hold the vision of my grandmother there—her small body moving slowly alongside the side of the hogan, a broom in her hand, her frizzy hair leaving tumbleweed shadows on the cracked, stucco walls. She's holding an armful of wood from the small crate sitting on the gravel beside her home. I can smell the firewood burning that is released into the dawn air and the coffee brewing inside. I can feel the warmth of her hug and the tickling sensation of her permed curls against my cheek. A simple touch could send me into oblivious comfort and a simple scent can enwrap my mind with memories. Each of the five senses breathes a memory spectrum across my aching heart and longing remembrance.

I prayed for happiness without ever realizing that happiness was all around me. The sound of my grandmother, my mother, my father, and my siblings yelling at me, laughing with me, and talking to me. I inwardly beg them to stay with me when I leave the land we once called nothing but a waste of time.

Just like my family, my beautiful grandmother is my light. I would watch her carefully and drink her in as if she would be gone within a second more. She is still here with me and her hug is what I crave when I am away. She smells of day-old Downy with the set-in wood drawer scent and the gel that tames her permed gray hair.

Her teachings of cooking, discipline, and being strong through the struggles live on in my daily life that rallies between two worlds. I have learned that forgetting and ignoring the memories with my grandmother left me feeling like something was missing. I struggled with loving myself and would loathe the person in the mirror. In other words, I felt like I was neglecting an important part of my identity, which was the traditional Navajo way of life.

*They say that the darkest part of night comes just before the dawn.*

*The scattered lost souls of night flow through the gentle breezes of the dewy clouds as the dawn  
peeks behind the eastern plains.*

*That darkest moment is where I struggle the most with everything around me. I fight to hold on—  
to catch up to the breathtaking essence of dawn that breaks through my smitten aching pain.*

*The white cloth of the sky slowly pulls the light into view as my eyes flutter awake and the  
shattered shards of my heart shine an endless beauty touched by the light of the dawn and  
morning watercolors.*

*The new day signals another day to start over or start again. I run and run, I walk and walk, I  
limp and limp, just to catch up to the radiating colors and promising silence of the dawn.*

I remember.

The mornings I would wake up in my grandmother's hogan to the sound of my *Shimasani* stirring the ashes of the night's fire. I would hear her small movements within the leftover darkness as she would grab another log and throw it in the fire. I'd snuggle under her blankets, which smelled of her home, their warmth enveloping me in their arms. Then she'd dust off her hands as she glanced at the bed holding my baby sister and me and pick up her blankets off the floor and place them on us, once again wrapping us up in every ounce of warmth that her hogan held.

The dawn light blurs her figure

embers of the morning fire

shine a spotlight.

The silent thumping of her heartbeat strings

a step or two

Bringing life to the darkness

her rhythm rides beneath her feet

Emitted purple and pink hues shower her body

her head rises

hair tied back

Beauty sustains the power she has over my heart

I'm in comfort.

Mother Earth knocks softly on the hogan door

*Shimasani* silently motions for her

Come in.

My grandmother soundlessly got the day started before the light of dawn escaped over the cold, dirt floor of the reservation. In the dark, the sound of the coffee maker choking out the steam water would break the silence; then the morning would stream, mixing with the scents of wood burning and coffee finely brewed. Morning had risen.

Grandmother, grandmother, *Shimasani*,

your hair is white and grey,

*Shining wisdom and time.*

I've watched your smile wrinkle

your eyes have sunken

with resilient sparkle.

I've held your fragile hand,

measuring and squeezing

the life rivers with each finger.

Grandma, Grandma, Grandma Bean,

If tomorrow awakens

and you're not here,

play a soothing breeze through my hair

aching, yet beautiful.

Remind me of your white curls,

your smile

your glinting eyes

and your pair of warm wrinkled hands.

I used to believe that my grandma would live to a hundred, and I still do. That the smoke from her wood stove meant that she was inside and warm. That she'll be sitting in her hogan,

drinking coffee, and talking with my relatives. That I can see her sitting on her ancient couch watching the door with her sunken eyes and a crack of a smile as it opened.

I want to picture her this way even as I grow older, because a life without my grandmother scares me, which is probably a major reason why I am writing this memoir. I want to remember her as she is now and how she was in my memories, because we have a special bond that I could never really pinpoint. It just seemed that at some point in my life, she existed.

The same goes for my home on the reservation, which just seemed to always stand on the hill. But, there still was a start, which goes for almost everything in the world. My start in that house was ugly, discomfoting, damaged, and scary. How I could bring myself to call it home still amazes me. However, the days aged, and I realized that my home is something beyond the materialistic world. It was never the plastic that is still trying to hold on, but the true being of home surrounded me in spirit. I could turn away and say that I am living, but, I could only say my home is that reservation dirt, mesa, pinion/cedar tree village that semi-circles around the box that sat lonely on a hill. All in all, the life I have lived so far is only a start of truly smiling, laughing, and loving the person I am now.

I am now re-claiming the term “rez” as a part of my identity, because at the times I felt that it labeled the prison I claimed to be living on, I never realized that the rez part of who I am built me to be stronger. I lived in resentment because I hated the fact that I was born on the reservation when other kids could live comfortably somewhere else. I felt ashamed of the clothes, the trailer, the hogans, the skeleton fields, and the vehicles. To me, rez once felt like a dreadful word to describe the poor, who were laughable and unapproachable. But now that I looking from the outside, beauty and harmony paints the reservations, rez has become my saving



grace. A word that labels the home that resides within my heart, my body, and the land that still stands against the hands of time.

## Chapter 1

Around eight years old, I almost drowned my little sister. Not intentionally.

Back before we had running water, my family used to haul it from a nearby place that we called, Transwestern. My sister, brother, and I took those weekly trips with my father before he left for another week of work. We would pull in with mismatched, empty jugs, and buckets. I sat in the back of the truck watching my dad and brother fill each one to the rim. Mother would be at home cooking or cleaning.

Dad was a stern and quiet man, with little to no emotion, at least back in those days. Oddly enough, I felt his love in those trips back and forth to haul water. I would watch my father's worn-down hands throw in the buckets and jugs filled with water with amazement and see the sweat dripping down the sides of his forehead. On the way home, my brother would sit in the back, and my little sister and I sat in the front with the maroon, three-seat interior. He had a cowboy hat holder above the middle seat decorated with a picture of me and him. My pigtails framed my flushed face as he wore his signature black, round sunglasses; he called the stickers he precious keepsake. With the radio set to a country station, the truck rode down the reservation road and he would hum along. In those moments, something warm and something beautiful auraed around him and made me feel safe and loved.

That day my sister and I took a shower together, my mother called it preserving water. At that time, having running water was not something to be taken for granted. So, when we would have to shower together, we often fought, mostly over small things like who was hogging the water or who was taking up too much space. In my memory, I can recall us making up a ridiculous competition of who could hold their breath longer under the shower. We made up our minds to play along before thinking about the consequences of our careless actions.

The yellowish orange light of the restroom tinted the plastic walls of the rectangular shower. The tiled walls of the shower had four corners holding the watermelon scented shampoo that soon released into the thick air. A bar of soap sat on the soap dish sticking out from the middle of the longer side of the shower. The unfamiliar tepid streams of water fell from the silver four-holed shower head onto our dark brown hair.

I went first. I held my breath and placed my head under the water as the sounds of the world distorted into echoes. My eyes were closed as I felt my body react to the shortness of breath.

The rushing streams of warm water filled the restroom with clouds of fog

I hear the muffling coughs of the restroom buzzing.

My ears have gone blind to the world that is trying to hold me

the air within my lungs cling onto life

I am slipping away.

A child re-entering this world

to the sound of water

choking on air as I cried out.

My eyes see blurs of life

I'm trying.

She's trying.

We're trying.

I let my head fall from the shower as I felt it pushed back under. Before I could take another breath, I was drinking water with a force unlike any other. My hands whipped around as I pushed my sister away.

“Let’s see how you like it!” I yanked my sister’s head toward the rushing water that nearly took my breath away. Her wet hair clung onto my arms as it swung from the quick movement of my anger circling her neck with one hand and the other holding down her defensive arm.

I remember the sound of her choking and crying out. Her haunting tears stain my memory, as I see the ignorance wash across my face as I hold her there. She grew quiet for a split second as I let go. Away from the shower, she coughs out water, and takes in every breath that she could take. She cried. I see her crying with her little innocent flushed face and remember me crying and begging her not to tell mom.

When my mom would hear us fighting or starting any trouble, chances are, the belt would be taken out. My mother grabbed either a belt, fly-swatter, or the broom and chase after each of us. She whipped us once or twice to get us to stop running and yelled at us to be quiet. This may be a culture shock to most, but for me growing up with a strict mom and dad, spanking was the norm. I do not want to portray my mother and father as monsters or abusers, because I don’t hold any grudge in the way they raised me because knowing them, they tried to give us chances to have a better life than they did. Even to this day, they still have empathy in their eyes when they look at me. I love them both and this is just how I remember them in my childhood.

When momma spanked us, we cried, and would blame each other. I was the one who got more of the spanking when it came to fights with my sister. Mainly because when my sister would tell on me, my mom would sometimes easily believe her because according to my mom,

little kids don't lie. So, I would get an extra whip or two possibly since I was older and could take it. Then my mother would tell us that we should treat each other better and that I should take care of my sister and not be the one hurting her. But after I got spanked or whipped, any process of important phrases like that went out the window. I would just be mad and angry at my mom and my little sister, and even my dad because as it turns out, getting spanked, hurt like hell and being told that you get more cause you're the older one was pretty crappy.

My mom was the "bad guy" and would do the spanking, whereas my dad would be quiet and silently nod in agreement with her. I honestly do not know why my father was so quiet back in those days and I still don't. All I know was that when my mother spoke, no one else could talk because everything she would say was right. After my brother, sister and I's butts or thighs burned and stung, we had to sit in front of my mother and listen to her explain the rules or reasons as to why we 'deserved' to be spanked. One mutter under the breath led to another slap or another hour of her yelling or scolding. Once her voice and words gave out, we were sent to bed. Minutes later, she would tell us to come to the living room and tell us that she was sorry and hug us.

Mamma's hugs were designed to hold me together.

When I fell into her arms

every part of me that thought I hated her instantly disappeared

I snuggled my little head against her warm neck

and listened to her heartbeat.

Discipline never made sense to me, even though I have seen my mother, my grandmother, my dad, and even my brother, revert to it after saying they were sorry or saying nothing at all. However, when I witnessed myself spank my little siblings, I just knew disciplining bled from my fingertips with anger and sadness. Both emotions overtook me in an instant and when I finally opened my eyes to outline the bruises on their little thighs and butts, I cried and promised myself I would never hit them again. I could feel the bruises from the days my mother, and sometimes my father, whipped me, and seeing my siblings tattooed with the same purple and pink swollenness broke me enough to say no.

Today, disciplining by spanking or whipping, does not happen as often as back then because of my parents' shift in personalities. My mother is more lenient, and my father is more carefree, but I do think that they still have their fair share of stress and struggles.

My sister moved to the vertical end of the twin-size shower with tears still coming down and desperate heaving sounds out of her little body. I stood under the shower cautiously and took the loofah that lost all soapiness from the rustling water of the shower head. I brushed a bar of soap over the layers of the loofah and finished scrubbing my body. I handed the loofah to my little sister and rinsed off the soap. After I rinsed off, I got out of the shower and covered myself in a Downy-scented towel. I sat on the toilet bowl next to the shower and let the dense air dry me off. The shower continued to rain on the other side of the curtain. Seconds turned into minutes before she finally stepped out of the shower without turning off the facet. I took off the towel and handed it to her. I stepped out of her way and turned off the shower.

My sister and I dressed in silence and her eyes were still bloodshot when we finished dressing. I still begged her not to tell mom. When I placed my hand on her shoulder, she pulled away and ran into our room. Deep down, I just knew that when mother sees her eyes, I was done

for. I let out a simple sigh and let one more tear fall. Another tally of being blamed. Maybe it was my fault.

As a young kid, I almost killed my little sister with the possibility of not knowing the bond we have today. Between the seconds of life and death, we stood together crying and feeling the air as it forcefully re-entered our careless and curious little bodies.

I believe that if that one day would have taken my sister away, I could not have made it through the life on the reservation. We fought through the spankings and the harsh reality that set in around the time when the burden fell on us to take care of our siblings. When our parents gradually became absent, we stood side by side. She was the shoulder I needed when I cried late at night and the comedic relief when we needed distraction. Rez for us became a tragic comedy as we laugh to this day about the stupid shit we used to do and the consequences that we went through.

Grandma once told us that as family, we must take care of each other and through the hate and anger we are family. In a single moment, my grandmother's words find a way to break through to my ignorant mind.

I have a theory that my reckless nature leads me to wanting to hear her calm me down. Therefore, when I get into trouble or feel anxious, for some reason, I think of my grandmother singing to me.

Thumping in the back of my head is the sound of my grandmother singing as she would rock me. Her voice is faint, but I can feel the heartbeat rhythm.

The scratchy radio broadcast of KGAK (All Navajo All the Time), choked to life in the eight cornered hogan. A woman's voice pulled through with a faint drum beating a steady heartbeat. Comfort poured through her tone, rendering the happiness of a mother's love. The

lady sang with low tension as a soft sound of a rattle danced with the steady rhythm. “Shí naashá... Shí naashá...” the lullaby patted against my back as my grandmother sang along.

“Shí naashá” eloquently and beautifully expressed the joy of the Navajo people who returned to their homeland. The celebratory song developed in different contexts as did the Navajo belief in Hózhó (beauty and harmony). When the women’s singing broke away, a careful flute soothed together the ending of the song. Elegance blended with the crackling buds of wood from the early morning fire.

The lullaby soothe everything around us. My grandmother’s soft voice trailed over my spine as the daylight painted our shadow on the tiled floors of her hogan. The smell of Pine-Sol and bleach linger on the floor surface as the day drifted slowly by.

In my eyes, my grandmother was the break of dawn, so calming and waking. Her gentle hues would find a way to enunciate the earth that create rivers over her face and hands. As her presence would awaken, the world walked through her hogan.

My relatives were the first in line.

The smell of coffee extended throughout the hogan, the old coffee maker struggled to get out the last of the brew as the hogan would fill up one by one. The voice of my cousin brothers would enter the silence first, complaining or laughing as they would fold the blankets of the night’s slumber. My mom would be in the shower after my brother, sister, and I were done washing up.

My auntie would walk into the hogan with her hair already fixed, her clothes bright with colors of the rainbow, and her strong-scented lotion or perfume chasing behind her. With a coffee cup in her hand she would head straight for the freshly brewed coffee. Steam misted around the aura of dust particles that fell through the window. Auntie would go selling every



weekend at the flea market and left early in the morning. She would converse in Navajo with my grandmother and take in sips of coffee before making the journey to Window Rock, AZ.

My mother would sit and drink coffee after she was done showering. All the family members who had gathered together would spread Navajo gossip to start their day. I would have no idea what they would be talking about, but still laughed when they did, feeling like I was a part of their conversation.

I would head over to the coffee pot station and try to make my own cup of coffee. My grandmother once assigned me a cup when I was small. It was a porcelain, beige mug that could hold about four ounces of coffee. When she wasn't looking, I would grab another cup because small cups were for babies. My little body would be standing there watching the fine, black, coffee enter the cup. When I poured in the creamer and sugar, the coffee turned a pale and creamy color and sweet as hell. The bitter taste was gone, which was all that mattered to me. Seconds later, my grandmother would be behind me.

*"Yaadila"* she called me crazy and tasted the diabolical cup of coffee. Her face was priceless. If only I could create that same moment with words, but I'll stop here.

In that moment, after she spit out the coffee; she poured the whole cup out as she slapped my hand.

*"Too sweet. Yaadi"* her smile kept me from crying and running home.

I stood there and watched her make a cup of coffee, she would pour in the creamer and sugar with precision and mix it all in with a spoon. Instead of handing it to me, she put it on the table and told me to sit down. Somewhere, she pulled out a round looking bread that had been halfway cut up. The crumbs tumbled on the table as she took a piece out of the plastic bag.

“Here. Eat it with the coffee.” I look around and my cousin brother dips his bread in the coffee. I do the same. The drenched pieces fall into the cup as my mouth attempted to catch the rest. She laughed and walked back to the bed on the other side of the hogan.

Coffee for a little kid? I know, I thought it was crazy too. But, to be fair, my grandmother would warn me, “Don’t drink coffee. You’ll stay small.” Nowadays, I wished I would have listened. Maybe then I would have been a little taller than my siblings. The slice of Acoma bread disappeared in seconds as I went up the table and grabbed another one from the bag. A heavenly comfort crumbled within my little hands. I took a bite and asked grandma where she had got the loaf from.

She called it Acoma bread, which would be bought from the Gallup Flea Market. The Flea Market would crowd with all walks of life and people from different parts of the reservation, but familiarity swarmed the dusty, loose gravel of the crowded market.

The scent of roasted corn, mutton, and chile maneuvered among the crowds of people wearing outfits that depended on the weather. Tamales steamed as a merchant would open the pots to retrieve the orders’ request. Kettle corn would be popped and released a sweet, caramel aroma to the thick air of grease burning for frybread, curly fries, and mutton.

People would bring out old and used items, while others sold new and freshly made items. Old and new blended together as multitudes gathered to seek out their interests.

Pottery, rugs, blankets, rug and fabric dresses displayed around the canopies of each stand. Distinct patterns of each culture and tribe hid in the shades of stands, crowded by people with infectious amazement. Others had smaller stands with natural herbs, medicines, hair treatments, and ceremonial substances. A specific group of individuals seemed to be at these

stands: those who worked with these medicines and those who were learning. Everyone else focused more on the food and eye-catching material wealth.

People talked in English, Navajo, and even Spanish. They negotiated, gossiped, and talked about everything in between.

*“Yá’át’ée’h (Welcome/Hello)”*

*“Aoo’, yá’át’ée’h (Yes, hello)”*

*“Ahéhee’ (Thank You)”*

These were a couple of the many phrases that bounce from one person to another along with other phrases that are too difficult to comprehend because they happened all at once.

Peyote songs, country songs, “rez” country songs, Mexican songs, hip-hop songs, and pop songs all came to play a symphony of exhilarating diffusion and blurred out conversations. The country classics of Waylon Jennings, George Strait, and Dwight Yoakam blended with the rez-bands of Stateline, The Fenders 2 Band, Dennis Yazzie and the Night Breeze Band, continued to be mixed with the contemporary musicians back in the day. However, I could only remember these artists as they are the clearest in my memory. Laughter, happiness and comfort filled my heart with knowing and experiencing the fascinations of a gathering unlike no other.

The man my mom would buy Acoma bread from would always have a sweaty, red face and would count his money. His workers would be kept busy as customers would stand in front of their stand, buying bread, pies, raisin-cinnamon rolls, and cinnamon cookies. I would have my eyes on the cookies. Mom and dad would pick out the bread, and pies and, one time, the man caught me staring at the box of cookies.

*“Would you like a bag?”* I shook my head and looked to my parents.

*“We’ll get two bags of cookies too,”* my mother said.

Excitement ran through my taste buds. The golden round bread is hard on the outside, but with a bite, the inside is soft and fluffy, which goes well together with stews, posole, and coffee. Acoma bread is one of the many delicacies that the Flea Market carried, and it will always be my favorite.

Steam, laughter, loud voices, crunching rocks, Navajo peyote songs, Mexican songs, dogs barking, kids crying, Navajo jokes, grease crackling, smiling, stern faces—all of it blended in a festive dance of the Gallup Flea Market.

Every Saturday morning, people would come to buy from the stands, and enter into their own world of chaotic beauty. At a young age, it astounded me how much of the people looked like me and talked like me, it was almost like an oasis for a rez girl like me.

## Chapter 2

I did not like being a quote unquote “rez” girl from a trailer. I wanted to be the Native American girl who came from a wealthy family and could afford the new technology, clothes, shoes, and a decent back-story. A title like “rez” scared the hell out of me, which is why I stayed quiet and only stood next to the side of my cousin-sister who knew where I was from and who I was when we were young.

How could I say I was rich when all I could see was money and material wealth? My parents, especially my mom, tried hard to dress my siblings and me up for school, but for some reason, I still envied the kids with wealthy parents and seemed to live comfortably. I switched on and off from a public school in Thoreau, New Mexico to a community school named Baca-Dlo'Ay Azhi Community School, located in Prewitt, New Mexico. The reason I switched was because my cousin-sister went to school in Prewitt and I did not want to be alone back in Thoreau. So, I put my mother through a hell stack of paperwork when I kept wanting to transfer and sent both my older brother and I to the same school.

My grandmother is one of the many reasons I can say I am proud to be “rez” or Native American. When I would look away and say, “ew”, she jumped on my tail and said to never say that when it came to our culture traditions. The same response came from my uncle. They both scolded me and said to never forget that I am Navajo, and nothing is going to change that. The more I rejected my identity, the likelier the chance I would struggle.

I can say there is a solace and comfort in remembering things as simple as a cup of coffee with Acoma bread or planting every other year with my grandmother. The simplicity of being a part of the wind, the sunsets, the dirt, the bushy green and yellow plants, the faded, salmon-tinted

mesas and pinon/cedar trees invite peaceful and reminiscent landscapes of memories that I can hold dearer than any material-wealth I dwelled in for most of my childhood.

I remember.

Those wrinkled hands, calloused with years of planting, cleaning, flipping tortillas and frybread, and defining the years before. They were my grandmother's hands that I would measure against my own. The ones that I soon grew into from the years gone. From the tiny, pink hands as a baby to the small, pale pink hands that measure against her aged, tan hands.

Every spring, Grandma's hands would break the ground on uncle's tractor rows in her cornfield. She'd wear her signature bright colored sweatpants and stylistic, patterned shirt. A straw hat would sit on top of her head as a wet, handkerchief wrapped around her soft neck, and a pair of gardening gloves fitted over her hands. Sunscreen was oddly never an option, but being burned by the sun meant that hard work was put in to whatever was done.

Her cornfield laid within feet from behind her hogan and beside the sheep corral. In those days, the cornfield stretched far. Horizontally north, the mesas sat proudly about a quarter of a mile away. A barbed-wire fence aligned her rectangle field to keep the sheep and goats from entering and eating the crops. A hose wrapped around one of the wooden ties that held the metal entrance of the gate and the blue and silver barrels of water leaned against the barbed-wire. The baby goats would whine and cry from the sheep corral as my grandmother made her way up the hill to her cornfield.

The corn, pumpkin, and squash seeds were dried throughout the year and would sit on a plastic plate in her hogan. The seeds would come from the harvest the year before. My grandma would clean the vegetables and place the seeds on a plastic plate to dry. The corn would be roasted or steamed and were used to extract corn pollen for prayers and ceremonies. The squash

was fried with corn and onions, and served with hot tortillas and coffee. The pumpkin, was my favorite. My grandmother would steam the cut-up pumpkin and put brown sugar on top of the soft, orange inside that would melt on my tongue intimately. The smell coming from the steamed pumpkin brings me back to those memories of seeing my grandmother's red and sweaty face, her hair in a low ponytail and her pumpkin-tinted fingers.

My uncle and cousins would dig the holes along the rows as my grandmother moved slowly to the field with an old coffee can of corn seeds.

My grandma would hold the seeds in her hand, counting three or four.

"This one is yellow. Yellow corn"

"Yellow?"

"Aoo (yes), you only plant three or four at once" in the hole where she pushed down the muddy, wet soil, she threw in the seeds.

She quietly whispered something beneath her breath. She then poured some water over the seeds and covered them with the cold mud.

Seeds

an image of new life

soundlessly on her palm.

Grandma casted them in a new darkness

whispering prayers to lie them to rest.

Another planting season has come:

corn, pumpkin, and squash,

I pray in years to come

you'll be summoned by the sound of my prayers.

When my grandmother would take off her gloves, the mud between her fingers listened to her directions as she filled up the hole. The first couple of rows she did carefully.

She then ran her fingers against the surface, making a circle.

The circle became a round trench to hold the water to feed the seedling in the days to come. Just like the sun rises from the east to setting in the west, the hole is a circle of life. The seeds were waiting for the day they break the surface to enter a new light.

"That's it." Grandma would smile as she finished the same process on the next holes in each row.

After she was done, she dusted off her sweatpants. The mud would be dried over her swollen hands as the day of planting came slowly to an end.

Days follow.

I would continuously ask her when we will head over to water the plants. My cousin sister, sister, and I looked forward to watering the plants because we were fascinated by the sound and feel of water. To be honest, we just loved to play with the water.

During the day, the three of us would play in the three to five-foot trench outside my cousins' house. We went to that mediocre ditch to play McDonald's by a petite tree shaped like a "y." We walked around and gathered empty bottles and anything else that could hold dirt. Then we would pull out random plants to use as pretend food. Our simple menu included things like: a soda, a burger, and fries.

If we were lucky enough, we would sneak away water from the outdoor facet on our auntie's, mustard, stained yellow house. Most of the time, we were chased away and yelled at by



our auntie, but sometimes, we got away with it. We would use the water to mix with the dirt and make mud pies, aka our burgers. The mud seeped under our fingernails and coated our dusty hands, which meant grandmother would spank us or yell at us and then tell my mom what we did. The rush of getting caught somehow made those moments more fun and exciting, and honestly, I wouldn't change it for the world.

When the sun was high in the sky marking the afternoon, our three little bodies would chase the imaginations and dreams of playing without a care in the world. Along with our make-believe restaurant, we would play in this one truck head with the back of the seats on the ground and the nose of the truck sticking up. The severed truck head was one of the many broken-down vehicles outside my uncle's hogan, who was my cousin-sister's dad. In that green-bluish truck head, we pictured open roads with the windows down and somewhere away from the reservation. The glass shards of the windows pinched our butts and the spider webs cornered around us. But those were our toys and the other toys back at my family's trailer were nothing compared to the ones that were outside.

My sister and I would race each other to the cornfields.

Buckets and the watering pot sat next to the plastic barrels of water hauled from the same place my family would haul from.

The hose on the fence was placed inside the barrel. Then we would have to suck on the other end to get the water flowing through the hose. Bucket after bucket we'd race through the rows, pouring the water carelessly over the plants. We set up competitions to see who would water more plants, but we poured unequal amounts of water in each plant base. We ran up and down the rows chaotically laughing and giggling, but when my grandmother yelled, we'd stop.

“*Hozhoigo! (Carefully) Yaadila!*” her voice projected within that field as she made her way through the rows.

“Get a bucket of water and get over here,” she would tell one of us to get another bucket of water and follow her to water the plants right.

I remember the time I was the one who had to follow her around with a bucket of water as she would say which one needed more water. She’d scold at me if a plant had too much water in it. When my grandmother got mad, the world stopped, and goosebumps inched up my arms and legs.

The sun would take time setting. My grandma would make us organize the buckets and hose before we ever left the cornfield. She’d take off her handkerchief and rub her neck. Her eyes winced in pain as she’d shake the cloth loose and let out a sigh. After the day of watering the plants was done, she’d head back to her hogan and prepare some bottles of warm condensed milk for the orphaned baby goats. Then she would start on dinner, which would always come with a side of freshly made tortillas.

At her hogan, my grandmother dusted off her shoes on the concrete square, floor porch outside her door. We were told to do the same. Back inside, she threw her handkerchief on the coffee table in front of a dark-stained drawer. Then she would kneel on the tiled floor to pull out a cardboard box with evaporated milk from commodity that she got every month. After she pushed the cardboard box back underneath her bed, she went to the table to wipe down the top of the cans and poked holes with a can opener at two ends. She poured the light yellowish liquid into a pan to heat up the evaporated milk diluted with water, just enough to be warm.

She used old glass Coca-Cola bottles as DIY milk bottles that would be filled with the milk solution and a nipple placed on the top to feed the baby goats. Once she was done, she

shook the bottles and wiped down the counter. She would hand them to each of us and told us to wait for her.

On the way to the sheep corral, my grandma would stop here and there throwing stray branches against the grandfather tree that stood so gracefully as it shaded the dirt floor. She squinted as the sunlight gleamed as brightly as it could in the last hour before setting. The scent of horse manure and sheep poop mixed with the fresh hay on the ground as we came closer to the sheep corral. The sheep corral held only the older sheep and goats, and the baby goats were corralled in an area beside it. This was to avoid them from getting trampled or bucked from the older herd and my grandmother kept the orphaned goats separate to feed them in the mornings and evenings.

We would pass the horse trailer outside the horse corral that held hay and chicken eggs. The chicken eggs were another thing we got into, which made my uncle's partner mad. My sister and I would crack the eggs into the dirt by the grandfather tree and mix it with a stick, just like we saw our mother do, but with a bowl and a fork. We also climbed in the horse trailer to avoid our grandmother or our mother seeing or catching us when we created mischief.

Outside the baby goats' corral, they chewed at our clothes and whined and whined.

"Shut up. *Na'* (Here)" the baby goats stuck out their mouths and forcefully pushed each other to get to the bottle.

Their fluffy coats of curly, white fur were coated with green and brown from the poop that bedded their round, chubby bodies. My grandmother slapped their heads and told them to wait and be quiet. We stood beside her and watched her hold the bottle steady as kept her thumb on the nipple to keep the baby goat from pulling it off. The *t'izis* (baby goats) sucked the bottle dry in no time and my grandmother pointed at one of us to go next.

The baby goats forcefully pulled at the bottle as I held one and the stingy, fat goats bucked the runts that barely got their chance to drink milk. My grandmother pushed them away and told me to the same when that happens. If you let them, the stingy ones will hog the bottle and the others won't get enough to eat, is how she explained to me. My first couple of times feeding the *t'izis*, I dropped the bottle and my grandmother picked it up with a laugh or a scolding. I guess it depended on the day she would have. But a while after, she trusted us to go to the corral by ourselves and the sound of them crying out reminds me of those late evenings and early mornings.

I can imagine the happiness I had in being free with the way I dressed and acted when I was back on the reservation. But when it came to stepping off the reservation and into a room of kids that were my age, shame and embarrassment kept me from openly accepting the fact that I was a rez kid.

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