

LOLITA LAST STAR: A THEORETICALLY INFORMED
NARRATIVE OF SURVIVANCE

by

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ABSTRACT

Common missteps by non-Native writers lead to literary representations of Native Americans as tragic figures slumping towards inevitable annihilation, as museum Indians and simulations of the *real*, mystical and noble “savages,” (yes, this still occurs in contemporary film and literature), or simply as inactive members of contemporary life. Authors also attempt to unveil and profit from sensitive spiritual and personal secrets, and offer explanations that do not match reality, leading to grave offenses, and the continuation of harmful stereotypes. In this respect, *Lolita Last Star* intentionally avoids discussions of spiritual and cultural traditions, or the actual personal lives of “real life” people, because these areas are guarded for good reasons, and instead focuses on native presence in contemporary American life, in the surprisingly complex, globalized space of the Rocky Mountain West. In other words, the final product is a narrative of Survivance; a concept first explored academically by Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor, in his book *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance*. Survivance, I would argue along with many others, may not be as theoretically complex as it first appears. At its most basic level, “Survivance is a practice, not an ideology, dissimulation, or a theory.” The concept of Survivance only becomes difficult when we look to the spectrum of responses to conditions that inspire the need to do more than survive. Survivance is coping, but it is also subversion, creation, amusement, ingenuity, reimagining, the provision of new explanations, and recapturing one’s own destiny. The characters and their actions in *Lolita Last Star* respond in illustrations of full human vibrancy that transcend space and time, definitions, borders, accusations of authenticity, oppression, domination, petty moralities, victimry, and they move us all one step closer to self-sovereignty and human dignity. They show that if anything westerners contain cultural universes and are better for it. The only frauds are the people too scared to step out of their narrow focus of what a westerner, an Indian, a firefighter, or a cowboy is. They are never afraid to ask, “Where the hell are we supposed to go from here?”

CHAPTER 1

*LOLITA LAST STAR: A THEORETICALLY INFORMED
NARRATIVE OF SURVIVANCE*Introduction

In the garden of gentle sanity,
May you be bombarded by the coconuts of wakefulness¹
~Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche

Places such as the West should not be “gridded” off and defined by “boundaries” creating something “stable, coherent, uncontradictory,” distinguishing between an inside and an outside” “us” and “them,” but instead should be viewed as “processes” constructed out of “the juxtaposition, the intersection, the articulation, of multiple social relations [and] riven with internal tensions and conflicts.”²

The Blackfeet, both the ancestors who hunted on the plains and their survivors today, have given ample evidence of their courage. They have endured, and by their endurance alone they have triumphed over the failure of those entrusted with their improvement. The courage of the Blackfeet merited more than mere survival.³

This project started a fight. Well, to take ownership, *I* inadvertently started a fight through a poorly planned interview with an old windsock flagging around on the plains, south of the Blackfeet Reservation. In her evaluation of me, she chided “you are an alien, digging around in what you don’t know.” I hung up the phone feeling terrified, mostly of myself, as the ultimate freak and outsider. My instinct was to run home, and quickly. Shortly after the coconut fell on my head, the feeling subsided, and I became increasingly curious about the source of such hostility towards supposed “outsiders.”

In my own estimation, I was anything but an outsider, creeping around like Beetlejuice in the border towns surrounding the reservation, hoping to unearth some

juicy piece of information; I was a westerner, a native Idahoan, a human rights activist, and a descendent of holocaust survivors, but clearly, different and confusing definitions about what constitutes an outsider and an insider, abound in a disorienting swirl of subjectivity. I suppose my own philosophical leanings allowed me slow down enough to soften to my rigid construction of myself, ask difficult, self-critical questions, and more importantly, be willing to hear the answers.

Firstly, I challenged my view as an insider, and formerly uncontested privilege to speak and write about realities in the region I call home. Admittedly, I began this process much sooner, but not to this ego blistering degree. The emotions and unearthing of personal histories requisite for the non-native, *writing around in Indian country*, started a year ago when I committed to the project. I anticipated resistance to my desire to incorporate Blackfeet characters into my New Western plot, but not from old women, and especially not from white scholars. If anything, native people, save for literary nationalists like Elizabeth Cook-Lynn and Sherman Alexie were more encouraging and supportive than anyone, well and of course, my committee. The plot thickened when I consulted native theorists, writers, and students who struggled equally with the question of who can and cant speak and write about Native Americans, how, and in what context.

Representative of the ongoing argument in the field of Native Studies, prominent scholar Elizabeth Cook-Lynn asks “Who Will Tell the Stories?”⁴ while Gerald Vizenor wonders “Who has the right to write about *Indians* and natives?”⁵ In a blog response about me, (yes, my project conjured this sort of angry reaction—sort of flattered, definitely embarrassed), Mary Scriver, self-appointed regional historian of all

things Blackfeet, said the next time she talks to someone about Indians, “they’d better have creds, by which I mean years working on a reservation or in an urban NA ghetto, sitting at kitchen tables over coffee to make friends and slowly get attuned to their real lives.”⁶ From her highly regionalized viewpoint, I was worse than a nobody--I was stupid, dumb, and blind, unwelcome, and ever worse yet, an unrealistic idealist with a dangerous streak. I danced in the pale moonlight with the Marxists, and even more embarrassing, I didn’t have “creds.” In response, my brother and I decided to start a cartoon series that entails terrible photoshop, and ridiculous dialogue to poke fun about all the crazies blowing around in the dust of the world. (We have been practicing survivance, like many people for some time, although we didn’t have a formal word for it).

Immediately, her definition of “creds” popped the cork to an endless stream of questions. Her criteria for credible storytelling entailed harkening from a very defined circle in the region, and living there *a long time*. Also, prospective writers needed first hand experience, or ‘being there,’ bare-skinned up against either Native American reservations, or urban ghettos. It would also help, apparently, to sit down and get to know a *real* Indian. After much analysis, and an acknowledgment that variations do exist, I narrowed down four very common, primary modes of justification for non-Indian writers in the heavily trip-wired world of Native American narrative. They include:

1. Being there,’ also known as ethnography and/or anthropology.
2. Claims to ethnicity or ‘Indian blood.’

3. Traumatized childhood or life events.
4. Desire to situate natives in a globalized set of complex relationships to solve modern problems.

Again, a variation of “reasons” surface, but after some layer peeling, the different works ultimately fall into one of the above categories. The novel *Lolita Last Star*, that I view as a collectively owned and created work, due to its inclusive, collaborative nature, serves as a careful, yet creative response to shared criticisms of the pitfalls, grave omissions, and false representations common to the works of many non-native writers.

When unmediated, these common missteps lead to representations of Native Americans as tragic figures slumping towards inevitable annihilation, as museum Indians and simulations of the *real*, mystical and noble “savages,” (yes, this still occurs in contemporary film and literature), or simply as inactive members of contemporary life. Authors also attempt to unveil sensitive spiritual and personal secrets, and offer explanations that do not match reality, leading to offenses and the continuation of harmful stereotypes.

In this respect, I intentionally avoided speaking of spiritual and cultural traditions or the actual personal lives of “real life” people, because these areas are decidedly closed off to me, and I instead focused on native presence in contemporary American life, in the surprisingly complex, globalized space of the Rocky Mountain West. In other words, I created a narrative of Survivance, a concept first explored

academically by Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor, in his book *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance*.

Survivance, I would argue along with many others, may not be as theoretically complex as it first appears. At its most basic level, “Survivance is a practice, not an ideology, dissimulation, or a theory.”⁷ The concept of Survivance only becomes difficult when we look to the spectrum of responses to conditions that inspire the need to do more than survive. Survivance is coping, but it is also subversion, creation, amusement, ingenuity, reimagining, the provision of new explanations, and recapturing one’s own destiny. These peacock like variances perhaps confuse readers and observers, so that what they see may be so much more, or even ironically, less. Vizenor, the godhead of said idea is himself at once clear and unclear, which speaks more of survivance than a perfectly constructed explanation. In response to a clarifying question about survivance, he explains:

Theories of survivance are elusive, obscure, and imprecise by definition, translation, comparison, and catchword histories, but survivance is invariably true and just in native practice and company. The nature of survivance is unmistakable in native stories, natural reason, remembrance, traditions, and customs and is clearly observable in narrative resistance and personal attributes, such as the native humanistic tease, vital irony, spirit, cast of mind, and moral courage. The character of survivance creates a sense of native presence over absence, nihility, and victimry. Native survivance is an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion; survivance is the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction, however pertinent...Survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, detractions, obtrusions, the unbearable sentiments of tragedy.⁸

Although writing about natives as a non-Indian is decidedly risky, the unacceptable alternative I encountered and could not abide when speaking about a place that contains native presence, is allowing a huge omission and leaving native Americans

altogether absent from the text. I couldn't talk about Pocatello or Glacier National Park, or Great Falls as a dynamic western space, without acknowledging the natives that live in the area. Also, as natives practice their own version of survivance, so do non-Indians, and globalized characters in *Lolita Last Star* cleverly find ways to duck under, or ride the insistent waves of colonizing institutions, unconscious, and therefore dehumanizing systems of capital, broken relationships, and subdued hatred and fear, often brought about by historical events they had no hand in creating.

The novel begins with the emblematic Flood of 1964, that claimed the lives of 32 people, mostly children and elderly people from the Blackfeet Reservation, yet was represented as a disaster in the predominantly white Great Falls area in National media. The Reservation sustained extensive loss and damage, and yet characters continue to press on in ways that far exceed states of survival (see APPENDIX B: Images of Events in *Lolita Last Star*, Figures 1, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11). Another major event, "The Starvation Winter," claimed many lives, but I used this as an opportunity to represent dormant native energy, and how their powerful reemergence will alter the course of the world as we know it (see APPENDIX B: Images of Events in *Lolita Last Star*, Figure 12). I relied on many of these images to create scenes and backgrounds in the novel. After all, I did not want to lift my papers to the light, and see reservation shaped holes punched out when the world we inherited, ugly as it may be at times, is collectively ours. Instead, I decided to regard the Blackfeet Reservation, and two strong women living there, as the hub of the universe in this work.

To adapt feminist theorist Linda Alcoff's thoughts on difficult subjects, from my viewpoint, this option was less than desirable, and simply because certain areas of discussion "are not easy, comfortable arenas," does not mean that avoidance is the correct answer. This may be why too little work [in many academic departments] has been done in these areas...we simply cannot afford to rest in our intellectual cocoons anymore."⁹As is, the balance looks like a busted teeter totter, where non-Indians either gain sky high popularity and sell masses of *really poor* literature about Native Americans, or do not write at all, and never get their writings off the ground.

Perhaps a more sensitized, researched approach will toss the either-or out completely, and allow for a more robust, scholarly discussion of Native American life in modern America that seeks neither profit, nor fame, but inclusion, and the rebuilding of a nation. A request to come out of safety must imply the need to do so, and when we look to not only literary misrepresentations, but the steadily depleting earth, the abundance of poverty related health issues, and collective cries for change, uncomfortable ventures out of our cocoons prove necessary. My desire was to respond seriously to claims of non-representation by creating (quoting Native Education Scholar, Scott Richard Lyons):

An academic book that moves "Native concerns to the forefront of political academic discourse. As the first people of this land—the first to develop it and the first to suffer its dispossession, the first to love it and the first to be forced to leave it—indigenous people need to be placed at the center of both political and scholarly spheres of action. Not as a marginalized inclusion, not as an add on: no, I am saying first people, first priority. I am saying it should be our indigenous right to be at the very heart of politics and knowledge making." Progressive scholars in particular should start with this fact by locating their work not on the

“frontier” but on Indian Land, not as “pioneers” but as settlers.” “They will come to see that they are not helping us but following our lead”¹⁰

Throughout the process, I consulted with native theorists, scholars, and writers to craft my scenes and characters in a meaningful, informed manner. This approach opened me up to new relationships with both local and distant people such as: the faculty of the Native American Studies Department, environmental and cultural activists, professors of other Montana colleges, native politicians, agency leaders, and of course I diligently studied Gerald Vizenor, Arnold Krupat, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Louis Owens, Diane Glancy, Louise Erdrich, Leslie Marmon Silko, and many other survivance narrative writers. Their ideas and developed theories on how Native Americans should and shouldn’t appear in literature (in the words of Dr. Larry Gross of NAS) “Allow non-Natives to do research in a culturally sensitive manner, and allow “natives to see themselves in the research results (their viewpoints, approach, etc.)”¹¹

As a result, *Lolita Last Star* (To Begin):

IS NOT: (like many other survivance narratives)

1. “Victimist history,” portraying Indian history as an unbroken string of atrocities and humiliations, devoid of high-points or anything that Indians can point to with pride [where] ‘Indians’ are the simulated universal victims. Victims have no humor; they offer the world nothing but their victimization.¹²
2. Anthropology or ethnology that “tries to discover the native traditions from a racist point of view, which is also the manifest manners, so as to produce a hierarchy of values.”¹³

3. “A neat social morality play.”¹⁴
4. A narrative of dominance where “An Indian character in modern American fiction is “expected to end.” Like Leslie Marmon Silko says, “I realized that, and I hated it. So I had her [a character] say to Tayo, “Don’t let this end like that.”¹⁵

IS: (hard to define, like many other tales of survivance, but nonetheless is)

1. A “renunciation of dominance, detractions, obtrusions, the unbearable sentiments of tragedy...”¹⁶
2. Similar to Louis Owens’s *Bone Game and Dark River*, where “Owens offers stories of Native mobility and motion, stories of relocation that come by choice. The growth of the protagonists and the tactical mobility of the community of characters convey a message that moves Native people beyond tragic portrayals, static definitions, exclusive tribal nationalism, isolation, and alienation.”¹⁷
3. Like Glancy’s philosophy of survivance that carries a moral charge that would apply to anyone who chooses to recognize their Indian heritage, whether genetic or ghostly and “in recognition of the past, and a conscious commitment to the present, and stands for a moral imperative to act with consciousness of the American colonial past that bears upon every reader.”¹⁸
4. Similar to the stance of Elizabeth Cook-Lynn’s “call for the writer to be encouraged toward conscience in his work.”¹⁹

5. “Writing [as] the weapon we bear as we go into the world we did not want.

It reinvents locale. It reshapes loss. Words after all have light.”²⁰

To revisit my battle, before you react with horror at my lack of cultural sensitivity, Mary Scriver is an old white lady, and a missionary with a background in Speech Education and Religious Studies—a granny with a punch, and a library card. She lives on the southern border of the reservation because in her own words, “even some people in Valier would like me to move away so I WON’T live by them. People actively drove me away from Heart Butte. “You don’t belong here,” said the vengeful woman.”²¹ She was married to Bob Scriver, the famous bronze artist who captured the west in hundreds of essential representations. No doubt Bob Scriver’s work contributed to the robust collection of western artists, storytellers, and scholars. My interest in him, and consequently his ex wife, came about by a study on indigenous property rights, and Scriver was accused of selling sacred articles to a museum in Canada for approximately 1.1 million dollars, which naturally enraged many members of the Blackfeet tribe.²² In my research last summer, I also stumbled onto her blog that details both the daily lives of the Blackfeet Indians, and their traditional stories and customs.

At that time, I briefly explained my project, and she instructed me in an urgent manner, to call her. Time passed, and on my last sweep through the reservation nearly a year later, I decided to contact her, where and when said skirmish ensued. At that point in the game, I hoped only to share an interesting conversation with a person who publicly touted much first hand experience with the Blackfeet people. After completing my work, my agenda became free and loose, and I entertained no set method for

garnering information. After an eight minute phone call, a lambasting, and a follow up message demanding to know, “Micaela, who are you really?” Immediately, I called my friend Debbie Sierra, and explained the situation.

I pulled off of Highway 44 in a turnout, taking a moment to compose myself, when I saw a freshly smashed pigeon on the side of the road—all dry, blue gray feathers covering the shame of purple entrails and red death. “That’s me,” I told Debbie, “a smashed pigeon on the side of the road.” She laughed lovingly at my naiveté and said, for one, “I should have gone with you,” and “well, don’t give up.” Smashed pigeons aside, the reason I linger about my new prairie dwelling friend, is that despite my desire to instantly dismiss her as a bit on the “unique” side, like many old shut-ins scattered about in rural landscapes, her criticism and claims pertaining to credibility are common, and worthy of further examination.

As a person who endured harsh treatment as an outsider herself, and was forced into exile from her own community, I find her treatment of outsiders even more ironic. Perhaps my status as student sets me up as easy prey, and my timid manner makes for a fine, high-glucose meal. Maybe it feels good to pass along the pain of that experience to someone else, instead of really acknowledging it. Perhaps the reasons are even more complex than just the politics of outsider-insider. As a former regionalist, I do understand the desire to keep knowledge locally controlled.

In my own studies of the west, I have been guilty of viewing my *physical position* and history, or *time* spent as a rare advantage to really understanding what the west “was all about.” I used to believe that those who fly in with their nice luggage, and

publicly glorify the place I call home, only contribute to out of state landowners gobbling up properties, and sealing them off from locals. Their fancy dress shops and rhinestone cowboy attire crop up on the main streets of rural towns everywhere, and soon the west endures another wave of colonization by wealthy Easterners. Obviously this kind of thinking is simplistic outsider politics played out on a much larger stage. In taking the claim that ‘being there’ in both extended time, and intimate space, permits you, or those like you to write about a particular culture, we come face to face with the implicit assumption that Native Americans, or *real Indians* only exist on reservations and in urban ghettos.

This direct or unintentional denial of Native American presence in non-reservation and ghetto spaces ignores the inevitable diaspora that results over time from a disrupted way of life, or simply due to choices made by a mobilized human being. Although many Blackfeet maintain special ties to the reservation, it should now be obvious that they traverse mapped boundaries, and make their way into neighboring towns and cities to attend school, shop, raise families, travel, and acquire employment. Louis Owens, praised author and critic notes that “along “seams” of contact, is a frontier space that is “multidirectional and hybridized,” contested, “the zone of the trickster, a shimmering, always changing zone of multifaceted contact within which every utterance is challenged and interrogated, all referents put into question,” whereas “territory” stands in contrast to it, “clearly mapped, fully imagined as a place of containment, invented to control and subdue the dangerous potentialities of imagined Indians...the ultimate logic of territory is appropriation and occupation.”²³

Another complication that arises from the “I’ve been there, and for a long time” argument is that presence and experience doesn’t necessarily guarantee understanding. Clearly, the above example of exile shows that despite the fact that the writer has lived in proximity to the activities of the particular group, much could be kept private, and the outsider has no idea when they pass back and forth between the invisible membrane that demarcates the inside or outside--unless someone deliberately throws your ass out. Plenty of ethnographers and anthropologists claimed to know, in very unbiased, scientific ways, the groups they studied. I think we can all move beyond the bias and objectivity argument, as even most scientists will reluctantly concede, that bias exists, and that management, not denial, mitigates predetermined views.

A distrust will always exist for the casual or serious observer of cultures not inherently their own, considering “anthropologists have used the inventions of ethnic cultures and the representations of the tribes as tropes to academic power in institutions,” and more critical yet, as Levi Strauss argues “that the sort of immediate, in person ‘being there’ one associates with the bulk of recent American and British anthropology is essentially impossible: it is either outright fraud or fatuous self-deception...[ultimately] there is no continuity between experience and reality.”²⁴

After all, despite Mary’s claims, I can say I have “been there.” My first native encounter occurred as a kid on the Nez Perce Indian reservation, when my grandmother bought a carton of cigarettes from an Indian owned tobacco shop. She walked to the counter with the standard carton of Gold Brand cigarettes, and I performed some clown style dance routine for the handsome 14-year-old boy behind the counter. After a series

of clumsy high kicks, and poorly rendered song lyrics, my grandmother asked, “You want to marry an Indian boy, don’t you?” I said, “Yep,” as if the thought of not marrying an Indian had ever crossed my mind.

Beyond that fateful moment, in the places I lived, natives were our swimming buddies at the public pool, the neighbor kids that lived across from my aunt and uncle, and my uncle himself was, and still is a Nez Perce Indian. When you encounter the character “Dave” in *Lolita Last Star*, you will meet him, and get a sense of his work ethic, exquisite humor, and penchant for royally pissing my aunt off. We are not related by blood, but my cousin and I are. He works as a fish biologist for the BIA up in Lapwai, Idaho, and every spring, all of us cousins raft the Lochsa River when the water level promises more than a leisurely float. I am aware that some may believe I used him as a one size fits all *Indian*, but closer to the truth was that his whole life, he demonstrated the concept of survivance. Only now am I aware of he and my cousin’s status as *Indian*, whereas in the past, they were simply family.

Throughout my years working with the Forest Service, many of my co-workers and friends traveled from reservations or hometowns, to the bases just like the rest of us. We were all a diaspora of vagabonds, college students, farm boys, and natives, hoping to make some money and see some cool places. Two Navajo friends from Tuba City, Arizona came to work on the crew, and one of the guys, named Nate, ended his season with a helicopter ride off of an 8000-acre desert fire. He wanted to get on a helicopter since day one, and his grand departure unfolded heroically with all of us

waving our pulaskis in the air at him, and snapping photos with our point and shoot cameras.

In Utah, two Navajo brothers, one who ran the fire engine, and another who took over a crew, coyoted out on cold, high mountain fires, went out drinking, and otherwise caused trouble with the rest of the crew. I still miss Tony, the younger brother who loved to subvert the bureaucratic idiocy of safety policies by blowing a plastic Forest Service issue whistle, and yelling, “That’s unsafe!” at opportune moments such as serious meetings or late night moments when our conversation got too emotionally deep—again, *survivance*.

In 2000, one of the worst fire seasons in 100 years, the entire fire world struggled to keep up with assignments, and BIA crews came out en force and endured the same hot sun and dismal conditions, often with leaner budgets and less resources. A stay on the Wind River Reservation, where breakfast consisted of freezing cold eggs and coffee, in a freezing cold warehouse, made me realize deeply that the struggle of the native firefighters far exceeded the already arduous burden of relentless emergency work, yet they never complained, and soldiered on heroically. Not until ambulances carried them off fires because of exhaustion, dehydration, or heat stroke, did they show any weakness. After the burn over of an engine that killed one young Oklahoma man, and seriously injured another, the disparaging treatment by government for fellow personnel became obvious to all.

I frankly run out of time, not material when recalling my treasured experiences with my Native American friends. Now, I live in Montana, bejeweled by seven different

tribes, and I find that my most beloved and respected companions and colleagues come from one or multiple reservations, or have long been divorced from reservation life, and live in areas that they have chosen of their own volition. At Montana State University—Extension Service, I worked with the tribes of Montana on housing projects, and then with the NCAI on a Meth Education Initiative in Indian Country.

Daily phone calls from the people at NCAI and tribal program leaders saved me from the bureaucratic boredom of piles and piles of paperwork, and we talked about the state of the world, and one gentleman from Rocky Boy liked to call and talk about fishing. I appreciated the fact that people would take time out during the workday to talk to friends, and take care of family responsibilities, while their white counterparts postured about and always put work over people. This position provided me with a rare view into the daily goings on of tribal agency personnel and programs, and how hard they are fighting to make their communities and their families healthy again.

Survivance. A more globalized view developed for me when I interned at Boise State University's adult education program, and worked with indigenous peoples from around the world, most of whom escaped the conditions of war and terror, to find asylum in the U.S.

Only, the U.S., even Boise, Idaho wasn't always the safe landing place they anticipated, and the racism, exclusion, exploitation, and suspicion continued to make life difficult. Even though many quickly longed for their home countries, "in an all too familiar colonial and postcolonial story, they have been pushed to the limits of their territories and their health. To survive, many have decided that they must learn, with

multiethnic help and through multilevel political action, better routes to self- defense, self-determination, and self-guided development”²⁵ The post-colonial story repeated over and over again, in disturbing clarity and predictability. Clearly, lodging a claim that you have ‘been there,’ for no matter how long, falls flat when the most common person is asked to think critically on their personal experiences with Native Americans.

When put on the spot, non-Indian writers tend to submit predictable claims that deal with ties to an ethnic past, or even some quotient of “Indian blood” to legitimize their work. Of all areas, this probably presents the most challenges, as trying to verify identity in any kind of verifiable manner inevitably turns into something dehumanizing and ugly. At a recent academic conference sponsored by the Native American Studies Department titled *Earth Rights: Learning the Language of Indigenous Environmentalism*, Walter Ritte Jr., Director of Hawaiian Learning Center, and long time land rights activist said in response to the blood quantum question, “You know how you can make a lot of money? Go and buy some dipsticks, open up a store, and when the government wants to check blood, you go stick it up some poor Hawaiian’s ass. No. Its politics. That’s all it is.”²⁶

The second part to Vizenor’s questioning on verifying Indianness, and who is “allowed,” wonders “How much native blood does it take to be a real *Indian* author? The answers to these questions vary from war to war, but the accusations always come down to racialism, separatism, and cultural dominance.”²⁷ Similar to territorialized borders designed to either keep people in or out, measurements of culture continually change depending on the political climate, as we see even in the category of white, and

its relative, movable nature. This is not to deny the importance of culture and ethnic heritage, but maybe an aside to contemplate the practice of identity investigations as a means to legitimize a person's right to speak on a topic.

In a recent conversation with my mother to do some fact checking, she said "Well, there are rumors that a Cherokee or two married into the family." Even though I groaned a bit, she meant well, and her desire to patchwork our family identity came mostly out of a place of empathy. My maternal grandparents are Romani holocaust survivors who in their words, settled in Tennessee, Illinois, and Texas to make a fortune in oil. The fortune part is not so certain, as on the whole they are relatively poor, but at the end of the day, knowing this history has not necessarily legitimized the work I have chosen to pursue, but sensitized and prepared me. To talk of outsiders and insiders, even gypsies, the quintessential outsider and ostra, have their own very strict notions of outsiders. The term is "gadje," and if you are a gadje, they will make up stories when you ask about their spirituality. They are less inclined to writing their histories, and believe that people will steal your knowledge if you write it down. Quite apt, if I say so myself. As kids, my brother and I laughed at my mom, and said she looked like Cher.

Nick, my older brother, would sing "If I could turn back time..." and I would say, "If I could find a way!" Kids who came over asked if my mom was Indian, and we always said "No, we're German." I remember my mom expressing sadness when Cher got a nose job saying, "I loved her Indian nose." Even those sensitive to culture, occasionally get it wrong, so as a badge to gain entry into a selective group, doesn't always fly. My family identified as German because of physical origin, not a sense of

belonging or true heritage, and on any given day, we could construct our identity to suit the context.

Despite this ethnic past, I feel no more Romani than German, or even American on some days, as do some young Natives report feeling no more Indian than American. If anything, knowing my history primed me to see similar realities, and in obvious ways, the Holocaust was to the Gypsies, what Westward Expansion was to the Native American. In an all too familiar formula, when non-Indian authors are found out in terms of ethnicity, they default to the “Well, my childhood [or life] *reeeeally sucked.*” Somehow, traumatized life histories are paralleled to the lives of Native Americans, and we are left with the conclusion that trauma equals Indianness; an unbearable conclusion.

Mary Scriver’s co-writer, Tim Barrus wrote and published the *Nasdijj* series as memoirs by a young Navajo man. The premise closely resembles Sherman Alexie’s work, and describes a young man with a neurological disorder, born of an alcoholic Navajo mother, and abusive white father. I will avoid trauma theatre details, but the work is quite graphic, and as a writer, I find it hard to imagine putting even a character through such hell. After selling 27,000 copies and appearing on the radar of readership of people like say, Sherman Alexie, people began to ask questions as to the authenticity of the accounts. In a letter to Time Magazine, Sherman Alexie recounts:

“I worried that *Nasdijj* was a talented and angry white man who was writing as a Native American in order to mock multicultural literature....Angry, competitive, saddened, self-righteous and more than a little jealous that this guy was stealing some of my autobiographical thunder, I approached *Nasdijj*’s publishers and told them this book not only was borderline plagiarism but also failed to mention specific tribal members, clans, ceremonies and locations, all of which are vital to the concept of Indian identity.”²⁸

Eventually, Nasdijj, or Tim Barrus gave up the façade when investigations revealed that he was actually an upper class white guy from Michigan. His former literary pursuits included books about gay pornography and sadomasochism, but those genres didn't pay off financially in the end.²⁹ In his final squirm while pinned down on the felt, he blurted out the supposed horrible nature of his childhood, and that his father was a big meanie and all that. Mary Scriver supported his position in a blog post titled “So Tim Barrus is Nasdijj—Get Over It!” and claimed, “Sometimes he played girl’s parts,” and “His father was a shift foreman for electrical engineering for the City of Lansing, a handsome, brilliant, powerful man who was violently abusive, esp. towards his son.”³⁰ In her final appeal to her audience for us to overlook the fact that he tried to “pass” as Navajo, she pleads, “As a teenager Tim attempted suicide by blowing his guts out with a shotgun.”³¹

Tim Barrus himself bit back in a blog by saying “people should pay attention to “real scandals” like poverty.”³² In an interview to get Tim Barrus to come clean, which he partially did, many including his publishers felt that “this wasn’t just a fraud against the intellectual community, but against the entire Navajo Nation, and that “Nasdijj” needed to apologize.”³³ None of the proceeds from the sale of the books went to the people conveniently referenced in his work, and the final response from both Tim and Mary was basically a big F-off.³⁴ After all this, the fact that any white person is permitted to click-clack out even one written word about Native Americans is unbelievable. Keys should be installed on every computer for the white person who begins to write about natives. Click-Boom! Even more shocking is the kindness shown

to a hapless fledgling like myself, when time and time again, whites have profited from Natives without their consent.

Leslie Marmon Silko possibly unveils the reasons behind such territorialism from whites bordering reservations, or even those in places like Lansing where the squirrels roam free with the tumbleweeds. She says, "Storytelling for Indians is like natural resources. Some places have oil, some have a lot of water or timber or gold, but around here, it's the ear that has developed."³⁵ Apparently it is also gold for publishers, and writers who fail in other genres. My initial instinct with my own project, was to shelf it in the dusty rank and file of the Montana State University Library. If any good ever comes out of this, I can promise that any reward will immediately go to the people mentioned, and any ill, comes to me. In the end, we clearly see that cases of personal trauma are what really end in deadly showdowns, and most everyone gets hurt. Again, like many people, I can say being a kid was hard.

Hey buddy, I know. I was in and out of catholic schools, and yes the use of "in and out" was intentional, as if religious learning institutions are places of reform for kids who looked closely at the situation and said, "this is baloney." Although far from quiet, I became the church mouse in that wherever there was food, I found my way in. One time in particular introduced me to the idea of theft and sin, and I found myself reciting words and verses I didn't understand to clear my soul of sin. I found a secret stash of chocolate chips the church intended on having us second graders peddle on the streets, so they could afford their wine and candles.

Something about “boast” turned into “toast” in my mind, and I began to think of buttery goodness while an old man with dead bug breath released his gasses in my face. On another peddling venture, the church wanted us to take to the streets to sell these Halloween tickets to a haunted house they put together. I pounded the pavement towing my plastic Barbie car with my box turtle in the front seat, and sold the Halloween tickets to inconvenienced strangers. Once at home, with 13 dollars in my pocket, I realized I had worked hard for them, and kept the money. That did not go over well. Perhaps this explains the Marxism. Closer to the truth, for me, post-Marxist theories, like tribal theories strive to “break down the separation of subject and object, of researcher and focus of research, found in traditional theories.”³⁶ A fictional piece allowed that expression to extend even more fully, and with human qualities (which was my initial intention for this project).

Anyways, I went to the haunted house, and when a big fat, ultra religious 8th grader grabbed me, I swiped a comb out of my hair, and hit her with it. I remember her grabbing my wrist hard, and saying, “you bitch.” I hit her again. Then ran really fast. *Survivance*. My brother and I employed *Survivance* in many other instances, of which I will spare you, but the response was typically highly humorous, cunning, and innovative, even as children. We escaped from schools, started food fights, got people in trouble, rummaged in the garbage for cast aside treasures, and reinvented them, and in the ultimate act of trickery and survivance, we turned these strategic positions and adaptations into marketable skills, and garnered gainful employment. Ideas of what is and isn’t traumatic are often as inflexible and sometimes subjective as identity, and

therefore shaky grounds to stand when trying to justify writing about cultures not your own.

In the most straightforward sense, I do not find it courageous to hide behind a façade to sell a bunch of books in the cutthroat game of print capitalism. I do not see a vital irony or spirit in having too much pain to deal with, and burying under the veil of night into Indian lives, as if their culture represented some sort of graveyard for all the pain the white world is too chicken shit to face. I suppose I understand to a degree and that “healthy people survive through storytelling, but sometimes the pain is so great that people bury themselves in silence and internalized anger, then pass this fear on to their children,” or in Tim’s case, other people, and I would say the people you deny a voice by not allowing them to participate in knowledge production that involves them.³⁷ At the end of a long day, your trauma does not entitle you.

The aside I would take to Vizenor is that survivance is as natural as language, if you examine the historical records, a multitude of people have employed survivance to overcome, and kick dirt in the face of dominance, violence, humiliation, and attempts to assimilate people into nothing more than consumer and producers, or worse, permanent captives in systems that fear their liberation. Many individuals who must deal with post-colonial realities practice survivance, for instance, the Palestinian men locked in Israeli prisons year after year, separated from their wives and children, with no hope of release. In *Wild Thorns* by Sahar Khalifeh, a group of Palestinian prisoners demonstrate survivance through storytelling and other means.

One of the prisoners struck up a beat, using an empty bucket for a drum. A few men danced, while others lined up for the traditional folk dance, the

dabke. The room was filled with claps, whistles and shouted slogans. Jokes were told. A poetry competition was held. The noisy party came to an end with a group anthem that brought a stream of tears to Basil's eyes. He felt transported to a world he'd never known, one where pain and hope intertwined and the will to live triumphed over prison walls.³⁸

I suspect a close examination of a wide selection of post-colonial texts would reveal similar instances of these strategies towards liberation and self-governance. Post-colonial writer, Arundhati Roy encourages us:

To love. To be loved. To never forget your own insignificance. To never get used to the unspeakable violence and the vulgar display of life around you. To seek joy in the saddest places. To pursue beauty to its lair. To never simplify what is complicated or complicate what is simple. To respect strength, never power. Above all, to watch. To try and understand. To never look away. And never, never, to forget."³⁹

Before I digress too much, as far as basic content and my method, *Lolita Last Star* innocently started out as character as question in the vast and tangled or rhizomatic space of the Rocky Mountain West. After performing an extended phase of research and writing, I created an organizational strategy and timeline to accomplish the sheer length of the work, and to ensure the themes worked well together (see APPENDIX C: Organizational Tools and Keys, Table One and Two 282-285). A multiplicity of questions, some springing from my own experiences, and some from those of peoples around me rushed forth, and in this work I attempted to answer: How do people, brilliant, talented, and creative as they may be, deal with the conditions handed to them? Whether they are the heirs of some grand inheritance, or a young woman delivered up on the proverbial shores of the Blackfeet Reservation, how do they respond to conflicts, obstacles personal or otherwise, and better yet, opportunities? Do institutions move people along in their own versions of "progress," or do they hang them up, so that

attainment of a whole and complete life becomes nigh impossible? How do people transcend a historical past that attempted to shatter everything they knew, and where is true healing to found?

To begin, I looked closely at the Rocky Mountain region, and drew a somewhat Owensian line around the Northwestern quarter of Montana, and the Southeastern portion of Idaho as the space I would critique (see APPENDIX A: Maps of Selected Region, Figures Two through Five 269-274).^{40, 41} No mystery surrounds my geographic selection; this space simply represents my own migratory range, and the truth in mapping we see in shrinking reservations highlights native mobility out of these “mapped” spaces. In this highly movable spatial selection, I have: fished in the rivers and lakes, camped and explored in connect the dot demarcations on the grid, fought wildfires, fell in and out of love, welcomed new family, and buried old, ran ultra marathons, visited family and friends, studied, and simply lived. This area is easier to describe in accurate ways, because all the natural and developed features are familiar. By all obvious definitions, I am a westerner, born of the place with a multitude of experiences, and a solid past to verify that I belong. But, living in the west also led me into reservations, Zen centers, Hindu ashrams, mosques, lectures and meetings with international scholars, and relationships with people from around the globe.

Like many writers and scholars, I found a discomfoting theme in the threads of belonging, insider, outsider, and what constitutes the *real*. My experience, flimsy as it is as evidence, reinforced the idea that the global cannot and should not be removed from the local. Writer Leslie Marmon Silko also takes this wide-screen approach in her work,

situates indigenous realities, and “strives to connect them to broader aesthetic and political questions, such as the nature of narrative, the shape of American history, and the fate of the modern world.”⁴² In her own words, she suggests:

What writers, storytellers, and poets have to say necessarily goes beyond such trivial boundaries as origin...good literature has to be accessible. It’s incredibly narcissistic to be otherwise...(she wants to make accessible) Things about relationships. That’s all there really is. There’s your relationship with the dust that just blew in your face, or with the person who just kicked you end over end. That’s all I’m interested in...relationships are not just limited to man-woman, parent-child, insider-outsider; they spread beyond that.⁴³

Instead of boundary and identity policing, it is important, opposed to nationalists Cook Lynn and Womack, Owens notes, that his characters often ask, “Who am I?” and “How do I live in this place and time? In other words his characters are not dealing with their own specific tribal national locales, but with movement and travel.”⁴⁴ I suggest writers do the same.

The characters and their actions in *Lolita Last Star* are a response to these questions, and their full human vibrancy transcends space and time, definitions, borders, accusations of authenticity, oppression, domination, petty moralities, victimry, and they move us all one step closer to self-sovereignty and human dignity. They show that if anything westerners contain cultural universes and are better for it. The only frauds are the people too scared to step out of their narrow focus of what a westerner, an Indian, a firefighter, a soldier, a Buddhist, a man, a woman, or a cowboy is. They are never afraid to ask, “Where the hell are we supposed to go from here?”

CHAPTER 2

HISTORICAL EVENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS IN THE
ROCKY MOUNTAIN WEST THAT CONTINUE TO SHAPE
PHYSICAL SPACES AND INTERCULTURAL RELATIONSHIPS

“wild rice
and native bones
washed away”⁴⁵

Two Medicine and Swift Dam Breaks

Just over a month and year after Frank left for Vietnam, Charlene found herself on the other end of a frantic phone call from her cousin in Browning, saying that Swift Dam and Two Medicine Dam had failed. Without strategizing, she set the phone on the counter and sprinted down the road from the neighbors’ house where she was visiting and drinking coffee, back towards her mother and father’s house. She ran breathlessly, blindly towards the blurry horizon, treading flint gravel and sparks under her flat-soled shoes. Her mother and father’s vulnerable faces hanging on the sky, flat and superimposed against the cleaved mountain range. The million-dollar rain had fallen on the Blackfeet Reservation for days, until Swift and Two Medicine dams failed, and sent its forgotten inhabitants scampering for higher ground.⁴⁶

Charlene cleared three cement steps without effort, and blast through the screen door, gasping for air as her parents sat looking out the window at the rain. The orchestra of chaos and truncated time delivered a hot, impatient rust brown Chevy to the driveway, and she scuttled their bodies out the door and into the cab of the truck with the slam of a

heavy door. Charlene glanced about and noticed the neighbors doing the same. The wide-eyed group, stacked upon one another, went screeching around corners and up hills to a place where the unstoppable wall of runoff could not snatch them away.

In the frenzy, Charlene felt her father's large warm hand pat her thigh. His fingers seemed to melt through her jean shorts and the heat reached deep into her muscles. When she looked at him, he had a calm half-smirk on his face, as if he were taking a carnival ride he had been on before. Her mother's face was frozen in a state of shock and the names of people lost collected in her eyes. Charlene reached through the tangle of limbs and touched her. Her eyes roved around nervously and she rang her hands, and Charlene withdrew her hand slowly.

Dave, Wilma's husband drove the truck hard with his knotty, dark arms and sinewy legs. Years of logging pressed his compact body into a hardened form, so much that Charlene could not imagine how Wilma made love with him. The muddy water swelled beneath the truck and offered resistance to the struggling vehicle. Dave's big black boot pressed the metal gas pad all the way to the floor while he lifted his heel and leaned forward. Spikes of his fine black hair splayed out of his netted trucker cap and he periodically flared his teardrop shaped nostrils. Wilma held Charlene so tightly that her nails dug into Charlene's arm and the skin went white. The water carried appliances, uprooted trees, parts of houses, and aluminum barrels down the streets steadily becoming submerged with water. The AM radio station KSEN announced refuges in Browning for those hoping to escape the squall, relentless rain, or flooded homes.⁴⁷

In Two Medicine Valley, a stalled out flatbed truck with people collected around it tried to resist the onslaught of water, but the vehicle continued to shift in the current. A rescue boat had arrived to scoop people up, succeeding marginally by pulling five or so into safety. Wilma commanded Dave to pull over and help by pounding on his shoulder, but he ignored her, and brushed her hand away. Her demands grew more shrill and desperate as the tiny heads of drowning children began to float away in the current. The water came and ripped the children away from the exhausted arms of what appeared to be the mother. Charlene had never before seen people that little, in water that deep and strong, alone. They reminded her of the Canadian goslings that bobbed in spring, and in her confusion, she felt amused until they sunk below the surface and did not reemerge.

The truck with people scattered all about began to shift in the water again, and followed the current downstream. At that point, Dave hit the gas hard and leaned forward through a surge of water. The truck tires spun, and the truck carriage floated momentarily. Wilma's vice grip hand squeezed Charlene's arm. Charlene eyed the water rushing against the door of the vehicle. Her memory snapped a picture of the tender onionskin of her mother's arm. She wondered how she would hang onto all of them and swim at the same time. Dave leaned hard forward, and the tires caught the road, spinning them towards safety.

The remainder of the wordless drive back to Browning went smoothly. A gentle, constant rain fell on the windshield, and the eeking of the wipers lulled Charlene into a fuzzy calm. When she tilted off gently towards asleep, she remembered the children in the water. She couldn't believe children so young could die in the first place. She then

imagined that someone would take their pale cold bodies up against the sky in agony, and pray for the life to return to their eyes like the murky-grey brown water. She felt relieved that her mother sat breathing next to her, warm, dry, static, and full of life.

The weary group reached the Holy Family Mission, just a few miles Southeast of Browning. Dave walked around the vehicle with the same vigilant energy from the last couple hours, and opened the passenger door. He reached out for the arm of his father in law, who gripped him firmly in return and stepped out of the vehicle. The two men helped Wilma and Charlene's mother out, and held onto her longer to make sure she was steady on her feet. She stood facing the direction they just escaped and stared off into the distance. Charlene and Wilma both put their arms around her, and cradled her limp, weeping head.

The men stood helpless against the burgeoning grief of the women and looked off into the opposite direction, into some other time and space. As they wondered where the water had carried their lives off to, cars full of people intermittently rolled into the soggy yard of the former boarding school. Although they were long time associates, all the people coming in looked like strangers, some wet, some injured, some motionless and wrapped in blankets. Charlene heard a few people say in astonishment, that *they had no warning*. The rain fell for days, but no one could foresee that the early summer rain would turn into a massive flood that carried their beloved friends and family, and their homes away.⁴⁸

The flood of June 1964 left thousands homeless and damaged millions in property, mostly belonging to the Blackfeet. The flood significantly affected both sides of

the Continental Divide, and most of the state of Montana was underwater. A number of writers, both journalists and novelists, covered the incident after all was said and done, one of which received a Pulitzer Prize for his work.⁴⁹ Meteorologists concluded that the rare combination of heavy winter snowpack in the Rockies, and the arrival of an unusual warm air mass from the Gulf of Mexico, created what the Weather Bureau called a “lee-side storm.”⁵⁰ As a result, 32 people died, mostly children. News reports in the following days gained national attention by ‘confusing’ the location of the disaster. Most sources claimed that residents of Great Falls and Kalispell, mostly white and middle class, had suffered the most damage.⁵¹ Those responsible for covering the event, omitted the accounts of the Blackfeet grandparents and grandchildren whose lives were taken as a result of the deadly combination of natural conditions, and the grossly misguided intentions of those who built the dams so long ago.

Montana historically lacked codes of conduct when it came to water regulation. This left the state vulnerable to those who would exploit opportunities to gain control of precious water resources primarily for the purpose of irrigating settlers’ lands. Control over water directly impacted how profitable a stakeholder’s future would be, as engineers and propagators of westward expansion claimed that Montana land values would nearly triple once properly irrigated. Lawmakers responsible for this precious resource compounded the aggressive protectiveness and acquirement of water and waterside properties, by over-appropriating lands and overseeing land and water use too infrequently. As soon as rivers were dammed up to achieve the ends of profiteers and developers, the public began to express concern over the safety of dams.⁵²

Political leaders attempted to mitigate the fears and dangers by playing with the idea of hiring engineers to manage the functions of the structures, and those granted permission to initiate irrigation projects, but eventually their plans failed under an underdeveloped, incompetent system. After a long period of negotiations between states that shared the benefits of the rivers, private landowners, and the State Engineer's Office, a compact to regulate dam safety was signed eventually in 1949. Unfortunately, this agreement applied only to those who secured water rights after 1950, meaning the State Engineer's Office could not enforce regulation or maintenance on dams that existed before that period.⁵³

Between an ineffective compact and the inability of the State Engineer's Office in ensuring dam safety, a disaster the magnitude of the Flood of 1964 was inevitable. The Lower Two Medicine Dam, built by the Reclamation Bureau in 1916 had not been properly inspected since its inception, and the combined desire to control water for settler's farmlands, and secure their rights as landowners, led to the disaster that stole 32 lives on June 8th, 1964.^{54, 55}

The names of the dead lie on the lips of bereaved family and float lonely in indiscernible dreams and memories. BIA reports and an article from the *Great Falls Tribune* named the deceased as: Rose Grant, eighty-four, Elaine Guardipee, four, Keith Guardipee, two, Alvin Guardipee, three, Terry Lee Guardipee, two months, Robbie Grant Jr., five, Rolanda Rose Grant, three, Galela Lynn Cobell, fourteen, Lorraine Long Time Sleeping, five, Thomas Hall III, twelve, Margerie Hall, ten, Martha Hall, eight, Kathy Hall, six, Marlin Hall, four, Edward Hall, two, Jody Hall, one; Mrs. Tom Hall Jr., thirty-

three, Peggy Bradley, eight, Jerry Wayne Thomas, three, Linda Arnoux, sixteen, Sam New Breast Jr., thirty-five, Mrs. Sam New Breast, no age listed, Patricia New Breast, no age listed, child, Ernest Lauffer, Fifty-eight, Gilbert England, forty-three, Ralph Oberlack, sixty-five, Joe Hamline, fifty-two, Bean Theakson, forty-five, Stanford Creighton, and Ivan “Happy” Williams.⁵⁶

Agency superintendent, William Grissom dispatched evacuations from nearby Malmstrom Air force Base, but the weather was too treacherous for helicopters to operate.⁵⁷ Charlene wondered if Frank knew about the disaster somehow, as if the two lovers were joined only by their military connections. As far as modern technology and communication were concerned, the reservation barely existed. Vast acres of stark prairie insulated the town from surrounding towns with additional and much needed resources. She couldn't even call him in a disaster situation, considering the military would not allow soldiers to reveal their locations and missions to outsiders, even family. Charlene filled with hopelessness and everything she knew to be safe seemed to float away on water.

Miles away, Frank fought a war of his own, comforted only by the thought that his new wife lived safely and comfortably in a small home paid for by his enlistment advance, and a loan from each of their parents. During the apex of the flood, Frank's dizzy head lay in the lap of a naked Vietnamese woman. He visited the small hut when he felt lonely for Charlene, or left out by the other GI's.⁵⁸ The woman's thin arms framed his face and he studied the soft black hair on the woman's arm. She giggled and squirmed, occasionally tickled him, and whispered closely into his ear. The steam of her breath

turned his inner ear damp and her words, indiscernible, soothed him into a rare state of relaxation. The structure of her body resembled Charlene's in its thin, yet healthy composition.

Her energy was far more kinetic than Charlene's calm, consistent manner. He closed his eyes, breathed deeply and allowed his aching bones to settle. The young woman squirmed out from under him and crawled seductively and unselfconsciously towards the man sitting in the corner of the room. Her hairstyle sat high and messy like the American country singers on television, and her dark, slightly smudged eyeliner extended her eyes farther out like some wildcat. Her gestures mimicked this feline, oversexed impersonation and she occasionally rolled on her back and swatted at an invisible string. Frank had never seen Charlene act this way in all of their moments of lovemaking. He watched the woman intently, yet somewhat disinterested.

Her small breasts sagged slightly despite her young age. A closer look revealed shiny silver-purple stretch marks on her hips and belly. The man in the corner petted her trimmed tangle of hair between her legs and passed her a pipe with a curling ribbon of smoke trailing behind. Frank watched her bony, long-nailed hand receive the offering and she puffed deeply. The expression on her face transformed from wanting to complete surrender, shortly after her exhalation of the acrid smelling smoke. Frank sat up and watched the man curiously as he retrieved the offering and took his turn.

His small face and eyes did not react to the miniscule contents of the smoke and he artfully refreshed the pipe with more opium.⁵⁹ His trained his eyes on Frank while he extended his arm. Frank cocked his head as if he detected the whining of bullets. Really,

he heard them all the time and gave up wondering if the sounds were real or imagined. After not sleeping for days and working to physical exhaustion and mental delirium, many soldiers eventually regarded bullets as normal threats within their environment.⁶⁰ The woman's movements slowed considerably until she wound down to a lounging position. Frank watched as she ran her own hand up and down the now unfamiliar line of her own body, up the hip, and down the waist and back again. She twirled her fingers in the cottony spin of her hair, smelled the strands and smoothed them over her dark nipples.

The man conducting the movements of the room said to Frank, "You weh like dis, iss like...peacepipe."

Frank took a few moments to understand the man. The man's emphasis on the letter "p" attracted the interest of Frank as the letters stuck momentarily on the man's dark, thin lips. Frank repeated "peacepipe," and looked at the strange device in the man's hand. He reached for the long ornately decorated metal instrument and brought it gently to his lips. Laughter and shrieks from the village children ricocheted in the balmy air outside the hut. The woman now sat with her back to the wall of the small, dank room and she held her knees slightly apart. Bed-like material made up most of the floor of the small room. Frank scratched at his skin and shifted uncomfortably in the soft pillowy nest for a solid place to rest. The small man sat cross-legged on an elevated settee and then reclined on his hip and elbow. Boastful banter from the GI's intermingled with the children's songs. Frank exhaled and said, "No, never had a peace pipe."

"Oh, so you not *reel* Indian."⁶¹ replied the man.

“Guess not.” Frank shrugged.

“You like thee guy?” asked the man.

“Who? Her?” Frank asked and pointed at the woman.

“No, GI’s. Your pahntner?” the man explained and pointed out of the hut.

“Oh, the soldiers. They’re alright.”

“You kieh someone yet?” asked the man.

“Killed someone? I don’t know.” Frank replied.

Frank became disturbed the time he intentionally aimed closely at a human body, so he pointed his rifle in the general direction of what was supposed to be the enemy. He fired at the same time as the others, so he never really knew if his bullets hit someone or not. Until the death of his friend Ken Dodd, Frank struggled with the idea of picking off another human being, especially ones whose realities mirrored the political situations of his own people.⁶²

“So you not really soldier either.”⁶³ the man said.

Frank blushed when he looked back at the man and he seemed to be laughing, but then, Frank’s eyes were all out of focus after breathing in the substance. A second glance actually revealed an expression of feeling pleased, a contemplative frown, and downturned eyes typically seen on a boy much younger. Frank examined the wall behind the mysterious man, and compared the faces of the man and the Buddha on the altar above him.⁶⁴ The Buddha’s grin gathered the waxy flesh up on his maroon colored face, and his cheeks pressed his joyful eyes closed in a permanent reverie. The face of the small man hung gravely and looked back at Frank. The images and faces shifted

occasionally and as an automatic response, Frank smiled back at the Buddha. No one ever told Frank about the Buddha, so he pointed and asked the man,

“Who’s he?”

The small, ageless man excitedly explained the story of the young prince and the renounced kingdom and family, and all the unalleviated suffering in the three worlds. He told him of the world of the hungry ghosts, and the insatiable wraith you become if you commit suicide. Frank registered a look of surprise at the word “suicide,” and listened closely to the story of the Tathagata, Regarder of the Cries of the World.⁶⁵ This Buddha assumes many different forms, the man told him; Woman, man, blue, green, red, white, he has been all of them. “You call Tathagata, namah Buddha, he come help you,” advised the man. Frank’s R&R time would be up soon, so he sobered up a bit and drank some cloudy, coconut flavored liquid the man gave him, then slowly made his way back to the barracks.

The smoky tar taste of the opium lingered in his mouth and wafted pungently when he exhaled or licked his lips. Gripped in the terrors of a dream that night, Frank struggled to breathe and tried to call out, “Namah Buddha! Namah Buddha!” so the demon crushing his chest would loosen its grip. Charlene appeared to him ethereal, wrapped in a blanket shivering and asked, “Where have you been?” He sat up abruptly and examined the quiet sleeping quarters, and tried to make out shapes in the reverberating dark. A few snorers and a couple stray farts interrupted the silence.

Frank learned of the flood on the reservation weeks later when he read a letter sent by Dave. The illogical ramblings of Dave revealed that his beloved narrowly escaped

tragedy due to his heroic driving. The letter was barely a page in length, but conveyed enough of the incident for Frank to imagine each event in detail.

Man,

I tell you, I knew my friend Larry was going to camp out, so after most of the flood passed, I went looking for him. I took my neighbor Scott, and we looked everywhere. I ran along the creek for miles, just looking for anything, but found nothing. I thought we'd find him stuck in the mud somewhere, but you wouldn't believe it! We found him dead drunk and passed out in a water tender! We sure partied later, thinking he was dead and all. Well, hope your doing ok. Everyone is ok here.

Your Brother,

Dave

When Frank finally returned from the war, Dave told him in precise detail, the adventure of recovering Larry. Dave also kept the bragging rights for rescuing the Clark family, securely in his chest pocket and patted it proudly every now and then. Frank raged at the injustice of being so far away when his family needed him most. His resentful gaze and eviscerating words seared all who dared to engage him in the months immediately following the flood. When his dark mood inevitably incited teasing from one of the more dull soldiers, a fight broke out in the chow line.

The fellow appeared amused to mask his fear, while Frank tightened his t-shirt collar around his neck. A man behind Frank pulled his arms off the hapless fool and as soon as a safe distance separated them, he huffed a cocky insult at Frank. Frank waited for a letter from Charlene to follow and tell him of the flood, but the letter never arrived. According to another one of Dave's letters that came as an inquiry from Frank, the family was fine. He focused an inordinate amount of time describing Larry's attempted mini

camp out and fishing endeavor, despite the constant downfall of rain and warnings that his plan wasn't safe.

Seasonal weather onslaughts failed to deter Larry from fishing, as well as any nagging his wife could hurl at him. In front of their friends, she berated him by pounding on his shoulder with her fat fist, all the while shouting some variation of *dumbsonofabitch*. His watery eyes registered no reaction, but instead, in his predictable way, turned to hug her to restrain her arms. Larry set his clock early every morning, and spent at least an hour methodically teasing fish out of the water out of one of the creeks before work, typically at Birch Creek on the South side of the reservation, or Two Medicine River.

For such a supposed stupid man, his artful displays with a strand of fly fishing line must have been an anomalistic skill. In the morning and evening sun, the free floating, delicate thread gently flagged towards the surface of the water, and drifted whisper like until he pulled the swaying 'S' back the same way a beautiful young woman throws back her hair. Despite his secret grace, dog-like, he gazed dumbly at the water, and if the line bonked a few times before his final reel in, he slunk in late to work without a lunch. Many suspected that fishing, in actuality, afforded Larry a rare opportunity away from his pious and angry wife, to drink his secret stash of peach Schnapps.

The reel, rod, and ample alone time provided the perfect diversion for Larry to drink and sing happily by the water. Around town, people awarded Larry's behavior with a nickname, Too-Drunk-To-Fish-Larry. A few kids had seen him attempting to load his hook with a worm, but he dumped his rod in the water instead. He pulled the pole back

up by the line and tried again, until he had the over-weighted line at a slow drifting angle in the current. Then he took a gulp out of the bottle in his satchel. Neighborhood kids liked to make up stories about him, and say that he lived on the reservation to spy on people for the federal government; the dumb stuff was all an act. The kids laughed and threw rocks at him, hoping he would give chase. Contented, he did no such thing.

Some of the older people in town said that Larry had tried to bait his hook with baby rattler snakes thinking they were worms, and they all bit him, and the poison made him retarded. *Cooked his brain*, they would say. When the flood slammed its way through the reservation, those like Larry were the first suspected to be dead. Larry must have thought the very same thing, considering later he reported that he became lost when he went looking for the old man who sold him bait.

Larry later retold the misadventure in his own theatrical way, and said he wandered to the small general store in search of some coffee, salmon roe, and night crawlers. One of his only friends, old Ward Svengen, deserted his shop when he heard his transistor radio crackle a warning of floodwaters. He gathered up his crippled, blind, old red heeler, the contents of the cash drawer, and drove off towards higher elevation. Larry peeked in the store window after trying the door. Ward decided to take his nicer, newer Oldsmobile he kept in storage out back, in case the flood turned out as bad as they thought. Larry stared at the vacant old truck out front and said he thought “Ol’ Ward had fallen, and been swept down the street.” Larry raised his arms in the air and played an invisible piano, splay-fingered with periodic emphasis when he told this story.

Folks like Larry typically burn through their friends due to their endless alcoholic apologies and inability to truly give to another person. For this reason, Larry loved Ward and the steadfastness of their friendship, based on the clean give and take of money and worms. People like Larry also love the occasions when catastrophic life events invite them to participate in the most dramatic orchestrations of sorrow and grieving. Every other day, the inexplicable, heavy pendulum of unexplored grief swings back and forth in their guts, doing all the damage it can. Events like the flood of 64' and the temporary loss of a friend offered an identifiable reason for the wrecking ball mindlessly whacking away inside. Even better that grief offered Larry the opportunity to participate in the ceremony of bereavement without actually losing.

Larry stormed away determined, back to his running vehicle, and began pulling on the 3/4 full bottle of fruity, fermented syrup. The burning soothed the ache in his chest and he roared off heroically to find his friend. Fallen trees, tangles of brush, and twisted arms of metal blocked the road to Ward's place, so Larry pulled off to the side of the road, slightly out of the way of the piles of debris. He ran clumsily towards Ward's house but found a wall of logs jammed together as tall as the rooftops. Larry let loose a wail of despair and began crawling the hard, damp wall of wood.

Tree limbs scratched his arms and the moisture leaking through set the wounds stinging in the air. He reached the top of the impossibly jumbled pile and looked as far out as he could. The floodwaters met Larry at eyelevel, and his eyes shot wide open. A loud thump of a drifting log unsettled him from his foot and handholds. Another log followed, banging into the slowly moving wall of logs backed by thousands of gallons of

water. The clarity of Larry's predicament sent him backwards off the volatile pile and he landed on his back. Within seconds, Larry was in his truck moving swiftly in reverse, yelling all the way.

Larry began aimlessly driving the roads, hoping for some chance that Ward was not beneath the pile of logs, or under the water he just escaped. He pulled to the side of the road, stared at the mountains, and rolled down his partially fogged window. A hole in the dark belly clouds opened and an intense, clearly lined ray of light poured into the expanse of a nearby valley. Larry saluted the rain sent just for him, that fell in sideways through the merciful light. He turned up the radio and fine-tuned the station with the dial until a clear lyric of The Highwaymen's "Michael, Row the Boat Ashore" created homeostasis in the atmosphere of tragedy, and sent him off on his journey proper.⁶⁶ A few deep sighs and whimpers, and another bottle of Schnapps inspired Larry to go walking down the road, bolstered by the booze into a defiant irreverence for his own life.

Dave searched for 14 hours for Larry, walking by Two Medicine River, crying and sniffing occasionally when the situation appeared hopeless. Scott, his neighbor, took the two-track road so couldn't see Dave wiping away the tears and snot. The two walked parallel to one another looking over occasionally for gestures that signaled a find or not. Dave stopped a few times to examine the debris collected around the submerged fallen trees and branches to ensure Larry wasn't part of the soggy bramble. He squinted at a few objects that resembled wet hair or ripped clothes, but signaled to Scott to keep moving.

The opaque and muddy water settled over areas of land that typically stay dry year around, and continued to carry a variety of objects downstream. Even though the

water's surface appeared slow and languid, the deceptively swollen flows could still easily pluck a person off the loose soil and swallow them. The two men walked upon a large, white water tanker pulled off to the side of the road, and hoped a driver could offer some information. Both men stepped up on each of the grated step sides and peered into the rolled down windows.

“Larry!” they cried.

“Hugnh?”

Larry rolled over on his side from face down position and opened one bleary eye. A stray puff of reddish-gray hair stood straight up. The top two buttons of his shirt were undone revealing a pale chest contrasted with a sun and alcohol reddened neck and face. After a few moments, his vision aligned onto the lighted face of Dave. His cheek and temple were imprinted red and white from the patterns of the woven, yarn seat cover.

“Dave”? he asked.

The party to celebrate the resurrection of Larry was a real winger.

The Last Star Family

Charlene took a break from the kitchen table downstairs where she constructed crafts projects and graded papers for her second grade class. A couple hours before bedtime, Frank took his medication. Charlene leveraged herself from the creaky chair and ambled her way into the dark kitchen. Her hips and knees ached for some reason, and limping for a short stretch helped her get accustomed to walking without pain. She grabbed the crisp, cold paper bag out of the refrigerator that held the vials of liquid that

would help Frank breathe. His blue plastic cup was half full of room temperature orange juice that she dumped for a fresh refill of water. He sat silently, watching the news while she hooked up the plastic tubes, poured the liquid into the apparatus, and handed him the mouthpiece.

The small machine whirred like a box fan with a powerful tinny motor, and Frank adjusted the volume on the television to compete with the noise. He breathed as deeply as he could, laboring through spasms to take in the maximum amount of diffused particles into his chest cavity. Charlene watched his protruding collar bones expand and relax with each inhalation. The lines around his eyes held all the sun and tears a long life promises to those willing to participate. He combed his dark hair but strands separated across his scalp from the oil of not shampooing for a couple days. Even though he groomed and kept himself neat, he felt nervous in the shower and worried about falling.

This meant that he took spit baths in the bathroom sink with hot washcloths and applied shaving cream and deodorant to complete the ritual. Charlene convinced him to get in the bath at least once a week, and she stood by to give him her arm so he felt stable. During his shower, she made coffee and toast for the two of them, and came back in to help him get out and dress. At the age of 59, Frank's body resembled that of a man twenty years his senior. Years of hard labor, environmental exposure, and violent situations battered myriad moments off his life, at least in the physical sense.⁶⁷ He always told Charlene that he felt better after the shower, and she thought he would be more regular with them, but every week presented the same struggle of convincing him. In the steamy warm light, his shiny clean face appeared lighter and refreshed. She liked to see

him with a look of relief on his face, especially after he made his way out into his chair and sat warm, cared for, and comfortable. As he reclined in front of the television that night, she noticed the vacant look on his face, and wondered what sort of ideas or memories passed through him like ever-changing weather.

After all these years, like many couples, they assumed that the other knew exactly what currents drifted beneath the public face worn by the other, even though that is rarely the case. Perhaps what they both know, is that knowing everything asks a lot more in terms of listening, understanding, and being willing to act on endless fears or desires. While taking his treatment, occasionally his lungs and muscles shook as if oxygen weighed an inordinate amount. His gray and black chest hair peeked over the v in his t-shirt and even though his frame was lean, a small fold of fat sat on his waistband. Charlene rubbed his thin arms until the hair on his forearms stood on end, and he dropped his hand on her knee. The two watched the flashing screen intently, and Frank wrinkled his brow in disapproval with the plastic mouthpiece preventing his protestation.

A Glacier County politician swore to the cameras, that he would provide the reservation with the proper number of law enforcement needed to keep the citizens safe. Another young woman reported a violent assault, but these reports often went uninvestigated due to lack of personnel in the tribal police force. Even when they brought the accused to court, the federal legal system claimed tribal courts lacked either specialization or jurisdiction. For a technicality, a criminal, especially non-reservation citizens, often went free and the victim lived a life of shame. In the rare event the judicial

system convicts the perpetrator, the assaulted then finds medical and clinical care wholly inadequate or altogether missing.⁶⁸

“This is the only place left in America where you can murder someone in plain daylight and go free.” said Charlene

“Mmmmgua.” Frank muttered.

The polished man in blue suit shook hands with another suit and sold promises of improving conditions for the native people. Charlene took the motorized inhaler from his hands, flicked the off switch, and handed him his pills and the blue cup of water. He gulped the pills down with a half-drunk can of Pabst Blue Ribbon. She pushed the cup toward his mouth, and he pushed it away with his palm, never taking his gaze from the speakers. Frank reached for his walker to retrieve the remote from the knitted pocket attached to the metal bars. Charlene pushed the awkward aluminum piece of equipment closer to him, and he rummaged, still watching the screen.

After he returned from Vietnam, Frank retreated somewhere into himself and that location seemed to be attached to the television. For days and odd hours, Frank watched football, the news, the weather, public television, cartoons, and fishing channels. He cranked the volume so loud that Charlene became agitated and spent as much time away from him as possible. Charlene told herself that Frank needed time to adjust to normal life again. During the time he was gone, Charlene spent most of her spare time with Wilma daydreaming about Frank’s return.

The two women walked arm and arm down the county roads in the evening, and created scenarios of Frank and Charlene’s reunion. In one story, Frank drives up the road

in an army jeep full of good-looking men and he jumps out after spitting gravel and dust, and takes her in his arms and spins her in her flowing dress. Wilma invented a story where Dave and Frank bring the men and end up in a fight with them over the two women. Charlene punched Wilma's arm and shook her finger at her face. Wilma admitted that she felt a little envy of the two and their Big Love.

Wilma and Dave married in her parents' front yard a few years previous to the flood. In the wedding photos, Wilma's hair is teased high on her head and the mosquito net looking veil appears carelessly pinned onto her hair. Her form-fitting bodice pulled her full body in at the waist while Dave looked too small for his suit with the oversize lapels. She and Dave both smiled excitedly at each other and held hands. In the succession of aisle shots, different people made their way towards the pastor as if he represented some destination they all shared. In the photo with her father, Wilma's face appeared relaxed and calm. With Dave, her face seems more excited, but also more on edge. He seemed oblivious with his hair combed across his shiny forehead.

The ground beneath her shifted somehow, and the two stand together at an angle that doesn't reconcile against the ground in the photo. Shortly after the nuptials, Dave began disappearing after dinner or work to go to the bars in town. More than once, she dragged him off a barstool and into the car. Even though Dave worked very hard most of the year on the logging crews, he spent a good portion of his money on cheap booze, card games, and jukeboxes. Other women didn't interest him much. He just liked to sit on the stools, listen to music, and laugh with other people.

Dave's father, a Scotsman from Nebraska, introduced him to both hard work and booze as a young man. Dave's mother, a beautiful Nez Perce woman, typically ignored the two and their raucous behavior. While they swore at each other and outdid one another at wood splitting, hiking, and hunting, she scoffed and took breaks out on the back porch to smoke tiny, menthol flavored cigarettes. Only for so long could she feign annoyance before she split with laughter, and chased them with a kitchen towel and smacked at the back of their legs. Dave shared both of their characteristics, and his shiny black hair and lean frame occasionally revealed the features of his father when his neck turned red in the sun, and his grey green eyes glimmered.

The wiry build he inherited from his mother served him well on the steep slopes of the Rocky Mountains. He charged around like some sort of bumble bee and dropped six trees to every other logger's two. Indian and Anglo heritage aside, Dave liked to take risks, mostly because he was good at it. Unlike many others, danger cleared his mind. He could drink beer on his lunch break, eat a heavy meal, start up his chainsaw and proceed to domino drop a line of trees, against all the warnings of field "experts." He'd aim the first tree like the cue ball on a perfectly flat table, and knock the other three trees down under the weight of the first. Wilma replaced his mother in some ways, and her notorious retrievals of Dave made her famous in town, especially amongst the bar crowd.

Once, after Dave went missing for two days on a supposed assignment to a cutting unit out of the immediate region, Wilma caught a hint and discovered him in a saloon in East Glacier Park, and collared him as he was aiming a dart at the center of the board mouthing "Hey say, don't go, to Wolverton Mountain..."⁶⁹ Dave lost the hearing in

his right ear as a kid when he developed chronic ear infections that failed to respond to antibiotics, so her yelling at him was no use. A good cuffing usually got Wilma the reaction she wanted.

Scarring built up in the ear canal, and saved Dave from having to listen to Wilma's demands, and his condition also kept him out of Vietnam. Many of the guys Dave and Frank knew invented ways to avoid the draft that included drinking pots of coffee and orange juice to raise their blood pressure. When the time came for them to take a physical examination, their unusually high levels exempted them from service. Dave admitted to Wilma that he definitely wanted to avoid the war if at all possible. He never shared this feeling with Frank. Wilma reluctantly admitted to Charlene that Dave's confession made him seem less attractive to her, even though she did not want him to go either. Charlene told Wilma that she envisioned Frank arriving tall and upright with an armful of flowers and gifts. When she met him at the base, he looked tired and a few years older than she remembered him.

A feeling of disappointment replaced the excitement she stored up over days of waiting for him. She daydreamed about the two of them together, and the agony of anticipation weakened her in ways she felt ashamed to share with Wilma. In her raptures, she imagined him strong and taking care of her, although a clear idea of what that meant never surfaced. He returned earlier than anticipated thanks to a shrapnel injury, and to her dismay, she found herself caring for him. When they lay in bed at night, she looked over at his face in the blue, reverberating dark and tried to make out the details of his features and match them to what she remembered.

Sometimes a frightening, even ghoulish expression formed on his face and she froze in place, held her breath, and wondered if some ghost had followed him here, or if the ghost was he. When they turned out the lights, she closed her eyes tight most of the time and tried to fall asleep before seeing anything in the room. She feared sometimes that if she looked, the demons that surrounded them would come alive before her. Part of her hoped that he wouldn't reach out for her intimately, at least until she got used to this new him. When he eventually placed that first longing hand on her stomach and moved downward, she felt surprised by the warmth and softness of his touch. A rush of guilt and desire swarmed in her chest when she thought this broken version of Frank could bring her sexual pleasure.

Emotionally he seemed like a stranger to her, but to her surprise, she craved him physically due to his new mysterious, yet gentle demeanor. Unlike other combat veterans she heard about, he never raised his voice at her or threatened her physically. The air of an experienced soldier offered enough mystique to satisfy those wondering if he were capable of violence. If anything, he slunk around the halls looking wispy and defeated for an extended period of time. The family suggested that Frank go through a traditional healing ritual, but he declined, promising that he would eventually get to it when he had time.

Many young, native men came home and underwent healing or cleansing ceremonies to purge the contamination of death and war. Recalling their experiences with their family members only served to solidify the inherent evils of war, and that large-scale human conflicts should be avoided at all cost. The support and understanding from

families combined with the spiritual situating of war experiences eased their transitions into civilian life. Being that Frank's father also served in a major war and out of patriotic sentiment, avoided ritual honoring and cleansing, Frank decided he too would suspend what seemed to be at the time, a silly old tradition. Instead, he withdrew and when the memories overcame him, he sat on the porch smoking cigarettes and stared at the street.⁷⁰

Frank smoked filterless Marlboro cigarettes when he and Charlene first met, and all throughout the war, and struggled through a brief bout of drinking when he first returned. Most of the time, especially in the early years of their relationship, Charlene didn't mind Frank's smoking and they would park, share cigarettes, and listen to the radio in the evenings. It was not until Frank passed out in the garage, supposedly working on a project, that Charlene threatened him with divorce if he didn't quit drinking and smoking. Frank stopped all heavy drinking thereafter, and years later his smoking habit, right about the time the doctor connected his difficulty breathing and insurmountable fatigue with the diagnosis of COPD.

The literature Charlene read about the disease showed an inflamed and swollen heart struggling to function. A cartoonish, hollow tube cut in a cross section, so the viewer could see, illustrated the hardening process occurring in the diseased arteries. The ex-ray lungs in the photo were filled with a soft fuzz, and when Charlene asked what the vague line was, the doctor said, "fluid." Charlene deduced the meaning and looked at Frank in his hospital gown and tube socks. His face relaxed, looking sorry, yet unknowing. Frank's diagnosis immediately transformed a solid marriage between two strong people, into an impenetrable bond between two people who understood

impermanency in the truest sense of the word. The doctor sent Frank home with a tank of supplemental oxygen, and a bundle of respiratory inhalers and medications. When Charlene contacted the Veterans Benefits hotline, a harried woman placed her on hold for over twenty minutes. Like many veterans newly introduced to civilian life, recovering the benefits of war proved to be no easy task.

If young, native men were not fully misunderstood during combat and wartime assignments, the post-war treatment of native veterans cemented the sense of alienation and disregard felt by many young men who served. Scanty data on veterans from tribal communities made tracking soldiers difficult if not impossible, and when vets did seek care, they encountered a maze of disconnected health agencies, and an administration too large, and therefore too apathetic for its own good. Many native veterans lost out on all their benefits altogether, and the promises that made enlistment more palatable, proved illusory at best.⁷¹ What remained the longest, were the soldiers convictions and promises of courage, and the after effects that they and their families alone absorbed and transformed into good. Charlene fought for months to get Frank's treatments covered, but endless and time-consuming phone calls and masses of confusing paperwork convinced her that the VA would rather not help with the expenses. The poor and irregular care Frank received only accelerated his condition, and his reluctant dependence on Charlene.

With the help of a walker he called his "horse," Frank walked tracks in the carpet from TV to fridge, TV to bathroom, TV to bedroom. A plastic trashcan sat permanently next to the chair and received his endless pop can and juice box contributions. Frank occasionally cracked a beer, but complained that it gave him heartburn, and opted for

strawberry or grape Shasta instead. Upstairs, Frank's children, Lolita and Ernie, thumped the ceiling and Frank repeatedly complained that they "sounded like a herd of elephants." He rarely went to the children's rooms to remind them to be quiet, or to talk to them much at all.

Lolita

"...I generate the Mind of Enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings..."

The banging on the walls, and shoes dragging against the carpet she imagined to be orange, although it wasn't, intruded her thoughts.

You must keep your mind still, especially in chaos. It's the true test of a still mind.

"...For as long as space endures, and for as long as living beings remain..."

One muffled voice blasted commands to what she saw in her mind as two others wearing denim coats. A tall, lanky boy's stringy hair hung in his eyes, and his cheeks were pocked with acne. He looked ashamed. She imagined hanging from her toes from the ceiling, and staying of the same mind.

Lolita's thighs burned a little, and her left knee ached. She breathed the pain in, and acknowledged the pain of all others. At once, the distractions pushed the membrane of her tolerance with a force, and for a moment, the hurt dug into her ruthlessly with its eternal, omnipotent hands. Her womb burned in its emptiness, and she imagined that barrels of guns brushed near her temples. Her exhalation reached through walls, across the acres of prairie, and like a blanket around the aching backs of those experiencing the agony of intimidation.

Sadhus of the Satya yuga stood in place for thousands of years and looked over their own shoulders, and could not twist their heads back into place.

The pain in her knee grew deeper, and more arthritic. Although the smoke of the incense smelled sweet and earthy, it made her asthmatic lungs tighten. She mentally resisted the constriction, and imagined the soft tissues relaxing and opening.

“Until then may I too abide, to dispel the...”⁷²

“God!” she cried. The irritation and tension lifted her like a spring out of her position and onto her feet, with the period between sitting to standing without time or intention. Lolita stood bewildered and thought herself to be in a new location, but knew not why or how she came to be there.

Every time Ernie’s troop of dark-jacketed friends came tromping in with the smell of winter and cigarettes on them, she closed the door to her room and waited for the drumming of elbows and backs against the four walls. The vibrations resounded within her like she was standing out on the plains, feeling the distant rumbling of bison or elk. Where they had come from or where they were going seemed uncertain, and ultimately unknowable. After two consistent years of meth use, her own brother also felt similarly remote, formless, and threatening to her.

Lolita Last Star punched the pre-set station button with her right middle finger, and the flute sounds that made her heart feel like a storm lantern in the silent dark, turned into trip hop. She imagined living life in a city like New York where people wore fashionable hats, and always knew what was cutting edge on the music and film scene.

The homeless people that sat on the benches with corporate proverbs, and the couples that fed the ducks in the park, would make perfect photography subjects.

They appeared to her in black and white, or sepia, especially if they were an old couple, and she sensed that she knew them, at least until she physically manifested herself in front of them, and examined the expressions on their faces as they looked over her dark hair and thick body. Many of the wealthy white women she encountered in her visions were all very thin, and very clean and organized looking. In her visions they performed in romantic and wispy ways, wearing pea coats and scarves, but became hard-lipped and hyper-material. Their faces steadily tensed and lost their warmth, especially when they were trying to act present and interested in someone else. She wanted to walk across the hall and protest the disaster that stole all the peace out of her life, and out of the Last Star home as a whole.

Her mistake in that brief moment was in believing that her brother Ernest was still the same boy she grew up along side. At the age of 24, he was two years younger than her, and up until recently, her closest companion. She still thought of him as a young boy in Superman pajamas matted with polyester pills. In their high school years they spent countless hours driving the country roads, talking philosophy, films, and their plans. When Lolita reached senior year and Ernie his sophomore year, they took a trip across the valley that led them to Old Agency, or Country of the Dead, where hundreds of Blackfeet bodies were buried in the starvation winter of 1884.⁷³

“I don’t see the rise in the ground, like they said.” Ernie said.

“Me neither. Maybe the ground settled.”

“Maybe from the floods.” Ernie chose a large boulder to aim smaller rocks at and momentarily gave up the mystery. Lolita threw a few rocks at the center of the boulder and watched them bounce to either side and on the ground.

“Its weird to think we’re standing on a bunch of people.” Lolita said. “We probably shouldn’t.”

“Listen.” the two quieted down and looked at one another.

“Nothing.” Ernie replied.

“Hang on, shhh...” Lolita kneeled down to the earth and placed her palms on the cold ground and lowered her face. The moist smell of minerals and decomposing leaves filled her nostrils. Her hands moved across the burial site, and she tried to feel something coming up from depths beneath her.

“Imagine starving to death.” said Ernie.

“Wait.”

Small rocks dug into Lolita’s shins and knees, and broke her concentration on her people long past.

“Mmmn. I could think of worse ways to die.” Lolita spoke into the soil. “But it was really cold when they died too.”

“That would be bad. Cold and hungry.” he said. “That shouldn’t happen to anyone.”

A bird crowed off in the distance and Lolita postponed the luxurious thought of dinner.

“You think mom is home yet?” Ernie asked.

Lolita walked toward the small truck and heard the hammering of wood and nails and lonely wails from underground. She stopped for a moment to listen more carefully.

“Is that the bird, or...” she began to ask.

Over 100 years ago, Indian agents assigned to the Blackfeet reservation attempted to acquire more rations for the long winter, but were refused by their supervising offices back east. The Blackfeet historically provided for their own needs, but after placement on a shrinking reservation where access to the once abundant buffalo diminished, the native people faced a long Montana winter without proper food rations. Agent John Young, the man responsible for the well being of the tribe, foresaw that supplies would not come, and prepared an escape out of his post by claiming the Blackfeet people were now self-supporting. Although they prayed to Aisoyimstan, the Cold Maker not to persecute their people, over 600 Blackfeet died of starvation in a winter that often plunged to 40 or 50 degrees below zero.⁷⁴

At the Old Agency, or Country of the Dead, a slight rise marks the place where hundreds of bodies, some only partially buried, were placed by agency employees. Carpenters frantically built shoddy pine boxes to contain bodies, and the relentless banging of hammers shot through the frozen winter air.⁷⁵ Pink and grayish blue streaked the sky reminding Lolita of how little light remained. Charlene most likely prepared a lecture for the occasion, if she beat them home from school.

Ernie and Lolita leaned against the truck momentarily and then opened the doors of the truck. Ernie slid the heat gauge all the way to the right, shivered, and grinned at

Lolita. Although only two years separated them, Lolita looked at him as if he were a small boy. In his hooded sweatshirt, striped blue and white polo, and close haircut, he reminded her of a cartoon from a children's show. She shook his shoulder playfully and he pretended not to notice, but he barely snuffed out a laugh anyways.

“How do you think it happened?” he asked.

“What, the starvation winter?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, apparently the buffalo were almost gone and the agency didn't have enough food rations, so the people starved to death. They dumped them into mass graves, barely covering them.” she said.

“Yeegh. How could they let that happen?” he asked.

“Good question.” she said.

“Wait, who is they?”

Teachers Leave Them Kids Alone

Ernest was a model student most of his young life, and in the 4th grade, received an award for an essay he wrote on the subject of courage, which he submitted to the JFK Library Foundation. The committee revoked the award when they looked into the validity of his claims about his father's service in the Vietnam War. He proudly proclaimed that Frank predicted an attack by the VC in the middle of the night using his native intuition, and saved a whole platoon of men. In the attack, Frank apparently sustained a shrapnel

wound to his head, and came home to a cheering crowd. His essay eloquently went on to explain how his father was a modern warrior, part of a long line of warriors.

Charlene got the phone call a week before Ernie was to travel to Boston to accept his award. Throughout the conversation, she said little and twirled the yellow phone cord around her arm. She calmly nodded and stared at the ceiling in the way she tolerated a sales solicitation. The woman on the other end told Charlene that the committee called Frank on a conference call to get an interview with the hero of the story, and Frank corrected the details of the tale. Charlene noted the accusatory tone in the woman's voice that suggested that they as parents put Ernest up to the stunt for some reward. The same woman informed the school of Ernest's transgression and the principle called him into a small dark detention room with chipped, green cement walls. Ernie told his mother later that the small, old man sat next to him and quietly lectured him about lying, and how it was a sin for which he must repent.

To appease the dogmatic urges of the principle, Ernie sat on the medical cot with wax paper over the pillow, put his two small hands together, and asked the ceiling for forgiveness. For the remainder of the time, until Charlene came and recovered Ernest, the man sat uncomfortably close to Ernie in his musty gray tweed suit, and stared at him without uttering an intelligible word. Ernest told Charlene that he tried to look as sad and ashamed as possible so the man would stop looking at him, and whispering under his breath. Charlene later took up the issue with the school board, but they decided that as the principle, the little man had a say in the discipline of dishonest students. Charlene could

have accepted the temporary, although infuriating moment with the old bigot, but Ernie's reputation as a cheater followed him through subsequent classes.

His favorite teacher, a pretty, young woman from South Dakota, protected Ernie and fended off the other teachers. Charlene imagined that in a file somewhere, were the details of Ernie and his incident. When he passed onto the next classroom, she lost control of the situation, and eventually like many other idealistic teachers who come to teach on the rez, left for good. The instructors who remained for longer periods of time often rigidly professed to know what was best for reservation children, although this meant dealing with the kids by relying on the authoritarian residues of missionaries from years past.⁷⁶ Over time, Ernie began to lose interest in school and even ran away during fire drills, or other opportune moments when other kids and teachers collected together on the lawn outside. His friendship with Thomas, as a poor kid from a troubled home, provided the rare understanding and support he needed to survive the long days at school.

Charlene expected a weekly phone call from the school that detailed some complaint about how Ernie and Thomas tipped a garbage can over, toilet papered a bathroom, or shot spit wads at the chalkboard.⁷⁷ Charlene suspected that their defiance had more to do with authoritarian, anglicized teaching strategies, and inadequate resources in the school system, than their intellectual ability and willingness to succeed. Of the problem, the tip of the deepest, darkest, most far reaching root that split in tiny, sharp shoots throughout all the students, can be traced back to the centuries of genocide and assimilationist policies that even the best curricula fails to heal in the matter of years since its implementation.⁷⁸ As far as the story, Frank affirmed that parts of the tale rang

true, like that his father served in the Korean War and claimed his service was part of his duty as a warrior.

The rest Ernie patched together from various television shows he watched over the years and a few threads of truth, but “so goes the retelling of history,” Frank claimed nonchalantly. Ernie and Lolita walked by Charlene twice on the way to the refrigerator and she looked at them as she always had. They poured glasses of fruit punch, grabbed a few slices of bologna, and walked back upstairs to resume playing games on the computer. Charlene stocked the cupboard with the healthiest foods she could find from the local IGA. Unfortunately, produce and fresh, regional products were a luxury the family couldn’t always afford.

Ernie and Lolita liked to snack on lunchmeats, pickles, and packaged granola bars, which was healthier than the diets of a lot of the children at the school where she worked.^{79, 80} When her knuckle rapped the door twice quickly, Ernie answered the door and looked out at her with a knowing look. She pointed the rolled up essay at him and shook her head in disapproval.

“Why did you say that about your father?” she asked. Ernie took a bite of the bologna and grabbed the essay out of her hand.

“Because the truth sounded boring.” he replied with a shrug.

The boy stood looking at his mother, at her mercy, waiting for a response. Charlene asked Frank why he failed to mention the conference call from the committee. He told her he thought Ernie’s appraisal of him made him proud, and mostly, made him laugh. “If everyone thought that way about me and my friends, things might be

different,” he said in response. Ernie crawled into Frank’s lap blinking tears away, and apologized for lying. He patted the boy’s small back with his big, work-hardened hand, and his attention wandered back to the television program. Ernie searched his face for a sign of forgiveness, or for the unarticulated love a father gives to his child through a warm wink or smile. Children innocently and naively look into the face of their parents, believing that the only existing factors are the two individuals locked in a moment together, and that the worthiness of the child determines the response.

When a friendly glance fails to surface, the sweet creature slinks away carrying generations of undelivered love. Every cell in the body receives the message intended for another and what it transmogrifies into, only time will tell. Charlene looked at his open, unknowing face, and worried about a creature so achingly naïve and mortal in a world like this. At his age, he resembled Frank before he left for Vietnam.

His skin glowed with good health and his eyes searched the world, clear and vulnerable. He lacked that deathless look of a human that has lived through war of some sort, domestic or foreign. The two are separate, but only the ones committed to that endlessness know of their immortality, and exactly how far removed they are from the rest of humanity.

When Frank told Charlene about his plans to go to Vietnam, they had just made love in his old red and white Ford truck. He parked next to Two Medicine Creek, not knowing of its tragic future, and rubbed the back of Charlene’s neck. She became nervous, thinking that Frank planned on proposing marriage to her. Her heart felt like a revved engine going hard, and Frank controlled the gas. Her eyes grew a little blurry, and

she put forth a great effort in focusing on his face. Frank tucked his lips inward like a person who vibrates an “m” sound when they think. He fidgeted with the knob on the dashboard and clicked it firmly into place.

She knew at that moment that he planned on revealing information of another sort, and the spinning inside turned into a deep black ache. She thought she knew what he would say. He would tell her that he had met another girl, and he was real sorry and all that. Anger passed through her, head to feet, when she remembered that they had just been intimate.

“What do you have to tell me?” she asked.

“Just say it.” she urged.

“I gotta go. For a little while. Ill be back.” he promised.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

At this point in their conversation, anger trumped all her other emotions, and the infinite undertow of grief and sadness pulled her away from the moment. She feared she would lose control and shatter one of his windows with her fist. When she looked at his helpless face, she began to cry in her own feelings of powerlessness.

“Where are you going?” she asked again.

“Me and Ken Dodd signed up to go.” he offered.

“Where?” she insisted. She became more impatient and frantic and turned her knees towards him, digging one into his thigh. Her hand gripped the hot steering wheel, and she peered intensely into his eyes for answers, and to discern his sincerity.

“To the war, overseas.”

As far removed as the reservation was from the rest of the world, how isolated and invisible, didn't matter to the war that preoccupied the world that August of 1963. Vietnam became an epicenter of dark hungry energy, and contaminated the entire human universe as it grinded away. Although she understood how his father and many other men felt, Charlene struggled to comprehend why Frank wanted to go there to that stinking mass of black death. Neither could his mother, or any of the other women who loved him. Contrary to the reserved advice of the women, his father told him he possessed a warrior spirit, and if he felt the desire to fight for his country, he should do it.⁸¹ Charlene knew that Frank longed to win his father's affection, and the pride Frank saw on his father's face when he talked about military service was enough to convince him to go.

Frank and Ken daydreamed aloud about wearing combat uniforms and firing big guns with names and numbers Charlene never heard of. The recruiter that talked to Ken Dodd claimed that Vietnam was basically a tropical paradise, and they could hang out on the beaches in their time off duty. Frank told Charlene that he could see himself coming home to her still wearing his uniform. They could buy a house. She stared at his face frozen in surprise, and wondered how he could possibly see this as a good decision—one that she would feel happy about. A horrible dread swelled in her heart with the knowledge that he most likely misjudged the reality of the Vietnam War. Charlene looked into Ernest's face, and saw the same look she had seen on Frank's face so long ago. For a moment, she thought it was Frank she was looking at, and not her own son. Ernest finished eating his piece of bologna, and was now staring at his feet.

Charlene remembered some of the moments she and Frank went through. She thought of Ken Dodd's terrible death. She thought about the nights Frank woke confused and frightened. She lay next to him, whoever he was, at night for many years, especially when he first came back, in states of anxiety, hoping the little movements and noises she made wouldn't wake him. The truth was certainly not boring, it was just not the truth people wanted to hear, especially some damn JFK committee.

She wondered what the hell those people knew about courage anyways. Judging some reservation kid's work, like they're always doing, judging. To their credit, one of the judges called Charlene a few days later and told her he thought Ernest was "one heck of a writer," and should "keep up with it." She didn't have to tell him to. He spent plenty of time in his room drawing pictures and coming up with stories, usually silly and fun, but creative and well crafted for his age.

When Ernest was 8 years old, he wrote a story in school that his teacher deemed inappropriate. Mrs. Shaffner, his second grade teacher, called Charlene and tried in her prudish way to describe his attempt at a story. Charlene picked up the story that Mrs. Shaffner placed in a manila envelope, and left it on the passenger seat until later in the afternoon. She felt certain that the teacher was overreacting, because she knew of the teacher's squeamish tendencies, and mostly, she knew the goodness of her son.

She took the envelope upstairs and sat in Ernest's room. He was still playing outside with his friend Thomas, so she had the quiet room to herself. She examined his toys, all the trucks with cute plastic wheels, and the smiling stuffed animals. She loved even his remnants and all the joys children can offer to a woman so tired at such a young

age. She opened the envelope and began reading the messy child's handwriting. He had drawn a woman wearing what looked like pantyhose, and had made a "v" in between her legs.

The v had an additional fork and the one-dimensional cleft supposedly represented details of the female sex. She knew he had seen her dressing before work, and must have remembered with a child's curiosity. He had also drawn a sun and a one-dimensional skyline, like all kids are taught to. He had written the word "poop" going diagonally up towards the sun in cornflower blue crayon about a dozen times. With her finger, she tried to scratch some of the wax off the lettering, but the blue stain remained dyed into the paper.

Mrs. Schaffner brought the drawing to the principle and instigated an investigation. A frumpy woman with scuffed, brown old lady shoes in her thirties met Charlene at work, and asked her a long list of questions in front of Mrs. Schaffner and the dried out, old hairless principle. Both of the asexual old crows looked more uncomfortable than anyone else in the room. Apparently any hints of sexuality, normal as they may be, brought up discomfoting truths neither wished to confront. After observing Ernie at school for a period of time, the Child and Family Services worker determined the results inconclusive, and moved onto another pointless assignment. Charlene protected Ernie from this unnecessary shame by not mentioning the conversations that took place.⁸²

The door leading from the garage to the kitchen opened and hit the counter. She began to walk downstairs and saw Ernest stomping through the kitchen with his bright blue backpack, pumping an action figure toy in the air. His little friend Thomas trailed

along behind him and watched the toy “fly” through the air. The two bantered back and forth about what the hero was doing. They created and sustained some plot, adding to it occasionally, as kids will do. Thomas made Charlene decidedly nervous, but knowing the details of his home life allowed her to feel sympathy for him that she reserved for only a few.

Charlene noticed that Thomas attempted to control the plot of the action figures story, and Ernie resisted a little, but eventually gave into the Thomas version. Many weekends, Thomas stayed the night with the Last Star family because his home was unfit. The entire neighborhood knew about Thomas’ mother’s drinking problem, yet avoided interfering, mostly because of Thomas’s father’s anger problem. When you dealt with one member of the Lee family, you usually dealt with all the others. Charlene locked the boy’s father out of the house when he tried to recover Thomas after a particularly bad fight with his wife. During this particular episode of domestic unrest, Charlene found Ernie and Thomas in the backyard gathered around a campfire.

The boys stacked a collection of blankets, clothing, and food around them and huddled next to the struggling flame. Frank wanted to give the boys a whipping, but something told Charlene that something serious must have incited them to go into survival mode. She walked out the sliding glass door and approached the sad faced boys holding each other’s hands. Thomas drew circles in the ground, and stared at the stick as if the knotty branch animated itself.

“Boys, you know you are not supposed to start fires without an adult.” she said.

The quiet continued for a moment and Thomas threw his stick in the fire while Ernie looked down at his sandaled feet, and a few small tears fell in front of him. The dry dirt greedily soaked up the apology like all the other sorrows that fall to the ground. It wasn't the first time a boy cried and the whole earth offered only a soundless shrug.

"What is going on?" she asked.

"My mom and dad are fighting again." Thomas replied.

"Well, people fight sometimes. Its what adults do." she said. Charlene thought momentarily about her response and wondered if fighting was all adults were capable of after a certain point in life. She figured since it was the Lee's fighting, that it was most likely extraordinary in nature.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Mom, they're fighting real loud. I think dad should go over there." Ernie said.

"Better not." Thomas said. "Its better to wait."

The thought of appeasing the wishes of a stupid, cowardly madman enraged Charlene and she rushed to the back of the house, and untangled the hose from the metal rack. After cranking the dial hard with her left hand, the green snake jolted and sputtered a spray of cold water. The boys stood from their huddled position and watched curiously while she dragged the coil towards them. They moved aside when she sprayed the flames and coals, and they hissed all their heat out into the atmosphere.

"Come inside now, ok? she said. "Frank, please make them something to eat."

The boys followed the woman inside without a word and watched to see what she would do next. Charlene grabbed a pair of yellow rubber boots and stomped them on her

feet, resolved to restore order. Frank stood by and also waited to see what she planned to do. While she stormed off, he then began lecturing the boys about starting fires. He asked them where they got the matches, and they said that matches were basically everywhere, but they found these next to the barbeque grill.

Thomas, Ernie, and Frank stood in between open curtains behind the window as Charlene marched across the road towards the Lee's home. The wind caught her hair and tossed streaming strands about that fell back down against her shoulders. Frank "humpfted" proudly and his eyes gleamed with delight in witnessing his courageous and beautiful wife. She walked closer to the small white house and noticed that one of the family members smashed the blinds against the window. Dirt and grime coated the curtains and metal slats, making the residence appear more like a dog kennel than a home. Charlene couldn't tell if one of their many pets damaged the property, or if the people living inside created these wretched conditions.

Their dented green Ford minivan sat in the driveway close enough to the garage door to make the wedged vehicle inoperable. The driver seat pressed against the steering wheel and the seatbelt hung from out of the closed door. Charlene scanned the scene and examined their yellow, weed filled lawn, and the junk scattered everywhere. Suddenly a person's back slammed against one of the already crushed blinds, and slid downwards to the floor. "Oh, heck no." Charlene said, and began walking back as quickly as she came. When she entered their house, the boys stood with their hands on their hips.

"Everything alright? What's going on?" Frank asked.

"Call the cops. I can't do nothing here with this situation." said Charlene.

Thomas cried for her not to call the police, but Charlene picked up the phone and called anyways. A loud pounding rattled the front door and Thomas's father yelled through the hollow wood that he wanted his son. His big fists banged louder and just as the doorknob turned, Charlene ran and dead bolted the door locked. He jiggled and twisted the knob so hard that the screws swelled in the wood, and Charlene thought it would break. Until the police came to apprehend him, he yelled, pounded, and cranked on the doorknob. Ernie told Charlene that Thomas's father constantly threatened to take him away.

Ernie said that Thomas thought that any day his father would pack him up and disappear, and he would never see his mother or Ernie again. His father's constant threats put Thomas on edge, and he often woke in the night during sleepovers and wandered throughout the house. His late night adventures woke her from sleep, and she would find him in the living room looking out the window, typically eating something he helped himself to.

Once she found him chewing mindlessly on a fistful of red licorice, and he startled so bad that Charlene had to grab him and hold him until he calmed down. She would tuck him back in bed and wait beside him until he fell back asleep to regain the calm look of a happy child. The tortured parts of him left him long enough, for him to find some peace. Ernie usually slept through these episodes as if nothing in the world could come and disturb him in his bed. Charlene read the paper the next morning, and the local police blotter reported that a man on their street went to jail for *savagely beating his wife*.

Thomas stayed with the Last Star family for another week and eventually returned home when Department of Public Health caseworkers determined he was better off at home than in foster care. Even though Charlene warned Ernie about staying friends with Thomas, he continued to care for his friend. Charlene knew that the influence Thomas brought into Ernie's life explained his trouble in school and some of his colorful new language, but she wanted Ernie to treat others with compassion, and accepted the additional trouble as a manageable cost of raising a kind son.

Our House is a Very, Very, Very Fine House

Now 24, Ernie and the other boys that created the disturbance upstairs began their inevitable and predictable exit from the home after the one to two hour period of time passed. Two boys continued to talk to one another in the room, and the Last Star family intentionally avoided recognizing the presence of the boys leaving, although a couple attempted to smile or wave at Charlene and Frank. Charlene always felt uncomfortable around the kids that were *too* nice, as they typically had the most to hide. Charlene and Frank weren't sure if Ernest was one of the boys leaving, or one of the boys that stayed behind. The infrequent times Ernie did come home, he brought his friends, and entered and exited the home quickly. The times Charlene tried to slow him up and talk with him, he became angry and would not return for long periods of time.

there are flowers
and new grass
and a spring wind
rising
grief memorizes this grass⁸³

The mud flats were speechless under the starless sky. The hands began to emerge and pull their way out until just a glimmer of planetary light allowed glimpses of their heads. Their hair lay smashed against their scalps, and the sand streaked down their exposed rib cages. She saw mostly women with their breasts barely attached and their mouths opened. She imagined that place to be the container of all the silence in the world, and all its complicity.⁸⁴ No one came to mourn or dress the dead. No one spoke another word of their departure.

All the meaning of death's language was pounded out like the dust beat out of a kitchen rug. Better to find it somewhere on the wind, or landing in the hair of the oblivious. She screamed loudly at the faces she saw on TV, and began shaking them so hard and so long that their soul departed their body from exhaustion. Those silent ones would come out on their porches and smell a decaying sweetness in the wind, something like leaves or old lettuce and road kill. The evidence would enter their noses with the sage and the approaching season, and retell the story they had so conveniently forgotten. They will say,

"I think there is a dead coyote down the road" or "Someone has hit a deer," and they will go back to what they were doing. They will dip their hands back down into their bowls full of dough, or marinating meat, and preheat their ovens. They will watch the news, disconnected, thinking that 'out there' has nothing to do with 'in here.' Meanwhile,

the dead are trying to crawl up the steps of her alter, but she cannot get down off her throne to meet them. Even the horrors of death could not shake her out of her visions of eternity. She wants to believe they are the 'Have not yet's'⁸⁵ as in they have not yet realized, or made meaning out of the stories they have heard for so long. She would die to believe it.

The dead end up frozen in the night, only half out of their graves. The sand and clay have dried on their skin, and their heads hang in defeat. It is too late, and no amount of shouting will change that. Language, time, and distance, have failed them. The birds are separated by two cages, seen as two entirely different species, with entirely different fates. Their meanings and origins are all confused, scattered like different types of rice on the deep floor of a canyon.

Lolita woke with her head at the foot of her bed. During her nap, she pushed a small plate with strawberry jelly and crackers onto the floor while she slept, and the brittle saucer shattered. She woke from another ancient fish dream, where she stood on some shore and watched the leviathan-like bodies slide against one another. The dark water concealed most of the details, but occasionally a large set of eyes emerged to the surface with a look of wanting on its densely structured, pre-historic face. This new dream revealed this desert floor where the fish no longer swim, and the memories struggle to emerge from the soil. They will become flowers.

When Lolita regained full consciousness, the images and the story no longer made sense when they so clearly conveyed a message previously. A cool and lonely feeling glided off her skin, making her feel clean inside and clearheaded. She looked down at the

red jelly and glass mixed, and imagined ways to reconstruct the shards for a while, thinking that everything looks gruesome when you are waiting helplessly for someone to die.

Well-intended but Overwhelmingly Bungled: ‘Efforts’
of Government and Agencies

“From the very beginning offices in the remote West were regarded as political plums...What better pasturage for spavined old war horses and disgruntled political hacks than the virgin meadows of territorial government?”⁸⁶

Seventeen miles away, Heather Contrares of the Department of Public Health turned onto highway 44 to the Blackfeet Reservation exit. This visit to the Last Star’s residence was her third since she finished her internship. Her department received an anonymous report that drug activity was taking place at the residence, and children were possibly in danger. Her red Toyota four runner glided like a low-flying aircraft through the turns of the highway, and over the back roads of the sparsely populated rangelands. Occasionally, she passed lonely ranches and farmhouses surrounded by pastures spotted with rangy horses compulsively clipping at the ground.

Once she arrived in the town of Browning, the long curve of the main street through town guided her past strategically placed gas stations, curio shops, and art and artifact museums. Off the beaten path, a few blocks out of view of the main strip where thousands of tourists made their way towards Glacier National Park, abandoned fireworks stands, pink and blue trailer homes, and HUD developments comprised the remainder of

the town. A resident of one dwelling knitted up a long string of used tires into a helix shaped work of art that arched over the fence and across half of the lawn. Assemblies of weathered lawn ornaments stood watch at another residence against a backdrop of amateur graffiti declaiming the worthiness of a local politician. Packs of feral dogs roamed the streets and dug through discarded fast food containers and trash bags. On her last trip, she extended her hand out the window to pet a stray that nosed up against her window.

The Border collie mix sniffed momentarily then decided to snarl, and she snatched her hand away just before the dog snapped its teeth, and slinked away on a broken foot. Residents of the town eyed her with a wariness that revealed their collective, long-standing fatigue for visitors and tourists. In her few visits, she noticed people of all varieties in SUV's and freshly detailed cars examining maps and pointing at the local natives and their homes. The local museum offered more of the kind of Indians they wanted to see, so they dropped in where a curator or guide explained the noble history of the Plains Indians.⁸⁷

Surrounding towns disowned the region and claimed that the reservation operated as a true reserve for the remaining native people. When Heather asked locals in Conrad or Cutbank for directions to a place on the reservation, a gas station attendant eyed her and said "We dunt go over thir. They aint friendly when you do go." As an auxiliary feature to the park, the reservation acted as a place for nostalgic travelers to catch a glimpse of what they believed to be "the last of the Mohicans." The young people she saw walking together on the streets looked "normal" by all accounts, but reports she studied revealed a

notable alcohol and methamphetamine problem within the young people of the area.⁸⁸

Although, despite the belief that meth affected native kids at a disproportionate rate, the scourge of meth reached all throughout the state, and Montana Meth Project signs became as significant in the once romanticized landscape as cattle ranches and blue ribbon trout streams. Certain groups of people simply had the luxury of carting their kids off to expensive treatment centers, and away from the public eye. As a response to methamphetamine use in the native population, the National Congress of American Indians launched a meth awareness and resources program that designed projects around tribal knowledge and realities.

For those on the frontlines, the meth cases presented unique challenges for those determined to eradicate the substance's use considering the budget for sending people to treatment had been cut drastically under the new administration.⁸⁹ To her knowledge, treatment centers offered the only little bit of hope since they isolated the individual from their environment. Although Heather grew up in the suburbs of Great Falls and most likely experienced a more manageable conception of struggle, she proclaimed it her duty to help the natives of her area.

Heather pulled up to the Last Star home, and looked to see if the families' white Dodge Aries was in the drive. Frank's red and white truck sat stalled out with the hood opened up in the gravel patch next to the driveway. She parked behind the car and scanned the date on the registration tag. Lolita heard the gravel turning under tires outside and separated the curtains to get a better look.

"Great." she muttered and dropped the curtains back into place.

Heather stepped out of her Toyota and grabbed her binder off the passenger seat before closing the door. She nervously searched her purse for a pen, and clipped it to the binder's face. Frank answered the door and went back to his chair before she had the chance to knock. When she walked in, Frank was trying to catch his breath. He looked up at her and gave a wave, and put his hand back down on the handle of his walker. Heather waved back at him and approached the kitchen area in search of Charlene. She walked past the wall of family photos, and paused at an 8 by 10 of the entire family holding on to one another on the carpeted prop. Lolita stood above Ernie and placed her small hand on his velour shoulder. A stray cowlick pointed off towards the viewers left, and his head tilted back from his shrugged shoulders and irrepressible mischief. He and Lolita both smiled with their in-between baby and adult teeth smiles.

“We didn't know you were coming,” shouted Charlene over the running water.

“Oh, sorry about that. I didn't actually know I was either. I am on my way out of town, and you guys were on the way.” said Heather.

“Ernie and Lolita are upstairs. Do you want something to drink?” Charlene asked.

“Uh, sure.”

Heather walked the remainder of the distance into the kitchen where Charlene stood washing a sink full of dishes. She looked up from the hot suds at Heather and nodded. She dried her hands on a towel that hung from the refrigerator and opened the door and grabbed a carton of orange juice.

“Can you reach up there and grab a glass?” Charlene asked.

“Sure.”

A plastic cup with a school insignia caught Heather's attention, and she pushed off her tippy toes and grabbed it with her fingertips. Charlene snatched it out of her hand and poured her a glass of juice.

“Thanks.”

Charlene waited with a hand on her hip as Heather took her first gulp. The two women eyed each other, waiting for the other to speak. Charlene wiped the remainder of the soapy water on her jeans, and brushed her shoulder length black hair away from her face. At this time in the evening, Charlene typically looked relaxed and had her shirt untucked, or had on a baggy sweatshirt of some sort. Tonight she wore a white t-shirt and a blue polar fleece vest, the same ones that she wore to school that day for parent-teacher conferences. Standing next to Charlene, Heather looked out of place.

Over the years, Charlene's body took on all the adaptations of age. Even though she was quite thin as a young woman, her hips and the rest of her had filled out from childbirth and a slower paced life. The shape of her face softened a bit, and lines gathered gently around her eyes that had become quite serious. Her bodily movements were generally relaxed, but her facial expressions revealed a much more grave countenance. In comparison, Heather looked more restless, lean, and awkwardly eager. Although she nodded her head in agreement during conversations and conveyed that she was listening very carefully, Charlene wondered if she really heard what she said. The business like attire Heather wore had the reverse effect of making her look credible. Between the poor quality blazer and artificially lightened hair, Charlene lost all hope that this girl had access to the resources the family needed.

“What do you think of the rez?” asked Charlene

“You know, I’ve seen it a couple times, so it’s not entirely new. I don’t exactly like being out here at night.” replied Heather.

“Neither do a lot of the people who actually live here. I would like to think that as soon as this place looks like the burbs, where you come from, it’ll be a little safer.” said Charlene.

“That’s not really true either. Not that I lived in the burbs, but that the burbs are any better. I think human behavior stays the same across the board, regardless.”

“I don’t know if I agree with that.” Charlene answered.

“Ever been around the Mormon community?” Heather asked.

“You a former Mormon? I’ve never had a problem. My mother lives in a community with a lot of Mormons, and if anything, they were weary of us. I would even say welcoming.”

“I feel more comfortable around natives than I do around Mormons. Unless meth is involved.” said Heather.

“It doesn’t make sense to me. Meth doesn’t seem like a native thing to do. So, do you know anything more about Ernie?” Heather asked.

“You’re right. Its not a native thing to do, but like a lot of other things was brought into the community from the outside.” said Charlene. “Ernie won’t talk to me or Frank. He talks to Lolita sometimes. Did you find out anything more about the treatment programs?” Charlene asked.

“I sent out a few emails, but am waiting to hear back. But as soon as I hear...” said Heather.

“Like we can wait any longer. I wonder if he would consider the treatment center in town?” asked Charlene. “I don’t want to send him away.”

“Do you mind if I talk to Lolita?” Heather asked.

“If she’s awake, then go ahead.” said Charlene.

Heather looked at Charlene and her disappointed expression signaled that she was done talking.

“You look lost in words,” Heather said.

“You mean lost *for* words,” Charlene replied.

Heather smiled, face flushed, and made her way upstairs past the closed, yet energized door of Ernie, and gently pushed Lolita’s door open. To Heather, his door represented a thin barrier between what was safe, and what was dangerous for the inhabitants of the home. Two inches of wood stalled what terrible presence waited inside from coming out to infect everyone else. Of course, such preventions only serve as convenient illusions, and only temporarily fend off the inevitable truth from showing its merciless face. Before Heather could make it through the door, Lolita managed to look busy typing away on her PC. She took her time and finished the sentence she constructed, and turned around to see Heather standing awkwardly in the doorframe.

To Lolita, she looked like a picture on one of the pamphlets she always littered the place up with. Lolita wondered why it is that when white people want to tackle a

problem, they create a bunch of pamphlets, drop them en masse, and then run back to the safety of their worlds. The advice in the handouts offered nothing natives haven't thought of before, so she just took it as a gesture of apology or guilt relief.

“Hey there, how's it going?” Heather cooed. Lolita noticed that she had on her clinical voice, and was attempting to sound empathetic.

“How's it going for you?” Lolita asked in return.

Heather set her stuff down on Lolita's dresser, and Lolita eyed it deliberately to send a message back. Lolita knew the upper hand was hers, and Heather's nervousness and lack of experience made her an easy target for scrutiny. Lolita dealt with her share of teachers, caseworkers, and clergy to know which ones you could mess with, and which ones would mess with you.

“How far you drive to get here?” Lolita asked.

“From Great Falls. Seems like a long way but...” Heather began to explain.

“That's a long drive. Seems like a waste.” Lolita interrupted.

Lolita turned back to her computer screen before Heather had an opportunity to reply. Heather's eyes widened excitedly at the possibility that Lolita actually entertained the idea of talking to her, as if she felt real progress from the last visit. Lolita recognized her excitement and thought this kind of display is exactly what makes this kind of person transparent. For Lolita, it was the hard-faced people who got what they wanted, because they didn't see their subject as a person, but as a means to an end or some kind of a clinical object. The relationships they built were for a report, or a win for the church, or some other kind of conquest. Those types typically didn't achieve their goals by

acquiring full consent from the person on the other end of their project. For Lolita, these types were the most fun.⁹⁰ They don't *really* see you, she thought, and mentally waved a hand in front of Heather's face. She tried not to snicker when her blank eyes struggled for an explanation that was most likely, not that difficult.

"Nah, the government pays for the drive and I get to see a friend who works over on the Flathead. It all works out." said Heather.

"So its convenient for you to come out this way?" asked Lolita. "As long as its convenient..." whispered Lolita.

"Huh?" asked Heather.

"Nothing." replied Lolita.

Heather fidgeted after she mentioned the 'friend' who worked on the Flathead National Forest, and her eyes snuck glances of the room surrounding Lolita. She seemed to temporarily forget that Lolita sat in a chair only a few feet from her, and stole glances of the titles of her books. Two flags hung side by side in Lolita's room above the bed, one light blue with the shape of the Blackfeet reservation in the middle of thirty white and black feathers. Protected by a traditional headdress were the words *Blackfeet Nation—Pikuni* that served to resolutely claim the reservation lands as Indian Country, for them alone. The flag symbolized the collective native desire for the U.S. government to interact with reservations and tribes as independent nations that share a relationship with them, and are not swallowed by them, concealed by them, or treated as endangered species reserves for a dying population.^{91, 92} Sharply in contrast with the bluebird sky flag, hung a red, green and white flag of approximately the same size.

“Italy?” asked Heather.

“Yep. I’ve been there a bunch of times. Love it.” said Lolita.

“Wow. Awesome. When did you go?” asked Heather.

“Go every year. It’s a tradition. A *native* tradition.” said Lolita.

“Really? I never heard...” said Heather.

“So, what of this friend?” asked Lolita.

Heather pushed at a sticky wad stuck in the loops of the carpet with her toe, briefly met eyes with Lolita, and looked away. She found it difficult to explain the nature of the friendship, and why she would stay overnight there, even though she had no obligation to explain her moral decisions. Lolita sensed that this friend was some sort of boyfriend, or maybe girlfriend. She clued in on Heather’s tone and body language when she talked, and figured the story was an interesting one.

“Well, anyways. What do you need?” asked Lolita.

The trained list of questions clearly nagged Heather, and she flipped through a few paper clipped pages in a folder. She avoided the questions partly because they only made the situation unnecessarily tense, and often embarrassed the healthy members of the family who cherished their privacy. Occasionally, she spoke with her coworkers about how appropriate it would be to tell her clients about the sorts of events that took place in white neighborhoods. She wanted to tell them all that in many ways, their condition was just as bad if not worse, just in a different way. She felt sure that this would come across as patronizing, or as an insincere attempt to level the playing field. Lolita tried not to enjoy her squirming under the glass too much, and decided against telling her that the

Pikuni flag shared a space with the flag of Palestine, the situation that so clearly resembled the plight of the Native Americans.^{93, 94}

“Can we talk about Ernest, well, and the rest of you?” Heather asked.

“Sure.” replied Lolita.

In a way, having someone to talk to about the problem offered a sense of relief, and loosened the knot in Lolita’s throat and chest she ignored for so long, but was now acutely aware of the subordinated worry and grief. To Lolita, Ernest felt lost to her, and the friends Lolita knew to chronically use meth never came back from those secret places the same. They often froze in whatever time period they began using the substance. When kids she went to school with grew older, they changed both in character and appearance. Some stayed and worked for local organizations, and eventually had families. Some moved away and went to colleges around the country, and some attended tribal college on the reservation.

False assumptions still abounded as to what constitutes a “real” Indian; the only real and therefore credible Indians either lived on reservations and were slumping towards extinction, scraped by in ghettos, or fancy danced in powwows. Even those who claim to be enlightened to the evolution and eventual diaspora of Native Americans, internalized beliefs about the real and the false when it came to tribal identity. Which threatened the integrity of native life more, introduced substances like meth, or faulty assumptions that immobilized an evolving population, was hard to discern.⁹⁵

The ones who experimented with meth continued to dress and talk the same way, and then inevitably deteriorated until they were a haggard version of their younger selves.

In run down vehicles, they zipped around town and cruised the streets late at night. With stringy hair, decaying teeth, and hollow eyes, they reminded Lolita of a hokey horror movie she and Ernie watched, where a scary troll slunk in during the night, sucked the unsuspecting sleeper's soul away, and left them a colorless shell of their former self. She shuddered to think of it. The fact that time passed completely evaded them. They couldn't figure out why people didn't "want to party," while they twitched and listened to their music until their ears bled. She still held onto some hope that it wasn't too late for Ernie. The lack of active response on her fathers' part surprised her, and she didn't know what to make of the situation.

From her perspective, he ignored the problem as if there simply wasn't one. Maybe he hoped it was a phase, or maybe he simply couldn't acknowledge the extent of Ernie's problem. Lolita felt compelled to tell him that the phases kids went through today were far more tumultuous than phases of the past, and shouldn't be passively "waited out." Methamphetamines changed growing up as everyone knew it, and the fact that the substance could be cheaply manufactured added to both the availability and affordability. Anyone with money could get his or her hands on meth. Tribal elders spoke of the advent of meth as a deep freeze that captured all in its midst. To them, a new and terrifying winter had arrived.⁹⁶ In addition to many other significant factors, who kids kept for friends often determined whether or not a kid tried meth.

Ernie entered the eighth grade with a few friends, Thomas still being one of them. Thomas's father eventually went away to jail after a particularly bad episode at the Lee home. The summer before the boys eighth grade year, the Lee family hosted a family

reunion at their home on the Fourth of July. They invited the Last Star Family when Thomas's father John, noticed Frank washing the car in the driveway. Frank gestured that the family might make it to the get together. Even though the Lee's social functions gave them a chance to get to know the neighboring reservation whites and those from border towns, they concluded that the events were a waste of their time.

Most of the people who attended showed up and talked shop or shit, typically community and work related. Charlene and Frank found their conversations relatively empty, and the drunker they became, the more lewd and pointless. The women that showed up typically ignored Charlene, or self-consciously shined on about some big truck or trailer their husband bought. When Charlene talked about education, family, and projects to improve the reservation and the state as a whole, they stared blankly at her, and the conversation stalled out into an awkward silence.⁹⁷ Ernie pleaded with Frank and Charlene to come to the gathering because he hoped that their presence would make the couple stop fighting. As a compromise, Charlene allowed Ernest to go, but warned him to be careful and to come home if John started to act strange again. Charlene and Frank decided to sit on the curb and watch the Lee family light off fireworks to make sure Ernie would be safe.

John invited over a surprisingly large group of his bar and work buddies to observe the festivities. Groups of fat men with farmer tans, sleeveless t-shirts and baseball caps thrown carelessly on their heads, gathered around a smoking barbeque. The music they played filled the yard and drifted out onto the street.

“Jesus, what is it with the Lynard Skynard?” Frank asked, and sang along to a line of “Give me three steps, gimme three steps mister, and you nevah see me no mo’.”⁹⁸ He laughed and looked at Charlene for her response, and she sighed and shook her head.

“I bet that’s what his wife is thinking.” he said. “Bad Company too. They like that, but I guess I like that band too.”

A drunk John yelled over to the couple, “Come on over here and help us drink this beer!” Charlene waved her hand at him.

A rowdy friend distracted John, and he quickly forgot about his budding conversation with Frank and Charlene. He reached into a large plastic bag and began assembling a bully of a firework. The fused together anomaly promised to titillate the crowd with the ability to be everything to everyone. With waxy, green fuses, empty beer cans, wires, sparklers with bright pink sticks, and all kinds of cardboard animals from bees to snakes, the mechanism resembled a gunpowder filled, atomic Frankenstein plant with rooty rhizomes dangling wildly.

“Ah shit,” Frank said, and grabbed Charlene so they could stand up and back away when ready.

“Watch this motherfuckers!” John yelled, and began climbing the fence with his creation.

He reached up to the overhanging roof and struggled his way onto the house.

“Wooooo hooooo!” he yelled.

“Maybe he’ll fall off and we’ll all have some peace and quiet.” Charlene muttered.

The crowd turned to observe the crazy man on the roof. They all took a few steps back and looked at one another for reassurance.

“John does this every year. He has the best fireworks in the neighborhood.” A thin, balding man said to a taller, fat man wearing roughout construction boots. A cigarette hung from the man’s noticeably chapped lip while he talked.

Charlene looked for Ernie and Thomas and spotted the two boys standing behind a tree.

“Ernie! Get over here.” Charlene yelled.

Ernie and Thomas ran across the street and stood by Charlene and Frank.

Charlene put her arms around both of the boys’ shoulders, and they plugged their ears when they saw John light the fuse. The crowd took another step back when the first crackler went off, and John threw the burning mess down into the yard. Luminescent green flared into electric orange, and lightning yellow showered off the bouncing object, and it rammed into the side of the house and raced through the flowerbeds, lighting each plant up like the burning bush as it passed. The crowd scattered and scuttled for safe places to stand while the buzzing ball whizzed and zipped around the yard. One notably drunk man ran up and kicked the now rapidly gunshot like banging mass away from the house to keep it from catching fire. Another man kicked it farther away from the house and out into the road. A little girl in a fluffy pink dress screamed and ran to her mother with a violent, ugly fit on her face and a guttural cry lodged in her throat.

The Last Star family and the nervous boys backed further away right when this fallen, dying star decided to launch into the air, 100-miles an hour past the tree tops and

telephone lines until a faint glow lingered in the dusk sky. The crowd laughed, cheered, and patted each other on the backs and shoulders. They checked each other jokingly for burns or missing parts, and resumed drinking their beers and eating their burgers. A few young women in tank tops and shorts that barely covered their flabby midsections showed up in the time it took John to rig his contraption together, and send it into the atmosphere. Darkness replaced the spot on the roof where John stood, and Charlene vaguely made out the outline of his body.

He propped his hand on his hip and pointed his toes outward while he looked down on the crowd of people. His chest expanded and he exhaled heavily. Charlene watched him crawl carefully back down onto the ground, surprised that after so much alcohol, he moved in such an agile way. When he appeared in the light of the porch, his face became hideous with agitation. Few noticed the man's foul mood until he yelled, "Why the fuck you kick it?" A couple of his buddies heckled and yelled smart-ass remarks, but for the most part he went unheard and the crowd mingled and shouted happily. Charlene expected that the man's evening would grow increasingly worse, and asked Ernie to come inside the house. He promised that he and Thomas would play away from the adults and stay out of Mr. Lee's way.

Charlene reluctantly agreed that he could play for a couple more hours. He and Thomas ran off quickly and disappeared into the darkness around the lighted center of the house. She waited for a moment or two to watch the boys until she heard them laughing and having fun again. She reluctantly concluded that he needed to learn some street

smarts and how to deal with difficult people, or at least learn how to avoid them, so went inside, occasionally looking out the window.

Charlene began picking up the house and momentarily forgot about the ruckus across the street when she noticed emergency lights flashing through the curtains. She rolled “Ah jeez, these idiots,” into an exasperated sigh, and headed back out the door. A policeman in a stiff, green uniform pointed in the direction the firework landed earlier. John folded his arms across his chest impatiently while the man talked. From what little she could make out, the policeman claimed that the incendiary landed in an elderly neighbor’s tree and caught some of the branches on fire.

The officer commanded that John go find the remains of the fireworks and pick them up, or he would charge him with littering. He also advised him to apologize to the frightened old couple that reported the incident. John argued with the policeman and quickly got close to the man’s severe, marine-like face. Friends from the crowd tried to talk John down from his heightened state, but he didn’t hear them. With a skillful move, the officer twisted John into a writhing, helpless position and tried to wrestle his arms into handcuffs.

Wendy, John’s long-suffering wife kneeled down and approached her husband struggling in the dirt, and told him to calm down through gritted teeth. He spun out from under the policeman and delivered a powerful blow to the back of Wendy’s leg and swept her on the ground.

“Add assault to those charges” grunted the officer.

John let out a loud groan and a few grunts about the time the cuffs clinked around his wrists. Charlene thought the crowd veiled by sulpheric smoke lit with passing blue and red looked pleased as the car containing John moved out of sight.

A week or so after John went away, Charlene visited Wendy to check on the family. Department of Public Health beat Charlene over to the home, but decided that with John out of the home, the family could straighten out their affairs. Charlene thought so too until Thomas continued to stay with the family when his mother went out, and stayed out all night. On her way to work at the elementary school, Charlene noticed Wendy rolling into the drive wearing the same clothes from the day before. She thought about talking to her, but wanted to give her some time to herself after John went away to jail. After a few weeks, Charlene planned on stopping by to talk about the situation. During dinner one night, Ernie packaged up a plate and took it upstairs. After a couple more times of preparing a separate plate and carrying it off, Charlene asked Ernie about his new delivery service.

“Mom, Thomas needs something to eat.” Ernie said.

“Ok. But why? Doesn’t his mother fix him dinner?” she asked.

“He says she does, but I went to his house the other day and he had food hidden behind his bed.”

“What?” Charlene asked.

“Yeah, he had an old potato and a few pieces of gum stuck to the back of the headboard. He said that he chews gum at night when he’s hungry. The other day he ate a mayonnaise sandwich for lunch.”

“Ok. We can feed him, but I am going to talk to his mother.” she said.

“Mom. They make fun of him at school.” said Ernie.

“How?” Charlene asked.

“The teacher caught him stealing food out of other kids’ lunchboxes, and made him apologize in front of the whole class.” said Ernie.

After work, Charlene approached Thomas’s mother Wendy and asked her if they could sit and talk about Thomas. She peered suspiciously at Charlene through the partially open crack in the door, and looked down at her feet. The family pounded a handmade sign into the ground that said *Bunnies for Sale, Meat or Pets*. Another sign nailed to the fence warned *Keep Out, Trespassers Will be Shot on Sight*. Charlene expected his mother’s face to look younger considering Thomas said his father was older than his mother. She also noticed that his mother looked young from a distance. The woman’s tight fitted cotton t-shirt and faded jeans revealed her thin yet somewhat flabby shape. Her body appeared young and thin, and her skin healthy, except for her face.

A combination of poor environments and cigarette smoke robbed the oxygen out of her skin making it look gray and inflexible. She parted her dyed, brown hair in the middle and feathered the sides out, sort of like the Farrah hair many women wore in the 1970’s. Although styled, her dry, brittle ends and cigarette yellowed nails revealed a significant lack of self-care. Her mouth moved nervously, and although the gold flecks around her pupils and smoky eyeliner accentuated her potentially pretty eyes, years of maltreatment and rough living hardened her gaze.

The inside air of the home wafted out through the door, and caused Charlene to turn her head. The stench reminded Charlene of dirty dishes, cheap air fresheners, and animal carcass. The unmistakable odor of alcohol and cigarettes also permeated the rooms and everything within them, adding to the offensive nature of the place. Boxes full of junk laid open along side white garbage bags with carelessly assembled items thrown in like clothes hangers and garbage. Charlene tried to decipher what portion of the mess resulted from the eviction of John, and what part was normal home décor.

“I’m movin’ his stuff to his sisters house.” Wendy said.

“That will be good. Maybe you can sort everything out.” said Charlene.

“Oh, no. I aint never sorting it back out with him again.” said Wendy.

“No, I mean for you and Thomas.” Charlene said.

“Well, I intend to.”

“Is he getting out anytime soon?” Charlene asked.

“Don’t know yet. He got a lawyer assigned to him, so we’ll see what happens.”

Wendy opened the door, waved for Charlene to come in and lit a cigarette while Charlene made her way in the house. A moose with glossy, resin eyes hung on the wood paneled wall next to a stuffed, hissing badger, a mountain lion positioned to pounce anytime, and a variety of other animals from the weasel family.

“You’re a hunting family I see.” remarked Charlene.

“John got some of em. Some are road kill or animals other hunters brought in to process, and never paid for. John does taxidermy.”

Wendy rifled through a stack of papers and handed Charlene a business card with a headshot of a live mountain lion with a title that read, *Nature's Reflections by John Wayne Lee, Taxidermy and Meat Processing*. She pretended to examine the card as if it were an important document, and handed it back to Wendy, to which she in turn set down on the cluttered table next to her. Wendy walked into the kitchen and dumped a pot of grainy, old coffee into the sink, and rinsed it out under the faucet.

“Come on in and sit down.” Wendy said.

A red, plastic bucket full of foamy liquid sat on the floor next to the tall, kitchen garbage can, and Charlene stared at it and tried to make out the contents. Sharp teeth with tufts of hair emerged from the milky bubbles, and she realized the bucket contained an animal's skull.

“You gotta bleach the rest of the stuff off if you want to get it really clean.” said Wendy.

“I see.”

“John was teachin' Thomas how to do all this, before he went away. He didn't seem to like it much, but its good for him to learn. I should show you the display room.”

“I don't have a whole lot of time, but...” Charlene said.

Wendy sat up from the wobbly, vinyl seat chair and paced quickly into the adjacent room and flicked on the light. Charlene followed, more out of curiosity than an interest in the art of taxidermy. The skin of what looked to be a dog hung on an iron stake from a wooden pillar. The empty, black sockets of his dried out eyelids squinted at Charlene. She carefully rubbed the dried, flaky nose with her finger.

“Wolf. John and his friend shot it a couple years ago. Thomas went with em’ and said the dog stayed alive in the back of the truck after they took it down and loaded it up. He sat back there with the kill and kept em company. I think he wanted to keep the wolf as a pet, but it finally died.” Wendy explained.

The room housed a well-rounded collection of processed and partially processed animals. The display room was an extension of the living room, but astonishingly well stocked with different types of pelts and skins stacked in piles, and mounted animals lined up side by side. A few of the creatures Charlene knew were surely illegal to kill, like the statuesque, white crane with its pouch like beak hanging open to receive an invisible fish. The sturdy, orange stocks of its legs held its top heavy, rounded body into an eternal pose of action.

Charlene thought the appropriate response would be to take each one and bury it properly so they could rest. Instead they were all frozen into a humiliating showcase, covered in dust, and slowly decaying in the open air for god only knows how long. Wendy watched Charlene’s reaction and once she was aware she was being observed, she smiled nervously and mumbled “very nice.” She managed to excuse herself and promised to return and address the problems with Thomas later.

CHAPTER 3

NON-ESSENTIAL CHARACTERS AND RESPONSES
TO PERSISTANT CHALLENGES –
INSTITUTIONAL AND PERSONALErnie?

“He’s still weird. About the same as last time. Either he is never here, or he is ratholed out in his room.” said Lolita.

“Hmmm...” Heather took notes on a yellow, government-issue Steno pad as Lolita talked.

“Look. I know you can’t do anything about it, but maybe you have ideas about what I can do.”

Heather shifted uncomfortably after Lolita’s comment, and tried to appear more serious. Sometimes the hours she put into her job ended up, at last result just hours attached to a paycheck. She responded more fervently to her superior’s pressure, than her initial desire to help the native people. After reading numerous books and articles and working directly with the native population, she failed to see any real change brought about by the agency. Every day that passed with its deadlines, endless emails, tasks without results, and obsessive compulsive methods for “helping” the communities they served, only reinforced the feeling that she would not be able to do this job forever like she originally thought.

Of course many start out this way, and Lolita herself encountered many of her type in the schools, the churches, and in other groups that wanted to “help” the native

people. At work, the caseworkers avoided the word ‘help’ like it were a dirty word, or bad taste in their mouths. Instead, they used words like ‘facilitate, coordinate, or advocate.’ Heather wasn’t entirely sure what the correct terms or approaches were.^{99, 100}

“Can I ask you a question?” asked Heather.

“Sure?” replied Lolita.

“Why doesn’t your family just move away to somewhere nicer? I mean, a lot of nice towns border the reservation. You don’t have to stay here.” offered Heather.

“Number one. Walk up one person in any of the border towns, any person, any town, and ask them what they think about reservation people. Number two, we don’t really like them either. They’re rude, judgmental, small-minded buttfuckers. We deal with each other only when we have to, and its better that way.”¹⁰¹ explained Lolita.

“Besides, our family is here, and so is our history. Our family doesn’t deal with problems by moving away.” replied Lolita.

“Oh.” said Heather.

“Do you feel welcome here?” asked Lolita.

“Where? On the reservation?” asked Heather.

“Yes.” said Lolita.

“Not really.” said Heather.

“Well, that’s how I feel all the time, especially in border towns.” said Lolita. “I would rather be dropped in a foreign country, or a huge city than in a town bordering a reservation.”¹⁰²

“Why don’t *you* move away?” asked Lolita.

“I thought about it, but I don’t want to leave my family. And I don’t have the money. Besides, I don’t know where else I would go, and I like it here more and more.” said Heather.

“Do you guys own this house?” asked Heather.

“Yes. My parents have lived here since they got married. They built onto it a little while back, but yes, they own the house and the cars. My dad doesn’t believe in payments.” said Lolita.

“Do both of your parents work?” asked Heather.

“Why? Do you think they don’t work?” asked Lolita.

“No, I just have to ask.” said Heather.

“Oh, so this is a questionnaire. I get it.” said Lolita.

“The more I know, the more I can help.” said Heather.

“My mom works at the elementary school teaching second graders. She’s worked there forever. My dad used to be in the military, and worked for the railroad company after he got back. He retired early on disability.” said Lolita.

“You know, I found this dental assistant program in Great Falls you might be interested in.” Heather said.

Heather began to file through the papers in her binder, looking for something. Lolita observed her as she searched and felt sorry for her nervousness, her smallness, her helplessness. She could have at least prepared a little better, Lolita thought. Heather was just too easy of a target. Surely, she also felt angry and insulted, but this feeling was nothing new. She thought how much better it would feel for Heather to be just like the

hard-faced people. This I'm-your-friend-but-am-better-than-you approach was far worse, and made Lolita feel even less understood. It feels far better to want to punch someone in the face than be dissected under his or her pitiful gaze. She felt fragmented and frayed at the ends, and didn't want anyone to look at her.¹⁰³

"I already have college plans, but thanks. What about Ernest?" Lolita asked.

"No, I just thought, I mean think, that you have a lot of potential." Heather said.

"And staring into rich peoples' mouths is the realization of my potential?" Lolita asked.

"They wouldn't all be rich." Heather said.

Lolita laughed and thought momentarily about the wide-open mouth and the shiny silver fillings. She focused in on the tiny red bumps in the back of their throats. She thought of the damage those sharp little tools can do on mouth flesh, and cringed at the thought of such a job.

"So you have a college degree?" Lolita asked Heather. Heather stiffened and changed to a more formal tone.

"I graduated High School in Great Falls, and went to MSU--Billings to get my degree in Social Work."

"Ugh. I hate Billings. It's an industrial armpit. Bunch of meth heads there too. I like the Red Lobster." said Lolita.

"I hate it too, but it was all my parents could afford. We made just enough money to pay the expenses, but not little enough to be awarded financial aid. Well, at least my

mother and stepfather. My father makes quite a bit of money, but wont help me with college, so that really hurt my chances to get aid.” Heather said.

“You don’t get along with your dad?” Lolita asked.

“I do, but there is not much relationship there, really. Were amicable. He just has never really helped after he and my mother divorced. I took my stepfather’s name. He’s great.” Heather replied.

“So, that’s where the last name comes from? I didn’t think you were ethnic in any way.” Lolita said.

“Right. My stepfather’s family is from South America, but even he looks sort of white, with the gray hair and all.”

“Seems like you get along well with your dad.” Heather observed.

“He’s pretty quiet. Pretty funny too.” Lolita replied, and smiled.

“Oh yeah?” Heather asked.

“Yeah, when he does talk, its usually something funny. Drives my mom crazy. She used to talk at him all the time, but has given up I guess.” said Lolita.

“I can see that with everything that’s going on.” Heather said.

“Yeah, they don’t really know how to handle the whole Ernest deal.” Lolita replied and twirled the end of a tassel on the runner on her desk.

“Hmmm...” Heather tapped her finger and stood up to get the pamphlets. When she went to reach for them, Lolita told her to forget it.

“Forget it. I’m not talking to her.” Ernest popped his head in the door, and then ducked back out.

Heather remained sitting in a rigid position with her eyes open wide, and tried to hide under the camouflage of a friendly visitor. Lolita looked at her with an expression of curiosity, and wondered what she planned to do next about the situation. Heather looked back at her and understood that she had to act. She stood up and walked out of Lolita's door carefully and searched around for Ernest. She took a couple steps and peeked into the open crack of his door.

Rumpled blankets lay on the floor, and he had more furniture in his room than she imagined he would. A twin bed was pushed against the farthest wall, and a dresser covered with papers and all sorts of items sat next to the bed. An out of place coffee table occupied the middle of the room and was also littered with all sorts of wrappers, bags, and even a few car parts. His room felt like the most sleepless place she had ever set foot, and she could not imagine ever being able to relax there. A Beastie Boys Poster hung on the other wall and she remembered when she listened to them in college.

Heather wondered if these mass worshipped bands knew how many people their music reached, and what kinds of places and situations. Like most small town teenagers, her friends got drunk and drove recreationally, and shouted Beastie Boys and classic rock music while driving the back roads. Patches of burned and stained carpet pulled Heather back to the moment at hand. A few street signs and traffic cones occupied one of the corners of the room. She asked in a quiet tone, if Charlene or Frank had visited his room lately. A thin sheet hung over the windows and as she focused on the patterns and worn spots, she heard Ernest talking downstairs. She backed out and almost bumped into Lolita.

“Sorry.” Heather apologized.

“It’s fine.” said Lolita.

Heather made her way down the stairs, in no particular rush and eyed the area for Ernest. She didn’t see Frank sitting in his chair or Charlene sitting at the table. The room appeared vacated and silent until she heard the garage door slam.

“There he goes.” Charlene said watched in the direction he departed to, and put her hands on her hips.

“Dang. Too bad we can’t call the police.” Heather said and dropped her arms at her side.

“Who knows when he’ll come back.” Frank muttered from behind.

The only lengthy conversations Heather ever heard from Frank happened when she was out of sight. The family treated him speaking as an event reserved for the privileged, of which she was not one. He and Charlene shared the efficient language of long-term partners that not even the kids understood. He talked at a low and regulated murmur, and she returned the same, even though her usual tone was a bit higher and faster.

A poorly functioning muffler in a four-cylinder car signaled Ernest’s departure. The sound grew smaller and smaller and eventually moved out of hearing distance altogether. Frank’s chair squeaked and groaned as he lowered himself into it. The volume on the television went up so that all remaining members of the house knew what to expect for weather tomorrow. Heather noticed that it was after seven o’clock. She thought about checking her phone to see if her friend called, but given the urgency of the

situation, she refrained. She thought momentarily about bringing the family together to go over the lists of questions given to her by the head social worker. Lolita already sensed Heather's desire to leave, even her desire to not be there in the first place, and prepared her things for her. She handed them to Heather, and she received them without protest.

"If you all can get together and think about the questions on this list, it may help us to figure out how to best help Ernest." Heather placed the documents on the kitchen table and they all looked at them.

"It could help." Heather offered.

Charlene went back to washing dishes and Lolita walked back upstairs. When she felt sure no one was watching her, Heather checked her phone and saw that she had two missed calls and a voicemail.

"Have fun on the Flathead." Lolita called to Heather.

Heather snapped her phone shut and placed it in her small purse. She double-checked her binder and the notes inside, wondering if she could do anymore, and decided to tell Charlene goodbye. Charlene gave a flat goodbye, but did not look up from her chores.

Lolita waited for the door to shut and the car to pull out of the drive, and walked back downstairs to see what Heather left behind. One sheet was a glossy 8 by 12 inch sheet detailing all the symptoms associated with meth addiction. Lolita knew a handful of people with obvious drug problems, but few showed symptoms this advanced.

Even if their teeth began to decay, they still had them. To her knowledge, they didn't steal or spend their days in jail, and some were even fat. Many became visibly depressed, but she didn't get involved enough in their lives to observe the paranoia or obsession that comes with the habit. Ernie spent most of his time in his room or out of the house, so she was unsure of all of his symptoms.

For the first year, Lolita noticed that Ernie wanted to spend more time alone, or with his friends. When she engaged him in conversations, his mind raced and he switched topics frequently. He often avoided making eye contact with her, especially after he and his friends barricaded themselves in his room. The brochure Lolita picked up documented the progression of one woman's meth use over the course of ten years. Around year six, she begins to resemble a blood relative of Keith Richards, or at best an impersonator of him. Lolita looked closely at the photos, in this case mug shots, and tried to discern the moment the woman lost her sense of human consciousness.

In the first four photos, the woman's eyes reported back an emotion more like defiance or an exaggerated sense of inconvenience. Her head is tilted at an angle that often results from asking "What?" or saying, "Fine, go ahead." At photo five she appeared overly calm and a little bit sad, but judging by her consciously styled hair, she attempted to put herself together at last. At photo six she appeared disoriented, and just barely attached to humanity by the remaining, yet defunct threads of her cognitive abilities. At photo seven, she has spun off into the universe, a soul wholly detached from its material, human form. The remaining photos chart a human slumping towards the embrace of death.

The blonde, mystery woman passed into that junction of eternity where life and death intermingle, and begin the inevitable expansion back out into the cycle of action. She completed the whole process in a variety of haircuts, styles of make-up, and states of dental health. She tried on different expressions for an audience that would compare her agonizing years side by side. In some sort of Impact or Western font, the final headline warns “Dead after 10 years.” The word “dead” was all capitals, as if the worst this person experienced was death. Many living in this world know that if anything, death is the final mercy. Lolita still believed the bureaucrats who made this PSA were portraying the worst-case scenario.

The advertisement seemed like another scare tactic or job-creating anti-drug campaign tool dreamed up by the conservative right. They liked to use a lot of advertising to prevent the ordinary person from turning into the kind of neighbor they didn’t want in their communities. Lots of folks use drugs in this country, Lolita thought. She used to think a lot less drug use occurred, but after high school, a friend gave her a run down of the people in the community who used drugs. She recalled her interactions with them and couldn’t exactly remember any out of the ordinary experiences. Extreme cases stood out in her mind, but many encounters came and went without even a minor upset.

They all behaved in relatively normal ways and were easy to be around. To her knowledge, none of them tried to steal from her, and none of them sized her up with depraved and desperate motives to somehow turn a casual meeting into an opportunity for acquiring drug money. Ernest definitely had a problem, and was not the same person he used to be, but he surely wasn’t this lady. Maybe he would just up and quit someday.

Lolita recalled the way British people on the radio talk about their addictions and say, “I plan to give up.” Lolita said “give up” a couple times out loud in a lower class British accent, the way she and Ernie used to when talking to one another. She liked the way some of them sounded, in that you could barely understand them at all. Her brother called them “lymies,” or “lymie bastards” after he heard the term on a British comedy sitcom. Ernest and Lolita occasionally called each other lymie, along with other insults common to a brother and sister team.

When they fought, the level of anger felt by either determined the honesty of each insult, as well as how sharp the barb. When Ernie became uncontrollably angry or frustrated, he threw down the fat or ugly card. Lolita retorted by accusing him of having no friends. Lolita and Ernie taught each other that when people really want to hurt each other, they say what their opponent most fears to be true. After the worst of the fight passed, each would ruminate on what the other said. Lolita would consult the mirror for proof that she was not fat, and Ernie mentally counted all the people he considered friends.

Lolita gathered up the papers that she spread about, and brought them up to her room. She sat in front of her computer and typed, “meth lady” and clicked on Google images. An assortment of drug-addled faces appeared and begged for help from behind the glass of the screen. She felt disconnected from all of them as if they were ephemera, as was typically the case with internet people and places.¹⁰⁴ Only certain images reached her, typically the worst ones with buildings obliterated, and glimpses of bare skin from the deceased.

Nightly she visited the cities of the Middle East, the seashores of Alaska by webcam, and the sorrows of the afflicted all through a set of clickety keys and a blue screen. Her poetry and pebbles in the ocean thoughts circulated widely, eternalizing and scattering her across the universe amongst the hallowed echoes of long departed stars.¹⁰⁵ From those heights, rigid spatial and ideological boundaries dissolved, and like pieces of colored glass turned on their sides, she could see through the layers, both floors and ceilings, that once enclosed her. Within a matter of seconds, she withdrew telescopically, and tuned into common noises from the kitchen below. The remaining cabinets closed for the night, and the chair her mom favored creaked under her weight. The television filled the downstairs with white noise after a prolonged, numbing period of patchwork voices.

Eventually the house succumbed to the night's silence, and Lolita's light was the last one burning. She walked over to her table by the window and lit a red, cinnamon candle in a glass holder decorated with black dancing skeletons. On this particular night, she spent twenty or more minutes browsing through the images of all those irrevocably damaged by meth. She scrolled and clicked through the houses that burned to the ground, the neglected and wounded children, the contaminated air and soil, and the bags of bones that once were humans. A disgusted feeling originating in her gut spread through her body, and she felt the poison of the bad image binge moving around her being. She took a deep breath in through her nose and deep down into her belly. Her midsection expanded leaving her feeling hollow as a large drum.

As the air made its way in, she imagined wolves running into her, merging with the purifying fires of her heart. The magnificent organ subtly converted them, like an

Escher painting, into abstract doves surrounded by golden-blue particles. She breathed the blackness and the wolves, and in the movement of eternity, a perfect 8, breathed out the calming blue doves. She saw the children grow healthy and fat, and their skin began to glow. The air and soil refused the contamination, and sheaths of darkness departed for someplace outside this galaxy. The pain driving the addictions in the people slowly dissipated, and the tortured and depraved looks were replaced with the dreamy mellows of peace. A cooling water bubbled up from the ground and surrounded the burning houses, putting out all fires. Lolita opened her warm hands, palms up, fingers relaxed in a gesture of surrender, feeling the hot blood push against her fingertips. A wave of her heat lifted off her hands, moving towards those most in need of love's warmth.

She envisioned that the steady breath of healing first visited her mother sitting at the table below her feet, although by now she was tucked safely in bed. She could see her mother's exasperated face relax, and for a moment she lost herself in an innocent moment, free from the relentless frenzy of thought and worry. Her father opened for a moment, long enough to remember Ernest, but not too much, just enough for a man out of touch so long with his own heart.¹⁰⁶ The image of Ernest receded when she tried to recover him, and his face manifested as a Frankenstein of faces, many of which she did not recognize at all. Momentarily, she panicked and looked about the room frantically to make sure she was in fact, in her own room. The feeling of safety returned until she realized that Ernest may come home late, and cause problems like he had in the past after one of Heather's visits.

The High, The Wide, and the Handsome

Now at the remote Spotted Bear Ranger Station, south of the Hungry Horse Reservoir, Heather reclined on the couch that doubled as a futon. She sipped from the Sierra Nevada bottle with her head at a lazy angle, and tried to avoid dribbling the beverage on herself. Her initial feeling of post-work relaxation began to turn into exhaustion and she thought about telling Paul that she didn't feel like going out to meet his friends. The thought of sitting in a bar sounded less and less appealing with each sip, and she stared at the tiled ceiling and counted the mold spots. The room smelled of deodorant soap after he opened the bathroom door after showering.

“You're quiet out there. Are you snooping?” Paul asked.

“Yeah, I found your hidden underwear stash. Most of them look dirty. What kind of girls you have over here?” Heather asked. She phrased the question in the form of a joke as many other women who have perfected this gentle delivery, but the implication demanded a semi-sincere answer. She waited for what seemed like ten minutes as he rifled through his toiletries to find something.

“Are there really underwear?” he asked.

“Are you kidding?” A flash of rage passed over her expression momentarily, but she waited and restrained herself for the answer.

“Right. I'm pretty isolated out here. You're the only girl I hang out with, pretty much.” he replied.

“Awww...you out here feeling jealous?” he asked. Paul walked out with a towel wrapped around his waist and leaned against Heather. He hugged her head in mock sympathy.

“Stop,” she warned him and tried to push him away.

“Look, she’s jealous.” he mocked.

Paul laughed and kept trying to hug Heather’s head. She started to smile and laugh as she shoved him. Heather yanked at the corner of his towel, and he laughed in surprise, and pulled it to keep it from falling off his hips.

“Hey you perv. Are you trying to look at my wiener?” he asked.

“Sick. No.” Heather let go of the towel.

The two laughed and he grabbed the beer out of her hand and took a gulp. He peered into the bottle, shook the fluid around the bottom, and finished off the rest. He walked to his small fridge and took out another for himself. Heather watched him with a little annoyance as he started in on the new drink.

“Any more in there?” she asked.

“Oh, sure. You want one?” he looked surprised.

“Yes, please.” she said.

Paul set the bottle on the counter and walked outside to sort through the shoes he left on the porch. From the futon, she eyed the glistening bottle and eventually got up to get it herself. Heather knocked the lid off using the edge of the counter, and threw the cap in the sink. She watched his outline through the front door in the porch light, and zoned out while he rummaged.

Heather met Paul at an after work barbeque that her friend's coworkers arranged. Her friend took a job as a timber cruiser on the Flathead National Forest, and Heather used her opportune location as a place to get away from her new, stressful job. She and Jaime became friends six years ago, and stayed in touch after graduating from college. The friendships Heather tried to develop always fizzled into casual acquaintances, or hollow drinking buddies, and the relationships that came easily in college eventually dried out.

After awhile she gave up on pursuing new friends, as driving halfway across the state was easier than connecting with people. When Heather first noticed Paul, she stood and talked with Jaime, while he hovered next to the fire, until Jaime walked over to get some more beer out of the cooler. Paul sidled up next to her, and adjusted some of the logs in the fire with a metal poker. His hip collided with hers, and she thought the maneuver was an accident and moved out of his way. He looked back and smiled a little, and she smiled back still thinking he was only being friendly.

Paul typified the Northwestern forestry worker, with stiff yet well-worn Carhartt pants, and a knife in the pocket made just for that purpose. He wore tall, black lace-up boots, and a simple cotton t-shirt that casually emphasized his strong back and arms. His angular jaw softened in the partially grown out beard of only a few days. Paul's strong work ethic, and humble demeanor made him far more approachable than what Jaime liked to call "dickhead mountain man types." Paul's friend Dan, a tall, blonde Midwesterner moved out to Montana after majoring in Marketing to please his parents.

After a few encounters with him, Heather noticed that he took pictures of everything with an expensive camera, and wrote about his experiences in a Moleskine journal.

“How Thoreau of him” she said to Jaime.

“Definitely Thoreau. Not Emerson.” Jaime replied. “Transcendentalist fart faces. I’ll bet my ass he has at least one Abbey book in all that crap.”

“No doubt.” said Heather.

Dan showed up on the Forest Service compound in his old Subaru stocked with an assortment of high tech gear and mountain bike accessories. In the New West, instead of directly approaching the naked mountain or foothills, at least to the Dan’s of the world, people were now required to approach some material mediator like Specialized, North Face, or Patagonia; the veritable Jesus Christs of gear, to enhance or legitimize experiences in nature.

According to modern “gearheads,” the nicer, aka more expensive, the better and in order to access the mountains, people must sort through racks of items in fluorescently lit aisles.¹⁰⁷ Now when people head to the local recreation spot, adherents of the Church of Nature are sure to dress in their finest technical fabric outfits. The bike they sit on while they buckle their helmet may very well be a \$6000.00 bike, and those who recreate can anticipate that when they pass, gearheads will take a good, hard look at their model. If the rider owns a \$500.00 Trek, they sit in the back of the church, or start at the back of the trail, with the drunkards nursing hangovers, and loose women who are too “lazy” to adhere to a rigorous training program.

The brands of mountain gear purchased and displayed lets the group know that the wearer doesn't follow one of those weird religions that prays to false idols, like 100% cotton, or worse yet, big chain store aluminum. When regular folks smoke these people on the trail, they can't figure out how their god let them lose to a less worthy devotee.

Paul told Heather that Dan was the most athletic guy he had ever known, but the laziest worker he ever supervised. Dan made sure that people knew that during the day he ran a professional grade chainsaw, but in the field he tended to wander and take frequent breaks. He often reported illnesses that prevented him from work, but could muster up the energy to bike or play Frisbee after work. Paul liked Dan as a person, but took exceptions to his work ethic. Heather talked to Dan a few times at get-togethers, but quickly tired of his self-conscious posturing. Jaime noticed Heather's annoyance and said, "They all want to be mountain men or cowboys." When Jaime came back from her beer quest, Heather asked her about Paul.

Jaime told her that Paul was nice, but she was pretty sure he had a girlfriend, or maybe even a wife. She also said she didn't know for sure, maybe because Paul behaved more like the dignified types in those pathologically independent fields of firefighters and fisheries guys, who did have a serious girlfriend or wife. The bachelors of those groups typically spent their free nights drinking beer, chasing girls and talking about drinking beer and chasing girls. Heather looked a little disappointed considering she liked the feel of Paul's presence and wanted to know him a little better.

Heather noticed that throughout the night, Paul glanced at her frequently and smiled. She smiled back, but temporarily forgot about her interest in him after convincing

herself he was in fact committed. She and Jaime woke up in the morning and made strong coffee and blueberry pancakes in their pajamas.

“Oh hey. I forgot to tell you. I asked Erik, Paul’s friend, if he had a girlfriend or a wife, and Erik said he didn’t.” Jaime said.

“Dang! Why didn’t you tell me last night?” Heather asked.

“Sorry. I forgot.” Jaime shrugged.

“Oh well. What would have I said anyways? It creeps guys out when girls make the first move.” Heather said.

“I think you’re right. Its always backfired for me.” Jaime admitted.

“Ooh. Still a few beers in here.” Jaime said and shifted them around. The glass bottles clinked against one another, and although Heather liked the sound, the beer incited a queasy half frown from her.

“You were putting em back last night.” said Jaime.

“Work was really stressful and I sorta hoped that Paul was single too. I guess I know now. Are you dating any of these guys yet?” asked Heather.

Jaime cracked the lid of a beer and chugged half of it like it were a cold soda. Jaime had always been something of a tomboy, with short red hair, freckles, and a square face. She dressed like the rest of the guys, and preferred to wear her work clothes even when she wasn’t on duty. Jaime was the kind of woman who actually looked bad when you tried to dress her up in make up and frilly clothes. Her face and figure was attractive by all traditional definitions of attractiveness, and didn’t need a lot of fussing.

Jaime's legs and arms were toned from working a physical job, and her skin always looked bright and youthful. Her smile came easy and her friendly, yet forward manner made her approachable to about everyone. Heather noticed her lack of interest in men, even when she was actively dating them, and praised her for her carefree attitude when it came to relationships. If anything, Jaime lived more independently than the average guy she worked with, and she laughed at them when they complained or pined away after some girl dogged them. Jaime lifted the half full bottle to eye level, and extended it to Heather.

"Ugh, not for me. I'm kind of hung over." Heather said poked at her remaining pancake.

"I hung out with Dan for a couple weeks, but he got on my nerves. He's really insecure. The only guy I really like is married, but if he showed any interest, I wouldn't like him anymore. Who wants to date a creep? Not me." explained Jaime.

"I noticed a lot of cute guys at the party last night." Heather said, and raised her eyebrows.

"Most of them are like Dan. They all hang out like gay friends and probably cornhole each other after work. The little guy with the ponytail is kind of cute, but small guys are kind of a turn off, and besides, he's a masshole."

"A what?" Heather asked.

"From Massachusetts. Total stereotypes. As soon as they move out here, they grow a beard. Annoying. Besides, they don't know how to work. They love to drink beer.

They love trucks and start hunting eventually. They hate working. I get tired of them and their rich families. Arrogant as fuck too.” Jaime complained.

“Guess I hadn’t noticed. I did notice that a lot of easterners are moving here.” said Heather.

“Easterners are always coming here. It’s like some sort of holy land and they come in waves. They complain about the traffic, the rude people, the crime in the cities. They think life is simpler here. They’ve simply read too many Time Life Collection books. Like I said, everyone wants to be a cow boy.”¹⁰⁸

“I wonder what Paul ended up doing the rest of the night.” Heather wondered.

“Probably just went to bed. He’s pretty quiet. I like Paul a lot. He works.” Jaime replied.

“I like him too, so far.” Heather said.

“You’re lucky if you get him. You’ll never have to hear him bragging about some mountain he climbed, or some elite group he joined up with. You’ll be spared a lifetime of boredom and exhausting ego stroking.” Jaime said.

“You still like the same types?” Heather asked.

“I’ve already told you. I like the real deal. The guy who can go it alone. He works his ass off, and is too tired and busy to care.” Jaime explained.

“About what?” Heather asked, looking a little worried.

“About competing. About his clothes. About gear and all that other crap.” Jaime said. “That way, he can care about more important things, like me.”

“Oh, ok. Now I see.” Heather laughed.

“No, you know what I mean. A real man. Not a pretender.” Jaime said.

“I’m gonna be a happy idiot, and struggle for the legal tender.”¹⁰⁹ sang Heather.

“Oh God, don’t sing that song.” complained Jaime.

“I don’t know, I worked on a ranch and the cowboys that worked there were not what you would expect.” said Heather.

“How’s that?” Jaime asked.

Heather’s stepfather knew a man that needed help on his horse ranch, just someone to clean the stalls and exercise the horses. She agreed to show up and work in the evenings after school, and in the mornings on the weekend. She rarely interacted with the owner, but knew him to be a busy enterprising man, short and stocky in stature, and curt in demeanor. Often when she worked, two hands hired by the man, worked with the horses for more specialized care and training. The first couple days, she shoveled and fed alone, but eventually met the two full-time cowboys when a fluffy little white dog ran up to her and jumped to her knees.

A pale and frail-bodied blonde man with a mustache drove up in a gray blue 1980’s Buick, stepped out carefully, and picked up the stray pet. He pointed at the dog’s nose with his delicate finger and said, “Naughty Ricky.” The dog licked the man’s finger through tiny sharp tartar caked teeth, and he stepped over to Heather and extended his hand with his head slightly cocked back.

“Rick senior. Nice to meet you. You are?”

“Oh, I don’t know if Dale told you about me. I’m the new girl. I’m just helping out a little.”

“Ok, yes. He did say something. This is Ricky junior.” he said and pointed to the dog. “Bruce named him after me.”

“Bruce? I don’t think I’ve met him yet.” Heather said.

“Bruce!” yelled the man. “Come here and meet the new girl!”

A wooden horse stall obscured most of the other man’s notably tall body, but his face indicated that he heard the call but ignored it in favor of the task at hand.

“Its fine, he looks busy.” said Heather.

“He’s been bitchy lately.” remarked the man.

“Bruce!” he yelled louder.

The dog wiggled when the man emerged from behind the wooden boards and the tall, dun horse that previously held his attention. Rick put the dog down carefully on the gravel road, and it ran off in a quick spurt to meet the other man, Bruce. When it reached his feet, he ignored its wagging and walked through its spastic attempt for attention.

“What do you want?” the man asked.

Heather waited uncomfortably and motioned for the smaller man to speak on her behalf. She looked over at him and he assumed an impatient pose with his hand pressed to his hip and his elbow pointed sharply towards the other man.

“This is Heather. She’s new.” said Rick.

“Hi. Make sure you don’t let the water troughs freeze. The new people always let the water freeze.”

“Oh, I wont.” Heather said.

The two men stood close to one another and Rick picked a few pieces of green hay out of the tall man's curly brown hair. He didn't seem to notice or mind the man's careful grooming.

"This is Bruce." announced Rick. "He's in a bitchy mood."

Heather cringed and waited for the man to take out his reaction on her or Rick. She waited for a stinging comeback, but noticed Rick smiling and restraining a laugh behind his pursed lips.

"Let me show you the mares. They have a different routine." said Bruce.

"Sure." said Heather.

Although she was in the middle of a job, she followed the man to take instruction and return to her task later. She ran back to the stall she previously worked at to ensure the bolt was firmly locked, and ran back to the two men already destined for one of the paddocks. The men walked closely together and Rick occasionally leaned into Bruce's side and talked closely to him. Bruce remained stiff and upright and didn't return Rick's level of enthusiasm. They stopped at a small, mucky area fenced off carelessly with a few tied threads of hot wire.

"This is Mary. She has about two weeks until her foal is born. It's her second try. Her last one died." said Bruce.

"How did that happen?" asked Heather.

"Who knows? Sometimes they just don't live." said Bruce.

“She needs to get some extra calories, so we have this feed you need to give her with three flakes of that hay over there, you understand? And don’t bust your neck on the haystack. Some of those bales weigh 150 pounds.” said Bruce.

“Sure. I can do that.” said Heather.

“It has to be that kind of hay. Its richer.” he said.

“Ill make sure she gets it.” said Heather.

“Rick, we need to go work with Shorty for awhile. Sandra and Dale said he’s been acting up. We cant have that. Its embarrassing.” said Bruce.

“They show the horses. Anyways, see you later.” said Rick, and waved at Heather.

The men got into the running Buick and drove towards the other end of the ranch. The little white dog sat on Rick’s lap and Heather could tell that he started up a one-sided conversation with Bruce. The swollen bellied horse gazed suspiciously at Heather from its weeping left eye, and swished its long tail. She ran her hand carefully along its rump and swayed back until she reached the firm ears. The once wary black globe of an eye began to open and close drowsily, while Heather vigorously rubbed the animal’s densely structured head and snout. Heather took the dark purple halter and lead rope off the fencepost, secured it around the muscular neck of the mare, and led her out towards the covered stalls.

“They were partners.” Heather said to Jaime.

“Partners. Ok. Like work partners or *partners*?” Jaime asked.

“Partners. But man those guys could ride and work with horses like I’ve never seen. Before I started, I thought I was gonna meet some hot cowboys to date, but these guys were the cowboys, and they were both taken.” said Heather.

*“They were the real deal.”*¹¹⁰ said Heather.

In Heather’s experience, the old ideal Western male lived alone for the most part, and would at least pretend to not care about the dealings of other people. He wouldn’t buy a certain type of jacket or hat to signal to the others that he belonged to a particular group, or would he? Many of the cowboys she knew purchased certain hats, because the particular style signified what type of cowboy they were, and where they came from. But after all the commercializing of the West through resort towns and gift shops, the different types of hats became scattered amongst tourists and the new locals who moved to the towns, and people gave up on telling each other apart.

“I think I met the real deal once. But I cant see you liking him.” said Heather. This guy lived too far off the map to participate in status and image charades. He was too busy and too tired to care.”

“Right. Those guys spend most of their time swathing hay, chasing cows, or working on their land, or someone else’s.” said Jaime. *“I’ve never met a farmer who got off work and went mountain bike riding or hiking. They go home to their family or hang out alone and eat dinner, then they get back to work, depending on the season.”*

“The modern mountain man type just seems weird. They’re hermits a lot of the time, or drunks with bad teeth.” Heather said. *“Probably have criminal records and that’s*

why they hide out in small mountain towns. Like the father and son team who kidnapped the jogger lady.”

“That was a true story?” asked Jaime.

“Pretty sure.” said Heather. “True story.”

The other men Heather met that adhered to the real Western way of life were in fact a bit eccentric, and tended to reject most of what modern living had to offer. They rarely appealed to women by talking about how they lived, but on the whole were single save for their dogs or livestock. The ones who did try on a wife for a while found the arrangement unsuitable, due to the “luxuries” a wife tends to demand.

“Oh, you remember that guy you met in Helena?” Jaime asked, and flattened her hands on her cheeks.

Heather, some friends, and the guy she dated at the time, traveled down to see a band Jaime liked. Heather never heard the band play, but after twenty minutes of listening and swilling drinks, she really liked their sound and how they energized the crowd. One man with greased 1950’s hair and a snap button shirt plucked a stand-up bass, and occasionally spun it around like a woman on a dance floor. The other tall dark-haired, nearly skeletal band member wistfully sawed on a fiddle. The stage lights illuminated his sunken in face and protruding teeth with hot gold, red, and purple, flash freezing him into an animated, yet bastardized Early Christian icon. The group played popular covers in a bluegrass-rock rendition of their own rendering, and even twisted the lyrics of “Don’t Hand Me No Lines, and Keep Your Hands to Yourself”¹¹¹ by the Kentucky Satellites into “...She started talkin’ bout herpes, started talkin’ bout AIDS!”

Heather rarely liked to dance at bars so just stood by and watched other people. Her date acted equally enthused to dance, and wore a pouty look on his face most of the evening. She found herself more and more bored, and scanned all the good-looking guys in the crowd. A young couple that danced with their faces pressed together caught her attention. The petite girl wore a thin cotton dress with tight jeans underneath so that her look was part country girl, part hippy. The thin gauze of her dress lit up with pink stage lights occasionally, and she stood at the center like a shining pistil. Heather noticed mostly that they looked free, careless and free.

When she went to the bathroom to get a much-needed break from her date, a small group of drunken young boys stared her down and brutishly fawned on about her looks. She straightened up and flipped her hair haughtily, and instantly behaved more like an attractive woman in the ten-second encounter with strangers, than she did all night with her boyfriend. In the bathroom mirror, she stood close to the glass with a tube of lipstick and slid the waxy stick across both lips. She posed for a few moments to see what others might, until a couple pretty girls walked in and occupied the mirror.

On her way back out of the ladies room, she saw her date still standing next to the wood column she left him at, and changed her direction to the bar for another drink. A real cowboy type, complete with dirty old hat and duster jacket, sat at the bar talking to an old man with bushy eyebrows. The two sipped whiskey and talked about something apparently disappointing, as the old man shook his head as the other man gestured. She pushed her way in between the two of them, and the younger man tipped his hat and

extended his hand. She blushed at the traditional formality of the gesture and shook his hand gently.

“Whatcha havin’?” the man asked.

“Whatchoo havin’?” she asked and pointed to his drink.

“Pendleton whiskey.” he said and took a sip.

“Well, then, that’s what I’m havin’.” she said.

“Well, alright then.” he said.

He waived the bartender down and he came promptly despite the lineup of young cowboys and drunk college kids waiting for another drink. The two operated on some gentlemanly code of respect for those your own age and rank or above. He took the man’s order by bending his ear closer, and poured the drink and served it up in under a minute. The man went to reach for his wallet, and the bartender told him ‘no’ with a referee-like gesture of his hand. She became intrigued about who this man was, and even though he was much older than her, she felt a twinge of attraction. She also felt that she was well on her way towards being drunk.

“I like your hat.” she said.

“Thanks.” he said.

He looked at her briefly and all but had her sized up. She admired the real cowboy look and spoke as if she knew something about him. He probably had his share of these kinds of women, and more than his share of their annoying, jealous boyfriends wearing new wranglers.¹¹² She temporarily forgot her boyfriend in the presence of this man, and when she remembered, avoided looking back to see his disappointment.

“You live round here?” he asked.

“Nah. I live in Great Falls. Hate it.” she replied.

“Oh yeah? Why?” he asked.

“Not much to do. Kind of ugly. We have an Air Force base.” she said.

“Why don’t you move?” he asked.

“I would, but the places I like are a little too expensive. Besides I just got a job in Great Falls.”

The two talked for a while about the rapidly rising costs of living in many nice places in Montana. They talked about how towns like Bozeman and Big Sky are no longer the “Real Montana,” and you know you are in really in Montana when you see those places in your rear view mirror. He claimed to live in the “Real Montana,” on the Missouri river. He also said that his house had no electricity or phone, and he got all his firewood by himself. He didn’t have any bills, and only had to worry about feeding his dog, and getting gas for his truck and his chainsaw.

Heather leaned close to him with her elbows on the bar, and listened intently to his better life. For her, the most fascinating part was how it would feel to be free of bills and loans, and all other varieties of payments and modern inconveniences. He said all he needed to be happy was a good drink of whiskey and some music.¹¹³ He nonchalantly told her that he played at this bar and a few others in the area.

Heather accidentally stumbled a couple times and slurred a few words and eventually forgot about all else save for his story. The old man he talked to until that time disappeared into the background, but when she looked over he was still there, but only

listening now. His large, thick square glasses distorted his eyes and the shadow of his hat hid the fine features of his face. After talking about the area for a while, he drew her a map on the back of a lime green order ticket. He circled a town called La Hood that lay next to the Jefferson River, South East of Whitehall.

“I play there sometimes with Merle Haggard.” he claimed calmly.

“No way!” she shouted.

He sat on his stool with the same expression as before, as if playing music with Merle Haggard were no big deal for a man like him. She began to wonder if Merle Haggard were even still alive. She tried to think of his face but kept pulling the image of Waylon Jennings instead. She remembered showing the cover of her Waylon Jennings CD to her senile grandmother, and having her say he was “one ugly woman.”

“He comes up with his Delta Blues friends and these old black guys just love to look up at the stars in Montana and play their blues. They never seen anything like it, a clear starry Montana night.” he recalled in a haze of nostalgia. He looked up at the old tiled ceiling and imitated a blues player in a starry reverie.

“Oh man, I’d love to be around to see that.” she sighed.

“Well, you should come to La Hood sometime to the main bar there and see us play.” He tapped the town on the map with his big cracked, engine grease stained finger.

“I definitely will.” she said.

The man flagged the bartender down again and pointed to his glass. The bartender gave him a thumbs up while he sorted through bottles in a cabinet below the old ornate wooden bar. He pointed at Heather with a curious look on his face. She almost nodded

her head yes, when she felt a hand on her back. She looked eye level at the tarnish streaked mirror in the old bar, to see her reflection standing closer than she realized to the old cowboy, and behind her, her forgotten date.

“Ooh. I gotta get. It was great to meet you.” She extended her hand and they shook hands again. He didn’t look up from his empty glass to watch her walk out with her date.

“I’m sorry. That guy was telling me a story.” she tried to explain.

“Yeah, alright. You ready to go?” he asked.

He yawned and rubbed his swollen, tired eyes while buttoning his coat and the two rode home quietly. Shortly after, they broke up and became friends. She kept the map after that night and stuck it on her fridge under a magnet, swearing to make it to La Hood to see her new friend, Merle Haggard, and the Delta Blues players under the stars.

“will have to share reports
of history which now rise
before us as mutant generations”¹¹⁴

All the men Heather dated shared something removed, something untouchable. They all had characteristics in common. Each had some issue with a parent, either a removed parent or a dysfunctional parent, and each had moved away from that parent. Each tried to make a home of their own in a place they perceived as safe, but failed again and again to create safety. They had been too poor, or too drunk, or too fed up with one thing or another. They never felt satisfied, comfortable, or accepted. The unhappiness she experienced with each one of them, she attributed solely to them and failed to see

similarities between them and her. For Heather, the unhappy people were easiest to leave. They revealed long hidden, broken parts and failed to fit them with anyone else's parts. They were fractured in places that cannot be fixed, or even reached. She hoped Paul wasn't one of them.

"You ready to go?" Paul looked at her as she stared 1000 miles away.

"Oh. Yeah. Sure." she said.

"You alright?" he asked.

"I think so. Why? Do I look weird or something?" she flashed an uneasy smile.

"You just seem sad or something." he said with a wrinkled brow.

"Nah. I think I'm just tired. Let's head out."

She heaved herself off the couch and felt heavier and more tired after the two beers. He reached out to grab her arm and pull her up. She wrapped her arms around his dense shoulders, breathed in the smell of clean cotton and men's deodorant, and kissed the side of his stubbled face. His arms and back hardened and he uttered a *huh* sound and kissed her on the temple. She liked how his physical strength and helpfulness gave her the feeling of protection. The thought of socializing with his friends still sounded tiring but she mustered up some enthusiasm anyways. She stood frozen in place for a brief period of time and sighed.

"Quit thinking. Are you thinking about work?" Paul asked.

"I usually don't take work home with me, but I have this family I don't know how to deal with. Well, I think the parents will be fine, but the son and daughter worry me." said Heather. "I wonder what they are doing right now. I'm probably just worrying."

“You have to start thinking of it as work, as mean as that sounds.” he offered.

“Its hard to think of people as work, especially when they are at such a high risk.

The younger boy has a substance abuse problem, and the girl is trying to deal with it. The worst part is I don’t think I can help them.” complained Heather with eyes that began to water.

“They are probably tougher than you give them credit for. Really. Let’s get out for a while and get your mind off this, ok?” said Paul.

“Its hard to just forget about it.” Heather said.

Paul opened the door as she finished her sentence, and she walked out in front of him. Heather looked around at the place Paul lived and saw a vast yard of soft, green grass, fragrant with evening dew and talkative insects. Ponderosas and firs reached out for the gradually appearing dots of light in the sky. A startled bird or two dashed out of the brush for higher branches, and dried tufts of natural plant life drifted across the lawn on periodic gusts of cool air. The old wood of the structure released a faint pitch scent after warming in the sun all day, and the occasional just off work vehicle departed the parking lot.

Heather always committed herself to developed areas against her will, considering they tended to offer more employment and educational opportunities. She imagined that life in rural areas would be more her speed, but the accumulation of debt from a socially mandated higher education required to “make it,” narrowed her choices to unsatisfactory jobs in urban areas with predictable pay, and alienating housing to accommodate those positions. After obtaining a somewhat urbanized education, Heather realized that the

demands of debt and work would drive her life indefinitely, and severely restrain her free will.¹¹⁵

“I love this place.” said Heather.

“Really? How can you tell? Its practically dark.” replied Paul.

“I wish I could live a little farther out, away from the city.” said Heather.

“Great Falls isn’t really a city, is it? You could probably move if you wanted to.”

said Paul.

“Nah. I have to stay close to work. I cant Peter Pan my time away in the forest like you.” said Heather.

“Oh, come on. You can live how you want to.” said Paul.

“There’s no work out here for me, and my parents aren’t going to pay for me to live out here.” said Heather. “I could probably get a waitressing job, but that wouldn’t pay for my student loans.”

Heather and Paul sat silently in the dark cab on the way into town save for Heather resting her hand on Paul’s knee, and him returning the gesture. The neon blue radio lights gave off a subtle glow and Heather’s eyes grew heavy every now and then. The road and the bright yellow dashes rushed beneath them and she watched the blurry figures of sagebrush and boulders pass at 70 miles an hour. She glanced at the roadside thinking she saw the glow of eyes in the periphery of the headlights, and wondered what was happening out in the darkness.

“So how long have you lived out here?” asked Heather.

“Where? On the base or in Montana?” asked Paul.

“Montana.”

“I moved out here right after I finished college. I studied forestry at Colorado State and took a job with the Forest Service. So, around six years.” said Paul.

“Where do your parents live? asked Heather.

“Michigan.” said Paul.

“Have your parents come out this way yet?” asked Heather.

“A few times. My dad met one of his business partners out here for a fishing trip. My mom isn’t too keen on the outdoors, but she likes to eat at fancy restaurants, so we took her to a couple of the steakhouses.” said Paul.

“So you pretty much designed your own life.” said Heather.

“I guess. I wanted to live here, so I did. Why? Is that unusual?” asked Paul.

“Not unusual, just fortunate.” said Heather.

“How so?” asked Paul.

“If you can’t see it, there’s no use in me pointing it out.” said Heather.

“Pointing out what?” smirked Paul.

“Well, I don’t think most people can create the life they want that easily without some help.” said Heather.

“Sure they can. Why can’t they?” asked Paul.

“Here we go with the “choices” and “working hard” conversation.” said Heather.

“Coming from you, that sounds pretty funny.” said Paul.

“Really?” said Heather sarcastically.

“Yeah, you are a white college graduate living in Great Falls. You have nothing to complain about.” said Paul.

“I’m not talking about me, Paul.” said Heather.

“So you’re a closet liberal?” asked Paul.

“I’m not a closet anything.” said Heather. “I just think that suggesting people make the right *choices* and work hard is a simplistic way to cure social ills.”

“I didn’t say it was a cure all. Hey, guess what?” asked Paul.

“What?” asked Heather.

“It’s the weekend and we can have some fun.” said Paul.

“Alright Paul, we can have some fun.” Heather said, and patted Paul’s leg.

The Frenzy of Self-Orientation

Although the red digital letters on the clock read 2:11 am, Lolita lay on her bed with feet pointed towards the pillows and kicked her legs while flipping through a magazine. She grabbed the third *New Yorker* magazine out of the tall stack in her corner, and thumbed directly to the fiction section. After the third paragraph, she began reading out loud to stay awake, “The lovely violent, no violet wilted...Wow, one letter and everything changes.” Lolita muttered. She combed the story and omitted letters where the meaning of the word would wholly change, and examined the results. “Postmodern poetry,” she traced her finger along, and put brackets around a few would-be “found” poems. The original story lost all sense until she came to the parts she missed. “Damn, not another war story,” she said aloud and tossed the issue onto another pile of rejects,

and already read materials. “They send you another one every week anyways.” The sound of something thumping the floor prompted her to look up and listen.

A few creaks and footsteps later, she realized that her father had gotten up to use the bathroom and his walker bumped into the doors. The flush lit up the whole house with the sound of moving water, and then nothing but deep night silence and the old refrigerator waking up to hum remained. Lolita grabbed another issue of *The New Yorker* off the tall pile, and again shuffled until she found the fiction.

Before she finished the article, she fell asleep with her face on the paper words. Her leg kicked involuntarily a couple times while she bumped back and forth between the light of the lamp, and the dark narrative of dreaming. The lids of her eyes twitched every so often, and she rubbed away from her face what she perceived to be a curious insect.

Lolita sat on a warm and sunny wooden picnic table and turned to notice two powdery, bark brown spotted moths flitting next to her hand. Upon closer examination, the two insects’ bodies were attached at the posterior abdomen ends, locked in a mating ritual. Delicate filaments vibrated around the specimen to her left, and it searched in a circular pattern to understand the territory with its fine arms. Lolita nudged the two to see if they would fly away, and the frenetic one continued to feel blindly around its immediate area. Occasionally its fragile feelers brushed the other it was attached to, but recoiled upon contact and returned to the frenzy of self-orientation.

The iridescent ocular orbs of the active moth contrasted with the opaque, vacant others’ and Lolita realized that the inanimate attached, was without life. The weight of the recently dead insect prevented the other from moving in any consistent direction. She

leaned closer still and the joined parts appeared hopelessly clasped together in a double scissor pattern. Lolita nudged the still one gently for a short distance to free the other, but its translucent skin stretched so the thin membrane over the winding innards nearly split. While she focused on the details of the winged creature's survival, her supporting hand grew cold.

An icy metal table moved her swiftly over the ground beneath her and she balanced to hold on. The table rolled along without other people actually pushing it and she tried to put her feet down but could not reach the floor. A man in the distance continued to say nervously, We Have to Take it OFF, or She'll DIE. The great weight of surgical opiates tangled her thoughts, made moving a struggle, and her breath labored. She fought to focus her vision, but whatever intoxicant coursed through her suspended her in disorientation. The scene reminded her of a car struck deer she witnessed as a child that also struggled to get up and run, despite its partially crushed head and wayward, nearly white eye. She bawled out the car window for the suffering creature. When her vision cleared, she woke under layers and layers of sterilized sheets. A growing spot of blood appeared mid-elbow on her right arm and she tried to lift the covers to see what the faceless people had done.

Lolita awoke like coming up gasping through cold water, and grasped her intact arm. "Jesus," she whispered and squinted at the clock that now read 4:33 am. She pushed the smashed magazine away from her face, and sat up to look around the room. As a result of the anxious dream or reality manifesting in sleep, Lolita needed to use her inhaler, and rummaged through her nightstand drawer until her hand made out the shape

and feel of the device. She inhaled two carefully measured puffs into her lungs, and held onto the last inhalation. A sketchbook next to her bed caught her attention, and she picked it up to examine its contents. The book contained a few charcoals of the inside of her room, and the trees outside her window. She found a clean page and drew what she remembered of the intertwined moths and entered a brief description of the dream with a date. She whispered, “Alright, that’s enough” to herself, and got under the covers for a few hours of sleep.

Lolita’s fitful dreams must have stirred a dormant anxiety in Frank, or transferred the restlessness into his sleeping moments, because he began to roll around and groan. Charlene opened her heavy eyes to check on him. She reached over and put her hand firmly on his hip to calm him. The frequency of Frank’s night hour war terrors lessened over time and as they made their lives more stable through work, family, and material advances. Charlene wondered if their troubles with Ernie reawakened the agitations of traumatic memory in Frank. She observed him while he experienced this dream before, where he tries to prevent something from happening, all the while calling out for help.

Frank inevitably reached the point in the dream where the tragic event he desperately attempts to prevent, takes place anyways. Every time before, he growled, and wailed in distress while Charlene tried to bring him to full consciousness. In the years when he first came home, Charlene learned to take caution when she woke him, after he reached out a couple times and grabbed her violently. She yelled to break through the illusion that gripped him. In later years, he was much more subdued, and easier to wake without a physical reaction.

“Frank.” she said firmly and waited.

“Frank.” she said again.

“Wake up honey, you’re having a bad dream again.”

“Charlene?” he asked.

“Yes, its me. Sit up, ok?” she commanded.

Frank log rolled over onto his stronger side, and pushed himself up with his right arm. A stray tuft of oily hair pointed off towards the wall making him look slightly silly and vulnerable.

“Oh, honey. Is it the same dream?” she asked.

“Yeah, a little different, but the same.” he said.

“Want to talk about it?” she asked.

“No.” he said. “You know, this time Ernest was in the dream, and he was a bad guy.”

“He was”? she asked.

“He was chasing us, I mean, me and Ken, but then he became sad and began crying really hard. I couldn’t make him stop crying, and he got scary again and ran away.” Frank recalled.

“Frank, what are we going to do?” she asked knowing he couldn’t offer a cogent reply, but that maybe a deeper, more reasonable Frank might answer her.

“I don’t know yet.” he said.

Frank rested back onto his side, and Charlene covered him to his shoulder with the blankets and rubbed his back. Wide awake, she watched him breathe until the sound

became the deep, apnea like gasps of sleep, and she moved away back to her side of the bed. Frequent dreams of Ken Dodd, like spontaneous reruns on late night television, disrupted many nights of rest for Frank and Charlene. When Frank's friend Ken died, she didn't hear the details from Frank, but from members of the community who knew his family. Frank still served in active duty, and needed to fulfill a considerable amount of time when the incident happened, so couldn't tell her directly. The night he finally told his version of the story occurred after a particularly loud and terrifying dead of the night episode. Sweat beaded and poured off Frank's face as he thrashed around in the bed and startled Charlene. She watched him grind his teeth, and grasp at the sheets until he began to yell and she shook him.

Considering Frank and Ken originated from small Montana towns and lower socioeconomic ranks, the military assigned Frank to the infantrymen, and Ken as an artilleryman in combat. Around two o'clock in the morning, Frank's company waited in a night defense perimeter and tried to rest the men for the next day, when a surprise attack by the VC crashed against their perimeter. Approximately fifteen Vietnamese men poured into the already crowded area and began firing rapidly. The men slept next to their gear, and guns and napped light enough to respond to threats. The platoon returned fire on the incoming men; killing most of them save for a handful that ran out into the hazy dark and disappeared. In the "holes" outside of the perimeter, sat Ken Dodd and the few others who watched for oncoming attacks. Ken's night to stand watch came up and in his characteristic way, he responded cheerfully.

Many of the men they served with feigned annoyance at Ken's consistently high morale, thinking him to be something of an imbecile. Early in the morning, Ken whistled recognizable parts and choruses of popular songs, and then repeated them when he forgot the remainder. His favorite selection was the main verse to "Please Help me I'm Falling," by Hank Locklin, and he would sound out the song occasionally adding emphasis on the words so they could be identified. Before the Ken Dodd whistle version of "Please help me Immm faaaaaalin!" he got up close to the faces of his intended audience, and sang as they tried to squirm away. Ken pestered, sang, and pantomimed until he got the response he wanted, usually a tired moan and then a laugh. To many, Ken seemed like your typical Gomer Pyle, but Frank knew his friend sacrificed the brave soldier's façade to keep everyone sane, himself included.

Compared with Frank's family, Ken's family reacted differently to his announcement of enlistment, of course excepting his father. The majority of them espoused the sort of conservative ideals that resisted questioning the motives, and intended outcomes of the controversial conflict. They treated Ken's service as the patriotic and heroic mission advertised to the public. Ken versus the communists, and he's going with Frank, so he wont be alone. Apparently fighting freedom-usurping communists isn't as fun on your own, so they say. When Ken walked out his door with his rucksack over his shoulder, his folks stood proudly in the doorframe resisting tears.

Ken's mother took his head in her hands and kissed his forehead and crown, her shoulders shaking. Frank kicked the ground looking a little embarrassed bearing witness to a private family moment. Ken's mom walked out and embraced Frank as well, and

said, “You take care of each other, ok?” Frank wrapped his arms around her waist loosely, and glanced at Ken and his father over her shoulder. His father tried to wipe away a tear with his big finger before the evidence could be spotted. Frank closed his eyes.

Moments after the torrent of rounds and brilliant sulfuric artillery showers subsided, Frank threw his pack on and ran out to look for Ken. Two men restrained him, shouting something about how the VC were probably hiding in the bush waiting for them to come out. Frank paced back and forth hour after torturous hour until around 0600 when the company leader commanded the men to patrol the area for potential survivors. Frank searched the area frantically hoping to find Ken alive. He tried to shake off images of carnage, and the dread of finding Ken in a graceless and violent state. He approached the hole Ken sat in for the night, and glimpsed the back of his head. After a few moments frozen in place, Frank realized that Ken’s body had not moved. His mind played tricks on him occasionally, and he flinched as if he saw him try to get up. When he stood close enough to make out details, the sight of a large gunshot wound in the back of Ken’s head, dropped Frank to his knees.¹¹⁶

A few other men noticed Ken’s condition about the same time as Frank, and they pulled him out of the hole by both his rigid arms. His knees stayed pressed close to his chest, and moved only slightly when they lay him on the ground. The men in his company knew that Frank and Ken were close friends, so they blocked him from the sight of Ken’s face. Another man ran up with a medic cot and some shrouds to cover the body.

Frank told Charlene that he expected to find a terrible mess, or Ken alive and completely well.

When Frank saw Ken's face, pale and calm, and his hands wrapped gently around his knees, the sight affected him more than either expected scenario ever could. He confessed in tears that in his surrendered state, all remains of personas and defenses dissolved to reveal the pure form of Ken again, the Ken that he knew for so many years. Something about the soldiers all blown to pieces, transformed them into someone or something else, so they seemed less like casualties and more like spectacles.

Charlene watched Frank for a while longer to make sure his fit had ended. A hot panic swelled inside of her when the thought of Ernie came to her mind, and what his condition meant for her family. The longer he stayed away and undoubtedly deteriorated, the more her family fell to pieces as individuals, and as a united whole. She always believed that no matter how rough their lives became, they would weather the difficulties together. Now it seemed that each member of the family would spin off into the void, never to be retrieved. They endured the difficult years after Frank's departure and return, and all the struggles with work and money, but now something far more dark and insidious confronted them. Charlene battled a pang of guilt when she remembered Frank's occasional, although scarce outbursts on the children.

To get the family out of the house, Charlene took Frank and the kids out to the local pizza parlor to eat and play games at the arcade attached to the building. Ernie and Lolita were still fairly young, about ten and twelve years old respectively. Charlene felt fortunate that they still behaved like children, and huddled together to exchange the

secrets young people trade. They still giggled and ran around shrieking unlike the more precocious children she encountered at the school. She always wondered what made these kids grow up so fast and look so hard. The problem usually related back to absent or abusive parents, or an event that caused the kids to assume a defensive position against the world.

Even though she sympathized, she spent more time protecting the kids they picked on and transferred their pain to, which was frequent. With hopeful eyes, the two begged Frank and Charlene for money to play video games. Both parents reached into their wallets to pull out stray one and five dollar bills for them. As soon as their hands received the currency, they scurried away giggling to the arcade room. The waitress told them their pizza would arrive in a little under an hour, so Charlene hoped she and Frank could enjoy a couple light beers and talk while the kids played.

Frank grabbed a napkin out of the metal box, and began folding it into different shapes that fell apart. He then flicked a couple leftover crumbs and baked corn meal off the table, and gazed at the television in the corner. Charlene placed her hand on his and asked him what was on his mind. He shrugged and continued to daze away at the television program.

Athletic men in white pants darted back and forth across the bright green background, and Charlene winced at the volume as it stressed the slated plastic television speakers. She withdrew her hand, picked up the napkin, and playfully threw the shapeless wad at his chest. He snatched it up off his lap and threw it back at her, eyes still on the game. She stood momentarily and he grabbed her belt loop and asked her “Where you

going?” now with a look of attentiveness. She replied, “To check on the kids,” and walked in the other room.

Ernie and Lolita sat on one of those large plastic Indy cars that shifted side to side when you turned corners. Ernie sat in the driver’s seat, while Lolita coached him. They laughed and began to yell when a pixelated cliff unexpectedly appeared around a corner, and they drove off into the aqua cartoon ocean. The large plastic car shook to imitate a crash, and they inserted more quarters after the Game Over sign stopped flashing. Charlene smiled and left them to their fun. When she walked back through the swinging wooden doors to sit with Frank again, she found him sitting in the same place, still watching the television. A sigh escaped involuntarily and she sat back in the rigid chair and watched Frank’s face, amazed that he couldn’t sense her, or didn’t care.

“The kids are having fun.” said Charlene.

“That’s good.” said Frank.

“Have you checked on the pizza?” asked Charlene.

“They said they’d bring it out.” Replied Frank.

“Do you want to play air hockey?” asked Charlene. She realized how ridiculous the request was, but wanted to invent a way to pull him out of his self-imposed stupor.

“No, you go ahead.” said Frank.

“Frank. It’s a two person game.” replied Charlene.

The game turned to commercials and about the time Charlene decided to talk seriously with Frank, a young girl with a large silver tray approached their table, and set the bubbling pizza down on the table between them.

“Can I get you another beer?” asked the girl.

“Not for me. Thanks.” said Charlene.

“Sir?” asked the waitress.

“Sure, yes, for me too.” he said.

“Frank. *Sirrrr*. Is that yes or no?” asked Charlene, and the girl looked curiously at the two of them.

“Yes.”

Ernie and Lolita ran in to get more quarters, but decided to shuffle in next to Frank and Charlene when they spotted the pizza. Ernie chattered on happily about how many points they earned playing the racing game, and hung on Frank’s shoulder. His story continued through muffled chewing noises of the pizza until Frank unexpectedly reacted and in a raised voice said,

“Jesus Christ, you gotta talk and chew right in my goddamn ear?”

“Sorry, Dad.” Ernie said, and watched his father’s face.

“Your dad is sorry honey, he is just trying to watch the game.” said Charlene.

Charlene shot a firm look across the table at Frank, but he missed silent accusation, and tuned back in when he heard Ernie whimpering. His small fist rubbed tears away from his eyes and clearly wounded, he sulked over to Charlene and crawled in her lap. Lolita and Charlene carefully observed Ernie while glistening tears collected in his long, black eyelashes.

“Jeez, don’t cry. That wont help anyone.” said Frank.

“Come on Frank.” said Charlene and gave him the look again.

“You want to go play again?” asked Lolita, and held out a few hand-warmed quarters.

“No.” replied Ernie.

The family chewed their food in silence, each one looking uncomfortable except for Frank who eventually returned his focus to the game. Lolita tried a few times unsuccessfully to interest Ernie in another game, or round of driving in the rattling car. After a few more slices and the polite waitress handing them a to go box, the family loaded up in the car and went back home. In the rear view mirror, Charlene noticed Ernie and Lolita’s hands clasped tightly, and their knees bumping together.

When the kids had problems at school or any other difficulties adjusting to life, Charlene wondered if Frank’s emotional absence was the cause. She thought about Heather and wondered if she would find some sort of program that would help Ernie. With no hope to go back to sleep, Charlene rubbed her feet together for a few moments in the sheets, and then sat up on the side of the bed. The bedside clock read 6:18 am, and anticipation of strong coffee led Charlene out to the kitchen.

CHAPTER 4

INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP EXPERIENCE WITHIN THE
INSTITUTIONS OF THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN WESTDenial of Ironic Progress^{117, 118}

Lolita woke to the sound of the telephone ringing through the floor. The smell of burning paper and singed wax alerted her that the candle burned itself out during the long night. Her mother's muffled voice sounded calm from what she could decipher from the second floor of the house. She thought she heard her talking about Ernie and wondered if he ended up in jail, or dead at some point, and someone found him. A laugh or two entered the conversation and her mother's voice grew louder and the words more annunciated.

"Grandma." Lolita said to herself.

The phone call ended by the time she made her way downstairs, and her gaze lingered on the sight of the phone placed back on the hook. In the morning light, the inside of the house appeared slightly less clean, and the furniture a little older and worn. The living room where her father usually sat appeared larger when vacant. The lingering fatigue from the restless night settled on Lolita's face, and a vague feeling of sleep deprivation induced nausea swept the lining of her insides. Dull aches radiated down both thighs, more so than usual, and the heaviness she typically overlooked increased the gravity around her. The idea of sleeping all day with the light surrounding her sounded like one of the more soothing options available in recent days.

“Lolita. We need to go see grandma.” said Charlene from the adjacent room.

“What’s going on with grandma?” she asked.

“She fell last night on the way to the bathroom.” said Charlene. “Nothing is broken, but she will have to rest for a few days, and see a physical therapist.”

“Is she going to come here to stay with us?” Lolita asked.

“I am not sure yet.” said Charlene.

After Charlene’s father died, her mother decided to move back to Pocatello, Idaho on the Shoshone-Bannock reservation where she came from as a child. Two of her sisters still lived as widows down there, and encouraged her to come and join them for company. She handled her husband’s death fairly well, at least by all external indications, but said she felt lonely, and wanted to get out of the house they shared. Charlene and Frank helped her sell her things, and move down to Idaho to be with her sisters.

Shortly after moving close to the other women, her mood and energy improved and the three old women bowled, played cards, and took walks together. Although she missed visiting with her mother, Charlene thought the move a good idea considering work and family took up the majority of her time, and she couldn’t spend the time her mother needed. Charlene’s mother, Louise, married her husband, Horace Clark, shortly after they met at a regional gathering on the Fort Hall reservation outside of Pocatello, Idaho. Even though the Shoshone-Bannock tribes historically fought with the Blackfeet Nation, Horace and Louise loved each other instantly. Horace made eye contact with the young Louise, and thought her to be shy and coy, small as she was physically. When he asked her to walk with him, she said she would meet him at the feast, and left him

standing by himself. After a great deal of chasing and convincing, she succumbed to his pleas and promises that he never failed to fulfill.

To Lolita, her grandmother and grandfather lived in a time when you met someone and trusted that something as absurd and abstract as destiny bound the relationship together. A deep distrust brought on by the divorce boom divided people, leaving her generation without the option of relationships that were meant to be in the cosmic sense. From what Lolita witnessed over the years, the romantic adult relationship devolved into periods of monogamy with one individual, broken up by the arrival of a new partner that offered a stretch of comfort and companionship.

Lolita thought the fact that her parents remained together all these years would encourage her to believe in the sanctity of marriage, but all the struggles they faced caused her to think otherwise. The solidity of her grandparents' union reflected a time long past when everything was built to last, or so it seemed to her inexperienced eyes. Lolita's limited encounters with the opposite sex offered only doubt and worry for what awaited her as a girlfriend or wife.

When conditions failed to improve at the Lee home, Thomas stayed with the Last Star family for the remainder of the school year. Ernie declared this new and permanent male inclusion the best surprise imaginable. Thomas always spent time with the Last Star children, but to Lolita, his moving in presented a threat to she and Ernie's exclusive partnership. Some days, Lolita enjoyed the extra addition, especially when playing games like hide and seek or other multi-player activities. She avoided being alone with Thomas because he always came up with what she thought of as weird ideas for the three of them.

He talked Ernie into pooping on the neighbor's lawn with him, and when Frank heard about the prank, he made the two apologize to the big dummy like man that lived in the house across the road. The physically imposing, yet doofy, open mouthed man shrugged when the boys stood looking afraid and sorry, and they ran back to Frank and proudly proclaimed that they apologized.

To Frank, the two looked far too carefree for what they had done, and he made them return with grocery bags and garden shovels to clean the mess. Ernie cried and pouted, and Thomas responded with quiet, subdued anger pinched in his white lips, short, fast breaths, and squinty eyes. When playing hide and seek one evening, Thomas volunteered to be "it" and Ernie and Lolita ran off in opposite directions. Lolita found a snarled, green patch of brush with a few trees leaning over the shadowy tangle, and crawled deep into the interior. After one last peek to see where Ernie went off to, she ducked with bated breath under the overhanging branches and leaves. Even though the light of day receded below the skyline, enough remained for her to make out the roving outline of Thomas.

The blurred curve of his head moved closer momentarily, and then further away out into the dusk atmosphere. A snicker built up in her mouth, and she shifted her stance and dropped her head to redirect the sound. Footfalls on the grass and semi-labored breathing from Thomas stifled the laugh, and she tried hard not to breathe or move. A pair of shoes appeared in front of the large bush that hid most of her from view. Small twigs cracked amongst rolling bits of gravel and dust. She thought that any moment, he would bust in yelling and announce his capture of her, and the three would go howling

back into the middle of the yard to start over. Instead he carefully parted the branches and ducked under, into her safe cocoon. As tall as he had grown, the low hiding place forced him to crouch down to keep the arrow shaped leaves out of his face.

Lolita looked around to see if her makeshift fort offered any escapes, but the opening behind Thomas was the only one. She thought momentarily about barreling him over and running out, but didn't want him to grab a hold of her.

“Ok, you found me.” she said.

“What do I get?” he asked and dropped the armful of branches back in place.

“I'm “it” Thomas. That's what.” she said.

“Don't I deserve a kiss for finding you?” he asked.

“Funny.” she replied sarcastically.

“You can't go until I get a kiss.” he said.

“Go find Ernie.” she said.

“I already found you.” he said and moved closer.

Sharp sticks poked into Lolita's back, and she realized she had slid a few inches back away from him. Thomas advanced and kneeled down in front of Lolita in the dirt. A chain slipped free from the ring of Thomas's shirt, and a dog tag shaped pendant with a cross punched out swung back and forth in front of her face. Lolita stared through the crucifix hole to his skin, and marveled at the absence of the image. No other boy ever pressured her for physical contact, and she hoped Ernie would walk up quickly and discover him. Inside the brush, the evening sky appeared even darker and a few crickets announced their newly confident, awakened state. Thomas rested his clammy hand on her

bare knee. Sweat and dirt mixed with the musty scent of an unhygienic adolescent boy when he approached closer, and a waft of air left his t-shirt. Any moment, Ernie would walk in and interrupt him, but before that took place, he pressed his toothy, moist mouth on hers.

Even though she sat frozen and tense, Thomas eagerly opened and closed his mouth around hers, and tried to part her lips with his. The damp, cool hand that lightly gripped her leg angled up and around her waist, and then slid across her rib cage. An involuntary pulling revulsion from inside moved her away from the source of discomfort, but he continued to grope clumsily. Shuffling noises drew closer and Lolita realized, relieved, that Ernie gave up his hiding to find the two of them. Thomas quickly withdrew his hand. Lolita perceived that his face took an eternity to move away, and the image of his small eyes closely set, and partially parted lips, froze in her view like staring at a bright light leaves a blue tracer.

Beyond the dreadfully memorable event, Lolita never experienced physical contact or a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship like her few friends at school. Even though many girls at her school bragged about experiments with their boyfriends, most of which they imitated from television or magazines like *Cosmo*, Lolita thought the drama between young people ridiculous and beneath her. She preferred to wait for a quiet, honest man like her grandfather, or no man at all.

“How long do you need to get ready?” Charlene yelled to Lolita.

“Give me twenty minutes.” she replied.

In her memory, the heartless symbol of sacrifice moved back and forth, ticking away like the oldest clock on earth. A chill ran up the entirety of her, and she shook off the lingering feel of Thomas's invasive memory hands. Frank decided to stay home while Lolita and Charlene drove down to visit her mother, Louise. Charlene worried about leaving Frank alone at home, but enjoyed the rare times that allowed her to look after herself more carefully. She had a difficult time leaving him to care for himself, but like every tired caretaker, needed an occasional respite. A quick call to Wilma relieved some of her worry, when she promised to check in on him regularly while she was gone. The two women both leaned back, and breathed a sigh of relief when the car pulled onto the highway, and away from home.

“We should just keep driving mom.” said Lolita.

“To where?” Charlene asked and laughed.

“Away.” replied Lolita.

Charlene watched the road ahead, and Lolita caught a calm and curious look on her mother's face. They drove until they reached a gas station outside of East Glacier, and pulled over for gas and snacks. The little location only hosted a couple wayfaring vehicles, and Lolita opened the heavy glass door that jingled from a leather strap of brass bells. A frail, fluffy haired elderly woman sat behind the counter with a small, white Maltese dog on her lap. Lolita headed for the snack aisle while Charlene walked towards the restrooms. Rows of neon wrappers, candy, chips, and an assortment of neatly organized, convenient treats lined the shelves. Lolita grabbed a packet of Fun Dip candy,

and examined the cartoon boy on the front of the waxy pouch with the unnaturally large smile on his face.

By the end of her pass through the row of high fructose temptations, Lolita carried one of the Fun Dips, two Big Hunk candy bars, and a bag of Chips. Before she reached the front counter, she opened the cooler for a Mountain Dew and a bottled water. The label proudly proclaimed the water's origin as a high mountain spring, but the bottling plant resided in Whitestone, New York.

Even though real high mountains and undoubtedly high mountain springs surrounded the Blackfeet reservation, the water quality within the city was often found to be substandard. Some residents complained that when they took showers, their skin would break out in painful rashes and sores. The pipes that carried the water rusted out prematurely, when they were built to last at least 100 years. When natives visited each other's reservations, the first question was often "Can I drink the water here?" to which the answer was often "no."^{119, 120} Before the development that took place over a matter of 100 years, the water and land in Northern Montana was pristine and healthy. Disguised as attempts to assimilate or civilize the Blackfeet Indians, mining, agriculture, irrigation, and oil field projects allowed many corrupt profiteers to benefit at the expense of the economic and environmental well being of the tribe. People living on the reservation feel the effects of *progress* still today.^{121, 122}

On her way out of the restroom, Charlene picked up a pack of sugarless gum and an Idaho-Montana map.

“I pretty much know my way until we get to Idaho.” Charlene said until she noticed Lolita’s stash of junk, and said, “Why don’t you wait until we get to a restaurant and eat some real food?”

“Its road candy.” replied Lolita.

“Its not food.” said Charlene, and put the items on the counter.

Lolita laughed and scooped up her goods as soon as the old woman rang them up with a wand scanner.

“You’re not careful, and you’ll be fat like me.” said Charlene.

The old woman with the thin, frail arms bagged up the goods and said, “Ok, thank you,” while smiling and looking down at her dog’s mouth full of tartar-coated teeth.

Charlene scrubbed the road grime off the front and back window of the car with the gas station issued squeegee, while Lolita sat in the car with her snacks and waited. The car sighed and gave a couple inches under the weight of Charlene when she loaded into the driver’s seat.

In Charlene’s hands, the thin map unfolded like an accordion on its in-breath to reveal the Eastern half of Idaho, and the creeping rectangle of Montana. She flipped the map long ways and short ways, and back again to try and decipher the most efficient route. The rare occasions when the family traveled to Pocatello to see distant family for births, deaths, or reunions, they took the southern route around Glacier National Park. The route allowed the family to stop in Kalispell on the way home to load up on groceries at Albertson’s Food Stores or Costco where the produce still looked fresh and prices were reasonable, at least compared to the small, overpriced stores in Browning.¹²³

“Judging by the map, it should take us about 11 hours to get to Pocatello.” said Charlene.

“Why did grandma move away from her family?” asked Lolita.

“She didn’t move away, she went back to them.” said Charlene. On the long trip, Lolita stared out the window and tried to remember all the journeys past, and if the unique landmarks she committed to memory still remained the same. When they approached East Glacier Park, Lolita wondered if they would have to pass through one of those booths with a nerdy looking man or woman in a green uniform.

As kids, Ernie and Lolita usually talked Frank and Charlene into buying them one of those magnificently loud when they bounce, fresh rubber smelling balls in the ceiling high wire crate. Ernie liked to reach his arm in between the mesh, and bat at the underside of a ball he liked until it bounced out into the aisle. He never took a ball straight from the mouth of the cage. Wispy swirls of indigo blue and crayon grass green drifted across a white background on one of the balls he chose, much like a NASA photo of earth. The circumference and loft of the lovely ball dwarfed all the others in the crowded pile, and him as well, as he stretched his arms out as far as they would go to hold it. Charlene would see only a few of his small fingers, and his shoes shuffling down the aisle. Fluorescent store lights added the right amount of gleam to make the object irresistible. He batted at Lolita’s choice when she held up a medium sized ball colored purple and pink, and asked if they could purchase that one instead. In a fit of anger, Ernie kicked his ball far down the cleaning supply aisle and the two chased after swiftly escaping toy.

Charlene and Frank winced when they noticed other shoppers frowning at them for letting their children run uncontrolled. Ernie cornered the ball in between the day old baked goods rack and the meat counter, and plunked all his weight down on the ball. The steely-eyed reddish brown lobsters that rubbed their rubber-banded claws on the glass distracted Lolita, and she lost interest in the ball. In the time she took to tap on the case and observe the doomed creatures, Ernest had taken the toy up to the counter for Charlene and Frank to pay. On the way home, Ernie picked at the air hole in the thin plastic bubble, and rested his weight upon it as if it were a big, warm belly.

“Do we have to pay a fee or show them our fruit?” Lolita asked.

“No, you are thinking of the border patrol check points. I don’t think we need to pay a fee.” replied Charlene. “We shouldn’t. Glacier also used to be Blackfeet country.”

“That would be ironic.” said Lolita. “National Parks, America’s Best Idea. Who said that again? That National Parks were a good idea?” asked Lolita.

“Rockefeller? Roosevelt? Oh, I can’t remember.” said Charlene. “We were able to fend off about everyone but the tourists coming through to Glacier. It was the end of that life as we knew it.”¹²⁴

“Never underestimate an Asian sightseer with a longhorn sheep fetish, or an autistic German that loves trains.” said Lolita.

“If I remember correctly, Highway 2 pretty much avoids the fee stations.” said Charlene. “You know your dad helped work on the railway around Glacier?”

Lolita leaned her face against the cool glass of the window until it fogged slightly. When they reached the Continental Divide outside of Marias Pass, Charlene honked the

horn twice and Lolita lifted her feet. Their childhood tradition of warning the “trolls” of their passing resurfaced without even a slight change. Charlene’s father started the ritual years ago to tease the kids, and they believed him when he said if they didn’t honk and lift their feet, the trolls would have their fingers run over, and would be angry.

Angering the trolls is bad luck, he would say, and conceal a grin. The honk and lift rule applied to cattle guards, bridges, or any other significant land feature that presented potential dangers. Looking back, Lolita realized that performing obsessive-compulsive tricks to appease angry, unseen, and possibly imaginary beings would be a never-ending event in her life, and her grandfather wanted to prepare she and Ernie. The kids used to pretend that the Continental Divide represented a wrinkle in the fabric of space and time, and when they passed by the green highway sign, their bodies would disappear momentarily. To aid the illusion, they both closed their eyes, and held their breaths in preparation for being submerged in an airless mystery. This time around, Lolita lifted her feet, but without Ernie, forgot to close her eyes and hold her breath. This time of year around Glacier, in what many consider an off-season, was Lolita’s favorite time to see the area.

By Late September, hints of the winter began to creep in by burning the green out of the aspen leaves, leaving brilliant oranges and yellows. In the cool air, the small, heart-shaped leaves fluttered like a thousand detached butterfly wings. Against the dark, eternal green of the lodge pole pines, and Douglas Firs, the ethereal, ocular aspen and curling, neon green mosses decorated the groves like borrowed pieces of fine jewelry on a velvet evening gown. Jutting granite bluffs broke free of the ground and stretched to lonely,

sparsely covered, thin-aired heights. A dense gray stretched over the wide sky with the travel worn road splitting the hemispheres, to eventually disappear into a fine point in the far distance. A few cars dotted the sides of the road so that drivers slowed to avoid clipping them.

Upon closer look, Lolita noticed the *Rent-My-RV* signs on the campers, or the license plates from other states. She couldn't tell what exactly captured their attention, but suspected that some weary moose or habituated young bear found its way into their shutters. Although she loved the natural beauty of the area, something suspiciously artificial and contrived diminished her interest level, like knowing the secret machinery of a magic trick. The more ornery and mystical tendencies of the land occasionally woke visitors up with surprise storms, or other unexpected, natural events. Those long familiar with the land knew how to react to disruptions, but encroaching development tended to change the degree and timing of both catastrophes, and predictable cycles and behavior of either weather or plant and animal life.¹²⁵

Against the rock bluff where the khaki short wearing, plus fifty travelers stood together waiting, some animal tolerated the humiliations a performer suffers for their pay. For those not from the area, the appearance of an animal was usually thought of as an unexpected surprise, and not a habituated response. In the case of the average National Park animal, the constant glare of tourists and the no hunting laws kept them from the gunfire of hunting season. People who lived in the area often remarked at how brilliant the animals were to amass within the boundaries of the park at the advent of hunting

season. Covetous hunters stood by the fences and waited for elk and deer to leave the safe zone on the well-trod path of their ancient migrational journey.

Lolita loved to see the large bucks with harems of does, stand against a fence just yards from an eager hunter in florescent orange. They usually kept a careful eye on the would-be killer that stood outside of the park boundary, and chewed their grasses with a slow relish. A line of three vehicles occupied the shoulder of the road about 1/4 of a mile along the route, slowing traffic considerably, and Lolita squinted to see the next spectacle.

A tall Eastern Indian man held the hands of his two pretty adolescent daughters, and his wife walked along side, as they made their way towards the banks of the Flathead River. His wife, a short woman with shoulder length hair, wore a burnt orange Salwar Kameez and occasionally lifted their large camera strapped around her neck to snap pictures of the three of them, or of the surrounding areas. They walked at a slow, relaxed pace and the father pointed in the direction of sights he wanted them to notice. A large group of Asian tourists moved in a group of about five or so and also took pictures of one another smiling either together, or against the trees alone.

They all gathered around the camera's view screen to examine the photo after it was taken, and either laughed or covered their mouths in embarrassment. A wiry, gray haired couple that shared striking similarities, jogged by in warm clothing while they wrote their conversation into the sky with their breath hitting the cold air. One of the tourists turned to catch their exercise routine in the mechanical memory of the camera, but the two failed to notice. Lolita examined the trees and the rocks towering quietly

around all the activity, while for a million years the rocks sat patiently, and the trees twisted themselves into immodest positions of waiting and wanting.

The dormancy of the high elevations and gentle rocking of the turns in the roads lulled Lolita to sleep, and when she woke under the roof of another brightly lit gas station island, she wondered how much time had passed. She looked up to see her mother paying another attendant for gas, and unbuckled herself to make a trip inside the store. Charlene rubbed the side of Lolita's arm as if to warm her skin, and half-apologetically claimed that she didn't want to wake her. A vigorous yawn escaped from Lolita's mouth and she stretched her arms up, conscious of her shirt and her bare midsection.

"Do you want anything while we are here?" asked Charlene.

"Where are we?" asked Lolita.

"Creston, I think." said Charlene.

"Road candy, mom." replied Lolita as she held out her hand.

Charlene frowned and handed Lolita a well-worn five-dollar bill, and called from behind, "I'll be in the car."

Lolita returned with a glassy foil bag of cotton candy and another bottle of water. A flat, cartoon clown smiled on the front of the bag, and held his own perfectly rendered fluff of multi-colored cotton candy, that looked nothing like Lolita's washed out wad of sugar. Charlene sighed when Lolita got back in the car.

"What? I want to try it." said Lolita.

"You should get a fruit bar or something." said Charlene.

"Mom, those are just as bad. Besides, it reminds me of the fair."

“The fair only comes once a year for a reason, Lolita.” said Charlene.

“Well, now it comes twice.” she said, and popped the pressure out of the bag.

Back on the road, Lolita plucked fine filaments of pink and green sugar off the smashed wad in the bag. After a couple quickly dissolving bites, Lolita rolled up the open end of the bag, and tossed it in the glove box. The rugged view out the window promised unimaginable freedom, yet unspeakable hardship. Open flats of range and desert landscapes were cupped by the Flathead mountain range; whereas on the map, the gentle crescent-shaped collection of ridges appeared as small as a scar on a woman’s wrist. Lolita followed their actual path on the map to get a better sense of what surrounded them. She evaluated places marked on the one-dimensional paper against their given names to see if the description fit.¹²⁶

“Swan Lake,” she muttered, and observed the glassy spoon shaped body of water, “No, Kūt-o-yīs’ Lake.”¹²⁷

“Why Kūt-o-yīs’ Lake?” asked Charlene.

“Because it looks like a spoon, and he travels around from place to place, feeds people, helps people, and destroys their enemies. If we can rename places, they change.” explained Lolita.

“You think a lake can change?” asked Charlene.

“Why not? They’re living things. But only as a whole. As an ecosystem.” replied Lolita.

On the fringe of the Lolo National Forest, highway 83 turned into US 200, and crossed the Blackfoot River. The erratic line of water traced over the earth like the careful, yet uncontrolled handwriting of an old man filling out a Christmas card.

“I wonder why they call it Blackfoot River when it is so far South of the reservation, from our people?” mused Lolita.

“Blackfeet land used to go all the way South of Great Falls, down to the Yellowstone River, around and up into Alberta, Canada and all the way back around. Like a big, tilted thumb print.”¹²⁸ said Charlene.

“Then the cowboys came.” said Lolita.

“And the whiskey traders. And the stockmen. And the missionaries. And the government. And many others who stood to profit.”^{129, 130} said Charlene.

“Just like that.” said Lolita.

“Just like that.” said Charlene.

Their small car putted slowly through the city of Missoula, and Lolita stared out the window at all the people. Long stretches of developed roads with stoplight after stoplight, and store after store, began merging into one wavy grey and red and green blinking smear in Lolita’s view. Two women holding hands in broom skirts, one with frizzy, red hair that reminded her of the witch on Wizard of Oz, the other terribly thin and spaced out, traipsed nonchalantly down the boulevard. They gestured casually to a passing man who signaled back, and then nervously dropped something but quickly retrieved it before they saw him bumble. At a stoplight, Lolita studied an eclectic cinder

block row of box-shaped stores, some small, some large, that offered a variety of commodities and services.

One store promised to fix your vacuum cleaner but the bright, opaque yellow paint with careless, red hand painted lettering, convinced Lolita that if she had a vacuum, and it was broken, she would take it elsewhere. Part of the commercial appeal also faded in proximity to the head shop next door that promised other fixes, which wouldn't have been so bad if not for the skinny, ultra white teenage boys covered in tribal tattoos, coming out of the store looking like Kid Rock's younger brothers. *The Wannabesomeone Tribe*, Lolita thought. She often wondered about this pre-apocalyptic lost "tribe" of young people from broken homes, in search of an identity, and wasted of all their hope. Why they returned to ancient traditions they bore no connections to, she was unsure.

Lolita thought that perhaps starting over from the ostensible beginning seemed like the only sensible response to a busted, old complicated world where every attempt at peace and happiness failed miserably under the blind stupidity of bureaucracy, cumbersome complications of technology, and the unassailable, yet wholly corrupt "morality" of religious institutions. Perhaps submerging their shame and sense of nothingness in THC, industrial tobacco, and destructive, codependent "friendships" offered the only relief when the comfort of family, or protection of a real tribe was no longer available. This group seemed confused about which direction they wanted to go; would they return to the 1960's in search of the Grateful Dead, or would they follow the Industrial rockers into more tattoo parlors and German techno acid parties? Lolita wondered if they would finally discover the origin of their birth, that primeval home

composed of loved ones and pure purposes like caring for self and family, and the grateful satiation of simple needs?

The boy hidden under a flipped ball cap pulled a translucent water bong out of a blue plastic bag resembling a jellyfish, and showcased the item in the crook of his arm. The other boy nodded slyly and pulled a corner of the bag open further, causing the other boy to yank the entire parcel away from him into a protective posture. Average looking men in blue jeans, cotton t-shirts, and work boots, went into stores to walk out with reasonably sized bags full of goods like tools or machine parts. An athletic, blonde woman pushing a baby stroller jogged around the window shoppers with ease, while the baby under the pull out canopy bobbed its heavy head in response to the swerves.

The majority of the men and women appeared part college, jeans and t-shirts types, but the men sported mountain man beards and high tech athletic clothes, and women blunt, low-maintenance haircuts and technical apparel. Their well-toned, well-tanned legs most likely trained over high mountain trails, revealed their subgroup designation as potential government employee like the Forest Service, or that of a river guide or general recreation bum.

On the way through town, Lolita noticed that the valley situated against the purple-blue, Bitterroot Mountains offered its inhabitants a pleasing combination of development and convenience, against a backdrop of wild recreation opportunities. The expansive range acted as a windrow against trouble and *too much* modernization and development; harsh winters cemented this pact the mountains made with the people and prevented *too many* newcomers from moving to the area, who may decide to stay. They

passed a Wal-Mart as well as an assortment of specialty shops like the ones they passed earlier, but with hip clothes, bikes, and art for sale. An old, black man in a green Army coat pushed his wheelchair up to the crosswalk and waited, all the while mumbling to himself. His thin, atrophied legs kept his top-heavy upper body planted in the chair, and his large belly from years of sedentary living, rested in his lap.

“I like Missoula, Mom.” said Lolita.

“I do too.” said Charlene. “Never really thought about it until now.”

“I think I should have been born in the 1960’s.” said Lolita. “I like the idea of Free Love. Not the pervy kind, but the idea of giving it free.”

“I hope you’re not thinking of that kind of free love.” said Charlene. “Besides, I think all those people learned that you can’t give away that kind of love for free.”

“Were you a hippy, mom?” asked Lolita.

“I’m Indian, I don’t need to be.” said Charlene. “Personally, I think that’s what the hippies were trying to be.”¹³¹

“How’s that?” asked Lolita.

“The war reminded them that all this obey stuff, and white picket fences, and two car garages wouldn’t make them happier, or stop wars and people from dying. The trust was gone, so they did what they always do in a crisis, turn to the supposed way of the Indians.¹³² They tried to go communal, no shoes, no shirt, no authority, no haircuts.”

“What’s that guys deal?” asked Lolita and discreetly pointed to a man opposing them in a Chevy with a lift kit.

The man appeared young and well groomed with a military cut, and clean looking t-shirt. His hands gripped the steering wheel firmly and his arms bent out as if he felt tense or nervous.

“Who knows?” replied Charlene.

When the light turned green, the man revved his engine and screeched towards them and passed by quickly.

“You never know. People really are strange, and they usually have something on their mind that has nothing to do with you.” Charlene said.

“I’m bored. I’m going to take another nap.” said Lolita.

After what felt like a very long, uncomfortable sleep, Lolita woke to old lodge pole fences passing before her face, imposed upon by high, green grasses in the process of dying out for the winter. A shiver passed up and down her arms, and she checked to see if the air conditioner was running. The knob rested midway between a collection of red lines indicating hot, and the blue lines from small to tall for cold. Her neck stiffened from falling asleep in an awkward position, and she examined her mother’s wrinkled brow and solemn face for a few moments.

Charlene’s gaze fixed on an imaginary event a thousand miles off into the distance, mesmerized by the constant coming and going of headlights. Dark circles began to form under her swollen lids. Occasionally, she began to nod off, and fended sleep off by inhaling full, exasperated breaths and adjusting her position in the seat. The frame of a large log style home glowed from lights behind the cathedral style windows that made up almost the entire front of the house.

Rows of lights followed both sides of a gently curved walkway up to a large, heavy door. Two empty, Bermuda style seats faced the road, and welcomed those passing by the home. The interior radiated a warm glow that the Last Star home did not. On each side of the grand residence sat a small, modest home fashioned after the understated, utilitarian 1920's and 30's. Compared to the centerpiece between them, the homes lacked the square footage and style to pass as suitable places to live. Although Lolita found the larger home aesthetically pleasing, she imagined that once inside, the grandiose design of the home, and all its fine décor would put her ill at ease. Shrubby pines lined up behind the residences, and evening settled into the air. A reflective green sign announced their arrival into the town of Salmon, Idaho.

Lolita observed the people milling around in the windows of the houses as they prepared meals and watched television, and wished that she could rest for the night somewhere quiet. She forgot or misjudged the length of the drive, or possibly Ernie as companionship shortened her perception of the trip. If she could, she would tuck him into one of those big beds, in one of those big houses and protect him under layers and layers of warm blankets.

Visions of highway roadside crosses passed through her mind, and the night felt so large and so endless. The floor slipped out from under her, and images of dark scenes and faceless people raised hot prickles on her skin. Gassy green streetlights cast long shadows of curbside trees over the roads, and the once quaint town assumed a haunted feel. The cab of the car felt constricted and spurred her to roll the window down halfway.

Lolita's restless rousing helped Charlene to wake, and she rubbed Lolita's forearm gently, somehow sensing Lolita's discomfort.

"I'm tired of sitting in this car." said Lolita.

"I know, me too. Maybe we can get out and walk around and stretch for a minute." said Charlene.

"Sounds good. I think I see an Exxon station up ahead." said Lolita.

They drove towards the brightly lit station a few blocks away, and pulled into the unexpectedly busy parking lot. Cars and trucks packed with teenagers blaring music out the open windows, lined the building. A shaggy haired boy with a 1970's haircut swept his bangs out of his eyes, and glared at Lolita. She pretended not to notice and ignored his indiscernible grunting. High-pitched giggles followed them through the glass doors, and muffled when they finally closed. A balding, older man with a heavy mid-section greeted them and leaned forward on his hands. He looked at Charlene with a bit of acknowledgement of both of their fatigue; his with late night hours and loud teenagers, and her, weary from the road and other unspoken burdens.

"We got fresh coffee. Just made it." he said and pointed at an industrial Bunn coffee maker.

"Great. But my daughter and I are dog tired. Can you point me to a decent place to stay?" she asked.

"Well, the place just down the road is a bit small, but I know the couple who owns it. They keep the place real clean, and it's not too expensive." he said. "I can make a call and let 'em know you're coming."

“That would be great.” she said.

One of the teenagers lined up behind her with a noisy plastic bag of something he wanted to purchase. Water balloons, Jet-puff marshmallows, and a Pepsi filled his long, skinny hands that appeared disproportionately large compared with his young face and lanky body.

“I aint’ sellin’ you cigarettes, so you can forget about it.” said the man behind the counter. The boy shifted nervously, put his goods on the shelf, and walked back out the door.

“These kids. I would have kicked my son’s ass if he pulled something like that.” said the man. “He graduated from University of Idaho last year, in Engineering.”

“That’s great. What’s he plan to do next?” Charlene asked. She normally wouldn’t have stopped to talk with the man, but the knowledge that the night would soon end in front of television, and a good meal, increased her feelings of goodwill and patience. Lolita approached her with a strawberry milk, a Chico stick, a box of Mike and Ike’s and a guilty look on her face.

“Well, he’s lookin’ for a job. Not much around here, so he’ll probably have to go where the jobs are.” he said.

“More candy? You’re going to be awake all night.” said Charlene.

“That’s alright. We have a ways to go anyways.” replied Lolita.

“No, I decided we should stay for the night. I don’t think I can drive anymore, and I don’t want you driving at night.” said Charlene.

An excited smile broke across Lolita's face so that the newly found, relieved feeling struggled to emerge through the dull expression that hung on her face for days. Her hand gripped Charlene's lower arm enthusiastically and she grasped her happily in return.

"Lets order pizza to our room." said Lolita.

"And watch trashy TV programs." said Charlene.

"Yes!" replied Lolita.

The man rang up their items, grabbed a napkin from below the counter, and began to draw a map to the motel. Charlene thanked the man and he saluted her casually with his hairy, knuckled hand and fat fingers. Lolita flicked on the vanity light to read the directions sketched up by the man while Charlene drove in the general direction of the motel.

"Its just right up here. Turn right." said Lolita.

"Perfect." said Charlene with a relieved sigh. "I don't think I could have driven any further. I'm beat."

"Uh, me too. I need a shower." said Lolita.

A vacant parking spot close to the front office caught Charlene's attention, and she directed the car into the space. She pulled the trunk lever next to her left knee, and the two exited the car and retrieved their bags. They both packed light with the expectation that they would not need to stay long. Charlene waited at the front desk for a while until a small woman ambled out slowly and wrapped her sweater around herself tightly. She checked them in quickly and lightly smacked her teeth during the process. The woman's

calm, unassuming presence put both Charlene and Lolita at ease. She extracted an area map from a drawer and placed an x on the front office and an x on their room, then slid a key with a large plastic key ring with a number across the desk at Charlene. When Charlene entered the little room, she expected a bit of a run down place, but to her surprise found the place very clean and well kept.

A knitted afghan blanket on the back of the couch resembled the woman's warm, old sweater and the smell in the room was a faint mixture of cleaning solution, aging furniture, and artificial lilac. Lolita immediately flicked the little television on and began flipping through the channels. The blue glow of absent channels followed by enthusiastic infomercials filled the room with a familiar presence. All hints of strangeness vanished when the television resumed its never-ending conversation with its loyal audience.

Millions of people gathered around the same programs during alternating periods of the day and night; the talkative little box replaced the collective desire to stare deeply into a fire, and provided a communal gathering place. Some enterprising person must have entertained a similar, although ridiculous idea. An unusually high numbered channel featured a pixilated, unusually yellow fire, like an actual flame burned inside the plastic box. Lolita and Ernie learned early that the images on the television were illusory when they closed one eye and pressed their faces up to the glass, and individually colored dots stained their vision, and tracked circular colors across the white wall when they looked away. The careless artifice irritated Lolita and she flicked to a channel with music videos.

“That’s my cue to take a shower.” said Charlene. “You can go ahead and order a pizza.”

“Hopefully something is open.” said Lolita.

Charlene closed the door behind her, and opened the stream of hot water. She flipped on the heat light and the dense, warm, radiance flooded the cool bathroom and warmed her skin instantly. Curls of steam rolled above the water into the ceiling while Charlene stripped her clothes off, and hung them on the metal hook behind the door. She sat on the side of the tub, and rubbed her tired feet at the bottom of the warm water on the flower shaped, traction pads. A small bar of fragranced, milled soap, a packet containing a shower cap, and two small bottles containing shampoo and conditioner were arranged neatly next to the sink, and she grabbed the bottles and the soap. Slowly, she slid her legs in and sat up to her waist in the soothing water. She rolled the square of soap in her hands under the faucet, and the surface slowly covered with foamy, rainbow-streaked bubbles. Lolita’s music crept under the door, but the beat and lyrics were just quiet enough to not be an annoyance.

Charlene lay all the way back, and let the water enter her ears so that she could hear only the banging of the water pipes, and her feet streaking across the metal tub floor. The sound of her own breathing filled her ears, eventually followed by the gentle beating of her heart. For so long, she felt out of touch with these simple, but vital functions. Everyone else needed looking after and worrying about. Being so closely in touch with her own sounds relaxed her, and reminded her that she was alive. Soapy lavender fragrance drifted on the plane of the water, into her nostrils. She rubbed her itchy, tired eyes with the insides of her hands, and it felt so good that she continued to rub vigorously until the need subsided.

Small drops of water fell from ribbons of water running down her wrists, and speckled her face and eyes. When the bath cooled off enough to notice, she pressed the faucet with her toes to allow a steady trickle of only hot water. With her head partially submerged, the amplified rumbling of water created the illusion of being gripped in the surge of a deep river. In this image, she relaxed and closed her eyes. Without expecting it, involuntary streams of hot tears poured out the sides of her eyes.

With her now prune skin fingers, she swept them out of her sight, but her vision continued to blur from the pain denied for so long. She remembered her mother, Ernie, Frank, and all the people who threatened to vanish from her forever. Soon, all of them could be gone, and nothing could prevent that day from coming. Water began to enter the sides of her mouth that opened from weeping, and momentarily entered her windpipe. A cough forced the fluid out, and she sat up to catch her breath.

Lolita called out, “Mom?” and turned the volume all the way down to listen. “You ok?” she asked.

“Fine.” said Charlene and rubbed her face.

Her hands gripped the sides of the tub, and she used them to lift herself to a squatting, then standing position. She pulled the vinyl shower curtain closed, and pulled the shower lever up to rinse the soap off her body. Lolita entered the bathroom quietly and asked, “You ok?” again.

“I’m ok. Did you order pizza yet?” Charlene asked.

“Yeah, should be here in about 20 minutes.” replied Lolita. “I’m going to get a soda from the lobby. Can I have a dollar?”

“Sure. Can you bring me a Sprite?” asked Charlene.

“Yep. Be right back.” said Lolita. “Love you, mom.”

Lolita closed the door before Charlene could reply to the kind statement. The unexpected expression lightened the heavy, tense feeling trapped in her chest for so long, and without that emotional compression, the lightness exhilarated her. She and Lolita spent the evening watching sitcoms together, laughing, and eating pizza. Charlene wished that back home she had this kind of time to spend with her kids. When they lay side by side in bed and turned off the small, bedside lamp, they both admitted that they missed Ernie.

Early in the morning, Charlene made coffee in the tiny coffee maker on the dresser. She flicked the television back on to check and see what to expect as far as the weather and roads.

Lolita rose a little slower and took her time in the shower. In the lobby, while Charlene checked out the next morning, Lolita studied brochures meant for tourists to the area, and pointed out the River of No Return—Frank Church Wilderness Area nearby. The vast region housed thousands of old growth firs and pines, massive in height, diameter, and majesty. Gauzy strands of dull moss hung from the astounding arms of the trees, like fine cloth from the many-armed, ancient Hindu goddesses. Lolita expressed her desire to spend more time in this area, and Charlene nonchalantly shared this wish. Lolita stashed the brochure in her handbag so that she would not forget. Refreshed, they headed back out on the road, the trip now much more manageable. When they finally pulled into

Pocatello around 11 am, the tension of the long drive relented a little, and they relaxed as they drove down the Main Street of town.

From the last time they visited, the town of Pocatello had grown considerably. Lolita remembered driving through as a young girl, and noticing only long expanses of open range and farmland, and at night, gassy green street lights that lit up the occasional parked car. The main strip of town and the surrounding areas resembled that cookie cutter model that had taken root, and sprouted in most American towns; Wal-Mart and a cluster of shoe stores, cell phone shops, optical shops, and your occasional Hallmark or veterinarian's office occupied extended blocks of the street.

Lowe's and Home Depot faced off in a competition for the hardware and do-it-yourself crowd, while Petsmart sold companions for under \$30.00. At Costco, shoppers confronted their desire to go bigger than needed, just in case, and World Market showcased other cultures for sale. McDonalds, Burger King, Wendy's, Subway, Pizza Hut, Quizno's, and KFC fried, prepared, wrapped, and assembled meals for hungry travelers, and the busier or lazier members of the community. Street signs with noble names of people and occasionally, plants, laid out in a grid broke up the different rows of chain stores.

The intermittent Mormon temple or other Christian place of worship sat regally in the center of suburbs, or on neatly landscaped, elevated landmasses. Of course many other types of commerce dotted the consummately consumerist sprawl, and Lolita and Charlene glanced at one another in surprise. Charlene pulled over into a McDonald's parking lot to use the payphone outside the restaurant. Wrappers from French fries and

burgers flagged in the wind, cigarette butts littered the sidewalk, and the heavy odor of hot cooking grease wafted in the air.

Three native, Shoshone Bannock youths, two girls, and one boy, stood on the corner outside the building with their hands in their pockets. The girls talked to one another occasionally, and the boy looked around quietly. At first, Lolita thought the young man looked a little like Ernie, but after watching his mannerisms for a while, decided he only resembled him. The girls wore dark makeup and black hats turned backwards. Their unusually pallid, thin faces displayed the haggard reluctance of a youth grown up too soon, in addition to years of fast food diets and cigarettes. Their pants hung down low on their hips in the style of some of the gangsta kids Lolita knew at school.

All three kids wore Adidas with straightened laces, and cuffed the bottom of their pants. One of the girls caught Lolita looking at her and flashed a dirty look, then laughed to the other girl. They appeared under the age of 16, and Lolita wondered where they picked up their style of dress. She met some Hispanic kids through the years who also dressed in this way, and they often hung out with the native kids. Sometimes she needed to look carefully to see whether the person was Hispanic or Native.¹³³ A long Oldsmobile pulled up and the kids got inside the car with the booming bass about the time Charlene began to walk back to the car with directions in her hand.

“I got the address where Grandma is. She sounds good.” said Charlene.

Uno!

After the initial anxiety of being alone in the house, Frank found himself increasingly bored, and began exploring his immediate area. He sorted through the pile of mail on his TV tray and threw away the junk mail, coupons, and requests for charity. He scooted to the edge of his chair, leaned forward and pushed off the couch to standing position. He regained his bearings and stepped out away from the chair, and headed towards the kitchen. A rag sat neatly folded on the sink and he ran it under hot, soapy water, and rang the additional moisture out of the piece of cloth. A scattering of crumbs on his TV tray fell on the floor when he wiped the surface, and he thought to bend to pick them up, but an unstable wobble stopped him. He parked his walker against the couch, folded his rumpled blankets, and stacked them on the chair in a tall pile. As a rare, but needed break, he switched off the television and wiped the dust off the screen. Static and dust popped and zapped but left a smooth, clean dark slate of glass after the rag's swipe. The muscles in his legs limbered up so that walking about felt more comfortable and easy. He reached out to switch the television back on in response to the newly found silence, but resisted doing so.

Back in the kitchen, he rooted around in the refrigerator for something to eat. A container of cottage cheese, some whole wheat bread, and lunchmeat occupied the middle shelf. None of the refrigerator's contents appealed to him, and he opened the freezer door. The temperature shift activated the noisy cooling cycle, and Frank quickly grabbed a package of corn dogs. He checked the expiration date and found that they expired three weeks prior. He shrugged and stuffed three of them in the microwave directly on the

circular glass plate. The light flicked on and the plate spun around and whirred loudly. He watched the dogs roll and spin around until the ding sounded, signaling the food had been sufficiently ‘waved. With the heat, the cornmeal covering released a fine, greasy sheen. Frank stood before the microwave and chewed the food hastily. The lack of formality and routine gave him an opportunity to move about freely, without someone fretting over him. He threw the remaining sticks in the sink and rinsed them off with water.

In he and Charlene’s bedroom, he pulled the blankets up to the pillows, and smoothed out the wrinkles on the bed. The angle he bent his body caused a bit of a struggle when he came back up, but he muscled through anyways. A change of clothes, and a shave later, Frank left the room and ambled back into the living room. Wilma planned on stopping by around three, so most of the day belonged to him. The open window framed a few houses without activity, save for an old man in a puffy vest going by with his dog. The wind had scattered leaves throughout the yard, save for rows where Charlene already raked, but yard work failed to interest Frank. He glanced upstairs at the hallway where Lolita and Ernie’s rooms were, and after not visiting that area for so long, decided to go and have a look.

Frank again parked his walker, this time at the bottom of the stairs, and carefully took a step or two. Once he felt stable, he took a few more calculated steps. The exertion taxed his lungs and caused him to pant a little bit. Like the instructions advised in the literature, he pursed his lips into a small “O” so that the air came in more forcefully. On exhalation, he released the air only through his mouth with an “E” sound. Once on the

second floor, he gazed for a moment at Ernie's door, and headed towards the bathroom the two shared.

A peek inside revealed a relatively clean bathroom, with only a few stray items, like Ernie's used razor on the vanity shelf, and a hairbrush clogged with black hair. He examined the wastebasket and found it half full, not enough for him to worry about. Lolita's door was labeled with a U2 poster, and a sign on the knob you could flip to say "Do Not Disturb" and "Service." Frank looked at the lettering up close to see which hotel the sign came from, and found that it was from a place they all stayed as a family a few years back. A turn of the knob and a slight nudge opened the light, particleboard door and Frank stood reluctantly, yet curious in the doorway.

Frank rarely visited her room, and when he decided to stop in, he usually saw only through the crack she opened to him. The faint smell of cinnamon and incense combined with a neatly arranged room, and carefully made bed created a comfortable, inviting space. A small lamp burned on a shelf built into the corner of the wall, and he flicked it off for her. The change in light caused the room to seem less welcoming, so he turned the light back on. Rows of books lined up on recovered pieces of wood, and cinder blocks flanked two of her walls. He couldn't remember when she brought these items into the house. He examined each title and ran his hands over the bindings. The smell of old paper and dust surrounded her collection, and gave it a credence that new books lacked. In the holes of the heavy gray bricks, she had placed votive candles that leaked wax into the pores of the stones. A few El Dia De Los Muertos dolls with hand painted skeleton faces stood guard on the surprisingly large shelf. Like some sort of ant, she must

have brought this collection inconspicuously piece by piece, each day placing a book or two in her bag, and bringing it upstairs.

The set of Indian dolls she played with as a child, which her grandmother gave to her, also stood on the shelf to watch over her precious items. Their plastic faces and painted on features always fascinated Lolita. When the dolls tipped back to lie down or fall down when a child played with them, their eyes closed automatically. In the standing position, the eyes reopened. As they aged, the eyes began to stay open permanently, even when in standing position. One doll wore nothing from the waist up save for a plastic, diamond-shaped piece of turquoise in the center of its chest. A leather hood with a feather Mohawk concealed the doll's hair so that discerning its sex was difficult.

The doll Lolita liked best was clearly a female doll, but because that particular doll type didn't come in male, the plastic woman wore the clothes and accessories of a chief. Lolita took the baby strapped to another more female looking doll's back, and placed into the care of the female chief. Of course as a child, this arrangement never seemed strange to her. She simply liked the look and feel of the toy, and its tiny, dot-eyed companion. Adults tried to correct the situation and explain "the way things are supposed to be" to the child, but she rearranged them again to her liking. Frank picked up the old chief, and held it gently on its back lengthwise in his hand.

The open eyes of the doll stared back at him with glossy orange pupils, and he closed the plastic lids with his index finger and placed it back on the shelf, standing upright. Frank pulled out a few books and examined the titles, and the insides of the jackets to read the descriptions. Lolita arranged the books by subject with some groups

more full than others. Her fiction collection contained about sixty titles, whereas science and math were around twenty in number. Lolita never liked the subjects according to Charlene, and preferred more artistic studies.

To Frank's surprise, Lolita's religion and philosophy section included many titles including different types of bibles from a variety of denominations, and a good number of Eastern philosophy books. On a small decorative table, Frank noticed a small notepad filled with handmade craft paper, a pen, and an incense cradle with brass stars set into the grain of the wood. Fresh ashes filled the groove cut out of the wood to catch debris. A rotund, hand carved statue of the Buddha was placed behind the wooden holder.

Frank grasped the smiling man in his right hand, and lifted him up to look under his flat feet. The maker carved the place of his origin on the bottom of his soles along with a couple indiscernible characters. The toes appeared square and very unlike the shape of real feet, with arbitrary lines to mark the separation of each digit. The rest of the piece was carefully rendered giving the impression that once the artist reached the feet, he or she grew tired and hastily completed the project to move onto another Buddha destined for someone's shelf or altar. Frank set the item of worship back down on the table, and watched it for a while. Many stores now sold statues and paintings of the Buddha as if it were a commonplace, household item, like the peace sign, or hearts, or some other such abstract symbol. Frank's encounter with Buddha happened under very different circumstances, and the popularity of the character clearly confused him. In the case of his daughter, the Buddha clearly resembled more than interesting decoration.

A few dried leaves lingered at the feet of the Buddha as a gesture of gratitude and possibly devotion. Next to the table on the floor, a bowl from their Corning ware kitchen collection contained all the previous remnants of her offerings. Frail, nearly translucent skeletons of flowers, long blades of grass, and broad but crumpled leaves from the immediate area piled up in the bowl as one fragile heap of daily anxieties, agonies, and pleas to something or someone greater. Frank witnessed similar rituals in Vietnam or at least the fingerprints of them.

When the soldiers entered village dwellings, they found altars still alive from the prayers and longings of the people. When they ransacked the homes, Frank discouraged the men from destroying the altars, as if doing so invited bad luck they could not afford. In response, the men teased Frank and he found himself interpreting for the Vietnamese, even though he knew as much as the other GI's about the culture and religion of these people.^{134, 135} Graceful wisps of smoke drifted heavenward to plead to all those wise ones who passed before, for mercy and relief from the immense suffering that afflicted them. Fresh flowers and food remained untouched amidst the ruins. In the ashes, Frank found partially destroyed, hand drawn renditions of the sacred image, some from the hands of children. Even after the fires and the bombs, statues of smiling, sweet-faced Buddha stayed behind to look after everyone and offer comfort. Frank flipped through the small pad of paper to see if any writings offered an explanation. Most of the entries took the form of simple requests, prayers, he supposed.

Lolita rewrote some of the passages in the original language, and below wrote,

Dear Lord,

Have mercy upon me and all the sentient beings. Please help the animals and people who are suffering. Please guide me to serve you best. Please show me the illuminating truth that makes sense of this.

Love,

Your Servant Lolita

Frank tried to remember if he ever told her about this philosophy, but felt sure he hadn't considering he never committed entirely, to any one god or another. At least she never brought it up to him, or to his knowledge, Charlene. A few books of the Buddhist persuasion spanned a length of her study table, just a few feet from the impromptu altar. On the cover of a large book with a glossy jacket, a man in his 50's wearing glasses smiled blissfully at Frank. The title of the book dealt with the art of happiness or some such thing, and the man on the front was listed as the Dalai Lama. Frank couldn't remember whether or not he heard of him when he served in Vietnam.

The happy man made a few appearances on television, mostly news, and Frank found himself tuned out during his talks, even though he liked the way he raised his arms and made funny gestures. Frank compared Lolita's arrangement of the items with the experiences in his memory and tried to reconcile them accurately. In Vietnam, the altars were typically set up in similar ways, with the Buddha in the center, and the daily offerings and some incense before him. The depiction changed every so often, and depending on what time period and place the image originated from, the style changed. Some of the Buddha's appeared in highly colorful paintings, others metal based statues

with differing representations, colors, and objects to correspond to the particular manifestation.

Frank remembered seeing the types the man in the opium den described to him in the village households. A few female versions of the deity, called Taras, appeared in rich, mossy green and a mist white or saturated sky blue, surrounded by ornate symbols that historically accompanied that particular form. Some held lotus flowers in their feminine hands and smiled kindly from a levitation position, while others confronted the viewer with muscular bodies and vengeful faces that promised protection to the devotee. Commonly, Frank found either a kind face or a grave, meditative expression on many of the Buddhas he encountered.

On rare occasions, he found the Buddha as a simple man, sitting by himself with his thoughts. Later in his life, Frank noticed the Buddha reappear in Target and Wal Mart as water fountains or evolved versions of the garden gnome, typically in the high ceilinged, humid garden departments. A smattering of shit from a small bird trapped in the garden warehouse streaked the side of Buddha's face, but he remained calm and stony. Now he appeared in his daughter's room in Browning, Montana.

How he arrived here or decided the location suitable, and what the nature of his relationship to Lolita was, Frank could not decide. A couple of her books clearly appealed to the common reader, judging by the format and simple word choice. They talked about how to be happy during a stressful workday, or how to deal with difficult people, and how to enjoy a simple moment. A lesson or two also introduced the novice to meditation on how to perform the practice properly, suggesting that people no longer

possessed the ability to sit alone quietly and breathe. The most well used, weathered book contained lessons not easily understandable to the layperson.

Lolita marked a few places in the text with green and yellow post it notes, and Frank read the passages reserved as important and memorable to her. The first passage read:

At that time the Buddha addressed the Bodhisattva-Mahasattva Great Adornment and the eighty thousand bodhisattva-mahasattvas: “You should entertain a deep respect for this sutra, practice it as the Law, instruct all widely, and propagate it earnestly. You should protect it heartily day and night, and make all living beings obtain the benefits of the Law. This is truly great mercy and great compassion, so, offering the divine power of a vow, you should protect this sutra and not let anybody put obstacles in its way. Then you should have it practiced widely in Jambudvipa, and make all the living observe, read, recite, copy, and adore it without fail. Because of this you will be made to attain Perfect Enlightenment rapidly.”¹³⁶

Frank stumbled over the words and tried to pronounce them out loud. His finger underlined the word “mahasattva” as he spoke the word into the empty room. Frank knew that many Vietnamese people practiced Buddhism, but hadn’t realized that the practice originated in India.

“Another good Indian idea.” Frank mumbled to himself, looking pleased. Now the teachings resided as far away as the reservation in Northern Montana, and landed into the willing hands of his daughter. Frank thumbed the pages to find passages that interested him, and read the second passage saved by Lolita. Two notes marked the page, one that looked older, and the other fresh and still in possession of its color. The passage immediately drew Frank in, and proclaimed,

This is suffering; this the accumulation of suffering; this the extinction of suffering; this the way to extinction of suffering; and he extensively set

forth the Law of the Twelve Causes, namely: Ignorance causes action; action causes consciousness; consciousness causes name and form; name and form cause the six entrances (or sense organs); the six entrances cause contact; contact causes sensation; sensation causes desire (or love); desire causes clinging; clinging causes existence; existence causes birth; birth causes old age and death, grief, lamentation, suffering, and distress. Ignorance annihilated, then action is annihilated; action annihilated, then consciousness is annihilated and form annihilated, then the six entrances are annihilated; the six entrances annihilated, then contact is annihilated; contact annihilated, then sensation is annihilated; sensation annihilated, then desire is annihilated; desire annihilated, then clinging is annihilated; clinging annihilated, then existence is annihilated; existence annihilated, then birth is annihilated; birth being annihilated, then are annihilated old age and death, grief, lamentation, suffering, and distress.¹³⁷

“Like a big game of Uno.” said Frank aloud.

“You keep trying to get rid of your cards, but the other players make you pick em’ back up again, and then some.” He set the book down and tried to make sure he put it in the place he found it, so Lolita would not suspect he looked through her belongings. The Buddha’s face continued to smile, and Frank tapped his oddly shaped feet and said, “You figured out how to get rid of all your cards, didn’t you?”

They Always Say That, But...

A large bee writhed on its back on the windowsill next to Heather’s desk, slowly flexing its angular arms away and to its soft, filament-covered body. In an attempt to provide a dignified death, she pulled it up gently by one of its folded feet from in between peeling flakes of white paint, and dropped it out the partially open window. Before the tiny, nearly weightless body hit the bark-covered flowerbed below, a magpie waiting nearby swooped in, scissored the bee in its shiny, black beak, and flew away into the trees.

“Damn.” said Heather.

Her boss, a plain, sort of doofy looking man in his early forties, leaned into the office she shared with two other women, and observed her for a while without announcing his presence. His pastel yellow, knit polo carelessly tucked in, emphasized the paunch that clung to his midsection, and his pants hung on by the grace his imitation leather belt. When the sleeves of his shirt rode up on his arms, the contrast between his tanned, hair-covered forearms and thin, shapeless, white upper arms speckled with red bumps became noticeable. The offending magpie gripped a branch that barely held the bird’s weight and called out for a response from neighboring birds.

“What’s the plan for today?” he asked.

His announcement surprised Heather and she jumped in her chair, then turned towards him with her hand on her heart. Because she shared the space with others, she typically left her door open for people to walk in, although she hated the frequent interruptions. Heather preferred working out in the field with people, at least until they overwhelmed her, and she desired the safety of her office again.

“Well, I...” Heather began but was interrupted.

“I have a family I need you to visit today.” he said.

“But I...” she interjected, and set her hand on a pile of paperwork.

“Here’s the file, let me know how it goes.” he said, and walked out of the office.

“Hey Bill? Bill!” Heather shouted.

Heather already managed a case file of about 15 families, some she had not

contacted or visited in months. Between meetings, paperwork, and field visits, she regularly only kept up with about six different families, and even in their cases, progress came about relatively slow. Her boss took his position only two years prior, and even though a Master's of Social Work degree from a prestigious school hung on his wall, his poor managerial and people skills inhibited him from actually helping anyone. The social workers she shared a cubicle with, complained that they made appointments to consult with him about their workload or difficult cases, but he either declined or decided to no show.

Heather flipped through the manila file that secured the papers with a metal clasp, and through a preliminary scan through the details, learned that the family submitted a claim about the condition of their home. After the report, pages of photographs detailing the problem revealed an extensive mold problem, and consequently a serious indoor air quality concern.¹³⁸ Small children and elderly people frequented the home of the woman, who often cared for her daughter's children while she worked. The owner of the home refused to amend the problem, and despite numerous complaints to various county agencies, the problem went unaddressed and was ultimately turned over to Department of Public Health.¹³⁹

Photos captured scenes from each room in the house, starting with the living room crowded with furniture and dusty knick-knacks. The photographer on duty held up a large corner of carpeting with a gloved hand to show the black mold growing underneath that warped the flooring materials. Wavy lines of the fungus crept up the wall resembling the profiles in natural history museums that show of layers of the earth's sediment. Corners

of the ceilings also contained large, spotted areas of black, virulent growth and the staff in the photos wore HEPA facemasks, rubber gloves, and full body protection suits, while the residents went unprotected day in and day out. In the spare bedroom where the children's bed and all their belongings were stored, a section of wallpaper was peeled back to expose a dense patch of tarry mold growth.¹⁴⁰

The flowered wall coverings once thick, glossy surface turned brownish and contorted in areas like a burned piece of letter paper. A googly-eyed teddy bear, leaned helplessly against the wooden headboard, popped into the corner of the photo as if the inanimate creature wanted the cameraman's attention. The same mindless spore colony ate deep into the grain of the wood of the headboard, giving it a hot, bubbled appearance.¹⁴¹

The remainder of the report suggested that the cost to remediate the blight would cost in the thousands, a bill the landlord would surely refuse to pay. Records showed the problem surfaced long ago, and the owner of the home hastily dealt with the problem the first time by slathering the toxic growth with a thick coat of primer paint and wallpaper. Either the residents would have to move into another home, which they already explained they could not do because of limited means, or the health workers would have to aid in the clean up of the infestation. Heather searched through her contacts to find someone with the expertise to deal with this problem, but the one contractor she thought capable, refused the job.

The phonebook yielded similar results, and although clean up experts claimed they could correct the problem, they estimated the work in the thousands, and the family

would have to evacuate the premise temporarily. Heather picked up the phone and called the number listed as the primary resident, and waited for the ringing to connect her to the person. A tired sounding woman answered the phone, dropped the receiver, then picked it back up again and said “Hello.”

“Hi. Are you there?” Heather asked.

“Ahem, hello? Are you there?” the woman asked after she cleared her throat.

“Hi. This is Heather from Department of Public Health.” explained Heather.

“From where?” the woman asked.

“Department of Public Health. In Great Falls.” Heather repeated.

“Oh, ok. Did my daughter call you?” the woman asked.

“Um, I’m not sure, but someone called us.” said Heather.

“It was probably my daughter.” the woman said.

“So, I hear you have a problem with your house.” said Heather.

“Oh yes, its just terrible. I am on oxygen, and am sick all the time.” said the woman.

“From the mold in the house?” asked Heather.

“I was on oxygen before, but the mold makes it worse.” said the woman. “And my grandson has asthma.”¹⁴²

“How do you say your name again?” asked Heather.

“Phyllis.” said the woman. “Phyllis Swims Under.”

“Phyllis. Can you tell me about your house?” asked Heather.

The elderly woman explained that she lived in the home for some time as a long time renter. She claimed the house had been flooded many years past, and when the area received moisture in the form of rain or high humidity, the mold acted up again. The summers especially, with the heat and mountain rains from the afternoon thunderstorms, activated what simple but potent contaminant lay dormant within the place. With a gentle but slightly desperate tone, the woman said that her grandchildren experienced more frequent incidents of asthma and her airways tightened more than usual, increasing her oxygen use.

Phyllis described the constant exposure to the unhealthy air as causing a burning sensation in the lining of her lungs, and bronchial tubes. After frequent bouts of bronchitis and a prolonged case of pneumonia, she decided to do something about the problem. She tried bleaching and scrubbing the foamy moss away, but after the caustic chemicals and released particles agitated her eyes and induced coughing fits, she gave up trying to correct the problem herself. Her daughter worked at Pikuni Industries, Inc. a locally controlled corporation ran by the Blackfeet people, and promised to contact some people she knew. Heather tapped her pencil on her desk, and scribbled out some ideas as far as her role in resolving the problem.

Heather began typing an email to her boss to request funds to clean the home, but knew that if he actually answered the correspondence, he would only offer excuses. She sent the email anyways, at least to document that she submitted a request. The woman's landlord might talk to her, if not to the woman who rented from him. When she called the number of the person listed as the legal owner, an old man answered the line on the

second attempt, on the fifth ring. His creaky voice and delayed responses informed her that he might possibly be even more feeble, and unsure of what to do as the woman living in the home. He said his son back east apparently had power of attorney and made all decisions regarding the man's small estate. He expressed a desire to fix the situation, but said his son had no interest in spending money and improving the place, and eventually wanted to sell the home after he died.

Heather hung up after the dissatisfaction of finding the man less of an opponent than she originally anticipated. The search engine she used to search for non-profit groups who performed mold remediation yielded no results, at least within a reasonable distance. Heather decided to go out and visit the woman, and to check out the area for any other affordable rentals. She figured she stood a better chance of securing housing funds, than establishing a budget to improve a rental the owner had no intention of fixing anyways.

When Heather passed her supervisor's partially open door, she noticed him picking at his nose hairs in a mirror positioned at an angle on his desk. He sniffed a few times to ease the prick that radiated up his sinuses and eyes. She walked by and he looked up to see, and only caught a quick glimpse of a passerby before his attention floated back to the small hand mirror. The office issue phone on his desk rang a few times and he ignored the calling until it stopped. Heather reached into the lockbox with agency car keys, and grabbed a set that went to a small minivan. At the front desk, she checked out a camera to further document the case for her own records. The last employee that used the vehicle left a small collection of trash from a hasty fast food lunch, and with a look of

disgust, Heather bagged up the garbage and tied a knot in the bag. She decided to take Hwy 15 up through Shelby, Montana, and over to the Cut Bank entrance of the reservation.

Outside of Conrad, Montana, on the shoulder of the busy highway, a young man wearing a long duster jacket pulled his horse along by the reins. In contrast to the highly structured, far-reaching, concrete passage, he appeared as if another time and place spat him out here to accomplish some noble or holy mission—or, he was completely insane. Upon closer look, his neat clothing appeared aged and dull in color, but neatly pressed and well cared for, instead of what she initially thought of as a homeless man’s attire. He walked slowly with his head down, so that Heather could not see his face covered by his cowboy hat.¹⁴³ His long, brown hair hung on his shoulders and a bit down his back, and his tall, dun horse walked behind as if the large animal had grown accustomed to imitating him after years of companionship.

The slow gait of the quarter horse matched the stride of the lanky young man, and its long head hung down, and bobbed and strided tiredly with each step. Large semi trucks rumbled by the man and created gravel-armed gusts that swept his coat up temporarily and whipped the horse’s mane into knots. The forceful bursts of wind from passing cars didn’t outwardly disturb him or the horse, and he secured his hat tighter on his head. The mysterious man reminded her of the ghost like character in country singer, Alan Jackson’s song titled “Midnight in Montgomery,” about the haunted reappearance of Hank Williams Jr. visiting a man lost in the city late at night.¹⁴⁴ The man carried himself without any sense of urgency or awareness of his surroundings, and where he

planned to go so far out here, was uncertain. Heather slowed the speed of the vehicle down considerably to watch the man, but he only continued to walk at the same pace with his face concealed.

To Heather's knowledge, the surrounding area contained little as far as where the nameless wanderer may intend to go and visit. An old railway circled the region dotted with old cow towns, and the Veteran's Memorial Highway cut straight through, all the way up to Canada. Outside of the national parks in the state, Heather often saw weary travelers with heavy bags on their backs, sometimes hitchhiking, and some just trying futilely to create a new life after they messed up their only good chances. After much disillusionment, they realize that due to shady pasts full of unsatisfied friends and employers, and unsinkable mental illnesses and problems, that these geo-pious places offer no such relief and only more hardship.¹⁴⁵ Soon they move on to places like Canada or Alaska, where like-minded renunciates, ascetics, and other varieties of mad men congregate to live out the remainder of their days in dark, noisy bars or on unnamed, desolate mountains. Perhaps this man also planned to go there, to transcend beyond the lower 50, and away from all the problems he created for himself.¹⁴⁶

When Heather reached the East entrance of the reservation, she grabbed the file that contained the address of her new client, and tried to remember the location of the street. After passing a long stretch of modest houses, Heather reached the number listed as the woman's address. The small, mint green house that appeared 1920's or 30's era looked relatively clean, and well groomed compared to some of the other partially dilapidated and littered places on the street. A large tree grew up through the middle of

the front lawn, and scattered yellowing leaves all over the yard. The flowerbed full of patches of bark, and carefully aligned flowers spoke of the spirit of the woman who lived in the home, and tried to keep the place maintained on her own. Parts of the landscaping remained unfinished, and heavy bags of lava rock and bark contained pools of rain. A three-foot high, concrete statue of St. Francis with his faithful, perched bird protected the house with his unfailingly merciful face. Heather partially wrapped two fingers around the brass ring to make a couple thwack sounds against the door.

A few long minutes passed, and Heather began to slowly spin on her heel to leave, when the ruffling of a person inside the home begun in response to the rap on the door. Another couple minutes went by and Heather listened into the inhabitant's activities to try and decipher if the person heard her or not. The door began to carefully open until Heather saw the tip of a taupe, leather shoe in the doorway. A waft of warm, mildew odor preceded the uncovering of a small, old woman's face. Her fragile, knotty old hand gripped the door and pulled it open all the way. She reached out and put her hands on Heather's forearms, and squeezed them lovingly as if she had known her all her life. Heather's face relaxed, looking pleased and relieved, and she lightly gripped the woman in return.

"I'm glad you came. I didn't think anyone would come." said the woman.

"Awww, someone would have come. I came." said Heather.

"They always say that, but they don't come." said the woman.

The woman led Heather into the house by her hand, and she held on just barely with her fingers clasped to the old woman's cool hand. The smallness of the room added

to the effect that the woman owned too much furniture. In a larger home, the amount of items would most likely look normal and well placed. A long, orange velour couch with wooden accents and armrests occupied almost the entire length of one wall, and the love seat, recliner, and coffee tables took up the rest of the adjacent walls. She owned a small television with wire bunny ears, and placed it close to the rocking recliner with afghan blankets draped over the back. A coffee cup only partially filled, some tissues, and a pair of wireframe glasses sat conveniently close to the recliner the woman favored. Gift boxes with shreds of tissue paper on the insides and nothing else, were scattered over the coffee table. Some sat awkwardly on their sides, partially open like she planned on using them very soon. Some family photos that looked around 15 years old, judging by the dress and hairstyles, sat on the wooden shelves with an eclectic collection of porcelain figurines in Colonial era costume.

Phyllis walked over to the noisy oxygen machine, unwound the soft, clear plastic tube and fitted the forked nosepiece into her nostrils. She shuffled stiffly towards the recliner and tried to lower herself slowly, but plopped into seating position after a few seconds of her arms shaking. With eyebrows raised and a firm upper lip, she breathed in through her nose and exhaled carefully with pursed lips. She slid the small plastic ring up towards her neck to tighten the oxygen loop around her ears and nose. Heather walked into the kitchen, filled a tall glass with cold water, and brought it out to her as she wheezed. Her long nailed hand with age spots and a couple simple gold rings, received the glass that she in turn lifted to her mouth for a slow sip.

“Thank you.” said the woman.

“So I saw the pictures. I am guessing it hasn’t gotten any better.” said Heather.

“No, I suspect not. I keep spraying bleach, and that helps for a couple days, but then its bad again.” said the woman.

“Phyllis, right?” asked Heather, to which the woman nodded. “Heather.”

“I’m glad you’re here. Can I call my daughter?” asked the woman.

“Of course.” said Heather, and reached for the phone.

While she talked to her daughter, Heather paced around and examined the framed photos in the woman’s living room. Smiling, distracted children and groups of multi-generational family members stood together in each image taken in parks or picnic areas. By the sound of the conversation, the woman on the other line planned on coming over to meet Heather. To prepare for the additional visitor, Heather straightened her shirt, and smoothed the lines out of her pants. The woman’s voice sounded strong and firm, and the older woman clearly depended on her. Heather examined the walls for signs of damage she observed in the photos earlier.

The house actually looked better in person than in the photos and the problem seemed more manageable. Before she asked too many questions, Heather waited for the woman’s daughter and made small talk to pass the time. The murmur of a radio station and a vehicle pulling into the drive, notified the two of the anticipated guest’s arrival. Heather stood to answer the door so that the woman could stay seated. Before she reached the door, a sharp looking woman in a leather jacket walked into the house with a couple bags of groceries.

She breezed by Heather without saying a word or acknowledging her presence, and entered the kitchen to put the purchased goods in the refrigerator and cupboards. Heather turned to look at the woman in the chair, and she began to struggle to stand. When Heather offered an arm, the woman held onto her firmly and stood up. The younger woman rifled through drawers and cupboards, and arranged dishes and other wares into their proper place.

“Hi ma. How are you?” she asked, and kissed her turned cheek.

“Good honey, thank you.” she replied. “Are you off work?”

“No, ma. I have to go back soon, but I wanted to be here to meet...what is your name?”

“Me? Oh, Heather. Nice to meet you...”

“Shirley. Nice to meet you.” replied the woman.

“Where do you work?” asked Heather.

“So, what can you do about this situation?” asked the woman.

“Well, that depends. If the problem is as bad as you say, then we might have to find your mother a new place to live.” said Heather.

“There’s nothing you guys can do to make them clean up the mold?” she asked.

Heather noticed the frustration rising and filling out the woman’s face. Her thin lips flattened as they pressed together, and her sharp nose angled downwards while her intense eyes flashed a look of defiance. She may have looked pretty on most occasions, but the disappointment harbored for so long, hardened her face into a mask that blocked any softness. Her lean body covered by tight jeans and a fitted, slick leather jacket added

to her tough façade. She pulled her sleeves up and exposed the fine hairs on her arms and a collection of silver bangles with traditional designs. A necklace with the sliver of a crescent moon hung from her tan neck like the astral eye that faithfully follows cars above the mountain range at night, and glides along the surface of the water.

“I called remediation contractors and they want thousands.” said Heather. “And they can’t guarantee that the mold wont come back.”

“Shit. Like we can afford to move.” said Shirley.

“I even called the owner of the house, and he has no control over what happens here. His son controls what happens to the property.” explained Heather.

“Yeah, right. I bet.” said the woman. “Old bastard.”

“They said the house flooded long ago. How long ago?” asked Heather.

“Back in the 60’s.” she replied. “You would think it would have dried up by now.”

“I guess the area is just too moist.” said Heather.

“Its Montana. It’s arid. I don’t know why we can’t get rid of it.” said the woman.

“It was a bad flood.” said the old woman, who had been quiet up until this point.

“Good people died.”

“No kidding? Why is this the first I’ve heard of it?” asked Heather.

“Just like everything else. That’s why. Mostly brown people died, so no one cared.”¹⁴⁷ said Shirley.

“And God promised to never flood the world again.” said Phyllis wistfully, with a tinge of humor.

“Ma, respectfully, you don’t have to explain everything in life biblically. That’s part of the problem.” lectured Shirley. “That God breaks all his promises.”

The women sat together for approximately two hours, and tried to come up with a resolution they all could live with, and afford as well. Shirley and Phyllis resisted Heather’s advice to move into a new residence, even with the funds Heather promised from either Indian Health Services or Department of Public Health. Eventually, they agreed they could no longer live with the blight that ate into every particle, and thread of their lives. They could no longer tolerate life under water, without air, surrounded by dangerous elements. Heather left the house satisfied and resolved to help the woman move into healthier conditions, and leave behind the years of illness and frustration that permeated the home. When she prepared to leave, Shirley shook Heather’s hand and met her eyes with a look of *this better work*, and Heather nodded. Phyllis drew her lips in and flashed a demurred smile and blinked her eyes, reluctant, but willing to hope.

All-You-Can-Eat

Charlene and Lolita pulled into the circular drive in front of the rehabilitation facility where grandma stayed. A large, granite sign embedded into a flowerbed read “Health Works—Rehabilitation and Long-Term Living Center” in laser carved lettering. From the outside, the building resembled a nicely landscaped apartment complex, but in the large viewing windows, a collection of elderly people in wheelchairs gazed outside or read newspapers. They found a close parking spot and approached the entrance arm in arm. An old woman with stringy, shoulder length silver hair waited by the automatic

doors with a frown, and when they got closer said, "I'm waiting for my son. He's late." Lolita attempted eye contact, but the woman refused, conveying her disinterest in continuing a conversation. She also held her left arm in her right hand, and moved the atrophied appendage around when she adjusted her sweater. One side of her face sagged slightly, and when a small, Asian child with a pink balloon walked up with a young man, her crooked smile appeared only halfway up her face.

"I'm kind of scared to see grandma." said Lolita.

"Don't be. She needs us right now." said Charlene.

"Grandma's tougher than anyone I know." said Lolita.

"That may be." said Charlene.

Once inside the building, split levels opened up into one tall ceilinged room. In the center, an expanse designated as a dining area contained a dozen or so people eating an early lunch. The food looked healthy and well balanced, with the plate neatly portioned with a sandwich, some kind of pasta salad or soup, and a small bowl of fruit. A couple lively looking old women with freshly styled hair chatted and laughed, while the rest ate slowly, and stared into their plates as if it were some portal to the past they couldn't fit into anymore. An ancient woman with high tufts of messy, white curls removed her dentures, dipped them in her coffee cup a few times, and then wrapped them in the cloth napkin. A prim and proper woman with a bright, stiff suit and short, corporate looking, blonde hair registered a disgusted look on her face. She stood out as another uncomfortable visitor to one of the other residents at the table.

A bus boy slinked by with his greasy hair in his eyes and his shoulders hunched, and she flagged him down to complain. He looked at the cloth bundle on the table, feebly restrained a snicker, and half-heartedly tried to talk the woman into reinserting her teeth. After making no progress, the two women, visitor and visited, got up and moved to a nearby, empty table with fresh settings. The white haired woman patted the boy on the hand with her twisted, arthritic fingers, and didn't seem to mind or even notice the offended table guests. Every so often, a woman in an electric wheelchair zoomed up, and collected their mail from the small pigeonhole boxes next to the front office.

While they familiarized themselves with the building, a young woman in navy blue scrubs with smiling teddy bears on the shirt approached them, and asked if they needed help. The girl looked about 19 years old with fluffy bangs and noticeable blonde highlights. She chomped on a piece of gum, occasionally letting her jaw go slack while they tried to describe the reason for their visit. Before they could finish, the girl paced over to the desk around the corner to retrieve a binder and a key, and said, "Come this way."

Through maze like hallways and corridors, they followed the slender girl who said only one or two words at most. Hotel style art hung on the walls, and featured prints of extravagantly rendered flowers with scientific names, or children with fishing poles wearing straw hats. An old man sat at a desk in a study nook and stared through an amplifier that blew up the newspaper words and his spectacled eyes nearly twenty times their size. The girl stopped in front of a door with a plastic, flower wreath hanging on a small nail, and unlocked the door without knocking first.

“Here she is.” the girl said.

Charlene and Lolita stared at the foot end of an adjustable bed, and saw two feet pointing up under a white, cotton blanket. The two women looked at each other for reassurance, and the young girl impatiently waited for them to dismiss her. Charlene nodded, and the girl walked away with a bundle of keys jingling from a lanyard around her neck. When they approached the hospital style bed with metal rails, they hesitated before the woman asleep under a bundle of blankets. In her vulnerable state, they recognized her clearly in physical form, but wondered what affect this injury had on her mentally and spiritually. An unattended television at the foot of the bed blared out a midday court television program. A husband and wife stood shamefully behind their respective podiums while an African American woman in a black robe lectured them on their childish behavior. Charlene turned the volume down considerably and pulled a chair up next to the bed.

“Mom. Are you awake?” Charlene asked, while Lolita stood by sheepishly.

“Mom. Can you wake up?” Charlene asked again.

“I love it when people ask you that, when you’re asleep.” said Louise, with a raspy throat.

“Hi mom.” said Charlene, holding back tears.

“Hi.” said Louise, and reached out for Charlene’s hand.

“Can you sit up?” Charlene asked.

“Hand me that controller.” said Louise.

Charlene searched around and did not find what she wanted, until Lolita noticed the hand-held device with buttons hanging from a thick cord over the head of the bed. She handed it to Louise, who fumbled with it for a moment, and then raised herself slowly and mechanically into sitting position. She looked over at Charlene and Lolita with a mischievous look in her eyes, and the worried looks on their faces dissolved.

“What happened?” Charlene asked, allowing all of her concern to be visible.

“Stupid mistake. I think I hurt my pride more than my body.” replied Louise.

“What did you do grandma?” asked Lolita.

“I like this show.” said Louise, distracted by the television. “TCB, Take Care of Your Business.”

“Grandma, that’s Judge Joe Brown.” said Lolita, restraining a laugh.

“Well, he’s right, gotta take care of your business.” Louise cracked, and grinned at Lolita.

“Mom. Seriously.”¹⁴⁸ said Charlene.

“Oh, well, I tried to get into the shower, and I think I had too much cream on my feet, and I slipped. I probably would have been fine, but I was stuck for so long, that the pressure made the injury worse.” explained Louise.

Unabashedly, she rolled the sheets back and showed the angry, red and purple melon-sized contusion on her hip. A rounded protrusion added to the serious appearance of the afflicted area. Charlene couldn’t decide what surprised her more, the damaged and enflamed leg and hip, or how thin her mother had become in the last couple years. Louise pulled the covers back over the wounded blotch, and searched their faces for a reaction.

Lolita's mouth hung open for a moment, and she awkwardly placed her hand on her grandmother's leg to convey a sense of sympathy. Charlene's eyes filled with tears for a moment, but knowing her mother's tough nature, pulled the emotion back in again.

"How long are they wanting you to stay here?" Charlene asked.

"They said six weeks, unless I have someone to look after me." Louise replied.

"Do you need a doctor or nurses?" Charlene asked.

"No, they just don't want me to fall again." replied Louise. "They tried to talk me into moving in here, but I said, no way."

"Good mom. We don't want you to stay here." said Charlene. "You can come back with us."

"Oh, no. You can't manage me. I can just stay here another couple weeks, and then go back home." said Louise.

"No, mom. That's not a good idea." said Charlene.

"Well, let's talk about it some more later. Right now, I am starving." Said Louise.

"Do you want me to call the kitchen?" asked Charlene.

"God no. That food is terrible. Order from somewhere and we can pick it up." said Louise.

"We can pick it up, mom." said Charlene.

"Alright then." said Louise, and turned up the volume on the television with the remote.

Louise and Lolita fell with ease into the routine of observing the television, like only yesterday and every day before they visited with one another. The small, clean room

contained most if not all modern amenities including a mini fridge, microwave, stovetop, and easy access shower. The room reminded Lolita of the motel room they stayed in the other night, except for the newness of this place. The carpets smelled brand new with industrial chemicals and all the appliances, windows, and cabinets looked fresh out of the box. If the meals tasted as good as they looked, Lolita didn't see the problem with living in a care facility. The slack jawed girl annoyed Lolita a bit, but everything else seemed tolerable if not pleasant. While Charlene flipped through the yellow pages to find a local restaurant to order from, Lolita scooted her chair closer to her grandmother and the two watched television together.

“You comfortable grandma?” asked Lolita.

“See that bottle over there on the bathroom counter?” asked Louise.

“I...yes. I see it.” replied Lolita.

“Grab that for me, will you?” asked Louise.

Lolita grabbed the brown, see-through bottle, and rummaged through the fridge for something to swallow the pills.

“Grab that Coke right there.” said Louise.

“Grandma, you shouldn't take pills with Coke.” said Lolita.

“Bring it here.” said Louise.

Lolita brought the bottle of Coke, and the bottle of pills to Louise and she set them down on the table next to her. Lolita watched her struggle with the bottle for a moment, and opened the lid for her. She rattled two large white pills out into her hand and swallowed them with a gulp of fizzy liquid.

“Now I’ll be plenty comfortable.” said Louise.

“I found a Chinese Buffet down the road. You guys want to go there? Never mind, mom shouldn’t be walking around.” said Charlene.

“Hell, I can use a wheelchair. Lets get out of here for awhile.” said Louise.

The women approached the front desk, and waited for the nursing assistant to reappear. She passed quickly overhead on the second floor of the building, and walked quickly in a pre-determined direction. In the corner of the office, a television at half volume threw blue flashes at the wall and onto the sweating, extra large cup of soda pop sitting by the TV. A ding signaled the opening of the elevator door, and the nurse’s aid approached them with her long nailed hands on her hips. Charlene went through the process of checking out a wheelchair, one far too wide for her mother, but worked nonetheless. By folding the chair out the girl demonstrated how the chair collapsed and opened for use. She flipped the metal foot pedals down so that Louise could put her feet on them. Lolita waited with Louise, while Charlene drove the car around to pick them up at the automatic doors.

Louise tried to wheel herself with her fragile arms, and Lolita offered to do all the work, to which Louise resisted but eventually accepted. To Lolita’s surprise the chair hardly felt like it carried any weight at all, and rolled with ease over the tiles. Once at the car, Louise stood by herself and opened the passenger door. Lolita tried to support her, but before she could get a good grip, the old woman had already swung her feet into the car.

“Ma, buckle your seat belt.” said Charlene.

Both Louise and Lolita buckled themselves in and adjusted a bit to get comfortable. The drive to the Chinese Buffet only took them a few minutes, and Louise unbuckled her seatbelt before the car stopped. Once inside, they followed an unnecessary maze created out of theater style ropes with brass hooks up to a cashier that asks what plan you want. A dull man with an overgrown moustache and a large mole on his cheek explained that for \$10.95, they could have the All-You-Can-Eat Chinese Buffet. Charlene shrugged and purchased three passes for the endless dinner option, and the man gave each woman a meal tray and a red, plastic cup. The hot oil and heating lamp smelling franchise brimmed with large families with multiple, rowdy kids, old couples, and heavy people eating without looking at one another.

“What do you want ma? It would be easier for me to get it for you, and you stay at the table.” said Charlene.

“Surprise me. Hey, get me some of those chick-eyed peas.” said Louise.

“Chick-eyed peas?” What is that? You mean black-eyed peas?” asked Charlene.

“No, the little peas in the tapioca and coconut.” explained Louise.

“Oh, frog-eyed salad.” said Charlene. “I doubt they have that here.”

Lolita sat with Louise for a moment and then decided to get up and get them all some sodas. She returned with two Cokes and a water. “That water better be for you.” said Louise.

“You need it grandma. Then you can drink a Coke.” said Lolita.

“Its starting already.” said Louise. “Pretty soon you’ll be telling me what to wear.”

Charlene approached the table with a tray balanced carefully in her hands. A bowl of soup, and a plate with a few different dishes in small servings took up only a small portion of the large, brown tray. She set the tray on the side of the table, and arranged the plate, bowl, and cup in front of Louise. Louise frowned, and poked around on the plate with her fork.

“Get me some of them fried shrimp, and some sweet and sour sauce.” said Louise.

“Mom, you should eat some vegetables. Its better for you.” said Charlene.

“Like I said.” muttered Louise, and scowled in Lolita’s direction.

“Ok, Ill get you some shrimp. Anything else?” asked Charlene.

A woman both as big around and tall as an old tree, lumbered towards Louise on the way to her table. From her chair, the woman towered over Louise, and all she could see was the woman’s bloated abdomen squeezed under a pair of stretch pants, and the bottom of her tray piled high with food. Louise assumed a self-protective position as if the woman intended to careen into her any moment, and let out an “Ah!” loud enough for those sitting around them to hear. Lolita buried her face in her arm to stifle the deep laugh that threatened to erupt at any moment. Her shoulders and back shook while she sputtered into her sleeve. When she looked up, Louise’s smile widened crookedly across the length of her face, and her aged teeth and heavily lined eyes lightened up in the humorous moment.

Louise employed the ugly beauty of old age and its inviolable mischievousness to amuse Lolita, and it did the trick. The passing woman glared at her with a gaping mouth and oblivious eyes, checked in on the condition of her heap, then changed direction back

to her table. For a brief moment, a man of equal heft looked up from his plate, one of three, and then resumed piling the food into his scruffy face. The two sat across from one another without speaking, and with a twinge of melancholy and discomfort, worked on the impossible piles of shrimp, rice, pork, and oily noodles. Each wore identical yellow gold bands on their plump, ring fingers.

Charlene set the tray down again as the two laughed, and waited for an explanation. Lolita and Louise assumed a more serious face, and arranged their food in front of them. Charlene scraped three deep fried shrimp onto Louise's plate with a fork, and set a cup of sweet and sour sauce down next to them. Louise picked up the shrimp, nearly as big as her hand, and began chomping away at them. Once Louise engrossed herself fully with her dinner, Lolita and Charlene took their turn at the bar of food. Nearly 20 feet in length, the buffet offered nearly every fathomable knock off of traditional Chinese food. Three different types of sweet and sour pork filled large pots under heating lamps. Diners could choose between black sesame or white sesame, hot or mild mustard, sweet and sour or chili sauce. The meat appeared in all sorts of colors from bright pink to charred black and in cubes, slices, or strips. Same story with the shrimp. Nature never intended such extravagance.

Deep fried varieties with an inch of breading lay scattered along with scoops of slippery, light orange, baby shrimp with tiny corncobs. Chicken, pork, and vegetable fried rice piled high in pots, never ran low with a small Asian woman in her 40's to frequently restock each food type out of a vat she carried by the handles, and dumped with both small arms around the pot. A serving tray with white, pink, and orange frosted

cookies and cakes arranged like fish scales, waited for each diner at the end of food row. The buffet offered an assorted scattering of dishes that strived to look and taste Chinese, and those from American chain diners. Both Charlene and Lolita scooped up a reasonable amount of rice, a mixed vegetable dish, and some fried shrimp.

A chubby little boy, whose parents missed his slipping away, picked at the tiny corncobs, nibbled them and threw them on the floor, or set them in between the rails for trays to slide on. He spotted the automatic ice cream machine and with already sticky fingers, began filling his pockets with M&M's, mini gummy bears, and rainbow sprinkles. A sugar cone dispenser above his head contained a few chipped cones, and he struggled on his toes to reach one. When an old man with a newspaper under his arm walked up to collect a berry cobbler and some coffee, the boy ran off and hid around a corner.

Louise cleaned her plate quickly, and looked around at what other patrons were eating. Charlene felt a lot less hungry than she originally thought, and picked at the remaining half of a shrimp. Lolita also ate quickly and eyed the buffet from a distance to strategize her next serving.

“I wish they had those chick-eyed peas.” said Louise.

“I didn't see any.” said Charlene, with a tone more wary than an hour ago.

“Do you want anything else while I'm up there?” asked Lolita.

“Get me a few more shrimp, and one of those cookies.” said Louise.

“Have you been eating at the center?” asked Charlene.

“The food is pretty bad, but then again, it ain’t much better here.” complained Louise.

“Mom, I think you should come home with us.” said Charlene.

“I don’t think that’s necessary.” said Louise.

“Mom. I can’t stay here for six weeks. I have to work and look after Frank. Your sisters can’t look after you either.” said Charlene.

“Well, who will look after them?”¹⁴⁹ asked Louise.

“We will worry about that when it comes up.” said Charlene. “Where will I stay?” asked Louise. “We’ll figure it out. Don’t worry.” said Charlene. Louise ate at the same disinterested pace as Charlene and eventually laid her fork down on the plate. A waiter came by for the first time to ask if they needed anything.

“I did two hours ago, but you must have been on the phone with your girlfriend, huh?” said Louise.

“Mom. No. We’re fine. Thank you.” said Charlene.

Lolita came back with a few extra shrimp and some fried rice. When she went to scoop the crispy, question mark shaped pieces onto Louise’s plate, she put her hand over it and blocked the serving.

“You eat it kid.” she said.

Lolita sat down and bit off half of one of the battered shrimp. She noticed the change in mood by how her mother picked at the remains on her plate, and her grandmother fidgeted with the salt and pepper shakers. Lolita pushed the plate aside, and folded her hands. Charlene pulled out a couple one-dollar bills, and put them on the table

under a cup. While Charlene organized her purse and put her wallet away, Louise quietly slipped one of the dollars from under the cup, and hid it in her hand. Lolita noticed the sly maneuver, and snickered again. Louise winked. Charlene looked at both of them and tried to figure out what was so funny, but their faces revealed nothing. When she looked away again, they glanced at one another, and Louise made an expression that if it had a sound attached, would sound like an extended *eeeeee*.

“Mom.” said Charlene.

“Oh, relax.” replied Louise, and put the bill back on the table.

By the time they returned to the facility, most of the inhabitants had turned in for the night, and the staff, occupied with their nightly care. Charlene wheeled Louise back to the room, while Lolita wandered off to explore around for a soda machine. Once inside the room, Charlene flicked on the lamp next to the bed, and Louise parked her wheelchair outside the bathroom door. While Louise used the restroom, Charlene sat on the bed, and rubbed her face and scalp. How she would take care of both her mother and Frank, and try and get Ernie the help he needed was beyond her comprehension. She considered asking Lolita for help, but knew she wanted to go away for college. She resolved to call Wilma at the first opportunity to see how they could balance the care giving duties between them.^{150, 151} Charlene heard Louise trying to wash her hands against the tall bathroom counter, and slowed her breathing to listen in on her. The water ran for a few moments longer and then turned off slowly. When the door began to open again, Charlene sat up and composed herself.

“Are you kids staying here tonight?” asked Louise. “There’s a hide-a-way bed in the couch.”

“That’ll be fine. It’ll save us from paying for a hotel.” said Charlene.

“And you can help me at night.” said Louise.

Patient’s Rights

The long, empty hallways stretched out before Lolita and at 10:00 pm, the main lights went out and nightlights took their place. Equal measures of distance in between each light exaggerated the effect that the hallway consisted of endless paths that disappeared in the distance. At the end of each hall a table with puzzles and board games, offered a resting place for those walking the perimeter of the building. Items remained from past visitors to each stop who set reading glasses, pens, photos, books, and even a remote control on the table, and forgot. Lolita stopped at one table and picked up a pair of socks with pink toes, and a few playing cards. Someone wrote initials in permanent ink on the bottom of the socks, but of course Lolita knew of no “E.J.” Out of curiosity, Lolita picked up the socks to see if she could locate the matching name on the resident’s doors.

A few doors remained cracked open, and when she passed the rooms, Lolita casually peered in to see mostly old women watching television alone. Either due to poor hearing or infrequent visitors, the people never looked up to see her. One room she passed smelled faintly of spoiled tomato soup, and she stopped at a strategic angle to decipher the origin of the unpleasant odor. An old man in a robe sat in his chair and nodded off occasionally to a noisy TV program. His own nasally snores woke him, and

he bobbed his sparsely haired head back to a normal position. Although much shorter and pudgier, his carefully groomed, thin hair reminded her of her great uncle Hal.

Between seeing her grandmother again, and being in the vicinity of so many elderly people, Lolita remembered visits past to family members when Ernie came along. They always laughed at uncle Hal, Louise's brother, and simultaneously dreaded and anticipated interacting with him again. Each time they saw him, his lip harbored the same stale wad of chewing tobacco, and they swore he rarely replaced the stinky lump with a new one. Even younger family members endured his wildly inappropriate teasing and flirtations, Lolita being no exception.

Hal stood at below average height and weight, but his swollen midsection pushed his pants into a desperate hang off of his backside. He secured them just barely with his belt cinched tight around his hips. The plaid, short-sleeved snap button shirts he typically wore emphasized the distention of his abdomen, and grayish brown tufts of hair peeked out over his top button. Occasionally, Lolita caught inconvenient glimpses of his ribbed undershirt or the crack of his butt; the last place young girls want to see—the private places that hint of older male sexuality, and worse, familial in nature. From a distance, Hal's fine crown of hair infused with sunlight, inspired recollections of convincing Elvis impersonators.

During a birthday party for one of the great grandparents many years ago, hoards of family members gathered from all around in Pocatello to celebrate. Louise's sister's yard filled with people Lolita and Ernie never met before this occasion. An aching old woman sat happily as if on a throne, surrounded by both immediate and distant relatives.

Her toothless, half crescent smile froze on her face, and every time Lolita saw her, her eyes remained pleased slits and the punched, black moon grin remained outstretched as a loving parent's arms. Children crawled in her lap, and she blessed them with a pat of her hand on their back, and a dry, gummy kiss on the head.

In her magnetic field, those who moved closer to her became increasingly happy looking, and turned away in varying shades of bliss. Her striking white, parted hair, neatly pinned in a bun contrasted with her naturally dark skin, lined with years of work, trials, and perseverance. Hal traipsed back and forth across the sunny yard with a tallboy of Old Milwaukee in his hand, and looked for unwitting audience members to pitch his jokes to. In a conversation amongst three of his in-laws, the oldest sister Hester tried to play his game and tease him back.

“If it were up to you, you woulda’ thrown us in a gunny sack long ago, and tossed us in the river!” complained Hester.

Hal turned to the smaller members of the audience, a group of boys, and said, “That’d be a pretty damn big bag.”

The boys roared, and he sipped his beer as if he had said nothing. Hester had no idea that Hal took out part of her intestine, played with it, and put it back. His jabs were surgical, and Hal followed the boys to the horseshoe pits, and told them to stop being sissies when they missed the stake in the ground. Of course, they took it all in good fun, and teased him in return. Either way, no matter the occasion or the weather, Hal kept his hair perfectly in a wispy, yet mist fine shellac.

After the enjoyment of teasing a group of small children and inciting curdling shrieks from them, Hal wandered off to a convenient shade spot to enjoy the view. To his shock and horror, a little girl about the age of 8, with stone black glistening hair to her lower back, snuck upon him from the back porch he leaned on, and dumped a pitcher of cold water on his head. All the air trapped in his belly immediately went into his lungs during the deep inhalation that came from the shock of cold water. Streams ran down his face, and streaks of long hair followed over his closed eyes. His work worn hands automatically located his face, and rubbed the water out of his eyes, to see what terrible culprit visited such a punishment upon him.^{152, 153} By the time he realized who affronted him with the appalling gesture, she hid securely within the ring of siblings and cousins who co-conspired to attack him.

Amongst the noise and joviality, mostly kids noticed the brilliant plot that avenged all who had been caught in the cruel and ironic clutches of uncle Hal. He escaped up the stairs of the back deck, and through the sliding glass door. A rush of children tried to follow him in, but as the ultimate prankster, he anticipated this strategy and locked the door behind him. Wet, screaming kids jumped up and down seal-like against the glass, and pounded for him to open the door until their parents came and shooed them away.¹⁵⁴ He forgot to lock the front door, and a few clever kids managed to get inside the house. Lucky for him, he locked himself in his sister's bedroom that shared a door to the main bathroom in the house, and bolted that door as well. After trying to get in unsuccessfully, the unruly troop lost interest, and resumed their water fights and hide and go seek. Ernie and Lolita figured that some means of entry must still exist.

Ernie remembered that a small, but high window in the bathroom could be accessed if they climbed on something outside to gain a height advantage. They found a painting ladder in the shop, and dragged it over to the designated viewing area. Once they secured it into the soil so it would not wobble, Ernie climbed up and peered in to catch a glimpse of Hal. He swayed back and forth, and squinted with his face close to the glass until a circle of steam fogged the spot where his mouth was. Lolita began to gently nudge at a snail on the ground with her toe, while Ernie continued to peek in and search for something to see. Ernie let out a surprised gasp, and Lolita rushed up the ladder behind him. He elbowed her and wailed that she was crushing him, so she moved a bit so that they could share the space a bit more comfortably. He held the inner rungs of the ladder, and tipped his head back to see at just the right angle, while Lolita grasped the outer rungs with her arms around Ernie.

From their viewpoint, they seized a rare opportunity to observe Hal and his hair in its natural condition. Without his shirt, he stood in front of a full-length mirror attached to the back of a door, and held the shocking length of his hair straight up in the air. Ernie commented under his breath that he looked like one of those troll dolls with the fuzzy hair that stands on end. Lolita, not for the first or last time, struggled to restrain a body-racking laugh, and Ernie elbowed her in the ribs again. When he turned to his side, Lolita and Ernie realized that the length of hair he held came entirely from one side of his head. Both kids gasped and watched with fascination as Hal begun the top-secret process of grooming his coif.

Over a period of two hours, Uncle Hal carefully stretched his hair across his arm and blow-dried the stray waves straight. His face, more like mug, with his baggy under eyes and sagging chin fixed into a concentrated, and serious expression, monitored his arms that moved gracefully around to accommodate the complex methods of his secret routine. Once dry, the flat, fluffed locks rested gently on his shoulders, almost as if an entirely new hairstyle had been created. He rifled through the drawers of the bathroom until he found a fine tooth comb, and began picking at the roots to rat the base and build volume. The automatic impulses that followed each technique could only come from the circuitry of a being that has performed the action an uncountable number of times.¹⁵⁵

Once he built the ground layer of the style though completing the rats through two inches of hair close to the scalp, he began to smooth hair around the fluff upwards to create the impression that the hair grew smoothly from root to tip. Then like a seasoned carnival worker artfully swirls fine, sugary strands into cloud formations, he wound the remaining hair into a wave that created rat pack bangs. He secured the remainder of the hair into the middle of his wonderpuff, and tiptoed around with his hand up like a fortress until he found a can of aerosol hairspray. To complete the illusion, he fogged himself in a haze of glistening Hair Net Hairspray, and stood before the mirror to admire his creation.

Finer than any Elvis, sleeker than any Sinatra, uncle Hal shined in the full length with his private masterpiece. He grinned at himself knowing he regained his smoothness, pulled his shirt out of the dryer, and wandered out to find a secure, childless location.

From under Lolita, Ernie whispered, "It's magic!" and with shared astonishment she agreed, "Its amazing!"

“concerning those who are not there,
or those who are no longer”¹⁵⁶

In the distance, Lolita heard the murmur of women’s voices, and slowly followed the sound. When she approached the noise she found that conversation actually came from one woman inside a room with a partially opened door. The aluminum nameplate read “Ellen Janet” to which Lolita raised the pair of socks closer to make sure the initials matched. While she thought of the other people she knew with two first names, the woman began to groan. Her cry sounded like someone calling out from a deep dream or someone trapped under a weight from which they could not free themselves.

Lolita looked to her left and right to see if one of the attendants were coming, or had heard the woman. A few silent minutes passed, and Lolita pushed the door open and examined the dark for a person. A confidence from inside told her that most likely, the woman would be in bed, and her intrusion was unnecessary. She worried that a nurse’s aid would walk in any moment and accuse her of stealing or some other crime. After her eyes partially adjusted to the dark with the help of a tiny nightlight in the bathroom, she noticed a person sitting on the floor.

At first glance, the figure looked male with shortly cropped hair, and square shoulders. A hand reached out and then slumped back on the floor. Lolita groped around for a light switch, and her hand found and flipped the hard plastic knob. The unexpected set of vacant blue, but hot, bloodshot eyes, and the blistered mouth that hung open completely threw Lolita. She stood back and waited while the strange looking person groped at the carpeting with their stool-encrusted hands. The woman’s eyes seemed to

roll back in her head occasionally, and she attempted to lick her cracked lips with her dry tongue. Horrified, Lolita hurried to the bathroom, ran some hot water and rinsed a hotel issue washrag under the faucet. Next to the toilet, a string dangled that when pulled hit the help switch that called the nurses. Lolita grabbed the string and yanked the thread until a red light flashed. A clock on the wall read 10:42 pm, and Lolita hoped that help would arrive soon.

Lolita rinsed the rag once more in the warm water, and rubbed a little soap into the cloth. The woman, or Ellen, sat on the floor with an old nylon nightgown that barely covered her behind. Red blotches on the backs of her thighs informed Lolita that she had been sitting in this spot for some time. Her bewildered expression turned into one of agony and surrender to Lolita to bring her comfort of any kind. Lolita rubbed her hands with the rag, and tried to clean the filth out of her nails. She went back and forth to the sink until her hands were clean. She tossed the washrag in a dirty clothes hamper in the bathroom, and grabbed another clean rag. First she washed her own hands with an unused bar of soap, and then prepared another washcloth with warm water and a little soap. Lolita kneeled next to Ellen and wiped her face gently with the rag until the buildup of dry spittle and blood disappeared from around her mouth. Her face softened under the kind treatment like any creature that knows the healing touch of a sincere caregiver.

The dyed, reddish hair with an inch of gray roots contained the oil of a week or more of not washing. Her mouth opened and revealed teeth caked with plaque, and a small, dry twig of a tongue. Lolita never saw such a sight, and looked closer to verify the condition of the inflicted part. An empty water glass sat on the bedside table next to a few

small, white pills. A thick layer of dust coated the tabletop, and the cold temperature of the room lead Lolita to believe that both the staff and family abandoned the unfortunate resident. The woman frowned, and tears welled up in her irritated eyes. A few unrecognizable words formed and fell out of her mouth, and Lolita tried to make out the meaning. She grabbed the glass, rinsed it in the sink and filled it with cool water.

When she raised the cup to Ellen's mouth, she formed her dried lips around the rim and began to pull in the water. To Lolita's disappointment, all the liquid ran back out of her open mouth, and onto the front of her nightgown. She could no longer drink. After so long without water, she could not drink. Tears began to pour down on the gown already spotted with moisture, and Lolita remembered a story she read about a bath of tears. A mother who lost her child, cried all over his feet when he returned, and in her ecstasy breast milk mixed with her tears, and she bathed him with the love her body could not restrain.

Except, no holiness remained here, and no mercy was to be found. Quite the opposite, and instead the woman dried out from all the neglect and cruelty. In an attempt to correct the woman's predicament, Lolita hooked her arms under the woman's armpits, and lifted her back onto the bed. She pulled and hoisted the surprisingly dense body up, and waited for her legs, straight and stiff to bend. Once away from the supportive side of the bed, Ellen struggled to stay in sitting position, and leaned back with wide eyes. Lolita held her up as best as she could, but decided that laying her on her back seemed best. Once in bed, Lolita wiped her face again with the rag and cleared away the tears.

Once her feet went beneath the sheets, Lolita pulled the blankets up to her chest and straightened the bed with her in it. At 11:33, after almost 45 minutes of the call light going off, two nurses aides arrived chatting casually. Ellen looked up at Lolita with a look of helplessness, and she grabbed a hard, wooden chair from a small desk and sat next to the bed.

“Ellen?” called one of the women.

“She’s here, in bed.” said Lolita.

“Oh, looks like you helped her.” said a heavysset girl with brown, permanently waved hair.

The other heavysset woman with processed blonde hair, who looked to be in her late twenties, eyed Lolita with a scowl on her pudgy face.

“Aren’t you a guest?” she asked.

“I am staying here with, someone. But I was walking and heard...” said Lolita.

“You are not supposed to enter the resident’s rooms.” lectured the first girl. “It’s the rules.”

“And you’re supposed to but clearly don’t. What’s wrong with her?” Lolita asked.

“Her family requested it.” said the second girl.

“What?” said Lolita. The girls explained that Ellen owned a lot of money and property, and that her daughter acted as the power of attorney in all matters. She and her son, a high maintenance city type, told Ellen that after her doctor diagnosed her with Alzheimer’s disease, she had no more reason to live. Because of the terminal illness, they claimed she had outlived her already limited usefulness. Shortly thereafter, Ellen refused

to take her medications, and her family cancelled all prescriptions. According to one of the girls, Ellen's daughter explicitly told her that if she stopped eating, she would die sooner.

After a period of great sadness, wandering, and debating, the remaining faculties in Ellen told her, yes, you should just die for everyone's sake. Her daughter must not have known even the basics of human processes, and that starvation and dehydration actually take an excruciatingly long period of time. They visited only once a month, probably to see if Ellen were any closer to dying, and then left after only a brief "visit."

The girl said that strangely, on one occasion while Ellen sat in the bathroom just a few feet away, the grandson told her he studied the effects of prayer on the mind. He bragged that he wanted to compare repetitive dance music, and different types of worship in human brainwaves. He complained that the sooner Ellen died, the sooner he could fund his study. He mentioned something about purchasing a new car as well, and the girl said she thought it weird that the openly expressed a cavalier desire for Ellen to die. Her life was just one more thing in the way of his happiness. The staff, under some warped adherence to patients' wishes, decided that they would leave Ellen to herself to die "as she wished."

Instead of encouraging her to eat and drink, they avoided bringing meals to her room and ultimately treated her like a hospice patient. Although, hospice patients require far more specialized care to manage their pain, hygiene, and comfort level. Even though her mind and body possessed who knows how many more days, months, or years, they regarded her as on her way out the door, and neglected to perform any measure that

would bring her back inside, out from such cruel weather. The girls explained, that with their busy schedules, one less patient to look after saved them a lot of time. Ellen lay in the bed, now with her eyes closed. Lolita couldn't tell if hearing the truth caused her to blank out momentarily, or if help finally arriving, allowed her a rare moment of relieved rest.

The lead girl stepped in to at least create the pretense of providing care, and began to change Ellen's nightgown and check if she needed cleaning. The other girl helped roll her onto either side, so that her shift companion could change Ellen's clothes without sitting her upright. The girls behaved as if Lolita no longer occupied the same space as they, and processed the patient while they gossiped about their alcoholic boyfriends and unfaithful friends. Lolita eyed the balled up socks with pink toes and heels, and initials marked on the sole. She backed slowly out of the room, and quietly shut the door behind her.

In the main area, a framed list of important numbers for seniors sat on a decorative table with silk flowers and a telephone. One of the numbers in hard to read sized letters dispatched the Ombudsman for the Elderly, and Lolita scratched the number down on a small piece of paper. When she returned to her grandma's room, her mother sat next to the bed asleep with the television still going. She tiptoed closer to the bed and noticed her grandmother watching a comedy program.

"I tried to tell her to go to sleep, but she wouldn't." said Louise in a whisper.

Lolita nodded in approval and pulled out the hide-a-bed carefully. Louise pointed up at the top of the closet and said, "Sheets are in there."

Too tired and disgusted to care, Lolita pulled a few synthetic fiber blankets off the shelf and a couple pillows, and made the bed quickly yet neatly. In the process of Lolita arranging the bed, Charlene awoke and went into the bathroom for a moment. She came back out in a nightgown and crawled under the covers. Her grandmother looked comfortable and continued to watch the television, and her mother fell asleep in a matter of moments.

“You going to be able to sleep Grandma?” asked Lolita.

“I’ll fall asleep eventually.” said Louise.

“Want anything?” asked Lolita. “Nah, kid. I’m ok.” said Louise.

Lolita felt an irrepressible urge to bathe, and without turning on the noisy fan, took a long, hot shower. When she crawled in bed next to her mother, the clean smell of her hair and occasional wheeze of her fatigued breathing, relaxed the remainder of the tension in Lolita’s chest, and she fell into the deepest of sleep. In the night, she draped her arm around her beloved mother, and held the two of them together through the uncertain waves of dreams.

No Good to Anyone

After another weekend with Paul in the quiet fold of the Flathead Range, Heather reluctantly made the drive back home on Sunday evening. She walked back through Paul’s door twice with the excuse that she just wanted another kiss goodbye. Miles of highway thick with Ponderosa and Lodgepole pines on both shoulders collected golden light in flashing slants, and threw them at her windshield. Although the slowly dimming

atmosphere impeded her vision, she basked in the warmth of moments passing and summer leaving for good. Acrobatic crowds of swallows expanded and contracted from the corrugated fields up to the treetops like black stars in a small universe. Along the way, she passed horse pastures framed by Lodgepole fences that leaned against one another like periodic x's. Two young horses chased one another, and ran along with the moving car through the tall, swaying grasses and over small irrigation ditches.

A smaller paint with a long main and tail kicked up its hind feet, and forcefully nodded its head. The other gave chase and reached out to nip at the other's neck and rump with its square teeth. The rangy horses looked about three or four years old—still wild and playful, but close to full-grown and nearly ten hands high. Heather remembered her stint as a ranch hand, and the cruel efficiency of agriculture and animal husbandry. Employees of the ranch waited for the long anticipated foal to arrive, and Heather wondered if the birth would take place on her shift.

Heather showed up for work early in the morning on a Sunday and began to feed, water, and move the horses out from the stalls to the pastures. Early winter snow built up in the paddocks and froze overnight with layers of piss, and green, fibrous manure. Once she performed her routine and all the horses ate and wandered about, she grabbed a pickaxe from the shed and tried to clear out some of the built up ice. A friendly barn cat and three dogs; an old border collie, a black lab, wire hair mix, and a little fluffy dog followed her from stall to stall and wherever else she needed to go. In between shoveling stalls, feeding, or picking up, they sat up from their spot of dusty, morning sunshine, trailed along behind her and begged for more attention. Off in the distance, the usual pile

of refuse burned, and released a steady column of pungent smoke. In between the morning and afternoon routine, Heather took a break and either ate some food or found a variety of items to clean or repair. The night previous to this day was a late one, and she decided to sit on the haystack and drink some water. The long, panel fence creaked open she stood to see who arrived.

The blue Buick pulled in slowly with the lights off and the passenger window rolled down. Rick senior sat in the passenger seat, this time without the little dog while Bruce drove and peered off into the blank distance. At first they drove past her, then backed up and stopped the car next to her. She mustered a friendly smile but both looked elsewhere, and did not return the gesture. Bruce stepped out and began to work impatiently with a couple of the horses. He straightened the haystack and covered it with the heavy plastic tarp. Both men stood around Mary's paddock with their arms draped over the rails. Heather walked up to them and stepped up on the bottom rail.

"How's she doing?" asked Heather.

She glanced at the mare and she appeared fatigued beyond anything she had ever seen, and struggled to breathe. Slow streams of snot and tears ran from her eyes and nostrils and her heavy, long lashed brown eyes remained closed most of the time. Staying awake appeared an insurmountable fight and almost as if intoxicated, the horse's legs occasionally faltered. The small paddock barely contained her massive body, and a flipped tractor tire lay embedded in the greenish muck. Mud, shit, and snow reached all the way up to the animal's hocks. The belly fur swirled into wet ringlets while snorts of hot breath interacted with the frigid air.

“Maybe she’ll be better when I put her in her warm stall, and give her some grain.” said Heather.

“No. She has no reason to be back in the stall. Leave her out here.” said Bruce.

Rick senior pointed and said “She had her baby.”

“Really? When did...” asked Heather.

“It didn’t make it. She foaled too soon.” said Bruce. “It was a boy.”

“Just beautiful. A beautiful little boy.” said Rick.

“Aw, did you bury it?” asked Heather.

“No, its over there.” said Bruce, and pointed at the smoldering burn pile.

Throughout the earlier part of the day, Heather passed strangling wafts of rubbery smoke while she worked, but thought nothing of temporarily breathing in a little. The direction of the slow wind angled the smoke at all of them, and they stood in ruddy, obscured sun. The nostrils of the mare opened and closed to take in the scent as tears continued to streak her face. Heather had never seen a horse crying, and wondered if she knew the fate of her offspring. The day dragged on endlessly, and Heather made every attempt to avoid a close up look at the burn pile.

When she passed the slowly diminishing heap of ash with a couple charred buckets of paint still intact, she held her breath and gasped once in fresh air. By evening, the night loomed closer and brought with it a deeper degree of cold. Heather stood next to the suffering animal, and rubbed her thick neck with her fingers. Fluid leaked slowly from the eye like opening of her sex, and Heather wrapped her arms around the horse’s body and squeezed for a long period of time.

“Like were no good to anyone, huh?” said Heather.

What she never said to anyone besides the man she planned to marry a few years previous to this moment, was that an abortion performed when she was a teenager scarred her, and left her infertile. During the engagement period, they decided to allow nature to take its course, but month after month, a period came instead of a positive pregnancy test. She explained that ovarian cysts ran her family, and most likely they were to blame for her inability to conceive. When confronted with the choice, her fiancée sided with a future that included kids of his own, and broke off the engagement.

Reluctantly, she closed the gate of the paddock, and secured the fence with a bungee cord. Even though Bruce told her to discontinue the grain, she scooped two large helpings of the fragrant meal into the upturned feeding tire. She drove away towards home, wishing she could sneak the mare back into its warm stall. After a couple more months of helping her father’s friend on the ranch, she decided to use her weekend mornings to sleep. Eventually, her interest in working with horses returned and the next summer, a large cattle ranch in Big Timber, Montana offered her a position as a ranch hand.

Due to the public nature of the job, the application process required applicants to send a video, and a written narrative detailing their horse handling abilities. A lot of guest ranches in Montana capitalized on the nostalgic fantasies entertained by those in love with the supposed “real west.”¹⁵⁷ Of course they demanded a high degree of secrecy when it came to putting on shows, and performing westernness. Admissions that even hinted that any part of the supposed daily life of the ranch was in any way phony, were

grounds for immediate dismissal.¹⁵⁸ In this country, the cowboy was god, and the place was some kind of heaven where asking too many questions about the truth constituted blasphemy of the worst kind. Part of the workers' duties entailed actual and practical tasks to keep the place operating, and others involved more creative responses from the staff in the entertainment of visitors. Heather's riding skills qualified her as an expert with most broken and trained horses, but intermediate at best with rank horses. She and Jaime went over the application together, and Heather said,

“How about I send in a video of me on horseback, and put it to music.”

“That would be awesome.” said Jaime. “No doubt. They would hire you.”

“I could get one of those horse heads on a stick for kids, and superimpose myself onto a background from an old Western.” said Heather.

“Even better, you can show yourself riding and then have a clip from the movie *The Man from Snowy River*.¹⁵⁹ In the video, you will be riding along, and then a super obvious patch of the part when he is riding down the mountainside will come on.” said Jaime.

“Yeah, show a man riding, and then suddenly I am there and look totally different.” said Heather. “I wonder what they'd say when they saw it?”

Once Heather got closer to Great Falls, she checked her phone for a signal and called Paul.

“Hey. Do you know of any cheap rentals in your area?” she asked. “I know it'd be a long drive, but I think it would be better than Great Falls.” she said.

“Ah. Really? What, you don't want to live near me?” she asked.

“I know. It would be a pain in the ass to get to work.” she said.

“I am dreading it a little bit, as always.” she said. “Ok, I will call you when I get off work tomorrow.”

Heather hit the red “end” button on her phone, and shortly thereafter pulled into her driveway. In the morning, she drank some strong coffee while she went through the deluge of emails in her inbox. A few she avoided by guessing their degree of low importance, and searched out for a response from her boss. A bold subject line labeled “Re: Housing Issue” came through around 7:48 Monday morning. She read quickly and gathered that he wanted Heather to tell the family that DPHHS or IHS could not help them. She reread the email a couple more times to see if he truly said no to her appeal. The rest of her emails came mostly from clients, and other office workers with minor requests. In the hallway, her boss chatted happily with another employee, and his voice carried through the halls. Even though a red light flashed on her multi-line phone alerting her that voicemails waited for her, she went out into the hall to talk to her boss.

“Whoa, well good morning there!” he said.

Perhaps because Monday gave him new energy, he dressed himself more formally than usual with pressed khaki pants, a white button up, and a plaid vest. He shimmied his already hiked pants further up, and put a hand on his hips. Heather looked in his oblivious eyes and crossed her arms. The cheerful smile that advertised his crooked teeth with heavy dental work waned into a flat line. He mustered up another contrived happy expression at the same time Heather asked, “Why can’t we help the Swims Under

family? You told me to go and help them, and I told them I would. They are counting on me.”

“Well, you’ll quickly learn that you can’t help everyone.” said Bill.

“Why can’t we do anything? That’s our job. Can’t we refer them to someone at least?” she asked.

“If you can find someone that can help, then go ahead and refer them.” he said.

“What about you? Why can’t you do anything? Isn’t that your job?” Heather asked.

“Whoa, I don’t appreciate your tone.” said Bill.

“And these people don’t appreciate living in a poisoned home where they can’t even breathe.” said Heather. “Why are we here if we can’t do any good?”

“Maybe you should go home for the day. Cool off.” said Bill.

By this time, a group of employees gathered around the scene, and sipped coffee from their “Mom of the Year” and “Yosemite National Park” mugs. None of them said a word, and waited for the next scene in the confrontation. Bill’s mouth quivered a bit and he assumed a more stern, authoritative posture when he realized an audience watched him. The group of mostly women ranging from mid thirties to early fifties stood by and said nothing, even though they complained to Heather on many occasions about his substandard performance as a superior. Their faces expressed either satisfaction masked with shock, or lipstick oblivion.

“I’d probably get more done at home, than all of you put together in this office.” said Heather.

Bill posed to speak but before he could, Heather turned on her heel, and headed for her office. He followed timidly behind her and watched as she grabbed her belongings, and backed out of the parking lot. A few miles from the office she caught a glance of herself in the rear view mirror, and looked taken aback by the solidified mix of anger and regret on her face. She flipped the mirror down and picked up her phone to call Paul. His voicemail picked up after the first ring, and she decided against leaving a message. Five minutes later, he called her back, but she realized she didn't want to tell him about her reaction. She rang Jaime's number, and she picked up on the third ring.

"Hi. How are you?" she asked.

"Yeah, I'm screwed. Can you hear it in my voice?" she asked.

"Not yet, but I doubt they would want me to come back." she said.

"I can't go back now. I need to give it some time." she said.

"I suppose I could, but I have clients depending on me, and only have about 400 dollars in the bank." she said. "And I swore to one of my families that I would help them get a new place to live." she said.

"Ok, I'll head your way." she said.

"Fuck." she muttered to herself.

Self-Preservation

In the dark, her hands swept webs away that collected in her eyes and mouth. Only until her eyes focused and the path beneath her feet became visible, could she see that for some reason she walked up the canyon of a mountain. Thin, cool threads

gathered in her eyelashes, in her hair, and on her lips. The constant blinking to see tripped her feet, and an imminent sense that a bone could soon break reminded her to slow her pace. In the black beyond, the sense of a pervasive deep freeze so acute, told her of the mercilessness that waited for her in those trees. Her voice carried a small distance and then fell away to the cracking of dead snags, and the spherical rhythms of oscillating winter stars. Something like a light from a house called from the immeasurable distance and promised warmth.

Miles passed beneath her feet, and she found herself standing in front of a mirror the magnitude of the entire western horizon. Naked hips collected the light in their sockets, while shadows concealed her from the waist up to her face. A slow spotlight passed over her from hip to face, and to her relief a vast cloth concealed her breasts and collarbones. The garment that initially assumed the shape of a fine evening gown that clasped around the back of the neck, began to move about on her body. Illuminated like a cocoon dangling against the wheel of the morning sun, the collection of threads she amassed on the long walk crisscrossed her skin in a thousand different angles, and veiled her head. To stop the moving article of clothing, she slapped her hands on her chest, and tried to slow the frenzy.

In response to her panic, the collar moved up around her neck to assume the shape of a pristine, white Edwardian Tea Dress from approximately 1905.¹⁶⁰ With her fingertips packed with earth, she raked the quivering winged creatures that composed the dress down and away from her face. In the mirror, she saw that thousands of tiny moths with hair-like legs traveled in circular patterns all upon her. Each swath she pulled away

from her left a burning, raised suffering on her bare skin, similar to an allergic reaction. Like constellations, lanterns composed of the same materials as the webbing that slowed her, lit up around her, and transformed the bone breaking cold into an oil painting shade of midnight blue. The more desperately she tried to clear the mass of insects, the thicker their layers grew until her lungs constricted. In her hands the curling clumps of delicate wings and powdery abdomens moving frenetically collected into a moist, weightless collection she flung to clear her hands. One by one people wearing traditional clothing gathered around her.

Two small children sat on a white horse and looked over their shoulders at her, while three women looked off in the opposite direction. Old men and women sat in rocking chairs with grave expressions, and held precious items in their hands.¹⁶¹ Thousands of beaded shoes piled up, some in neat rows and some tossed in careless heaps. Muddy water filled many of the moccasins and began to soften the rawhide, and make the once rugged animal hide glisten. The moths continued to vibrate in multitudes on her agitated skin. Ancient Blackfoot shirts with careful stitches and hairlocks hung side by side in the air, without people in them. Fringed and intricately beaded vests wrapped the broad chests of kind faced men.¹⁶² The webbed lanterns the size of small Chinese boxes, larger at the top and tapering down, glowed in the same cadence as a breathing child from blinding white to dark again. Children's toys, similar to the dolls she played with as a child lay scattered on the ground. Upon closer look, the fine details of the face revealed a frown that consisted of one black line, and the eyes altogether absent.¹⁶³

Moths began to surround all these items including innumerable toys, bags, pipes, leggings, gun cases, bows and arrows, instruments, tack, backrests, utensils, cradleboards, and sacred bundles.¹⁶⁴ Lolita ran to the collection and feverishly tried to clear the moths away from the treasures, but they refused to let up their ticker-tocker movements and blotting with curled tongues, and finely barbed hands. They crawled all about her face and tried to enter her mouth, and all she could see as she batted with her eyes closed, were the people standing side by side on a dirt road that receded into a dark row of trees. Soon they all vanished and all that remained in the struggle were the collections of shoes, and her crouched over naked.

Vacancy

With a feeling similar to someone cracking a door to her most private moment, Lolita scanned the room with sleep-swollen eyes. Instead of discovering a curious onlooker, Lolita found a room of disinterested people. The indentation where her mother once slept retained the outline of her body, but she now stood with her head cocked, listening to a woman explain “options.” A fanned out stack of materials covered the small breakfast table, and Charlene watched them while the woman explained each one.

The tall, curly haired woman in her fifties eclipsed Charlene with her broad shoulders, and hips stacked on top of towering legs. Although a wispy, flowered shirt softened her boxy body, a determined hardness set deep into her eyes and delegitimized her attempt at understanding, “the process of our loved ones aging.” Lolita thought at first

that she resembled a gussied up version of Dorothy Zbornak from *Golden Girls*, but remembered Dorothy actually conceding some kindness to her hapless housemates.

Lolita waited for Charlene to argue against the woman's absurd suggestion that her grandmother rated at a level II, or in need of moderate, but full-time assistance, and that they could leave her at the facility. With her hands crossed in her lap, her grandmother reacted to the conversation as if some part of it rang true. Her elbows rested on the hard, plastic arms of the wheelchair, and she stared at the tips of her shoes while the two talked. She occasionally slid her feet together, and then two inches apart again. Lolita's wrist began to hurt from holding her weight, and she kicked her legs out of the sheets, and touched her feet to the floor. Unsure of what the woman said from beginning to now, Lolita approached the sensitive meeting carefully, and began reading the lines and microsecond expressions that flashed across the woman's face. Her presence went unnoticed as the woman continued to point to black and white descriptions in a collated binder labeled "Nursing Assessment."

With her thin, age spotted hands Louise rotated her wedding ring around and around her ring finger, and tapped the bottom on the armrest. She found Lolita in the corner of her left eye, and winked. Lolita noticed a missed a button on her sleeve and quietly snuck in to correct the stray flap of fabric. Louise patted her hand as she pulled it back.

"Mitzy." said the woman as she extended her hand.

Multiple gold chain bracelets gathered at the fatty part of her palm when she offered it to Lolita. Her long, curved acrylic nails barely held onto a pamphlet until she

tucked it under her arm. A flash of her bright orange bra drew all the women's eyes. A smile hung on her face, and began to slide when Lolita intently followed the nervous quivers that developed around her mouth.

“Ok, then. Well, we could get you in an apartment today. There's one upstairs that just opened.” said Mitzy. “It's *really* nice.”

Lolita jabbed Charlene in the rear end with her knuckle. Charlene eyed her grandmother who continued to study the squares on the vinyl floor. Lolita poked into her flesh a second time, this time much harder. Charlene grabbed Lolita's hand and held the fingers together, while the woman finished her marketing pitch. Louise tipped her head back to face off with the ceiling, and then pretended to watch out the partially shaded window at some parked cars with the sun gleaming on their windshields. After a couple days in the facility, Lolita wondered if a way out for all of them actually existed. In between a hazy daydream and sharpening to the present moment, Lolita worried that the woman would try to commit them all with her almighty clipboard and residential options.

NOTES

1. Chodron, *The Places that Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times*, 89. Quote from Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche.
2. Campbell, *The Rhizomatic West: Representing the American West in a Transnational, Global, Media Age*, 37.
3. Foley, *An Historical Analysis of the Administration of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation by the United States*, vi. 3 Vols.
4. Cook-Lynn, *Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegner, and Other Essays*, 62.
5. Vizenor, Gerald, *Postindian Conversations*, 150.
6. See Scriver, "My New Interview Policy."
7. Vizenor, *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*, 11.
8. Vizenor, *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*, 1.
9. See Rosendale, "'Feminism(s) and the Left: A Discussion with Linda Martin Alcoff,'" 245.
10. See Lyons, "The Left Side of the Circle: American Indians and Progressive Politics," 74.
11. See Gross, "Storytelling as Theory."
12. See Velie, "The Concept of Survivance in Gerald Vizenor's Bear Island: The War at Sugar Point," 148.
13. Wen Yu, Ying. "Playing Indian: Manifest Manners, Simulation, and Pastiche," 95.
14. See Lockard, "Facing the Windigoo: Gerald Vizenor and Primo Levi," 210.
15. Silko, *Conversations with Leslie Marmon Silko*, 40.
16. Vizenor, *Narratives of Native Presence*, 1.
17. See Gamber, "*Bone Game* and *Dark River* by Louis Owens," 238.
18. See Mackay, "Diane Glancy's Paradoxes of Survivance." 247-258.
19. See Mackay, "Diane Glancy's Paradoxes of Survival," 261.

20. See Glancy, "A Journey Towards Survivance," 278.
21. See Sriver, "Drifting the Alleys."
22. See Farr, "Troubled Bundles: The Travail of the Cultural and Religious Renewal," 11.
23. Owens, *Mixedblood Messages: Literature, Film, Family, Place*, 26.
24. Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance*, 76.
25. Dean, Bartholomew, Jerome M. Levi, *At the Risk of Being Heard: Identity, Indigenous Rights, and Postcolonial States*, 130.
26. See Ritte, "Earth Rights: Learning the Languages of Indigenous Environmentalism."
27. Vizenor, *Postindian Conversations*, 150.
28. See Alexie, "When the Story Stolen is Your Own."
29. See Fleisher, "Navahoax."
30. See Sriver, "So Tim Barrus is Nasdijj—Get Over It!"
31. See Sriver, "So Tim Barrus is Nasdijj—Get Over It!"
32. See Alexie, "When the Story Stolen is Your Own."
33. See Fleisher, "Navahoax."
34. See Fleisher, "Navahoax." Many other sources confirm this story, from *Esquire* to random personal blogs of people expressing outrage.
35. Silko, *Conversations with Leslie Marmon Silko*, 22.
36. Brookfield, *The Power of Critical Theory: Liberating Adult Learning and Education*, 36.
37. Womack, *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*, 237.
38. Khalifeh, *Wild Thorns*, 114-121.
39. See Roy, "Come September."

40. See “Region of Coverage,” (Appendix A: Maps of Selected Region, Figure 5).
41. See “Western Region Reservations,” (Appendix A: Maps of Selected Region, Figure 4).
42. Karem, “Representing the Southwest: The Fiction of Leslie Marmon Silko,” 159-164.
43. Silko, *Conversations with Leslie Marmon Silko*, 26-27.
44. See Gamber, “*Bone Game* and *Dark River* by Louis Owens,” 255.
45. Vizenor, *Bear Island*, 49, 47.
46. See Parrett, “Montana’s Worst Natural Disaster,” (see Appendix A and B)
47. See Parrett, “Montana’s Worst Natural Disaster,” (see Appendix A and B).
48. See Parrett, “Montana’s Worst Natural Disaster,” (see Appendix A and B).
49. See Parrett, Personal Interview.
50. See Parrett, “Montana’s Worst Natural Disaster,” (see Appendix A and B).
51. See Parrett, “Montana’s Worst Natural Disaster,” (see Appendix A and B).
52. See Sherow, “The Fellow Who Can Talk the Loudest and Has the Best Shotgun Gets the Water: Water Regulation and the Montana State Engineer’s Office, 1889-1964.”
53. See Sherow, “The Fellow Who Can Talk the Loudest and Has the Best Shotgun Gets the Water: Water Regulation and the Montana State Engineer’s Office, 1889-1964.”
54. See Sherow, “The Fellow Who Can Talk the Loudest and Has the Best Shotgun Gets the Water: Water Regulation and the Montana State Engineer’s Office, 1889-1964.”
55. See “State of Montana Natural Hazards Mitigation Plan – November 2001” for supporting evidence of the dam’s instability, and consequent role in severe flooding.
56. See Parrett, “Montana’s Worst Natural Disaster.”
57. See Parrett, “Montana’s Worst Natural Disaster.”
58. See Leow, “Way of the Warrior.”
59. See Leow, “Way of the Warrior.”

60. See Sanderson “Vietnam Powwow: The Vietnam War as Remembered by Native American Veterans.”

61. Vizenor and Lee, *Postindian Conversations*, 84-85. Vizenor describes the term *Indian* as an invention, “the ethnographic construction of a model that replaces the real in most academic references.”

62. See Sanderson “Vietnam Powwow: The Vietnam War as Remembered by Native American Veterans.” Many veterans expressed disgust at the thought of acting on behalf of the white man, and accomplishing his ends, as they saw similarities in the situation of Native American Veterans and Vietnam people in terms of desiring self-determined living.

63. Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans of the Vietnam War*, 137-138. Wartime roles for Native Americans in the Vietnam War were often confused and “racially motivated,” considering *Indians* were believed to possess unique skills and instincts.

64. Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 45-46. The “other” Orientalizing the “other” due to exposure to the dominant cultures ingrained ways of viewing Eastern/Asiatic cultures. Loomba analyzes Said’s argument related to the condition of Orientalism and reiterates “knowledge of the East could never be innocent or ‘objective’ because it was produced by human beings who were necessarily embedded in colonial history and relationships.”

65. *The Threefold Lotus Sutra*, 320.

66. See Highwaymen, “Michael, Row Your Boat Ashore.”

67. Churchill, *A Little Matter of Genocide: Holocaust and Denial in the Americas 1492 to the Present*, 247-248. Churchill examines the widespread evidence of poor native health compounded by “the lowest annual and lifetime incomes of any group on the continent...[and] by a decisive margin, the highest rates of infant mortality, death by malnutrition, exposure, and plague disease.”

68. See “Maze of Injustice: The Failure to Protect Indigenous Women from Sexual Violence in the USA—One Year Update.”

69. See King, “Wolverton Mountain.”

70. Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans of the Vietnam War*, 19-24. Holm describes many young men who went through ritual cleansing upon returning from war, and some who found no relief. Most agreed that through witnessing “the horrors of war and, by contrast, [they] knew the wisdom of peace.”

71. Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans of the Vietnam War*, 17. Many native veterans found the VA, especially in the Reagan-Bush era a “bureaucratic labyrinth” where reports discounted the presence of Native Americans in their data, and that “little cooperation existed between the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the VA benefits office.” These conditions made access to benefits including home loans nearly impossible.
72. See “Generating the Mind for Enlightenment.”
73. See West, “Starvation Winter of the Blackfeet,” (see Appendix B: Images of Events in Lolita Last Star, Figure 12).
74. See West, “Starvation Winter of the Blackfeet.”
75. See West, “Starvation Winter of the Blackfeet.”
76. See Riner, “American Indian Education: A Rite That Fails.”
77. See Riner, “American Indian Education: A Rite That Fails.” Studies at Indian schools have revealed “four techniques which seem to offer some immunity to the various attempts at forced conversion; these are: silent withdrawal, prideful disdain, disruptive humor and profound commitment to one's own beliefs. The Indian students have discovered the effectiveness of these techniques quite on their own.”
78. See Grande, *Red Pedagogy: Native American Social and Political Thought*, 17.
79. See Ruggera, “Diet Counseling to Improve Hematocrit Values of Children on the Blackfeet Reservation: Community Health Apprenticeship Project.”
80. See Krisberg, “APHA Calls for Better Indian Health Services.”
81. Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans of the Vietnam War*, 118.
82. Womack, *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*, 208. Although not applicable across the various tribal identities (non-essential), native humor often allows self-depreciation in sexual matters as opposed to Christianized, oft-shameful treatments of sexuality.
83. Ortiz, *From Sand Creek*, 9.
84. See Ortiz, “A Moment of Silence.”

85. Brookfield, *The Power of Critical Theory: Liberating Adult Learning and Teaching*, 35. Brookfield warns against a potentially unkind attitude towards those “whose consciousness has yet to be raised and who have yet to see how they are colluding in their own oppression.” His statement reveals that he considers the “Have Not Yets” not entirely a lost cause in the struggle towards liberating themselves and others.

86. Foley, *An Historical Analysis of the Administration of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation by the United States*. Vol 1. Introduction, vi.

87. See Grande, “American Indian Geographies of Identity and Power: At the Crossroads of Indigena and Mestizaje,” 192. Grande discusses the relationship between geography and identity for Native Americans who still live on reservation lands that border “white” towns. This sometimes contentious geospatial arrangement “not only shapes the ways Indians perceive and construct Whites, but also significantly influences their own views of American identity...the dependency on outside capital generates a subordinating effect, leaving American Indians at the virtual mercy of venture capitalists and Whitestream do-gooders.”

88. See White Grass, “The Road to Recovery.” Herman White Grass, a Montana state certified counselor estimated that “about 75 % of the clientele that we have treated in that age bracket [18 to 30 yrs] have tried or are addicted to methamphetamines. It is that high.” The Blackfeet chemical dependency center is an in-patient treatment for Native Americans in Browning, Montana.

89. See Brossy, Personal Conversation.

90. See Glancy, “The Naked Spot: A Journey Towards Survivance,” 278. In the face of rude oppressive practices, agents of survivance discover creative and pleasurable ways to subvert even hapless agents of oppression. According to Glancy, “Survival is formulating survival on one’s own terms. It provokes the absence of meaning that is thought to be and shows the undertones of *being*...”

91. See Toensing, “New Indian Commission Chair Supports Amending State Recognition Bill.” The idea of a sovereign nation has entered the mainstream “red” consciousness, and in obvious ways is a very old idea, one professed since first contact. Toensing describes a case wherein various tribal entities vied for inclusion into a project that would affect the status of the tribe. “Tribes are not states. Tribes are not a ‘local’ group. Tribes are independent, federally recognized governmental entities, which enjoy a unique government-to-government relationship with the United States under Article I of the Constitution, and for whom the United States exercises a special trust responsibility.”

92. Means, *Voice of Indigenous Peoples*, 59-60. William Means, President of the International Indian Treaty Council makes a strong connection between preservation of lands and cultural identity and the need to view them appropriately.

93. See Toensing, "Oglala Lakota Traveler Sees 'Deep Parallels' in Palestine." In both academic circles and mainstream native society, a striking parallel is drawn between the plight of Palestinians under Israeli occupation, and that of the Native American/Settler Colonial reality.

94. See Abu-Laban and Bakan, "The Racial Contract: Israel/Palestine and Canada," 639. "Israeli historian Ilan Pappé maintains that the ethnic cleansing of Palestine and the Palestinians in 1948 'has been erased almost totally from the global political memory.' This is despite the fact that since the Jewish holocaust, and more recently with the advent of electronic media, 'it has become almost impossible to conceal large scale crimes against humanity.'" Similarly, the same can be said for the colonial past of Native Americans, and the uncovering of truth through technology.

95. Campbell, *The Rhizomatic West: Representing the American West in a Transnational, Global, Media Age*, 238. Campbell discusses beliefs about fixed identities and places that serve to enclose contemporary native people in old assumptions, or discredit those who step away from rigidly defined locations, like reservations.

96. See "Just Like Winter," NCAI, (pdf).

97. See "McFee, Malcolm. "The 150% Man, a Product of Blackfeet Acculturation," 1098. Although self-admittedly not keen on anthropological studies of contemporary Native American life, McFee points out that the Blackfeet self-identified as "white-oriented" viewed themselves as "more independent, acquisitive, hard working and success oriented than their more Indian neighbors" and valued their social worth by "economic standards, scheduled work hours, formal education, and accumulated capital."

98. See Collins, Van Zant, "Gimme Three Steps."

99. See Lyons, Scott Richard. "The Left Side of the Circle: American Indians and Progressive Politics," 74-78. Lyons explains Indian resistance to "progressive" ideas as a result of years of failed ideas of what progress means advanced by the political left. Many of the "good ideas" that promised to assimilate Indians, and improve conditions came from so-called progressives. When young and idealistic administrators and health agency employees approach native communities with proposals on how to "help" the community prosper, the result is understandably a collective sigh, and lack of buy in to the program. As a result, those who desire to "help" are sent away feeling burned out and defeated.

100. See Thomas, "New and Veteran Teachers' Perspectives About Delivering Multicultural Education." Studies reveal that those who intend to work in a multicultural environment receive little to no training on how to conduct themselves in culturally diverse settings.

101. See Lyons, Scott Richard, "The Left Side of the Circle: American Indians and Progressive Politics," 70. Lyons describes a justifiably angry young man who described (among other negative experiences) "the racism he experienced daily in the reservation border towns where Indians have to do their shopping."

102. Campbell, *The Rhizomatic West: Representing the American West in a Transnational, Global, Media Age*, 231. Campbell supports Louis Owens's view on reservation "territories" in that a more fluid conception of borders and border crossings allows for "the zone of the trickster, a shimmering, always changing zone of multifaceted contact within which every utterance is challenged and interrogated, all referents put into question." A fixed space, drawn on a map creates a "place of containment, invented to control and subdue the dangerous potentialities of imagined Indians."

103. See Alexie, "Without Reservations: An Urban Indian's Comic, Poetic and Highly Irreverent Look at the World." Alexie addressed a large crowd of people in Boise, Idaho and expressed his hatred for white liberals, which took many aback. For many years, I thought on this issue and after reflecting on my dealings with "sympathetic" teachers and social workers as a young girl, I understood the desire to have a formidable "enemy" to face off with, opposed to someone pitying, and therefore shaming you.

104. See Tatum, "Spectrality and the Postregional Interface," 9. Tatum describes the dematerialization of physical realities that occurs in a technologically advanced, globalized world. "By using the term "spectralization," Spivak also wants to stress an intensified process of abstraction, the *dematerialization of peoples and things* that operates across the restructured landscape of multinational corporate capitalism."

105. Campbell, *The Rhizomatic West: Representing the American West in a Transnational, Global, Media Age*, 267. Technological advances undoubtedly threaten to desensitize those who rely on them, but (in line with the recommendations of Owens on traversing fixed borders) on the contrary offer unprecedented opportunities to enter the realities of others and experience being an outsider until there is no real other, and unfix boundaries that only serve to keep us entrapped in ideo-territorial conflicts.

106. Chodron, *The Places that Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times*, 131. Chodron describes the Lojong/Compassion practice that Lolita is employing in this scene.

107. See Nichols, "Backpacking and the Ultralight Solution," 128. Nichols points out the irony of elitism around high tech gear and that "buying stuff to help us better experience nature constitutes "a contradiction between how we want to connect to nature and how we actually do." After all, nature supposedly "mitigates the materialism and artifice of modern capitalistic society."

108. See Shamir, “Our Jerusalem: Americans in the Holy Land and Protestant Narratives of National Entitlement,” 30. The concept of “geopietism” in this article applies to protestants who claimed entitlement to Jerusalem as their official “home,” and place to worship. Geopietism is often a response to less than optimal conditions in the individual’s current location, and the subsequent assigning of holy qualities to place. I would argue that the North American West has become this to many in search of a “better life,” back to the time of the initial phases of westward expansion. This also relates to the desire to return to a perceived time of purity and wholeness, or Eden.

109. See Browne, “The Pretender.”

110. See Cook, “The Only Real Indians are Western Ones: Authenticity, Regionalism, and Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance, or Sylvester Long.” 140-145. The discussion between the characters Jaime and Heather can be interpreted as an extended, although light-hearted debate about what constitutes authenticity in the West, especially for men. Definitions of what is *real* often shift, but in terms of a “real cowboy,” “the champion, can only be recognized by those in the know, for he refuses to limit himself to one role, to be told by his clothes. Moreover, clothes can’t tell the half of it, for the stampede is full of cowboy poseurs and wannabes.”

111. See Baird, “Keep Your Hands to Yourself.”

112. See Cook, “The Only Real Indians are Western Ones: Authenticity, Regionalism, and Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance, or Sylvester Long,” 147. The real is typically praised over the false, but Cook challenges claims of authenticity by pointing out “When one can teach or preach authenticity, it is already archaic.”

113. See Cook, “The Only Real Indians are Western Ones: Authenticity, Regionalism, and Chief Buffalo Long Child Lance, or Sylvester Long,” 145. Fantasies of the real or authentic [serve] “as a way to imagine and idealize the real, the traditional, and the organic in opposition to the less satisfying qualities of everyday life.”

114. Ortiz, *From Sand Creek*, 87.

115. See Donehower, Hogg, and Schell, “Constructing Rural Literacies: Moving Beyond the Rhetorics of Lack, Lag, and the Rosy Past,” 19. After the economic restructuring of the west, rural areas were drained of many jobs and educational opportunities. Many believed the urbanized life offered more prestigious opportunities, and people moved away in large numbers, further weakening the economic structure of many rural areas. As a result, family connections dissolve, and to pay for higher education, students take out loans that eventually prove insurmountable.

116. Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans of the Vietnam War*, 139-148. In these pages, Native American soldiers and Holm provide descriptions of combat and different types of duties and situations.

117. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, 29, 35. The validity of “linear progress, absolute truths, and rational planning of ideal social orders” began to fall apart as a shared belief after class struggles resultant of capitalism, and the publication of *The Communist Manifesto*. Native scholars suggest that the period of postmodernity, and the subsequent loss of faith in absolutes fell apart much earlier after periods of violent conquest.

118. Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance*, 68-70. Vizenor points out that “the natural reason of tribal creation has never been without a postmodern turn or counterpoise.” In the literature of survivance, “natural reason and a reflexive nature are virtues.” When the supposed drive towards progress leads to the production of hoards of unnecessary products, pollution, waste, and poor health, naturally people reject the notion.

119. See Stein, Personal Interview. Camille Stein works as an Outreach Coordinator for Montana State University’s COOP Nursing program, and regularly visits reservations throughout the region to coordinate students for the nursing program. She noted that the water on some reservations contains harmful contaminants, and is undrinkable and causes a variety health problems.

120. Richardson, “The Ties that Bind: Indigenous Peoples and Environmental Governance,” 347-349. In many cases “Indigenous peoples are primarily victims, not perpetrators, of environmental harm” and “the conscription of Indigenous resources into cash economy through dams, mines and other projects have had ruinous consequences for native lands and communities.”

121. Foley, *An Historical Analysis of the Administration of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation by the United States*. Vol. 3. A significant amount of development occurred on the reservation in terms of irrigation projects, oil field harvesting, structural institution, and mining. The Blackfeet realized very little of the profits of these ventures, and most of the money to fund the projects, and the results went to corrupt agents and profiteers.

122. See “Blackfeet Community Water Project, Blackfeet Reservation, Montana, EPA.”

123. See Skye, “E.L.D.E.R.S.” Gathering for Native American Youth: Continuing Native American Traditions and Curbing Substance Abuse in Native American Youth,” 117+. A strong correlation exists between nutrition and poverty, and the prevalence of type two diabetes among Indigenous Americans is at 50%. Healthy food is often the least affordable and travel or additional funds is often necessary to obtain it.

124 See Mitchell, "A Portal to the Past: The Blackfeet and Their White Friends," 79. The editors describe the final "wave" that ended a traditional life connected intimately to the land. The Blackfeet lived through and overcame "two great wars in which so many of their sons and daughters participated with distinction (World War II and the Korean conflict), oil wells, increasingly mechanized farming and ranching, the coming of the jet age, and the great influx of tourists to Glacier Park," but their former model of life never would be the same.

125. Richardson, "The Ties that Bind: Indigenous Peoples and Environmental Governance," 341-344. Richardson stresses the importance of consulting with Indigenous groups when any sort of development takes place partly because "they are active environmental managers, guided by eons of accumulated wisdom and expertise" and "the quickening pace of loss of traditional knowledge [is] having a corresponding devastating impact on all biological diversity."

126. See Lee, "Survivance Memories: The Poetry of Carter Revard," 346-347. Renaming or "unnaming" allows people in the process of decolonization or agents of Survivance to reclaim spaces as their own, and give them their own meaning. Clever renaming is "a riff both on manifest destiny and on American history's naming of parts."

127. See Grinnell, "Kūt-o-yīs', The Blood Boy." Name and description taken from this source.

128. See "Traditional Blackfoot Territory," (see Appendix A, Figure Two). Map.

129. Foley, *An Historical Analysis of the Administration of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation by the United States*. All volumes document the history of the shrinking of Indian lands due to stockmen who wanted grazing lands, profiteers who wanted land, water, and minerals, and missionaries who recruited souls. See all three volumes for more information.

130. See West, "Robare: Elusive Outpost in Blackfeet Country." This article goes into detail on the illicit whiskey trade on the Blackfeet reservation that invited crime, and all sorts of other social problems.

131. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, 86-87. Perhaps I stretch to support my own assertion pertaining to the motivations of the hippy generation, in any case, Harvey supports this line of thought through a quote by Hewison: "The impulse to preserve the past is part of the impulse to preserve the self. Without knowing where we have been, it is difficult to know where we are going. The past is the foundation of individual and collective identity, objects from the past are the source of significance as cultural symbols. Continuity between past and present creates a sense of sequence out of aleatory chaos and, since change is inevitable, a stable system of ordered meaning enables us to cope with both innovation

and decay. The nostalgic impulse is an important agency in adjusting to crisis, it is a social emollient and reinforces national identity when confidence is weakened or threatened.” I would take an aside to nostalgia serving only the purpose of reinforcing national identity, and alternatively, this mental adaptation provides for an identity that is not associated with the cause of the decay or destruction.

132. See Gross, Personal Conversation. Dr. Gross and I had a conversation about the importance and legitimacy of tribal sovereignty, based on predictable historical U.S. Government consultations with Native American communities in times of national crisis.

133. Dean, Bartholomew and Jerome M. Levi, *At the Risk of Being Heard: Identity, Indigenous Rights, and Postcolonial States*, 122. Dean and Levi discuss youth who experience disruption or apocalyptic destruction of their culture and develop “...identity crises that accompany rapid change.” Although they apply their theory to Russian youth, I find it appropriate when thinking of the Native American kids I have met who dress like inner city Mexican or African Americans. They associate with the struggles and desire for material success like the rap stars. They also tend to get along with other minorities other than whites much better.

134. Holm, *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls: Native American Veterans of the Vietnam War*, 155-157. Holm interviews Native American Veterans who describe assignments based on soldiers status as minorities, and ability to “blend in” with the Vietnamese. White commanders conveniently lumped together all racial categories to accomplish high-risk missions.

135. See Leow, “Way of the Warrior.” In the documentary, soldiers talk about how they discouraged soldiers from destroying altars that remained in abandoned and evacuated Vietnamese homes.

136. Kato, Bunno, Tamura, Yoshiro, and Miyasaka, Kojiro, *Threefold Lotus Sutra*, 26.

137. Kato, Bunno, Tamura, Yoshiro, and Miyasaka, Kojiro, *Threefold Lotus Sutra*, 158.

138. See “Care for Your Air: A Guide to Indoor Air Quality,” by the EPA for more information on mold and indoor air quality.

139. While working at Montana State University—Extension in the Housing department, we dealt with multiple complaints from around the state that dealt with toxic mold, and the landlords’ refusal to remediate the problem. Callers often expressed frustration due to health problems, and inability to move into healthier housing, or pay for the problem themselves.

140. See “Energy-Related Mold and Moisture: Awareness and Impacts for Weatherization,” all images. This document shows various conditions in homes impacted by mold infestation.
141. See “Energy-Related Mold and Moisture: Awareness and Impacts for Weatherization,” Slide 34. Description taken from an actual case involving a child’s bedroom contaminated with mold.
142. See “Care for Your Air: A Guide to Indoor Air Quality,” by the EPA for more information on mold and asthma, or other respiratory conditions.
143. See West, “Robare: Elusive Outpost in Blackfeet Country,” 55. The article discusses the rough whiskey trader types common to Blackfeet Country in the settlement period, and describes “that readily identifiable character in the *dramatis personae* of any Western, a “man with a past” as more of a non-fiction that not in these histories.
144. Kelsey, *Tribal Theory in Native American Literature: Dakota and Haudenosaunee Writing and Indigenous Worldviews*, 54. Kelsey points out that “Those remnants which now dwell upon the reservations present only a sort of tableau— a fictitious copy of the past [or reactions to] Vanishing Americanism.” Arguments and accusations related to authenticity abound, especially in terms of the highly constructed, oppositional categories of identity labeled “Cowboy” or “Indian.”
145. See Shamir, “Our Jerusalem: Americans in the Holy Land and Protestant Narratives of National Entitlement,” 30. Again, the conversation of geopiety.
146. See Kollin, “Survival, Alaska Style,” 144, 146-147. Kollin discusses this “last frontier,” namely Alaska, as a space that attracts those disillusioned by consumerist cultures, and in search of a pure place/experience/lifestyle with unnamed mountains and borderless expanses of land. Unfortunately, this experience is in itself, highly commodified, and searchers find only more disillusionment and disappointment.
147. Krupat, *The Turn to the Native: Studies in Criticism and Culture*, 52-55. In the writings of dominance, affairs of native cultures are not important, including greatness or human suffering. Constructions that result from the mentality of EuroAmerican/West as the “center” automatically exclude people that at first glance, do not fall within this definition.
148. See Kroeber, “Why Its a Good Thing Gerald Vizenor is Not an Indian,” 30. In describing narratives of Survivance and the trickster, Kroeber states, “the trickster’s core narrative turns on some form of self-victimization, although always at the end escaped, recovered from, or made socially re-creative through some process of self-transformation, usually carrying with it significant linguistic effects, often the bestowal

of names.” The character Louise practices this form of self-victimization and then subversion of expectations, and ultimately avoids falling into the money-centered trap of the modern healing institution by employing humor and avoidance.

149. See Arbuthnot, Elsa, Dawson, Jane, and Hansen-Ketchum, Patty, “Senior Women and Rural Living.”

150. See Madsen, “On Subjectivity and Survivance: Rereading Trauma Through *The Heirs of Columbus* and *The Crown of Columbus*,” 61-83. The author asks us to rethink our notions of healing, and the definitions of illness and trauma within the “culture of dominance.” The characters are reluctant to commit their elderly family members to institutions of false healing where advanced age is treated as an illness. The unintended result is that with limited means, family members become overwhelmed with care responsibilities.

151. See Arbuthnot, Elsa, Dawson, Jane, and Hansen-Ketchum, Patty, “Senior Women and Rural Living.”

152. See Kroeber, “Why It’s a Good Thing Gerald Vizenor is Not an Indian,” 30. Uncle Hal demonstrates the trickster’s tendency to create trouble for him or herself, and find a clever way out. Although his humor might sound cruel at times, he uses it to connect people in unexpected ways.

153. See Vizenor, “Trickster Discourse: Comic Holotropes and Language Games,” 189. In response to potential criticism of Hal’s insensitivity, the trickster is “a force of treacherous disorder that outrages and disrupts, and on the other hand, an unanticipated, usually unintentional benevolence in which trickery is at the expense of inimical forces and for the benefit of mankind.”

154. See Vizenor, “Trickster Discourse: Comic Holotropes and Language Games,” 187-198. Tricksters cannot exist or function in life, or on the page without the “whole complex social situation in which it [the story] occurred.” This literary technique is a reaction to the social sciences that historically isolated an individual from his or her networks and environment to “study” them.

155. See Vizenor, “Aesthetics of Survivance: Literary Theory and Practice,” 11. Vizenor makes it clear that “survivance is a practice, not an ideology, dissimulation, or a theory.” In this scene, Hal acts out his “recovery” from potential self-inflicted shame by carefully reconstructing an appearance.

156. See Mackay, “Ghosts in the Gaps: Diane Glancy’s Paradoxes of Survivance,” 256. The original sentence reads, “without this responsibility and this respect for justice concerning those who are not there, of those who are no longer... what sense would there be to ask the question “where”? “Where Tomorrow.” The obvious implication is

that the word “justice” has been deleted, and the paradox, is that not all people experience the triumph and deep pleasure of survivance, or even survival.

157. Campbell, Neil. *The Rhizomatic West: Representing the American West in a Transnational, Global, Media Age*, 113-150. In these constructed copies of the west, “any sense of an original, authentic West has been displaced and disrupted by the effect of the hyperreal... where the real and the imaginary collapse into each other, creating a thirdspace from which interesting, critical questions emerge about the production and consumption of meaning, about the role of myth and icon, and about the persistence and fascination with all aspects of westness.” The term here is “westness” but I chose “westernness.”

158. See, “Anonymous.” I intentionally omitted the employee’s name to protect them.

159. Miller, *The Man from Snowy River*.

160. See “Mrs. Ralston’s Chat about the Advance Fall Fashions—The New Embroideries, New Shirtwaists & Blouses, Dresses for Boarding School, and More.” This 1904 edition “features and stories include sheet music “Best of Cole and Johnson Negro Songs: Lindy,” “The Unwelcome Feminine Touch,” “In His Place,” “A Self-Made Courtship,” “Dolly’s Economical Ideas for the Summer Girl,” patterns for making Alice in Wonderland pillow covers (by Peter Newell), award winning drawings for building country houses, “\$15 a Week for a Family of Four,” “Mrs. Ralston’s Chat about the Advance Fall Fashions,” “The New Embroideries, Sewing for Babies, New Gowns for Autumn, New Coats & Suits for Winter, New Shirtwaists & Blouses, Dresses for Boarding School (all of which are illustrated).”

161. Hungry Wolf, Adolf and Beverly, *Blackfoot Craftworker’s Book*, 4.

162. Hungry Wolf, Adolf and Beverly, *Blackfoot Craftworker’s Book*, 17-23.

163. Hungry Wolf, Adolf and Beverly, *Blackfoot Craftworker’s Book*, 62-64.

164. Hungry Wolf, Adolf and Beverly, *Blackfoot Craftworker’s Book*.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

MAPS OF SELECTED REGION

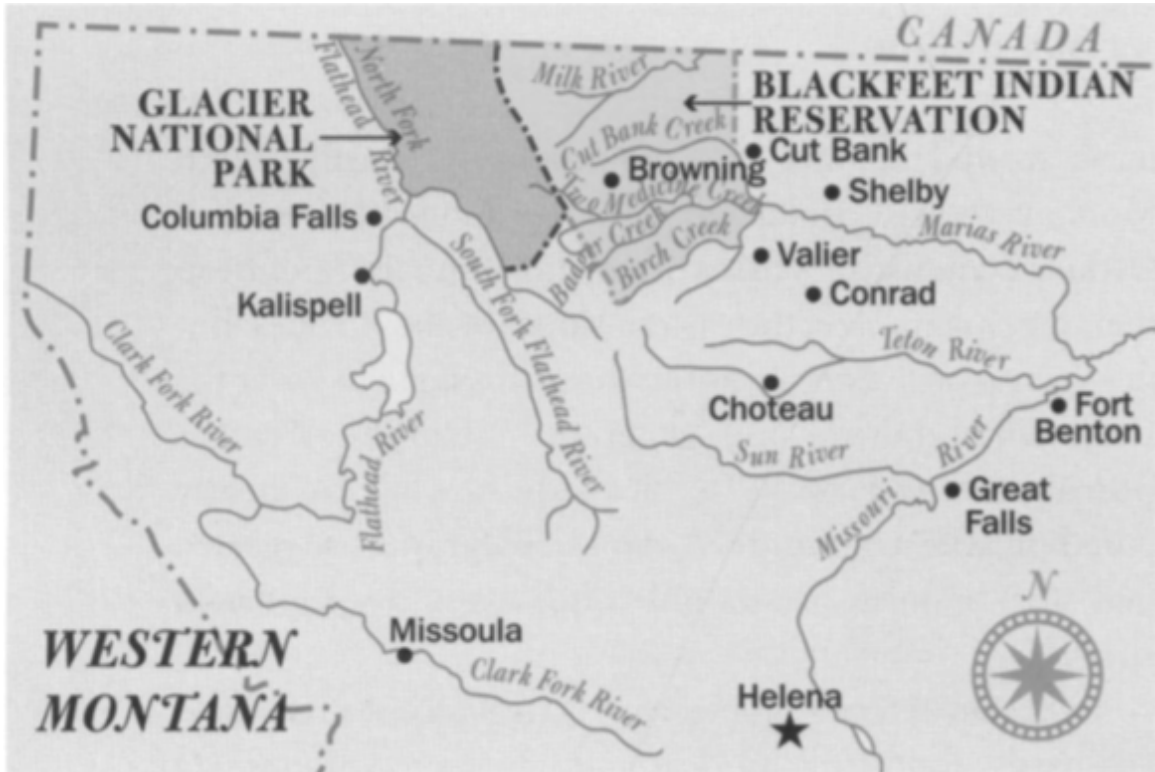


Figure 1. Blackfeet Indian Reservation.

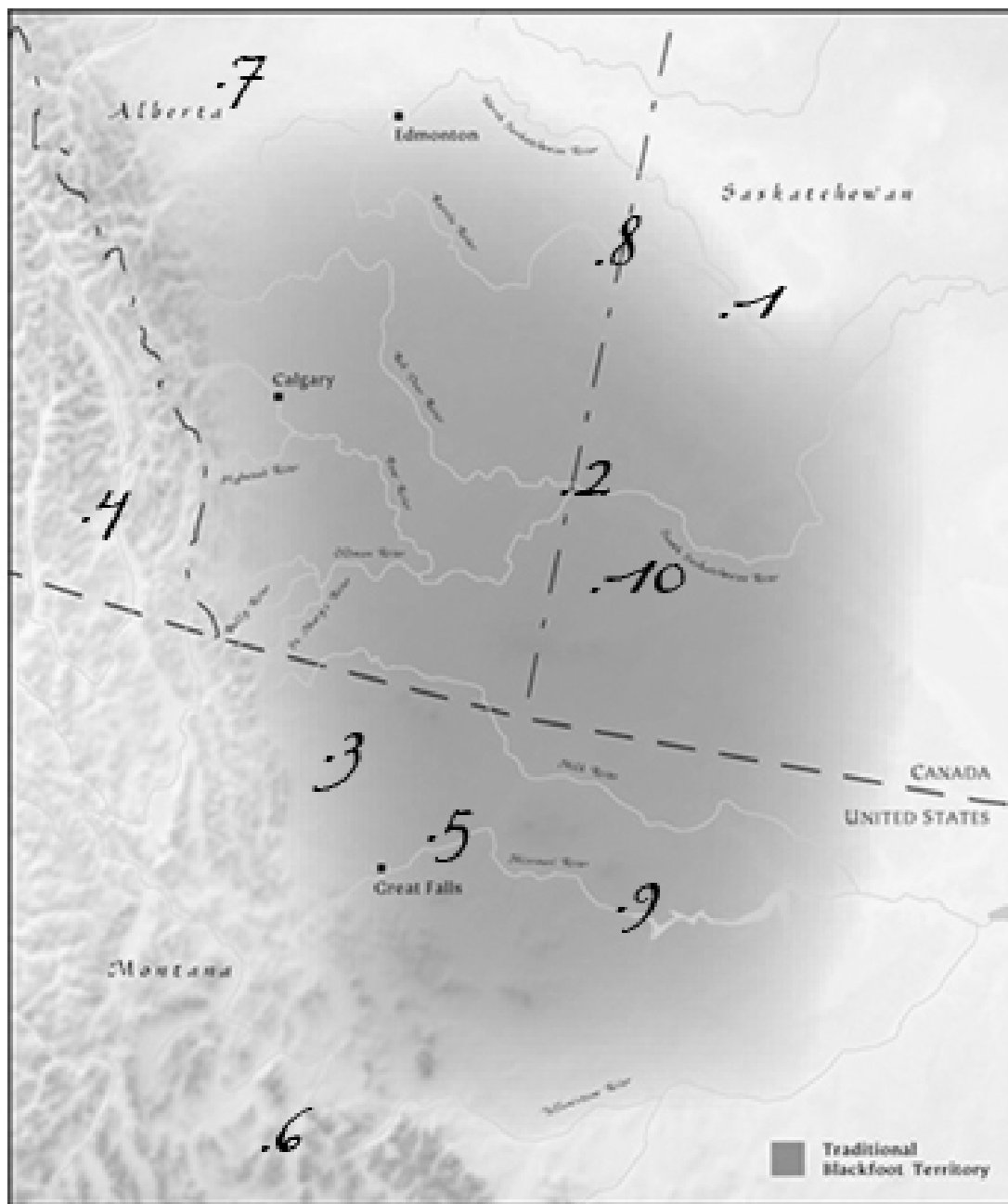


Figure 2. Traditional Blackfoot Territory.

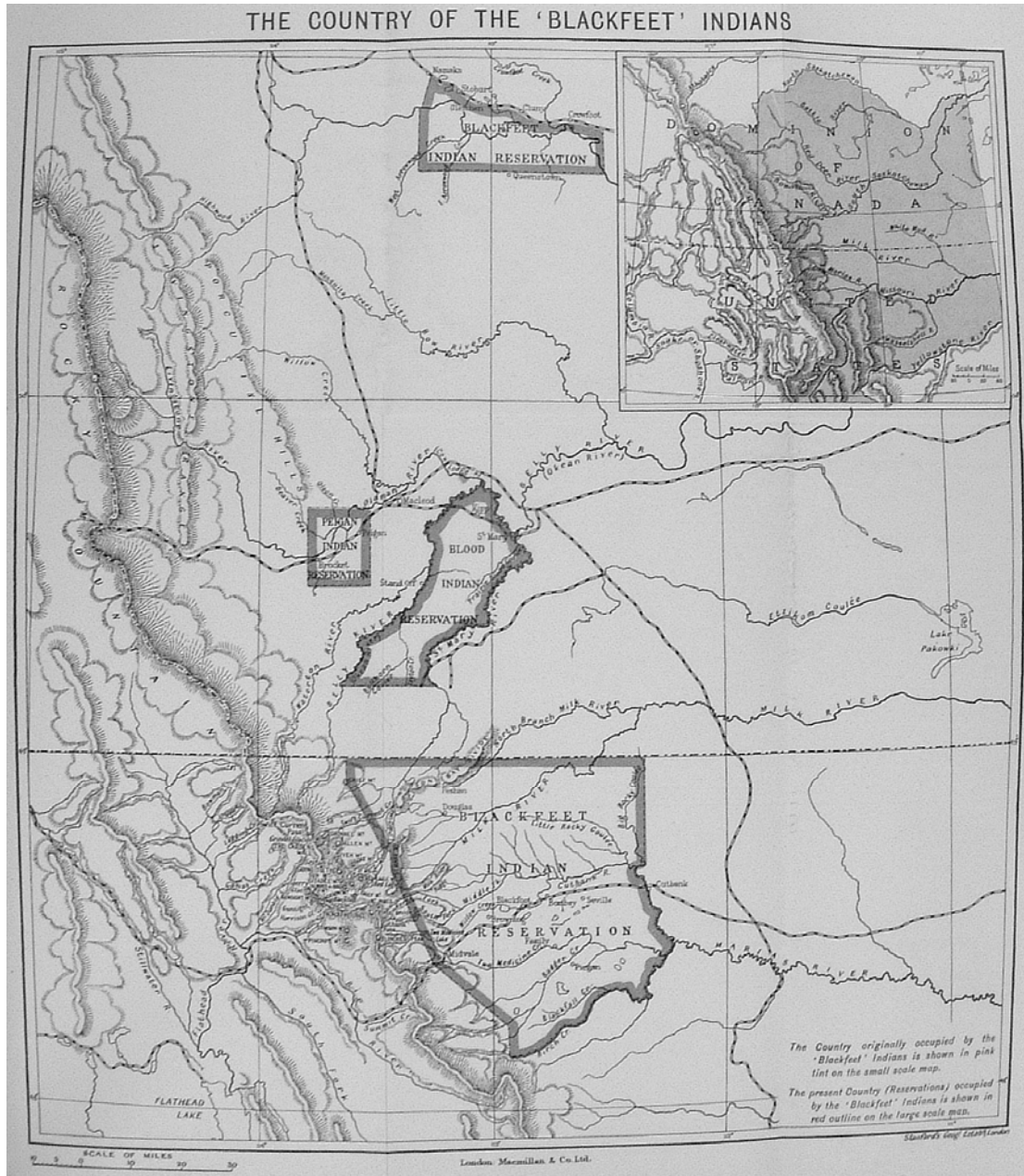


Figure 3. Blackfeet Territory Today.

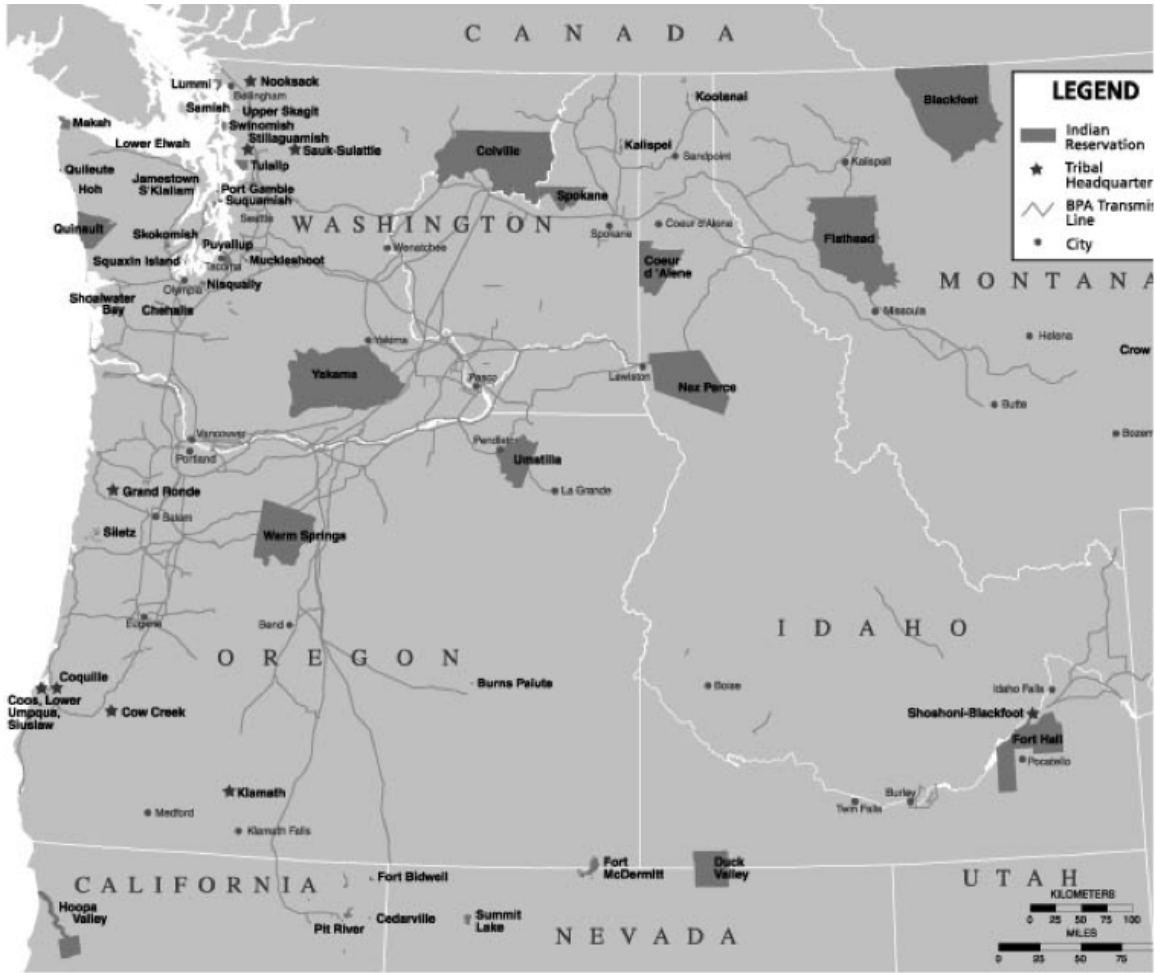


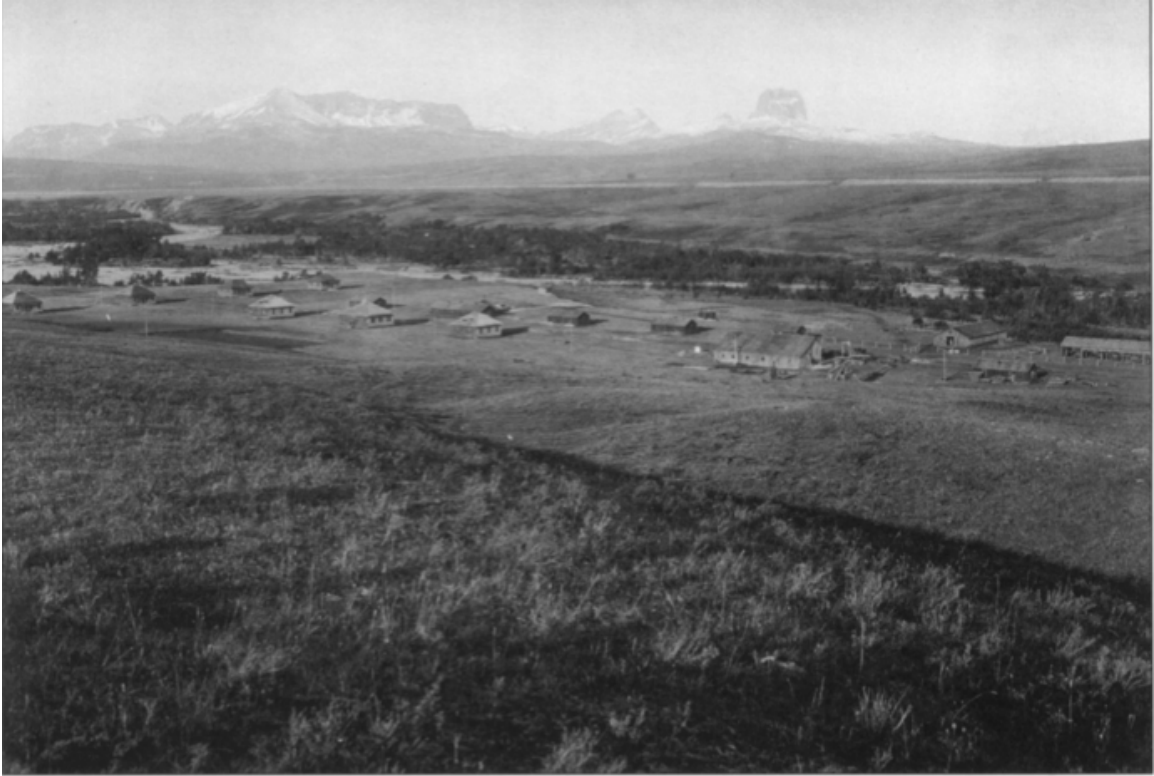
Figure 4. Reservations of the Rocky Mountain West.



Figure 5. Region of Narrative.

APPENDIX B

IMAGES OF EVENTS IN *LOLITA LAST STAR*



On the windswept plains of the reservation, protected creek bottoms were favored locations for homes and ranches, putting many in harm's way during the flood. The buildings in the photograph above are part of a Blackfeet Irrigation Project work camp used during the construction of Two Medicine Dam and canals. The mountains in the distance are on the eastern edge of Glacier National Park.

Figure 6. Browning before the Flood of 1964.



In the flood's aftermath, the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council declared June 8 an annual day of mourning in remembrance of those who lost their lives. Above, flood waters from Two Medicine Creek still covered U.S. 89 and nearby structures on June 9.

Figure 7. Aftermath of the Flood.



Figure 8. The Region Under Water.



According to news reports, most of the bodies of those who drowned were taken to the flooded Holy Family Mission on Two Medicine Creek (above), a few miles southeast of Browning.

Figure 9. The Holy Family Mission.



Figure 10. Two Medicine Dam, Before.



Figure 11. Two Medicine Dam, After.



Figure 12. Old Agency, or “Country of the Dead.”

Images Courtesy of:

Parrett, Aaron. “Montana’s Worst Natural Disaster: The 1964 Flood on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation.” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*. 54.2 (2004): 20-31. Web. 5 May 2009.

West, Helen B. “Starvation Winter of the Blackfeet.” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*. 9.1 (1959): 2-19. Web. 5 May 2009.

I have collected a variety of images pertaining to the region’s history ready for release upon readers’ request.

APPENDIX C

ORGANIZATIONAL TOOLS AND KEYS

Story Board/Scene Organization with Thesis Focal Areas

Table 1. *Lolita Last Star* Story Board.

1. Flood Scene (H)	2. Frank in Vietnam (H, S)	3. Introduction to Other Characters (Larry and Ward) (N)	4. Introduction to Lolita and Ernie (N)	5. Starvation Winter (H) *needs to be explained-described
6. Ernie and Frank Back Story and Their Impact on Charlene (Ernie and Frank Disconnect) (H)	7. The Appearance of Thomas Wayne Lee and 'Savage' Beatings (S)	8. The Current Situation of Lolita and Ernie (I)	9. Introduction of Heather and Investigation (I)	10. Charlene Witnesses the Taxidermist 'Prize' Display (N)
11. Lolita's Investigation and Meditation (I, N)	12. Heather's Life—Intro to Paul, Jaime, and Minor Characters (I)	13. The Real Deal—"Gay Cowboys" (High, Wide, and Handsome) (N)	14. Lolita Rejects the <i>New Yorker</i> (N)	15. Lolita and the Moths (Living, Dying, Dependency, Suffocation) (H, N)
16. Ken Dodd's Death (I, N, H, S)	17. Frank and Charlene's Life After Vietnam—Frank's Sadness and Children (I, H)	18. Lolita and Charlene go to Glacier and Pay Fee (Tourists, International, Glacier/BF Land) (I, N)	19. Lolita and Family Visit Shoshone-Bannock (Gangsta, Franchises, 'Progress,' Unwelcome Touch (H, N, S)	20. Frank Discovers Lolita's Buddhism (Is it Real/Authentic?) (N, S)
21. Heather Visits Flood Families—Forty Years Later (Criticism Over Biblical Perspectives and Cameo) (I, H, S)	22. Lolita and Charlene Visit Nursing Home (I, N, S)	23. Chinese Buffet (S)	24. Ernie Meets His Uncle the Magician (N, S)	25. Lolita Witnesses Family Wanting Money ('usefulness') (I, S)

Table 2. *Lolita Last Star Story Board* - continued.

26. Heather Takes Care of Horses—Reproductive Issue? ('Usefulness') (N)	27. Lousy Boss Doesn't Come Through w/ Funding, Heather Quits (I)	28. Lantern Moths (Species?) Museum Articles and Moth Balls, Scraping Off (H, N) END for May 2010	29. Lolita Goes to Tribal College. The Recovery of the Scriver Artifacts, Plans to go to a "Better" Program (I)	30. The Truth About the Blues (all following scenes will be developed for future study beginning August 2010, doctoral work)
31. Heather Gets Lost, Breakdown	32. Thomas Takes Ernie to Duck Pond and His House	33. Winter Arrives—Thomas Introduces Ernie to Meth, Thomas Kills the Rabbits	34. Lolita Watches 'Native Dancing'	35. Charlene Observes Barbarism in Modern Animal Slaughter
36. Ernie Contemplates Suicide, Ernie Tries to Rob Grandma	37. Grandma Heals Ernie and he Takes a New Name	38. Charlene Helps Heather (Charlene Talks About Mortgage, Vet Benefits)	39. Frank's Healing (a long time coming—similar to healing ritual, but different)	40. Conclusion—Lolita Rides the Wave—Two Hands of Lotus (some drown some get their thirst quenched)

Key:

- I: Individual and Group Experience within the Institutions of the Rocky Mountain American West.
- H: Historical Events and Developments in the Rocky Mountain West that Continue to Shape Physical Spaces and Intercultural Relationships.
- N: Non-Essential Characters and Responses to Persistent Challenges—Institutional and Personal
- S: Demonstrations of Survivance and Self-Healing

The following table presents a general breakdown of the sequence and timing involved in developing my thesis. Each step will be emailed and delivered in hard copy. Meetings will be arranged according to the availability of committee. Projected dates are flexible.

Table 3. *Lolita Last Star* Development Timeline.

Completion Date	Thesis Development Steps
<i>Phase 1 (May 2009- September 2009)</i>	
May 2009	1. Assemble a collection of pertinent articles on Blackfeet history, begin looking for books for Annotated Bibliography
May 2009	2. Define the vision for and intent of the thesis project
May 2009	3. Meet with Prospective Thesis Committee Members to discuss project
August 2009	4. Collect book titles and authors from committee and check out
August 2009	5. Meet with Thesis Committee Members to verify that project will be acceptable and receive feedback on progress thus far
August-September 2009	6. Submit preliminary draft of findings from summer reading and review feedback
<i>Phase 2 (September 2009-December 2009)</i>	
September 2009	7. Begin completion of reading list to “inform” the creative writing process, log all books into annotated bibliography
October 15, 2009	8. Submit Prospectus, Timeline, and Annotated Bibliography
November 13th	9. Submit next draft installment to committee for review. Current draft is 70 double spaced pages. Topics will cover historical events that shape the land and people. Topics will not or cannot be mutually exclusive, but will highlight one significant topic and explain its connections to other systems and topics. This draft will be 100 to 125 double spaced pages.
November 15th	10. Corrections to draft based upon committee feedback, correct any problems and resubmit if necessary
November 30 th	11. Submit next draft installment to committee for review. Topics will cover the introduction of individual and group experience with institutions of the American West. This draft will be 175 to 200 double spaced pages.
December 10th	12. Meet with committee to discuss progress and problems. Submit any additions or corrections to draft.
December 30th	13. Complete next draft installment and review entire draft for problems or opportunities for creative additions. Topic for this installment will focus on the solidarity of similar places, how they can potentially leverage one another out of an enduring social problem. This may or may not work, but I will explore what happens when this is attempted. This draft will be approximately 250 double spaced pages in length.

Table 4. *Lolita Last Star* Development Timeline - continued.

<i>Phase 3 (December 2009-March 2010)</i>	
January 15th	14. Submit current draft to committee for review. Continue researching, correcting, and writing.
January 30th	15. Consider committee feedback and correct draft if necessary. Submit draft to outside reviewer for 'layman' feedback. Submit application for advanced degree to DGE.
February 15th	16. Complete next installment of draft based off feedback and new research. Topic will focus on the nonessential character of the American west and how he or she deals with the all aspects and challenges of the space. Again, topics cannot be extracted from one another, but work best when one aspect is highlighted. Draft length will be approximately 300 double spaced pages.
March 1st	17. Conclusion of drafts will be submitted. Final page length will be approximately 350 double spaced pages.
March 15th	18. First draft final review. Generate list of corrections, problems, needed additions and amend.
<i>Phase 4 (March 2010-May 2010)</i>	
March 30th	19. Meet with committee to discuss progress, problems, and updates. Continue corrections, edits, and revisions.
April 5th	20. Submit final corrected draft for review.
April 15th	21. Respond to committee feedback and revise if necessary.
May 1st	22. Seek permission to present.
May 10th	22. Present thesis project.