

The spirit only came to stand at the foot of Nicky's bed in the slick blackness of inky summer nights. The crisp coolness of the night and the wicked dance of the stars called the ghosts out of their hiding places, letting them slip back and forth on paths that the sun otherwise seared shut. Spirits find safe passage in the black, drifting back from their new world to skirt about the old.

The shrouded spirit drifted in somewhere after midnight, looming over her, drawing her out of her dreams by mere presence and power of will. She would have screamed but the voices told her this was a safe spirit and so she watched it and it watched her until finally she slipped out of bed to glide after it, padding down the wooden floor, the wooden stairs, onto the carpet entry way and out the door.

He was gone now, sliding away wherever it was he went, but she knew where he wanted her to go, it was the same place every night, the same place he always wanted her to go, the place she had gone so many times. She stood in the cool air, feeling her clothes around her, her hair lifting in the breeze. It was a sign, the ghost, the voices in her head, all of it. There was no other explanation. No logical one, anyway.

Not being one to ignore cosmic signs, she followed the familiar path, down the street, leaving footprints in sweat along the concrete and she could hear in her head the voices again, the voices of her parents and the voices of her siblings and all those who went before. Because somewhere down deep they were waiting for her, waiting, waiting, waiting, inside the earth, calling after her.

The sidewalk ended and she found herself in the pinion trees, following the paths of the wolves, walking in their skin like all her ancestors before her, feeling the birthright in her veins, the filial spirit. And the voice of her Navajo Grandmother, telling the story of the skin walkers, speaking so rapidly her words became a song and the song became the night and the fire and the wind. And her theories swirled around them, how the Navajo must wear all skins, must dance in coyote and slink in wolf and soar in crow before she could ascend, before she could be purified.

She liked the feeling of the dirt in between her bare toes and she imagined her Grandmother Wolf slinking back and forth behind her, keeping watch with her yellow eyes. She was closer to herself here, closer than she was all those miles away at school, with the other blonde, white, singing girls. This was her true life, here in the dirt, and this passage into the forest was her blessing way.

Up the dirt path, around past the Santa Maria chapel, past the cemetery smelling like grass and shallow graves, over the barbed wire fence and into the marshy lowlands. The Mesa Negra rose before her like one great impenetrable fortress, but the ghosts came streaming towards her, standing around her, silent, still.

The wind whistles with the sound of her Grandmother's stories, hums with ectoplasm, drawing something out of her—the spirit she could have been, the life of the Diné buried deep in her bones, the eternal night that creeps in around her toes and lives like a neighbor to her heart. This is the life she should have had, this life of dancing and music, of yelling and ghosts, of leather and bones. This life living in the mountain, cradled in sandstone, away from doubt and war and fear. Harmony with the mesa, with the grass, with the shallow graves.

Miles and miles from the pueblo, in a proper grave, in a mahogany box, Nolan sleeps the eternal sleep and sends his spirit out to her to stand in silence before her with the others. Her parents are here, and her siblings. Her Navajo Grandmother and

Grandmother Wolf. Twyla Thomas, who died of a brain tumor before turning sixteen and Nicholas Ramos, who was killed by his best friend and a gun. Just the shadow of a little yellow haired girl Nicky had once seen hit by a car. Her sister's stillborn twins.

The dead parted as she worked through them, approaching the mesa with a sudden need to feel the slick black basalt beneath her hands and feet. Up, up, up. The smell of salt and fire and lives so long ago left behind. Hands nicked and bloody with climbing. There was only so much height she could achieve before there were no more footholds, until the face dropped away, smooth and foreboding.

The dead waved after her, following, but still silent. The last ledge. But tonight was different. This blessing way was different. She had been in the ice for six months, so far from her Dinétah, she needed to go higher. The ghosts followed, watched her feel along the cliff, pull herself slowly up, up, up.

The top of the mesa was well grassed, and the grass was humming in the wind and she knelt among it, taking great handfuls of it. Nolan came first, standing in the grass before her, looking just as he did at the last military ball, perfect and solemn in his dress blues. Silent. They had never seen each other in so complete and total wholeness before. And now there was nothing to say.

A week ago, she was happily finishing finals, excited to make the eighteen hour drive home from Idaho to New Mexico, from ice to red sand, excited to feel the grit on her skin again. Four days ago, the call had come. Three days ago, the flight from Idaho to Arlington to watch Nolan tucked in for that final sleep by the flag he fought to protect. Two days to fly back to her apartment, drive home. And so his spirit was the newest and the most painful. Four days dead. Four days of contact with the dead to sully her.

And for a moment she hated this country and all it stood for. What kind of nation raised their young to be warriors? To send them off to fight for the problems of the old men? Her spirit yearned to lift out of her body, to slip along in the grass with the others, to ascend to the next world as everyone she had truly loved already had.

The mesa was an intensely sacred place and though she did not really believe in the Navajo Way, this place was the closest to God she had ever felt. He hovered closer here, sent these ghosts out like a receiving party, just for her.

Six months in the ice and four days contact with death. That's what was different about this blessing way. Not only had she left the Dinétah, she had attended a funeral, and worse, the funeral of her best friend. The darkness dwelling alongside her heart was thick and growing. Nolan—it was not Nolan, it was his spirit, and it was not even that, it was merely a construct of her brain—moved until he was directly before her, forcing her to acknowledge him.

It was a chance, she knew, to tell him the things she should have said, here in the witness of all the dead she knew.

The grass hissed and hummed and the spirits stood, unaffected by the wind or the silence or the piety of this place.

And suddenly he began to transform before her, from his dress uniform, to his camo and Kevlar everydays, and then, like watching a movie in which there was no setting and no other players, Nolan's body was ripped to pieces by a flash of blue light. And then rewound and played again, until she could smell the blood and felt that it was her, not Nolan, being ripped apart, feeling the empty pain of being one second and then not being the next. A great blue light that simply ended him. And she no longer had to

wonder what it felt like to die, because, at least for Nolan, it was a painless passage from ignorance to knowledge. What ever he discovered in the last moment of cognizance must have been the most true and complete thing he had ever known.

“I’m sorry.” She whispered, because he knew everything now, but it had taken dying to learn it.

He nodded.

“I can’t...”

He nodded again, morphing finally back to his dress blues, ready for the military ball. “Do you remember that poem we read, junior year in Lit? The one by Percy Shelley?”

“I remember.”

“Can you remember how it ended?”

She swallowed hard and shook her head.

“Because I can’t stop thinking about it...I just wish I could remember how it ended.”

She slept in the singing grass and when she woke she was alone and the sun was weak and blue on the horizon.

The next night Nolan came, instead of the shrouded spirit, to stand at the foot of her bed and draw her out of the dream.

“Do you remember the end of the poem?”

She sighed and shook her head. “No. Do you?”

“No.”

“Is this what the next world is like? Searching for answers to trivial questions?”

The look he gave her was his answer. No, Nicky, that’s what this world is about. Somehow, he was engaged in his own blessing way, to cleanse himself of this world’s impurities.

Her presence was requested at the mesa, but she was sleepy and the nightmare of Nolan’s death had finally faded.

“You walked the way of the wolf.” He smiled. “Now the coyote.”

Tonight they would dance.

And every night Nolan came, asking after the poem, and even if she gave him the lines, he would still return the next night. And they walked the way of the crow and the cougar and the bear and sang the old Navajo Grandmother songs and danced the coyote dance in the rain.

Every night his spirit faded a little and his inquiries began to make less sense.

“Poem? My poem? Do you know? What’s my ending?”

Until he came to stand before her, barely visible against the inky night. “Ending? My ending? Where’s my ending poem?”

Her heart rattled against her ribs and for a moment she just watched him cycle through his nonsensical questions. It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t fair that he should punish her this way. He had the lines, he knew how it ended, didn’t he? Was this really how it worked, this endless searching until you faded away into nothing?

“My poem? Ending? Poem ending? What’s my poem?”

The mesa was perfectly still, enshrined in some ethereal silence she knew was just for her. Because she had walked in all the skins, and danced and sang and it was time just to be quiet, to just let the earth swallow up whatever was left.