

PRIEST OF THE PRAIRIE DOGS**Matthew J. Kelley**

After forty-one years on the Navajo Nation, the Baptist missionary—hollow-cheeked, tube-gasping, and ready to cross the River Jordan—found himself trapped in a medication-induced vision.

Although Anglos cannot be admitted into the Winslow, Arizona Indian Health Service Hospital, the man's collapse in the lobby, with no money in his wallet, no insurance card, and no emergency contact, got him upstairs.

A young woman floated above the preacher's sterilized steel and wheel bed—barefoot-brown, cloud patterns on her sun spun skirt, bare-bud breasts, butterfly wings of obsidian hair tied over each ear, a tentative smile. The black-hole depth of her long-dead eyes pulled on the preacher's face.

At first, the preacher tried to call for help, then tried to look away. He thought of the Lord Jesus but couldn't remember any prayers. Couldn't do what he had done his whole life. In thirty seconds, the girl's presence burned through the biblical fortification of his brain.

Heat from the girl's chest flushed his face. Cornmeal dust from her skirt hung in the air. Sage oil from her skin penetrated his plastic nasal tube. Scrambling against the bed's headboard, the preacher tore out his IV and knocked the water glass off his tray. His penis-catheter pulled

apart splattering urine across the sheets. Like a child fighting his mother's embrace as his will collapsed, and for the first time in 60 years, the clench in his body relaxed.

Without speaking, the girl's thoughts moved through the preacher's head like morning sun through lizard-belly.

"Today, white-face Grandfather, a man scraped up my bones with a road-grader. After eating food I've never seen, he placed my skull inside his lunch cooler. That evening he brought me to his village and showed my head to his children. Lost again—no longer sure where my Mother's pueblo was—I heard your prayers.

"I was dead a full season before Kokopelli came back from his southern world. As his youngest daughter, he warned me to leave, but I wanted to stay for the harvest dance. Before the first corn was eaten, Frog-Clan Boys from Hononki Village dragged me into the desert. Wanting me for their pueblo, crazy with hunger and fear, dehydrated and tired of my crying, those boys raped me, cut off my breasts, clubbed me into blackness. That night those boys came back to roast and eat my buttocks. They stripped and smoked my thighs, threw my head into the arroyo. The meat left on my bones turned black in the sun.

"When my weeping Mother clung to him, Kokopelli didn't say much—just released the two scarlet macaws he'd carried up from the jungle to trade for turquoise. That night he made an offering to Xolotl, the blue evening star, and my pain went away. The next day he hunted and killed those boys. He left copper bells for my Mother and never came this way again.

"More than seven-hundred seasons passed before a Navajo shepherd found my skull. Singing a protection prayer, he propped my head on a hilltop.

“Somehow—as witness—unchanging change. Ten-thousand dawns. Ten-thousand sunsets. Bright star nights. Ice storms. Antelope feet. Stinging sand. Spanish saddles. Snakeskin. Lizard scratch. Mud flood. Lark song. Sheep bells. Sun dogs. Moon rings.

"In one terrifying roar, the asphalt blanket of Route 66 and then the more massive darkness of Interstate 40 covered me—and I slept.

"People said Kokopelli was a God, but I knew his warmth, the pad of his run, his smell of sweet chili and flowers. White-face Grandfather, my father, Kokopelli, will help us. Our time....on earth....is done."

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The Hospital's ICU night nurse—a buzz cut, effeminate Hopi man fresh from Northern Arizona University's nursing program and ashamed of his brown bear size—charted that the preacher had been upset, had been sitting up, had been shouting, crying, and laughing. At 23:21 after ten ccs. of intravenous Propofol, the preacher fell asleep—bone head sunk against the pillow, cheeks oddly flushed, eyes searching parchment lids.

Knowing that the preacher couldn't hear, the nurse spoke to him in Hopi, promising to bring the Hospital's medicine man during the healer's morning walkthrough. Picking up a silver crucifix from the preacher's table, he pressed it into man's translucent hand.

At 03:20, an auto-sensor triggered Code Red. An out-of-breath-from-the-second-floor shift physician supervised the 11-minute Class-III resuscitation. When the contents of the patient's stomach disgorged, CPR was terminated. The bear-nurse charted that the patient

“crossed over” at 03:35. Deceased in sleep. Massive cardiovascular collapse. “Peace provided by Jesus.”

What the nurse didn’t record was that an hour before the preacher had tried to sing what sounded like an Aztlan-Cohua song—a Hopitu-Anasazi-Aztec prayer, the nurse had been told about but had never heard. Outside of a few Kiva-chants, no Hopi had spoken the Uto-Na’huatl tongue in 1,000 years.

Two days later, the Indian Health Service ‘s Medical Examiner—a miniature pink-faced man whose lab coat was buttoned to his tie and who wore purple latex gloves in an attempt to brighten his day—alcohol-swabbed yellow corn pollen off of the preacher’s forehead. Propping the preacher’s wax-arm under his own, the Examiner unwrapped surgical tape holding a silver crucifix and a crumpled eagle breast-feather to the inside of the man’s hand. After studying, and even smelling, both fetishes the Examiner thumbed open the preacher’s bible, inserted the objects, and snapped the package tight with a rubber band.

With forceps from his pocket, the Examiner pulled a rolled butterfly wing from the preacher’s right ear. Admiring the blue iridescence, he folded the wing smaller, bent over one end, and poked it back. Without breathing, the Examiner slipped around the table and pushed the tip of a second wing deeper into the man’s left ear—no need for the preacher’s family in Iowa to get upset. Although the Examiner hadn’t been to church since boyhood camp, he let the hospital’s Native American staff both protect themselves and help the dead in whatever way they could.

Three hours later—fluids drained, antiseptic injected, orifices plugged, body gowned, documents signed—the Examiner's two assistants loaded, sealed, and labeled the body bag. Initialing the shipping permit, the Examiner returned the chart to his always-smiling Navajo secretary and poured himself a cup of coffee, again wondering why she chooses glasses as round as her face.

Grimacing at the coffee's burnt bite, suddenly aware of his secretary's unusual silence, the Examiner raised his eyebrows and turned. His secretary pursed her lips, Navajo-style, toward two men waiting in his office.

The child-sized medicine man, in contrast to the bear-nurse sitting next to him, perched on his chair like a bird.

The medicine man had been introduced to the Examiner some twenty-years ago. His village called him "Burrowing Owl." His in-laws called him "Priest of the Prairie Dogs."

"As a boy," his Navajo-Dine' secretary had initially explained, "they found him living in a badger hole—eating grasshoppers and lizards. Small for his age. Made chirping sounds. Didn't speak human for a year."

Expanding his black-moon eyes in greeting, Burrowing Owl touched a once broken finger to his beak. The silent laugh of his stomach ruffled the grey of his page-boy haircut—the traditional style of Old Mesa photographs.

Burrowing Owl's Kiva name was Masau'u—something one didn't speak. A turquoise ring disk the size of a horn-toad covered his left hand. His right toyed with one of his two dangling blue earrings.

“Turquoise falls from the sky.” In the years they’d worked together, the Examiner’s secretary had said it a hundred times. “Turquoise is a gift from our Holy People.”

Pulling a chair from the opposite wall, the Examiner touched the leather of Burrowing Owl’s hand, then sat. Enjoying Burrowing Owl’s blinking and silent inspection, the Examiner leaned back, arms behind his head, and speculated to himself why the night nurse was still on duty. Suddenly aware of the nurse’s rubbed-bloodshot eye’s, the Examiner dropped both his smile and his arms.

Burrowing Owl’s laugh was again soundless, but he tipped his body forward, pressed his broken finger on the nurse’s knee, then reached over to tap the plastic videocassette in the nurse’s paw-like hand.

The nurse cleared his throat, the buckskin of his usual voice now stiff. “Doctor, do you remember that video liability protection system we installed in ICU last year? This tape’s from that preacher’s room. I seen it ten times. He’s talking in the old way.... Crying.... Then singing. At first, I thought the light over his bed was a lens flare, but the camera checked good.”

The nurse’s voice sagged. “Doctor, you can see her. Something’s there. We just got back from Zuni Pueblo. Those Ashiwi-elders down there helped translate what this preacher man said. They’re driving up tonight.” Emotion and the lack of sleep broke the nurse’s mask. He bent forward and covered his face.

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Three phone calls and two hours later, the Highway Department foreman kicked a rock with his cowboy boot, his face as purple as the grader-operator had ever seen it. The Medical

Examiner stood his ground in front—white-coated arms crossed, sunglasses blank. The two Hopis watched through the cracked windshield of the Examiner's green Subaru. Burrowing Owl's head barely showed over the passenger dash. The bear-nurse towered from the car's rear seat, his knees splayed wide against the seatback, his feet trying to side-step a spill of medical journals across the floor.

"For Chris's sake, Jake, you know better," the foreman cursed the grader-operator. "Shut it down, and take'm to your place. Giv'm any shit they want. Just keep the flipp'n Feds off my job."

The tires of the foreman's truck spun gravel.

Heading west on Interstate-40, the Examiner's Subaru followed the Grader-operator's oversized pickup truck.

Swinging off the Winslow exit, the Grader-operator kept looking in his rearview mirror. "Goddamn gov'ment bastards." He drove slow, exaggerating his turn-signal like they were idiots. "Son a'bitch. Shit." How could they possibly know? Somehow they even knew his kid's names. And that so-called medical examiner, Doctor Somebody flipp'n Somebody.

In the grader-operator's rearview mirror, the Examiner's sunglasses glared over His Subaru's steering wheel like a cop.

"Providing he cooperates, we won't take this further," the asshole Examiner had told his foreman.

"Well, shit a brick." Bastard kept his hands in his pockets the whole time. Afraid to get'm dirty. Well, screw'm and his flipp'n white coat."

Wheeling up into his home's cement driveway, the grader-operator activated his remote opener, gunned his big-bore engine, and watched the garage's mouth lift up. Inside the room's darkness, a kitchen door half-opened, the pale face of the operator's wife poked out. He waved her silent by shaking his head and pointing at the Subaru.

A small man wearing a doctor's coat and sunglasses was already out of the car and staring. A giant Indian in blue scrubs was helping a child—or someone,—from the front seat. Flipping on the garage light, the grader-operator's wife stepped down onto the concrete floor—arms folded over her stomach, mouth lipless.

After slamming his truck door, the grader-operator sucked in his gut, hitched his pants, tightened his belt, and shrugged. Wheeling a bicycle away from his workbench, he pretended to inspect the seat.

The Examiner stopped under the garage door with his feet apart, hands in his lab coat pockets, his sunglass face blank. Twenty seconds later, he forced a cough. The grader-operator straightened up. Shrugging, he pointed to a cardboard U-Haul box on the workbench.

The Examiner nodded the nurse to move forward, but the big man—frozen--just stared. Burrowing Owl—his hand on the Examiner's arm for balance—leaned forward with a supportive grunt to unlocked the nurse's feet.

The box was heavier than the nurse was ready for—the skull rolling; thunking the box's side. Nauseated, the nurse leaned against a metal garbage can and tried to breathe.

The grader-operator's voice was too loud. "Blade may'av dinged it, but it's just like I found." Sweat trickled under both of his thick arms. He pushed back his cap and scratched the

underbelly of his forehead. "Jaw's there too. Even teeth. You say it's a girl who's been crying. Jez' H. Christ giv'me a flipp'n break...." His voice trailed away. He stepped forward to rub a grease spot off the box's side, smearing the spot wider. Turning, the grader-operator glared at his wife. "Where the hell's my rag?" Not helped by the steel of her face, he looked back at the Medical Examiner and rolled his eyes. "Christ almighty."

Burrowing Owl slipped a leather pouch from his jean pocket then sprinkled white cornmeal over the box, workbench, and floor. Peering up into the nurse's face, the medicine man pushed a pinch into the Nurse's mouth. The Nurse held out his tongue for a second taste, the brown of his face gone clay, his breath locked. Burrowing Owl pushed the nurse's stomach with the disk of his turquoise ring and clicked his tongue. "Huutu. Breathe in. Holy breath spirit."

The medicine man turned, nodded to the grader-operator's wife, and spoke to her in soft Hopi.

The nurse flushed, then choked out a translation, his voice a rasp. "My grandfather here asks if you and your husband feel OK?"

The woman tried to smile but couldn't. She stared at the tiny Hopi then glared at her husband—the spider veins in his beer-sagged cheeks magnified. Turning to the man in the white coat, the woman saw an image of herself in his sunglasses and stepped back.

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On Saturday morning, three-hundred pickups, vans, and cars lined the dirt road into the Anasazi ruin. Three Navajo policemen and one policewoman—in their sand-tan, short sleeve uniforms—leaned against a truck.

With more sky than earth and no trees for fifty miles, the Painted Desert horizon gathered around the mesa's waist like a herb-dyed Navajo-skirt—rolling hills of storm-washed sandstone—bisque, amethyst, terra-rosa, amber, chrysolite, amaranth, cadmium, dinosaur-bone—dry washes frosted soft with breeze-rippled waves of clumps of knee-high lemongrass.

On the mesa's top next to a crumbled stone wall, a seven-foot-tall shade arbor the size of a tennis court had been thrown up during the night—a mat of green-leafed branches trellised-up on bark-stripped, scrub-oak posts.

Back on the road, around the tailgates of two pickup trucks, the night work-crew nursed their late breakfast—jackets off, jokes, shy smiles on brown faces, blistered hands, open pink boxes of Dunkin' Donuts, styrofoam cups—shovels and axes set aside like easy-reach rifles.

Three ravens tumbled in an updraft over an adjacent ridge; their chortle calls mimicked by two boys. A spotted ground squirrel kept changing her mind between scolding and darting out and back. Four Navajo cowboys stopped talking about the drought and watched a flock of western bluebirds—their chirp-song matching the rhythm of their dipping flight. Two sweat-dark horses tied to the bumper of a truck whinnied at a lone rider coming in.

Three young Navajo women in ankle-skirts, leg-wrap moccasins, and black-rain hair welcomed each new arrival with a bundle of sage.

"Once you climb up to the ceremony arbor no talking," the smallest woman instructed, her black eyes studying each visitor like a teacher absorbing first-day children. "Remove watches and western jewelry. Cell phones off. No shoes. Bare feet on the earth unless you're wearing traditional skins. Use a blanket or shawl if you're wearing shorts. Do your business now because once they start, you shouldn't leave." She flicked her chin toward four aqua-colored porta-potties.

A spill of boots, running-shoes, lace-ups, and sandals lay across the first dune. People inhaled the sage bundles as they climbed. Parents tapped the sage blessing on the heads of their children. Children were kicking night-cool sand with bare feet.

Like flowers placed on Earth's altar—Apaches, Navajos, Hopis, Utes, and Zunis sat on the ground facing the shade arbor—bright shirts, cowboy hats, caps, every style of black hair, every shade of brown skin. An out-of-context sprinkling of white, black, and Asian faces—hospital nametags, awkward smiles.

Under the arbor's shade—on a card table placed next to the open grave and covered with hand-woven, black-manta cloth—the Anasazi girl's skull had been washed and wrapped in embroidered white lace; the spun-cotton cloud-flying mask of Hopi burials. A butterfly-bow of blue macaw feathers was tied on top. Beneath the girl's skull, someone had slipped a folded, seldom-seen antelope skin dress with a white-wool cape.

A line of Hopi medicine men stood to the left of the grave—jeans, western shirts, vests, black headbands, corn bundles, eagle feathers, gourd rattles. A parallel line of Navajo Ha ta'a'li' medicine-singers stood on their right.

Once everyone was sitting and the first song done, Burrowing Owl was helped up on a fifty-five-gallon drum cut in half and flipped over. The bear-nurse, dressed in what looked to be an overstuffed wedding suit, stood next to him to translate the medicine man's words into English. People who didn't know Burrowing Owl were surprised by his booming voice, the flash of his eyes, the shake of his hair.

"Today I speak not as Burrowing Owl, Priest of the Prairie Dogs.... but as Masau'u."

The smiles on his relatives faded when they heard the word Masau'u—all Hopis in the audience straightened, the older men fishing cotton headbands from their pockets.

Masau'u paused to let the big nurse translate. When the nurse finished, he turned to a now standing, woman as she sang out a Navajo translation. Heavy with silver and velveteen—proud of family and face—the matriarch tilted up her head as if singing to the sky.

"Today it's not about tribe," Masau'u continued. "Today it's not about skin.... not about death.... Today it's about your heart.... Today it's about your life."

"Every day above the ground is precious.... The history of all people.... from Ancient Ones to Navajo.... to our White and Foreign Relatives.... is all the same.... It's about our children's laughter mixed with the tears of their parents.... It's about storm and rainbow.... It's about thirst-cracked lips and summer rain."

The nurse's voice broke. The Navajo woman's translation dropped into an operatic whisper. People leaned forward—most understanding two languages, a few understanding three.

Masau'u's mouth now opened and closed without a sound. Sweeping his arm through an overhead arch, cornmeal fell like snow from his fist. Those in front saw tears in the folded

leather of his cheeks. Burrowing Owl swayed, coughed, bent over, then slowly straightened up to stare so long at the horizon that many turned to see what he was looking at. Suddenly pushing up on his toes, Masau'u stretched out his neck, the top button on his shirt straining. One long shriek. Two chirps with the second note rising.

Half the men in the audience gasped—a prairie dog's warning—"Coyote coming." Several shaggy-headed boys—smelling of sun, sheep, fry-bread, and campfire—leaped up, looking around, embarrassed. One leggy, walnut-skin girl was also standing, the shrill whistle of her own reflex automatically calling her dogs before she remembered where she was; laughing, bright face full of joy, her black braids danced. The squint-eyes of a shrunken grandmother sitting next to her wet with pride and memory, the rib-cage sick puppy on her lap lifting his head.

Like a migration-weary bird finding perch, Masau'u' closed his eyes and slumped forward. A fox-quick man in front jumped up to help him down. Most people looked at their hands. One whimpering baby—held too tight by her sister—got handed back to his mother.

A silver-skin man with a raisin face whom no one had ever seen, shuffled up. Even shorter than Masau'u', he pushed a trembling clay bowl of water to Masau'u's lips, half of it spilling over the medicine man's rib-bone chest. Saying something in Zuni, only those in front could hear, caused those few who knew the language to laugh. Relief sank through the crowd—a wave of murmur about the raisin-faced man not seen outside his Pueblo in fifty years. The man's grandson, his polished-gourd face made heavy with black-rimmed glasses, bent to whisper in the man's crinkled ear. The boy took his grandfather's arm and eased him back to his seat.

Back on his barrel perch and now somehow taller, Masau'u' brushed sweat-damp bangs from his face. His voice rumbled like the mountain-thunder people sixty miles to the south.

“We are ten-fingered peoples.... Each dawn, the Holy People send us ten miracles.... Each day ten miracles are given to every person on earth.... Eyes open or not.... Heart open or not.... Whether you see them... or not.”

When the Navajo translator finished, her head stayed down, her breath asthmatic.

Most of the adults leaned back. A breeze whipped under the shade arbor—those crying with wet cheeks were the first to feel cool. As the Navajo singers started their Mountain Song, cornhusk cigars of sacred tobacco passed through the audience.

A few minutes later, those men standing in the back twisted around to look over the mesa's edge at the road. Others sitting nearby got to their feet.

An orange and white ambulance had nosed itself off the dirt track and was stuck—wheels spinning dust, light-bar angry-red. As the pushing men gave up, the vehicle relaxed and its lights flicked off. Eyeglasses flashed through the passenger window—the smiling round face of the Medical Examiner's Navajo secretary.

The ambulance's back door opened. Six men pulled out a black particleboard coffin. The Medical Examiner moved in behind, the buttons of his lab coat straining, his sunglasses crooked. A stump-sized white lady with a mop of red-florescent hair clung to his arm—the strap of her purse like an ammunition belt across her chest.

After a few steps in the sand, the Examiner stopped—his feet apart, bracing against the woman’s weight. A Navajo policeman jogged over and took the lady’s other arm, saying something that made them both laugh.

Halfway up the mesa, both the Examiner and the lady fell, the policeman dragged to his knees. The crowd gasped. Three cowboys scrambled down to help.

Once on the mesa’s top, the pallbearers paused to catch their breath. Several steps behind, the red-haired lady—face blotched strawberry and mouth open, tucked in her blouse. The policeman brushed sand off her back, then wiped his own face. A grinning boy with brown broomstick arms handed the Examiner his sunglasses, the policeman his gun belt.

As the pallbearers reached the grave, all medicine men rose—song full-open, rattles roaring, the audience pulled to their feet with their hats off. As the pallbearers turned to find their seats, Masau’u’ eagle-fanned smoke over each foot, hand, and head—a pinch of pollen from his pouch in each dry mouth, a sip of spring water from an abalone shell.

The Red-Haired Lady slumped on a blanket next to Masau’u—her face puffed, eyes closed, glasses fogged, purse clutched against her chest with both hands. Ten minutes later, as she struggled upright, the singing stopped.

Masau’u took his time covering the Medical Examiner with smoke—this blessing, slow-motion deliberate—the precision slap of heavy-feather. Drawing a line of pollen across the Examiner’s forehead, laughing with a series of chirps, he pushed the Examiner’s body around to face the people. In English, Masau’u shouted. “Here.... is.... my.... brother.”

Clapping turned to cheer. The opposing balance of the two men—pepper and salt, feather and steel, cloud and earth, blood and sky, moon and sun. Twin healing warriors.

The Examiner then raised his hand and yelled, his Midwestern voice a mountain stream cutting through the desert. “We got the body off the train just in time,” his now sunglass-free eyes laughing slits, one brown sock hanging from his stethoscope pocket.

The Examiner pointed back to the grinning nurse, his hand kept flat to avoid the impolite finger-point of a witch. “Lawrence here tracked down the preacher’s daughter in Chicago. I picked her up in Albuquerque this morning. Hasn’t heard from her father in 36 years. She’s never been to the Southwest, and she’s never met an Indian.”

People laughed loud and then applauded as the bear-nurse helped the Red-Haired Lady to her feet. Masau’u puffed smoke from his corn-husk wrapped tobacco, coughed, spat, then drew a pollen streak across the lady’s forehead. He called for an eagle feather—“Hikwsunpi”—then roared his own translation in English. “Breath-spirit feather.... Hold it upright.... Sit down.... Close your eyes.... Pray to Jesus.” Pressing his hand to the top of her head Masau’u wiped his own tears with the back of one sleeve then surveyed his people—mountain-lake eyes under a full moon.

People laughed nervously. One lady in back sobbed openly. Many closed their eyes. A barrel-shaped woman in front with a single grey-rope braid moved to the Red-Haired Lady’s blanket and took her hand. Another rubbed the lady’s shoulders.

As the Medical Examiner opened the particleboard coffin, people in front moaned and leaned back. The singing restarted, Hopi and Navajo healers alternating their chorus—four

directions, four mountains, four winds, four blessings. Someone passed up a Navajo blanket. Hospital staff were called forward. Hands eased the body of the sheet-shrouded preacher out of his box. Masau'u fanned up a cloud of smoke, people paddling air in their attempt to draw the protection over their children.

With a nod from Masau'u, two men jumped in the empty grave. Six Navajo healers moved through the audience fanning cedar smoke from clay bowls. One Zuni medicine man—face to the sun,—offered up a feathered pipe-bowl, the shrill cry of his eagle bone whistle causing the horses on the road to flinch.

Lowering the preacher into the earth, they eased his body to a sitting position with his head facing east, knees bent and tight against his chest. One of the interns, surprised by the body's flexibility, whispered in the Examiner's ear, proud of his boss' work. After holding a blanket up to the eastern sky as an offering, they wrapped it around the preacher's body like a towel around a wet child; snugging it tight with a braided-wool rope.

As the chanting slowed, Masau'u sprinkled white cornmeal over the girl's skull-bundle—lace, blue-feather, snow dust. Hopping into the open pit, Masau'u placed the dress, cape, skull bundle, videocassette, and two food packs at the preacher's feet. Pushing four prayer-feather sticks in the ground, Masau'u pulled the preacher's silver crucifix from under his own shirt—the cross now soldered on a silver chain. Placing it over the preacher's blanketed head, he sprinkled pollen and stepped back with a yell. “His protection Kachina.... Jesus.” Some in the audience clapped.

The gravediggers grabbed Masau'u's arms, but in their exuberance, pulled him too hard—several feet into the air. Masau'u's joy was bird-like—his moccasined feet made an exaggerated kick, his arms flapping, his face cackling. Even the men hand-pushing dirt into the grave laughed.

Smiling wide, bowing deep, Masau'u handed the rubber-band sealed bible to the preacher's daughter, the tip of a broken feather sticking out. "His medicine bundle."

Back on his half-barrel, Masau'u raised both arms skyward and shut his eyes. People closed their eyes to hear what he was hearing: the scrape of shovel, the overhead drone of a NY to LA jet, the gurgle of a man's stomach, the heartache of a mother—a photo of a Marine-scrubbed son clenched in her hand—a man clearing his throat, the suck of a baby's mouth on a breast, a lonely raven, the mumble of a nodding auntie, a goldfinch working thistle, a horse pawing gravel, a police radio on the road, the time-throb-thump of four hundred human hearts.

Masau'u turned, pointed to the grave, and shouted. "We're all visitors on this earth.... White. Brown. Black.... All on different paths but all ending in the same hole." Tossing in four different colored pebbles, he whispered a final prayer.

The Hopi side of the Healers started their Flying Song.

Hopping off his drum Masau'u moved into the squeeze of sitting people. Balancing with the people's upheld arms, he found the Grader-operator and his wife—both awkward on low folding chairs. The wife, trying to hide her painted toes in the sand, was crying. The grader-operator sat stone-faced, his cap off, his face blotched pink. Puffing smoke from a tobacco husk someone handed across, Masau'u made them both stand—the grader-operator holding his hands

palm-up like he saw the others do. Masau'u fanned the wife's down-turned head, wisps of her hair flying until her scalp tingled. Tilting up her chin Masau'u pressed the center of her forehead with his gnarled thumb then slowly wiped both of her cheeks with the leather of his pouch. Masau'u spoke first in Hopi, then repeated in English. "My bag collects the tears of brokenhearted women."

The grader-operator's wife opened her eyes. Most of the women and a few men in the audience were weeping. Some prayed out loud in Navajo. A man no one recognized—stood away from the group, feet together, facing south, his high voice soft—sang to the sky in Apache.

Satisfied with the wife's eventual smile, Masau'u straightened up. Nodding first to the bear-nurse, he turned to speak pointedly to a group of men from his village.

"Sometimes our messenger is a coyote.... Sometimes our messenger is a heavy equipment operator...."

Balancing again along the line of up-stretched arms Masau'u wove back to the grave and scrambled back on his drum.

"Like an arrow shot by our Ancestor—the arrowhead—our spirit, cuts through time and space.... Their sacrifice is shaft.... Their wisdom, our feather.... Their prayers warm the breath of our sleeping children...."

"We cannot control the world.... We cannot control other people.... But how we respond to what happens.... how we let the world affect us.... is ours alone."

Pointing into the half-filled grave, Masau'u continued, "Our Grandmother-Daughter here... has been lost and crying for a thousand years.... Today she flies home.... This Bible-man flies with her.... He found us.... She found him.... We found her...."

During the last prayer-song, one of the cowboys in the back, having spent the day watching for clouds, shouted out the first rain. An hour later, the police radioed headquarters that 19 vehicles were stuck in the mud while trying to turn around.

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It was dark when the mud-covered Navajo Police SUV followed the last vehicle to the highway. As the passenger van turned onto the pavement, it honked twice—two grinning men in the front, a mother in the back passing out snacks to wet, excited children.

The grader-operator's truck pulled up on the highway and stopped under the SUV's headlights. While the Policewoman held her mag-light, the grader-operator peeled clay-caked snow-chains from his tires, cut off his frayed towrope, and threw the mess in the truck's bed. Wiping his hands on his pants—unconcerned about his lost cap, wet bald head, congealed-blood bumper-bang on his right temple—the grader-operator shook the policewoman's hand with a grin.

The Navajo policewoman held his hand longer than necessary, pulled him slightly forward, and then shone the beam of her light across his face. Stepping forward, she stretched up on her toes, and she kissed his cheek.

As their truck pulled away, the grader-operator's wife waved out her powered-down window—her other hand fingering an unfamiliar turquoise necklace around her throat.

Through the slap of wipers, heater roar, and windshield fog, the policewoman double-flicked her headlights in reply. As she turned to her partner—her dark eyes wide, raven hair full of raindrops, tears cutting through the wet already on her cheekbones—she swallowed several times before speaking.

“Burrowing Owl was right. The turquoise in this redneck’s eyes fell from our sky.”

They both laughed. The policewoman's partner handed over his coffee and reached for the mike. "Window Rock, this is Unit 7, we're safe on the blacktop, and we're coming home."

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