DINÉ BIKEYAH (Navajo Reservation)

Lorie Adair

Diné Bikeyah was tired Shi'yazhi, that's what the federal agents told us once more, the message, this time gentler in tone though no less pointed. Our sheep, cattle, and horses had overgrazed the land, creating gullies worse than ever before so when the harsh male rains fell, the nutrients were washed away leaving barren land behind. They said it was unfortunate that we had not been careful enough in storing winter hay, in putting money aside to buy what we could not grow. But those were scarce times, and so we let the livestock out each morning to fend for themselves and eat across the land until the grasses and flowers were all but gone.

This time the government solution was filling gullies spanning 25,000 square miles of reservation and for the People to give the land a rest. We could sell the sheep that did not carry disease to the agents who were buying them for $1 a head. Later we learned they sold them for $1.50 to the ranchers of Montana and Wyoming who had fertile soil. We could take heart though. Even if it was true that the topsoil was thinning to nothing and blowing off portions of the land, it was still useful. The Nation was rich in coal and, more importantly, uranium.

I learned all this in the usual way—through a network of cousins and clansmen out to MacDougal's trading post to shop and argue. Sheep herding was following the old traditions, and who didn't recall times when the Range Riders drew into camp to cut the sheep down in their tracks? Many remembered days so bright it stung the eyes to look upon the land, and in the distance came the riders, dark figures on the horizon.

Jake Billy told of the wash a few miles beyond the red mesa and his horse picking its way through thistles and goat head thorns. The sun was rising high overhead and a light breeze blew his hair back from his forehead, a beautiful day to be witnessing so much death. But his parents brought him along behind the riders so he would learn why he should never trust what *bilagaanas* said, instead watch their actions.

What he recalled most of all was veering into a canyon where cottonwood trees shaded an arroyo, and creosote bushes grew creating a small oasis. While the sheep lipped up tender plants, a twelve-gauge shotgun cracked the silence followed by other shots that echoed off the canyon walls, and he watched muscle blasted from bone. Every stone was splattered with blood that day, and he shuddered telling the story. He never ventured back to that canyon area even though decades of rain and snow had washed the gore away. You can't shake the smell of blood once it's been spilled, Shi'yazhi—how even the memory of it hangs thick and metallic in the air.

Others picked up threads of the story remembering their grandmothers falling to their knees despite thorns tearing through the thin material of their skirts, how they crawled to the edge of this same canyon and cried for the waste of meat and wool. Their sons and daughters pulled them away, rocking them and singing an old time song—one tone mostly and keening their sorrows with them so the old ones would not lose heart, become stones to truths they were entrusted to share and the People had need to hear.

But the young ones remained unmoved by these recollections and they had forceful voices that rose above their elders'. These were the ones who chose to leave the reservation for a time to be schooled in logic and debate, in the slick words of the *bilagaana*. They urged us to listen to these agents who walked more softly on the land and drank coffee with the People, lowering their eyes respectfully when they spoke. They were learning *Diné* ways, were meeting them halfway. Hadn't the People already tried the ways of the old ones so long ago defying the *bilagaanas* and letting their sheep become too plentiful again? Bit by bit the land was blowing away from underfoot yet here was opportunity—money in the pocket from sale of sheep and the chance to move from herding to mining.

True, the medicine men said it was wrong to tamper with the life force of the land, but what were ceremonies in the face of science? It was time they relied on modern information not the visions and stories of the old ones—especially alcoholics like Jake Billy.

Some refused. In Dinnehotso, Harold Smith slammed the geologists' change on the counter at his trading post saying he would not sell them another cup of coffee if they kept on about the gray rocks. But more and more were like my brother-in-law, MacDougal—willing to do whatever it took to bring his post into the modern world.

You must remember that during the war when it was a hardship for us to behold mothers and wives lingering over family treasures they'd traded for food, he had the will and scent for money. If the government was determined to send an army of engineers out to pave roads and companies to haul and mill rocks, it had to be worth a great deal and so we should embrace change.

My memory weaves it this way Shi'yazhi: morning mist burning off the land and MacDougal's horse picking through goat head thorns on the way to our place. He passed by cooking fires that were a mingle of pinon and cedar, of corn mush heating in a pot. He was riding out to a low mesa east of our land where children had climbed and wrestled on an outcropping of rock during September's Squaw Dance. It was an unremarkable place but geologists had given MacDougal rocks and the mission to compare them to all the formations he knew in the region. He had become their scout, was no different from the enemy Utes who'd led the cavalry to *Diné* hiding places during the land wars more than one hundred years ago.

From my hogan I watched him linger near the rock then clap dust from

his hands. He mounted his horse then rode it past our sheep corral, and seeing it empty, knowing my husband had put the livestock out to pasture, was at that moment guarding them against wolves and coyotes, MacDougal did not trot past, didn't have the patience to wait and speak with us together later on.

He hobbled his horse at the trough and gazed out past the clothesline where jeans and a broom skirt flapped in gusts of wind. A dust devil gathered under the shadow of the mountains, flinging fine sand higher and higher and MacDougal fixed on it. I'd heard this had become his way since the agents, speculating on what he might next gain from the People.

I grew tired of waiting for his fascination with dust to run its course called, "It's the same sky out your way."

He bent at the waist and entered the hogan that is very much like this space, Shi'yazhi—circling east to west like a womb, like the earth itself. MacDougal's eyes flicked over our possessions, ticking them off one by one: six sheepskins, a coal stove, the table and two chairs, three Pendleton blankets piled atop a wooden chest, my weaving loom set up near the window. Manny was sleeping behind it on that morning because nightmares had frightened him, and since only good comes from the heart of the loom, he'd eased to sleep there with his face turned to the curving wall.

My youngest, Evette was there too; she was just a baby and laced in the cradleboard with cedar beads dangling from the arch of wood to ward off evil spirits. The coffeepot was warming on the stove, and I poured a cup for MacDougal then set it between us on a swatch of oilcloth. He asked where Benjamin was, and I nicked my chin toward the red mesa and said he'd headed out that way.

He tried to make small talk about Benjamin and herding, about rodeo and the competition my husband faced especially since his time for practicing had been shortened by family obligations. Fueled by coffee he went on talking, his voice full and leathery, a snake voice winding through the room, filling in all the silent spaces, circling round to stories about my mother, father, and grandmother. That voice wore like a rut in the road while I took sugar cubes from a tin plate and swirled a spoon in my cup.

Not one for the small talk *bilagaanas* like to make before working around to their real purpose I said, "I know about the agents."

He tapped the end of his spoon so it clattered against the Formica then stretched his neck. He was accustomed to my sister's ways you see—how she'd fill in the spaces where he'd left off. If not in words then motion—offering her guests more coffee, a clean spoon for each new serving, another can of sweet milk, a canister of homemade cookies. MacDougal liked to get to the truth in his own time, but he was boring me and I had much to do before evening.

He set the cup down and dug in his jeans for the bandanna he'd knotted around the rocks. He nudged one into a band of light that shined on the table,

and I saw how flecks of gray in the Formica matched it.

The mining companies were setting up trailers for families near the uranium sites and pumping water from the San Juan River not only to leach the uranium from stone but also provide families with running water. “In Cortez and Farmington you can fill up a sink for dishes, run a bath, and draw water from a faucet all at once. It could be the same in Sweet Canyon,” he finished

Water could bless, and money ease us toward forgiveness for generations lost to the Long Walk, boarding schools, and other policies the government was finally admitting hadn’t been in the best interests of the People. Here was an opportunity for the *Diné* to heal.

Manny woke and I drew him to my lap then set to working my fingers through his long hair to braid it. I was thinking about my mother-in-law who had been at the trading post when the agents arrived. She’d stared at the backs of their heads where clippers had shorn the hair so short freckles showed across their scalps and was reminded of fish bellies, pale and soft, how easy it would be to crush them with a rock and be done with the whole business of agents.

Of course she didn’t, just kept wadding newspaper to clean the windows and swept and washed the wood floors after the men passed. It had been raining off and on for several days, and the agents, sent off in false directions by a People long on memory and short on patience, were caked in mud from pushing their jeep from arroyos. Unlike the old ones who refused to acknowledge the agents, MacDougal had smiled at their approach gesturing the agents into his office where they drank coffee and spoke privately for hours.

I looked down at that rock thinking it a small and dull thing to ride all the way from Washington for but said no such thing. It had all been said before by the elders—the land beneath our feet was the only thing we could depend on. MacDougal wanted to help the *bilagaanas* carry it away for profit. I wanted peace.

Before I could slide the rock back to MacDougal, Manny snatched it from the table flinging it across the room and tracking it like he expected it to become a butterfly or hummingbird, might miss the transformation if he so much as blinked. But it remained what it was—an ordinary rock—and so my son climbed from my lap and went out to the yard to switch the horse’s tail. I closed the door after him, picked up the rock, and placed it before MacDougal.

He pocketed the rock then brushed his hand past the oilcloth, to pour another cup of coffee.

“I told them maybe I’d seen their rocks, maybe not. They know it’s here though. They took pictures from the sky.”

I stood taking the pot from the table.

“The war is over. Why do they need it now?”

“That isn’t the point. They want it; so they’ll take it. If it’s not legal they’ll change the laws to make it so. We could be ahead of everyone else on this.”

He leaned forward, his hands pressing the table. “We can manage *them* for once—hold out on the best places until we see the money. They can’t find all the uranium. There’s too much land and not one of them knows his way through every twist and turn.”

I turned my back to rinse my cup in a bucket of water.

“I’m letting you know because we are related now,” he said.

“It is true you are my sister’s husband.”

Perhaps it was my tone that woke the baby for Evette screamed so I had to draw her from the cradleboard. I turned to the window to nurse and look upon the land that MacDougal kept speaking of as though it were foreign and using the language of currency. He described royalties that could be had—2% for anyone who put in a permit, all it took was a census card and a signature down at Window Rock for the mining company to break ground. I was thinking about the war and the news that had trickled in about the *bilagaanas* gathering Japanese to pen up outside of Phoenix then taking the land they’d farmed for generations. Still, they wanted more.

Evette snuffled at my breast. I looked at her gazing up at me and smiled. Eventually, MacDougal walked out the door.

I pictured him arriving home, settling his pale hand on my sister’s shoulder when he found her crying at the sight of red dirt slung across her kitchen floor— the ritual of bleach, hot water, and mop futile against its motion. Wind blew it into our mouths, our hair, the seams of skin along the knuckles. This is how *Diné Bikeyah* blesses her children Shi’yazhi. She expects nothing less in return.