

By That I Meant I Loved Her (after Audre Lorde)

“On December 21st, in answer to her entreaties and the solstice, I sent her a greeting card of a green urn filled with stones which read, ‘I must have rocks in my head.’

By that I meant I loved her.”

- *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* Audre Lorde

I read Audre Lorde’s biomythography, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, for the first time when I was 19. I was having backburner thoughts about gender and sexuality (at the time I identified as a cis bisexual woman) and this book came to me at exactly the right time. To this day, Lorde’s depiction of sapphism is what grounds and defines my own lesbianism. Lorde was my first queer ancestor and my first named creative ancestor, which makes her double important to me in a way that goes beyond words. This quote from *Zami* has always stood out to me, along with the very clear description of the card. I loved the idea that you can profess your love to someone with something slightly absurd yet deeply romantic when infused with love. I made these for my friends for Valentine’s Day 2023 after fantasizing about making a print of the greeting card for several months.

Wings (after Chrystos)

A hen, one who could have brought more geese, a female, a wild one
dead Shot by an excited ignorant young blond boy, his first
His mother threw the wings in the garbage I rinsed them
brought them home, hung them spread wide on my studio wall
A reminder of so much, saving what I can’t bear to be wasted
Wings

...

I muse on how he will always think of the woods
as an exciting place to kill This family of three lives
on a five acre farm They raise no crops not even their own
vegetables or animals for slaughter

...

That dead goose
This boy will probably never understand that it is not right
to take without giving He doesn’t know how to give His mother
who cleaned & cooked the goose says she doesn’t really like
to do it but can’t understand why she should feel any different
about the goose than a chicken or hamburger from the supermarket
I bite my tongue & nod I could explain to her that meat raised
for slaughter is very different than meat taken from the woods
where so few wild beings survive That her ancestors are
responsible for the emptiness of this land That lawns feed no
one that fallow land lined with fences is sinful That hungry

people need the food they could be growing That spirituality
is not separate from food or wildness or respect or giving

...

I wait for the wings on my wall to speak to me
guide my hungers teach me winds I can't reach I keep
these wings because walls are so hard wildness so rare because
ignorance must be remembered because I am female because I fly
only in my dreams because I too
will have no young to let go

- "Wings of a Wild Goose" Chrystos

Chrystos (1946-) is a Menominee two-spirit lesbian poet born in San Francisco. What stood out to me while reading their 1988 collection, *Not Vanishing*, was how Chrystos balanced rage toward white supremacy with the tenderness of lesbian intimacy. This poem, "Wings of a Wild Goose" said so much about Indigeneity through the unassuming symbol of goose wings. In some ways, that made the translation to a visual medium easier. I loved Chrystos' gentleness with the wings because he goose reminded them of themselves. I also loved the line, "meat raised for slaughter is very different than meat taken from the woods where so few wild beings survive." The wings on the wall are not lifeless- they contain the spirit of the goose, the memory of everything they could've been, and what they continue to be. The ghost or shadow of the whole goose over the skeletal wings is a reminder of this. It was difficult for me to create a print of the indoors, almost shut off from the world. I did not want to create a piece about Native isolation or loneliness, it felt too real and familiar. But that's part of what Chrystos is saying too. We construct our own worlds through our homes and other safe places so that we are never truly alone. We recognize all living creatures as our siblings. We maintain our freedom and autonomy in small spaces. Chrystos feels like an auntie, like someone who regularly visits your grandma's house and who always comments on your mother's facebook posts. They give you blunt life advice and smell like cigarettes and tell you embarrassing stories about your relatives from before you were born. Chrystos does not necessarily feel like a blood relative, but people of color know that this does not mean they're not family.

Are the Ancestors Near? (after Janice Gould)

1

Desert heat, high clouds, and sky
the color of lapis. On this journey,
anything seems possible,
so we stop by an ancient cottonwood
to kiss. The beauty trembles,
doesn't say a word, just watches
me, so open. Small birds fly by, flock
in the shady tree above us. What
settles in her heart? What congeals?
Hope? Despair? Far off, the river churns

in its sandy banks, swallows veer, turn
in fiery air. Will these kisses seal
her to me? I her lover, she my wife?
Is all of this a dream, my whole life?

...

4
Sacred. Sacred. Sacred. Sacred. (Speak
in a whisper.) We slip into this
space half cognizant. The land is very
large indeed: bones of the earth
worn down, though she is a living thing.
See how she exposes her grace? Antelopes
graze on the far plain—their high,
white tails—the red soil throbs
its slow heartbeat, and the blue sky
clears so smartly, perfectly, like
radiance. Are the ancestors near?
What can we know? We decide
to wander around this prairie, mistaken
for Utes, buy commodities in little towns.

5.
Late afternoon we head west along the willow-banked
Malheur after the long curve of the Snake River plain.
(Above the falls where the Shoshone went to pray
we soaked our feet in cold water, and I observed
the arch of her brown foot.) Rabbitbrush and sage
along the highway, juniper on far hills and bluffs.
Sundown, and dusk falls over the wide basin of land.
In Burns we eat eggs in a cafe, take a room
in the Motel 6. In the dark, I can see
her black hair, black against the pillows. Its clean
scent makes me think of corn. At dawn, I hold her
and there are kisses. Then more kisses. Then more.
The day is cold; a north wind blew last night. But
the land is open. Rain falls in showers of light.

...

- "Six Sonnets: Crossing the West" Janice Gould

Janice Gould (1949-2019) was a Koyangk'auwi Maidu scholar and poet from Berkeley, California. "Six Sonnets" was published in the second half of her 2011 poetry collection *Doubters and Dreamers*, where she explores her lesbianism. This was my first time meeting Janice Gould on the page, but I immediately fell in love with her work. This poem in particular stuns me for many reasons. I love the reimagination of the sonnet form here, and Gould plays a lot with sonnets throughout the collection. Gould takes us on a road trip through these six sonnets. In order to create a similar sense of movement, I wanted to integrate the themes of the poem into one dark line representing the lover's hair, the road, and the river. Gould is explicit about the concrete joy and sensory pleasures of being with a loved one, yet speaks more cryptically of creeping doubt and anxieties. I wanted to focus on the light through the sky and the landscape, without ignoring the everpresent darkness. There is no light without the dark. Despite the anxiety about what lurks in the shadows, I did not want to play into the narrative that darkness is scary. The title of the poem is taken from the fourth sonnet, which I took to mean that ancestors are all around and below us, in the dark places. Gould's poem is in some ways a love letter to the landscape- another reminder of the way Native lesbian poets synonymize Indigeneity, sapphism, and the land. In my Native lesbian family tree, Janice Gould feels like a cousin, in the way that it seems everyone is each other's cousin on the rez. You don't know exactly how you're related, but she tells you that she bought your aunt her first beer and she was there when you were born.

Thirst (after Natalie Diaz)

365.

...

The US-headquartered companies announce,
with armed guards, *You can't drink from this lake anymore*. The Natives gather rain instead, open their beautiful water-shaped mouths to the sky, catch it in curved, peach-colored shells, in halved gourds, in their water-shaped hands.

The companies say, *Read these documents-- we bought the rain too.*

We own the rain.

210.

...

Are you able to love anyone--
your mother, your son, your lover--
in the midst of such hunger and this fire
stretching out and lengthening your throat?

How many bodies have you pressed into,
not for desire but for the saliva you sucked

from their tongue?

...

211.

There are differing opinions about how kissing
became criminal. Who hasn't drunk,
hasn't begged at the well of a lover's mouth?
Love has never been different from thirst,
but now everything is different. All the cups
are filled with dirt-- even our mouths.

- Excerpts from "*exhibits from The American Water Museum*" Natalie Diaz

Natalie Diaz (1978-) is a Mojave poet and former basketball player. Her 2021 Pulitzer-winning collection *Postcolonial Love Poem* weaves together themes of sapphic love, ancestral land, and Indigenous rights. This print pays homage to Diaz's entire collection through these excerpts from "*exhibits from The American Water Museum*." I wanted the woman in the print to look Native, with a nose that reminds me of the people I love. What is in those disembodied hands is open to viewer interpretation- is it the dirt that Diaz mentions? Is it water to finally quench the woman's thirst? Is it the emptiness of false hope? Or is it something else entirely?

Reading *Postcolonial Love Poem* for the first time was life-changing. Diaz helped me understand that my relationship with Paula Gunn Allen's work was not a fluke but a sign that I belonged in this Native lesbian poet family. There is a mutual appreciation of a Native woman's body as a metaphor for ancestral landscapes. Not in an objectifying, dehumanizing way, but with the recognition that we can map our deep ancestral love for the land onto each other. *Postcolonial Love Poem* is an intimate portrayal of sapphic love that makes me emotional every time I read it. This is the only print in the series that does not use nature imagery, but at the same time feels so tied to the earth because of this metaphor. Diaz is also the only Native lesbian poet I've read who is closer to my age which creates a more intragenerational relationship. Natalie Diaz feels like the cool and aloof aunt that you only see on holidays. She gives long hugs when she sees you and asks you a lot of questions. She says very little about her own life, but you'll take notes when she does because you want to grow up to be just like her.

The Moon Remembers (after Paula Gunn Allen)

"i have it in my mind that
dykes are indians

...

because they bear
witness bitterly
because they reach
and hold
because they live every day

with despair laughing
in cities and country places
because earth hides them
because they know
the moon

...

like indians
dykes have fewer and fewer
someplace else to go
so it gets important
to know
about ideas and
to remember or uncover
the past

...

they remember and they
stay
because the moon remembers
because so does the sun
because the stars
remember
and the persistent stubborn grass
of the earth”

- “Some like Indians Endure” Paula Gunn Allen

Paula Gunn Allen (1939-2008) was a Laguna Pueblo and Lebanese American scholar and poet. Her poem “Some Like Indians Endure” is about the similarities between Indigenous and lesbian identities. We have both faced oppression and erasure at the hands of “whiteman” and yet we find each other, we overcome, and most importantly, we remember. Even though we have fewer and fewer places to call our own, we are still connected by our resilience and our ancestors. We find joy and community everywhere. This print highlights both Native culture and queer culture with ceremony, dance, and protest. The constellations are divine hands that form bridges between these floating rocks, proving that we will never be cut off from each other. And, of course, no lesbian piece is complete without a reference to the moon.

As a Northern Cheyenne and Lebanese American lesbian poet myself, Paula Gunn Allen has been a significant queer ancestor to me. I love this poem for its reconciliation of Indigenous and lesbian identities. Paula Gunn Allen is the grandmother with warm hands who makes Indian tacos whenever you come over because she knows you love them. She doesn't even notice the hot grease splatter- the freckled burns all over her forearms can attest to that. Somehow she always has another old photo album to show you, pointing out cousins you'll never meet because she wants you to know you're never alone. She seems old and fragile now, but sometimes she'll talk about her life and you remember that it's only the toughest Native women who can survive this long.