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They Moved Away: Stories of Location and Relocation

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*THEY MOVED AWAY: STORIES OF LOCATION AND
RELOCATION*

JO CARRILLO

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We thought they might come for us any day. We were young, but we prepared ourselves in much the same way that we imagined a sick person prepared to die. We tried to make peace with our families and friends. We made love. We had children. We prayed. Though in the back of our minds, we wondered how life in the cities would unfold; we wondered if we would end up east or west; we wondered if we would drift together.

As it turned out, they came for us separately, by immediate family.

I remember one child in particular. She skipped behind her mother and sisters as they hurried toward the trucks. I remember that she was dressed in an orange smock. I remember her child sounds of smacking air through small, pursed lips. I remember that she waved goodbye to the rocks.

ii

He hated his job, but it was the law. The people had to be stopped from building or renovating. Sometimes they had to be moved; it was the law. Their property had to be destroyed. That was law too. A few people said that the fences had to go up so that the mining company could come in, strip the land, send energy to the cities, and so keep the country strong. But that was all rumor. There wasn't much he could say about that.

Sometimes the elderly women he moved would kick dirt in his direction or curse him. Sometimes they would accuse him of betraying his people. He tried not to think too much about them. They were bitter, and they were sad, but they were citizens just

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like he was, and as far as he was concerned they should obey the law.

On one of his days off, he wandered through town, going from bar to bar to pass the time. In one bar, he saw a woman whom he had once moved. She sat at a table. She wore a white blouse, a full layered skirt, tennis shoes, and jewelry. He watched her wrinkled hands tap a rhythm against an aluminum can.

There were three people in the bar: the bartender, the woman and him. Together they were surrounded by a song about blue skies and blue days. He walked past her table. The sound of her drumming caught his attention; he knew the rhythm. When he got to the bar, he glanced back. He watched her head ease with the beat. Blue days faded against a song he remembered from childhood; she tapped a distant memory on the can.

"What's with her?" the bartender asked.

"Don't know," he said, tightening his shoulders into a shrug. "Don't know," he said again as he felt his feet keep time with her song.

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He agreed to move from Tolani Lake to a different place. The new place, the government agent promised, was a much better place than Tolani Lake. At first he was reluctant; he explained to the agent that Tolani Lake was his birthplace. At this the agent smiled kindly and said "I know."

Eventually, he found out that the government had given him a house in Flagstaff. The government agent told him the house was worth \$60,000. That didn't impress him any which way. It was early spring, and he was concerned with planting a cornpatch. He stayed on at Tolani Lake; the \$60,000 house in Flagstaff fended for itself.

One weekend in late spring, he went to visit his sister in Albuquerque. When he returned to Tolani Lake, he returned to levelled land. His corn plants, strong and upright when he left, were now limp, green ribbons strewn across the red dirt. He walked through the carnage. He sat in its midst. He cried. He

prayed. He cried again. And with nothing left inside, he drove back to the \$60,000 house.

When he arrived, his daughter told him that he had to pay for water, electricity, garbage collection and property taxes. She reminded him about this kind of thing every once in a while, but he forgot. She would scold him and warn him that the government agents had moved him once and they could do it again. She told him to pay right away. He had never paid for water before. He gave his daughter the money in a burst of silent anger that warmed his skin like heat from a wood stove.

For the first time in his life, he spent his days inside smoking cigarettes. His daughter noticed. She tried to lift his spirits by giving him a color t.v., but he covered the English speaking contraption with an old blanket. He wanted it mute.

It came to him one morning as he made coffee. It came to him like a blast of wind and leaves. It wasn't altogether clear, but it was there. He took his hoe out from the hall closet and walked into the front yard. He turned some dirt; it was rich, very rich. These were still the pink days of early summer, but time was short. During the next week, he planted a cornpatch. By the purple days of mid-summer, little shoots presented themselves.

With his prayers and songs, the shoots grew and grew. His \$60,000 house flattened under the weight of their silky hair—first the windows popped out, then the brick walls crumbled. If he didn't hurry, they might all die from a frost. And if they died, then he would die too. But they were tall, strong women like his daughter. They sang and danced in the rainy afternoons. He sang and danced with them. He surrendered himself to their broad leafed arms. And though he was a grown man, he let them cradle him back to Tolani Lake.

iv

She refused to leave. She couldn't be bothered with that. After all, she was old and blind; she knew that she didn't have much time left, and there was still so much to do here. She lived with her daughter Betty. Betty was sixty-two. Betty hauled the water and wood, herded and fleeced the sheep, carded the wool, spun

the yarn, cooked and did much of everything else except weave. Betty didn't like to sit at the loom for long periods. She said sitting like that made her back ache. Betty preferred to walk, so she let her mother do the weaving.

In her blindness, Betty's mother wove intricate designs. She told Betty that those patterns came from closing her eyes and looking inside. This she wouldn't say, but when she was inside she saw mountain flowers birthing and being birthed, brooding summer skies with arches of color, green against red—she saw a fire, and it was strong. She, unlike the younger weavers, didn't bother herself with markets or styles. She just wove what she saw, confident that age traded one vision for another.