WOVEN STONE

SIMON J. ORTIZ

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For my children,
Raho Nez, Rainy Dawn, and Sara Marie,
and their children—
and their children's children henceforth:

The stories and poems come forth,
and I am only a voice telling them.
They are the true source themselves.
The language of them is the vision
by which we see out and in and all around.

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INTRODUCTION

Recently, I spoke to several groups of Laguna Pueblo Native American students at Laguna Elementary. After introductions and thanks for having me visit their school, I said in the Acoma Pueblo language, which is a linguistic sister to Laguna Pueblo, "Deetseyamah sthow-uh. Ehmi aistih dzuusteh, gaiyuh." Understanding that Deetseyamah was my home from where I had left that morning, a kindergarten boy raised his hand and said, "You speak Indian too?" "Hah uh," I said to the wide-eyed boy. "Yes. The Acoma language, which is almost the same as the Laguna language," I added. He smiled, and, looking at the children in a circle on the floor around me, I saw most of them smiling warmly.

I asked, "Do you know where Deetseyamah is?" None of them raised their hands or answered. Perhaps there were a couple who shyly wanted to, but they did not say anything. "Who knows where McCartys is?" I asked then, and many of the children quickly raised their hands. "Deetseyamah is where McCartys is. McCartys, Mericano dzehni shheyah ehmih ehgah. McCartys, that's its name in the American language," I told them. Realizing they knew or had learned where I was from, Deetseyamah, in their own language, they smiled again.

Standing before the children, I realized that what I do as a writer, teacher, and storyteller is to demystify language, and I smiled. Making

language familiar and accessible to others, bringing it within their grasp and comprehension, is what a writer, teacher, and storyteller does or tries to do. I've been trying for over thirty years.

I didn't wonder that the boy, whose age I was almost fifty years ago, was so wide-eyed when I spoke to him in the Acoma language. Unfortunately, even with the advances made in bilingual education in the past twenty years, Native American languages are still not widely used in U.S. schools. I doubt if he even rarely heard his teachers and other school staff speaking in the Laguna language. That the children knew the name McCartys and where it was but did not know Deetseyamah, I understand. English language use is so commonplace now, and too often it has replaced native languages. McCartys is on New Mexico and Acoma and Laguna Pueblo maps, but not Deetseyamah or Kawaihkah, the native name for Laguna Pueblo. But when I told them the place name, Deetseyamah, and they understood it to be the same as McCartys, they realized they knew, *in their own language*, the place. It was not some strange, faraway village in a foreign country or another state but a community much like their own, and it was only several miles up the road. And they smiled in recognition of this as they grasped and understood this within the context of their family and community, heritage and culture, local history and landscape, and familiar language. I hope also the children realize that the name, Deetseyamah, and their language, whether it's mostly Laguna or mostly English, has as much validity, maybe more, as any other name and language.

As a writer who has used language, mostly English, in poetry, fiction, and essay for many years, I've tried to bring it within my grasp and comprehension and those of others, as I've said before—to demystify it essentially. I feel I've made English, the Mericano language, accessible to me, or at least some of it, but that was not always the case. To another group of Laguna Elementary students, I said, "When most of you started school, you likely spoke English and maybe Laguna as well. When I and others began school at McCartys Day School years ago, we did not speak, write, read, or understand English or very much of it." We did speak, understand, perceive, and feel in our native Acoma language, however, and if there is anything that has sustained me through my years of writing it is that fact, even though I do not speak the Acoma language as fluently and fully traditionally as others do in the Aacqumeh community.

Language and Consciousness

When I was born in the early 1940's, the first sounds of language I heard were those of the Aacqumeh hanoh—namely, my family and community. The Acoma people, according to oral traditional mythology, since leaving Kashkahtrutih, an immemorial time and place in the epic Acoma narrative of our development, have spoken our language. Even the language known and used in that ancient time and place is no longer spoken except in memory. "Kash," my mother told me, "means white. For example, kashshehshi. White corn. Now, there is another, more recent word, for it. 'Kash' is of the old language." Upon leaving Kashkahtrutih, it was required of the people to speak their own language which would come about from their intelligence, perception and expression, creativity, their consciousness.

Most of the first songs and chants I heard were in our native dzehni of Acoma, because that was what my mother and father and my grandparents mainly spoke—although I am sure I heard a small amount also of Mericano songs and childhood ditties from my older sisters who were in school. In our home and community of Deetseyamah as well as Acoma Pueblo as a whole, the main language was Acoma although, since Spanish colonization in the sixteenth century, some people spoke Spanish, as they did English when American occupation began in the 1840's. The cultural and linguistic integrity of Aacqu was relatively secure, though shaky, in the first half of the twentieth century, although it was constantly under attack by U.S. education, values, attitudes, influences, politics, and its economy—really by everything on all sides. Aacqu, like other Pueblos and Native American people, had to be constantly on the defensive, protecting its self-government, culture, livelihood, rights, land, language, its very lifeblood and spirit, everything. Within family and community, the Acoma language was a vital link to the continuance of the hanoh, the people, as a whole. The prayers, many of which are in song and chant, were for that, and I am sure the first murmur of prayer I heard and understood was in the Acoma language.

Years later, when I learned English well and began to use it fluently, at least technically and intellectually, I found myself "objectifying" my native language, that is, in translation. And it felt awkward, almost like I was doing something I was forbidden but doing it anyway. I've posed myself the frequent question: Is it possible to translate from the

Acoma language to another? Yes, I've insisted, but I'm not sure I am convinced of it or of how complete the translation is. Since we're all human with the same human feelings and responses to feelings, we understand and share hurt, love, anger, joy, sadness, elation, a gamut of emotions. However, human cultures are different from each other, and unique, and we have different and unique languages; it is not easy to translate from one language to another though we egotistically believe and *think* we can. And that is when I found myself objectifying my Acoma language and at emotional odds with myself.

When I was a very young boy, however, there was only one language and it was that commonplace, intimate speech carried on at home and community among family and others. And it was language that was specifically Acoma mostly, with a scattering of English words and phrases and even Spanish which had been "Acomized" and incorporated into the native tongue. Being very young, I had no need to distinguish language differences, nor was I aware of any until later; I simply understood and spoke "a language" with my parents, sisters and brothers, grandparents, aunts and uncles. This early language from birth to six years of age in the Acoma family and community was the basis and source of all I would do later in poetry, short fiction, essay, and other works, as a storyteller and as a teacher of creative writing and Native American literature.

Within our clan, the Eagle—Dyaamih hanoh—our family was close and supportive of each other, which was common throughout the Pueblo. A tightly knit clan and communal outlook and responsibility were encouraged, and these fostered close family and kin relationships. Unfortunately, this connectedness doesn't exist as strongly and integrally now as it did then, it seems. This closeness of family recalls for me a story I heard my oldest sister tell about a boy who could not talk.

The boy was four years old, well past the age when, normally, children talk or begin to. Other children his age were talking but the boy did not, and his older sisters were concerned. Why didn't he speak? Was he okay? They tried to get him to talk, saying Acoma words and urging him to repeat them, but he was silent. They had a grandfather who was a religious leader and healer; he knew the art and science of putting a person back into balance within the life of the Aacqumeh hanoh. So the sisters of the boy went to him, asking him to come and help their beloved brother to talk. "Maybe the boy has nothing to say," the grandfather told the girls. "Please, Grandpa," they pleaded. "Come

and take a look at him; maybe you can help him." So the grandfather went to see the boy.

He called his grandson to come and stand before him, and he spoke to him. "Amoo uh, Nana, because of love for you, your sisters are worried about you not talking, and because of love for you, I have come to you. Perhaps, Nana, it is not time for you yet to speak, but you will when it is time. It is with language you will come about for yourself as a person and as a son of your family. It is with knowledge and words that you will know and express love for yourself and your people. Dzehni neeyah—with language—and with responsiblity for yourself and others, you will speak. That is how you will come about as a person. Amoo uh, Nana, nehmahshrou shruuh." Assuring the boy he would come to talk, the grandfather asked him to open his mouth widely, and, reaching into his levis pocket, he drew out a big, brass door key. He inserted the key into the boy's mouth and said, "Now, Grandson, you will speak." My sister concluded the story by saying, "Ever since then, we haven't been able to keep his mouth shut." And as I recall, she looked at me and smiled as if I had been that boy in the story.

It is that closeness, that intimacy enhanced by language, that I remember vividly, that was very apparent in our community of Aacqu, which is why I am pointing out and stressing language. The oral tradition of Native American people is based upon spoken language, but it is more than that too. Oral tradition is inclusive; it is the actions, behavior, relationships, practices throughout the whole social, economic, and spiritual life process of people. In this respect, the oral tradition is the consciousness of the people. I think at times "oral tradition" is defined too strictly in terms of verbal-vocal manifestations in stories, songs, meditations, ceremonies, ritual, philosophies, and clan and tribal histories passed from older generations to the next. When I consider the "idea" of Acoma oral tradition, I think of the interaction of the grandfather with his grandson, as well as what he spoke and what the story verbalizes as it is told. Oral tradition evokes and expresses a belief system, and it is specific activity that confirms and conveys that belief.

My book of poetry, *Going for the Rain*, written many years after my boyhood, expresses that closeness to a specific Native American way of life and its philosophy, and it is structured in the narrative form of an actual journey on the heeyaanih, the road of life, and its experience.

At the time of its writing, I felt this best expressed what I wanted to say with a literary perspective about Native American traditions, life, and experience. That boyhood closeness to life made me want to know it completely, to yearn for it, and to experience it deeply, and, paradoxically, it made me fear it as well and to avoid experiencing it—to run and hide from it in instances. Although not aware of it at the time of my youth, this was a prelude to the alcoholism I was to suffer later.

Starting school at the U.S. government McCartys Day School was looked forward to with both excitement and trepidation. Native American people have been faced with American schools since the 1870's or so as a federal policy. Though there were a few schools located in Native American communities or "Indian country" and American white teachers were sent out to educate Native American people, many, many children were sent away to federal and Christian mission boarding schools far from their homelands. The policy was to break or sever ties to culture, family, and tribe, to change indigenous people into "Americans." It was a severe and traumatic form of brainwashing, literally to destroy the heritage and identity of native people, ostensibly to assimilate them into an American way of life. "Mericano nehyahwihtraa skquwaahdrumaah," as the Aacqumeh hanoh would say. "To make us into American white people," as the Acoma people saw it. It was fearful to be faced by this, and my mother used to say that some grandparents would hide the children whenever a Mericano was seen driving a buckboard wagon toward Acoma. "They would sweep kahnee branches behind them to wipe away their tracks as they hid on the mesas," she said.

This official U.S. educational policy in its most extreme practice was implemented into the 1950's. My mother and father were sent before the 1920's to St. Catherine's Indian School and my older sisters, when I started school at McCartys, were at Albuquerque Indian School. It was exciting, however, "to go to school," even though I hardly spoke or knew any English except what I'd been coached to say by my sisters. I could say my "ABCs" and "Good morning, Miss Oleman," and I soon learned, "May I please be excused to go to the boys' bathroom," which is not easy for an Acoma child to say simply to go to the toilet. Most of us six- and seven-year-old children looked forward in any case to meeting and knowing each other, playing games, coloring pictures, and sharing a further sense of community and bonding which sometimes took the form of resistance against school and teachers. Though it was

forbidden and punishable with a hard crack by the teacher's ruler across the back or knuckles, we continued to speak in our Aacqumeh dzehni, surreptitiously in the classroom and openly on the playground unless teachers were around. I have some fond memories of being in Peekqikqih, the beginning grade, although the reality of it then was harsher than my recollections.

Reading was fun. I quickly learned how to read. I know it was because I loved language and stories. All my life up to that point I loved the sounds of language and what was being told, and I would listen avidly to just about anything and I eavesdropped a lot, about which my father teased me by calling me a "reporter." As early on I associated reading with oral stories, it was not difficult to learn to read and subsequently to write. All in English, of course, as there was no such thing as bilingual education then, though now very minimally a few schools provide it. My mother read to us, too, perhaps even to a small extent before I started school, but my real interest and love of reading had to do with stories. I'd heard stories all my life, ranging from the very traditional to the history of Acoma-Mericano relations to current gossip. Stories were told about people of the Aacqumeh community, our relatives, both living and long ago, and there were stories of mythic people and beings who were wondrous and heroic and even magical. Some stories were funny, some sad; all were interesting and vitally important to me because, though I could not explain it then, they tied me into the communal body of my people and heritage. I could never hear enough of the stories. Consequently, when I learned to read and write, I believe I felt those stories continued somehow in the new language and use of the new language and they would never be lost, forgotten, and finally gone. They would always continue.

In writing *Going for the Rain* and later *A Good Journey*, I was very aware of trying to instill that sense of continuity essential to the poetry and stories in the books, essential to Native American life in fact, and making it as strongly apparent as possible. Without worrying about translation, I tried to relate them directly to their primary source in the oral tradition as I knew it. This quality of continuity or continuance I believe must be included and respected in every aspect of Native American life and outlook. I have often heard Native American elders repeat, "We must always remember," referring to grandmothers and grandfathers, heritage, and the past with a sense of something more than memory or remembering at stake. It is knowing present place and time, being present in the here and now essentially, just as past genera-

tions knew place and time whether they were Acoma, Lakota, or Mayan people. Continuance, in this sense, is life itself.

Since I was in school from Peekqikqih to the sixth grade at Deetseyamah mostly, I was still within the hold of family and community; this was fortunate as many others had been taken away to school and still were at that time. I had a strong, continuing social-cultural connection with my people, for which I am grateful. "Education" and "learning" were stressed by parents, Acoma elders, and tribal leaders; they were deemed to be essential to our future and ability to live in the American way of life. Though it was not definitively pointed out, it was implied that education was necessary for employment and to live a bountiful, better life.

I began to feel stirrings of thoughts that focused upon our way of Acoma life compared with the American way of life. At moments, I even heard and perceived the idea that being Aacqumeh was not quite as good as being Mericano, although it was not until much later that I would find the words to describe and define racism, discrimination, and colonialism. However, the loving hold of its children by the Acoma family and community was insisted on, especially with reference to school. The social and cultural integrity and future of Aacqu would be maintained and strengthened by education and learning. Often and again, I heard elders repeat, "Go to school, stay in school, and get educated so you can help our people." Later when I learned the language to think and talk about colonialism, I knew the Aacqumeh hanoh were in resistance against the more destructive elements of American education and policy.

In 1954 when I was in the fifth grade, our family lived in Skull Valley, Arizona, for one year, and this was the first time I became surely aware of a world beyond Acoma. I knew there was one of course before then, since our teachers at McCartys were white and not Acoma people (Miss Oleman was from Missouri, wherever that was) and I read books (other than the school fare of Dick and Jane and Spot) where I learned of faraway places like South America, Africa, New York, Denver. And we had battery-powered radios that received broadcasts from El Paso and Shreveport which could have been on mysterious planets I read about. And definitely there were people howchaatya—"outside"—who were Mericano white, in great numbers and very different (we thought of them as rich and powerful), and there were Kashtu-urrlah (what we called our Hispanic neighbors), and Muurrlahtoh (African Americans), and Chinese (usually anyone who was Asian

American). There were also Lagunas and Navajos, Native American people nearby.

Acoma people had been outside, away from Aacqu, usually working, especially for the railroad and in the military, and they brought back knowledge and stories of California, Texas, Kansas, the Pacific Ocean, World War II, the Philippines, and Korea. My father had worked for the Santa Fe railroad since the late 1930's, and so I knew to some extent of places he had been, and it seemed to be a strange, very different, exciting, and somewhat scary world outside.

For me, this fear of the other world had to do not only with its difference from our familiar one but also with a feeling of not belonging in that world. It was a Mericano world where people were well off and in control, and we were Acoma people who were poor, who, I had been told, were taken care of by Shrahnaishtiyahshi Tsihchuu-hoochani, Our Father Big Government. As a fifth grader, a child of colonialism, I had doubts that Big Government would protect and take care of us if we left Aacqu. There were also other signs that it was not exactly safe away from Acoma. When young people, such as my older sisters (and later myself), were taken away by the busload every August for Indian boarding school, parents, grandparents, and other elders would advise and warn them of bad and dangerous influences they would face. These included alcohol use, bad people, and "wrong ways" in general. They were to remember family, home, community, and the ways of the Acoma culture. Many had been lost as a result of leaving home and of powerful influences, especially alcohol. Like many Native American communities and tribes, Acoma was afflicted by the destruction caused by liquor. Our family directly experienced the disease as my beloved father and other relatives abused alcohol, which caused family tension, arguments, distrust, fear, pain, all of the trauma of alcoholism.

Although I listened eagerly to stories about California or Arizona or other places, I also noticed there was something less than positive about them. I think it had to do with an awareness that it was socially difficult to live within the Mericano world and its way of life. I also noticed that Acoma people who went and lived howchaatya dhuuh—outside out there—were different, and when they came back home, they were different. They dressed, acted, talked differently, and even thought and felt differently, I sensed. I had perceived this in reading about American life in *Reader's Digest*, *True Romance*, "Our Weekly Reader," and school books with the famous Dick and Jane characters.

They lived with Mother and Father in a house with a lawn and white picket fence, and I knew they were different. But I really didn't know about Acoma people outside. Did they also come to live in houses with white picket fences and have dogs named Spot? So when we moved to Skull Valley where my father worked for the railroad, I had some knowledge of Mericano society, although a lot of it was wrought in my imagination and speculation. And we did not come to live in that mythical American home but in drab, substandard housing the railroad company provided for its section crew laborers.

Beyond and Not Beyond Acoma

Beyond Acoma, howchaatya dhuuh, was not the best of all possible worlds. For the first time in my life, away from our tiny enclave of Native and Mexican American railroad laborers' families, I felt like a minority. I couldn't talk about it, however, much less describe the feeling; up to then, I don't think I'd ever heard terms like "segregation" or "discrimination" or even "minority." But the feeling of being physically outnumbered was there, especially in that small farming and ranching community in north central Arizona and at the school where my younger sister and brothers and I were the only Native Americans. It was a tiny, one-room school, much smaller than the one at home, and I believe this helped us socially to "integrate" the all-white school, although we were regarded with curiosity and topical interest which was at times very uncomfortable. I was eleven years old, growing into adolescence, experiencing new sensations, finding girls enticingly interesting, and discovering new emotions especially about my identity. And I read voraciously just about anything I could get my hands on. The schoolteacher encouraged students to check books out of the three-shelf library, and I read *Robinson Crusoe, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and books by H. G. Wells and Arthur Conan Doyle, and many others.

Feeling like a minority in an American world was definitely not a good feeling. It meant feeling that you were looked at differently or feeling excluded, which did take place from time to time. There was something else, though, which didn't have much to do with race and culture. It had to do with being poor. My father as a railroad laborer was paid very low wages, and we got all our clothes and food from the company store, the Holmes Supply, on credit billed against my father's paycheck. We dressed as best we could but cheaply, and we kept our shoes until they were really worn.

As I was older then, likely inspired by magazines and books, I began to dream of the future, what I would do if I could and when I could. I took a job weeding and watering a garden for the local village store owner for whom my father worked on weekends, and I saved my pay of fifty cents a week. For a while I also sold mail-order hand salve for a company that offered prize merchandise after so many sales. From that enterprise, I got my first typewriter, an odd one-strike contraption that was more of a tin toy than anything. Perhaps that "typewriter" was part of a dream I may have begun to have, although I don't recall anything specific.

At that pre-adolescent age, experiencing new feelings from one moment to the next and being naturally inquisitive, I began to wonder about life. Questioning led to expressing, it seemed; for me, they were related. I feel lonely. Why am I lonely? What is loneliness? This is the way it feels. I feel love. Why? What is love? This is the way it feels to feel love. And then I think I began to write poetry, inspired by a mix of feelings and country-western and folk songs, strangely not Aacqumeh songs which I had grown up with. They were songs I heard on the radio, especially by Jimmy Rodgers and Hank Williams, or sung by my father who had a good voice. I liked songs that told stories, ballads, whether happy or tragic, and I began to write song lyrics and try out a fledgling, quavering voice in secret. And it was at that age, my yet-unseen future as a poet was launched with the publication of a Mothers' Day poem in the Skull Valley School newspaper.

We fared well as a family howchaatya dhuuh, although there were difficult and timorous times on occasion. I made close friends with my first non-Native American acquaintance, Boise, an itinerant Irish cowboy's son. We were the only fifth graders that year, and we shared a closeness as we went fishing, adventured, played cowboys and Indians (he, or his sister, was sometimes the Indian), and talked about girls. That year I learned the world outside was very big while Deetseyamah and our Acoma community were very small. I also learned gladly that, while not easy to do so, it was possible to live in the Mericano world and with some of its ways. White people were very different from us; sometimes they did strange and perplexing things, but generally if you watched and listened and considered them very carefully, you could understand them. As a people, I distrusted them less, although I was still wary of something that drove them willfully, aggressively, powerfully, and arrogantly. In that first time of living outside of Acoma, I

didn't know it was that same drive that had settled its domain and rule over Native American lands and enforced an educational policy disguised as civilization.

After a last school year at McCartys, during which time I wrote juvenile poetry and songs, fantasizing being on stage or radio probably, I was sent to St. Catherine's Indian School in Santa Fe. I began to keep a diary, although it was more or less an accepted notion that boys didn't keep diaries. I did anyway, and since then I've kept a journal from time to time. In my diary, I wrote the usual notes about what I was doing and what was important: I got a letter from Mama today . . . I almost got in a fight with R. because . . . Said Hi to Dolores . . . Plaid socks are stupid . . . some of my feelings—though I think not much because, being shy and quiet mostly, I didn't talk or tell anyone about them hardly. Typically, I was the silent, stoic child of a dysfunctional family, community, and nation.

Now, many years later, I'm happy I was perceptive enough to keep a diary, write songs and poetry, read as much as I could (nuns encouraged it though I was supposed to only read books for lower grades—which I didn't limit myself to), and listen to stories. And remember stories, especially traditional Acoma oopehtahnee and tseekeenomah, old time stories, which I recall acting out in solitary sojourns in the hills and arroyos near St. Catherine's School. I smile now seeing that thirteen-year-old boy in a sandy arroyo long ago, loudly playing out the mythic story of the fierce, epic battle at Kashkahtrutih. My diary-keeping came to an end when one of the nuns caught me writing in it during study hall instead of doing my seventh grade science homework, and she took it. She didn't forbid me to keep a diary; she returned it and encouraged me. But I was self-conscious about it after that, and I quit for several years, although I kept writing poems. And by then, impressed with fiction I was reading by Hemingway, Saroyan, and Faulkner, and even plays by Shakespeare (although these were for upper grades at St. Kate's), I thought of writing stories.

I began writing brief, cursory passages, mainly scenes, descriptions, parts of plot, character sketches, and such. I didn't know anything about writing stories of course, except that stories were about people, what they looked like, what they did and how they acted, and maybe what they felt. At the time I don't think I made any solid, conscious connection between my piecemeal stories and those I read in books and magazines. I may have believed those stories came out of thin air and somehow got into print. And I know I didn't conceive anything

about being a writer then because Acoma people were so distant from being Mericano that it was not even possible to consider such a thing—or dream of such. And yet I must have dreamed, or a dream was taking place which pulled me into it.

When I was working on the manuscript that was to become *Going for the Rain* and *A Good Journey* (I divided the book after I was told 300-page first major poetry collections weren't a good idea), I was very aware of my formative, adolescent years. In retrospect I discovered I had grown up educated or knowledgeable, though not literary in the strict sense, in the oral tradition, although I didn't know I was. In fact, I was just then discovering literature, and I was making, in my early teenage years, the initial connection, also a discovery, between literature and my writing poetry and beginning stories. By then I was at Albuquerque Indian School because it was closer to home, Deetseyamah, and my family. I had learned that AIS trained students in trades such as carpentry, sheet-metal work, agriculture, and, I think, maintenance. At that time of the early to mid 1950's, Native Americans were hardly encouraged to go into the professions but mostly into manual and technical trades, and so I wanted to learn a trade, really to become employable. That was the basic motivation; Native American young people were to grow up and go to work: get a job. It was the 1950's alright; there was even an early rock-and-roll song of that era with the lyric, "get a job." It was also the era of "Indian Termination" and "Relocation."

These were U.S. federal government programs applied as policies which darkly symbolize the oppression of Native Americans in the 1950's. Acoma Pueblo and other Native American people in the Southwest were not directly affected by Termination as it was mainly applied in Wisconsin and Oregon, but it was an effective threat that simply and bluntly said: The U.S. government will terminate all federal services, ties, and recognition of Indian reservations and Indians will no longer be known as Indians. Relocation was simple too: the Bureau of Indian Affairs offered one-way tickets to jobs or training in urban areas such as Dallas, Chicago, San Jose, Los Angeles, Cleveland. The intent of the program, officially called Adult Vocational Training, was to depopulate rural Native American homelands.

The result was even more powerlessness, further fracturing and weakening of communities, and the loss of more people. No one could avoid and not notice the feelings current then. There was a sense of

despair that even elders' urgings for the upkeep of tradition and heritage could not dispel easily. I recall at Aacqu that fewer and fewer people were taking part in religious activities, and those few were mostly older people. New Mexico legalized the sale of alcohol to Native Americans early in this period, an action that avalanched tremendous destructive personal, social, health, and legal problems. It was a sad time, and I don't exaggerate.

In spite of this, mainly because I was young and within my teenage world, I had dreams—or perhaps I began to let myself dream. I'd grown up in a harshly real world of poverty, on dry land—though beautiful—hard to make a living on, alcoholism in the family, and generally being faced by an anti-Native American America. And yet, maybe because of it, I dreamed of overcoming that and being respected and looked up to, being successful and rich, traveling to distant places, having a big car—some of those dreams were teenage fantasies heavily influenced by an American lifestyle and pop culture. I was at the same time aware also of changes taking place. It was a fast world, it seemed to me: one year it was the 1940's and then the next year it was a decade in the mid-1950's; one winter Acoma people used horses and wagons and the next spring some drove trucks and cars; my sisters had left home mostly and had begun to have children. The sand and rock trail to the top of Aacqu was suddenly paved so that trucks and cars could be driven on it; two Acoma young men had killed a state policeman; electric power lines sprang up overnight, and we had electric light for the first time. With astonishment, amazement, and occasional bewilderment, I noticed these things, and I thought about them seriously as a young Native American saw an older world change under his feet.

My grandfather had died early in the decade, and it seemed with his passing that something surely strong and significant was gone. Though I hadn't come to know him so well I sensed this, because as a boy I would go with him to tend our garden and fields, gather wood with him, and I would herd his sheep. I listened to his songs and stories, his advice and counsel spoken in a firm, steady, patient voice to his children and grandchildren, and I watched him working and moving about with the aged graceful motion of a man who has lived a long purposeful life. I was in awe of my grandfather actually, as he was a healer and spiritual leader who was highly respected by our people and other Native Americans who came to him for treatment and advice. In memory I see him in the midst of this rapidly changing time, especially as he spoke of seeing "Aishtenhower" in Gallup eighty miles

west of Acoma where Dwight Eisenhower made a quick presidential campaign stop, described by my grandfather as a large crowd of people looking at a Mericano who was going to be the Tsihchuu-hoochani. The world and times were changing, and I could feel myself changing with them. Watching and studying these changes, I began to think of the possibility that I had something to do with them, and I wondered about the relationships between people and circumstances.

I wanted to retain the memory of my grandfather and grandmother and the grandfathers and grandmothers before them and the times they had gone through. I had heard the oral history of the Spanish coming, the taking of land by them and later by the Mericano, the Treaty of Guadalupe de Hidalgo that was apocryphal to the native people, the coming of the railroad, the struggles to keep land and a way of life and sovereignty as a people. I became aware that I was living in a time and place that was the result of change in which Native American people had a role and that we had a role now. Though I didn't understand exactly how this role worked or could work, I felt it was there and nothing could change it. Therefore it was important to remember the past so that I could learn from it what there was to do in the present. Although Aacqu was the only real place I'd ever known, I had learned it was only a small tribe, one of many across the nation. At Indian School, I had met Native Americans from different communities who spoke different languages. A sense of heritage and identity was becoming apparent to me, and it was the beginning of a definite purpose in being Native American—Indian, as we commonly knew ourselves then. With this forming abstractly in my mind and tangibly aware of it in emotional reactions, I felt a pride and love for my race and culture, though paradoxically at the same time there was a bothersome self-consciousness about being Indian. By then I was out of Albuquerque Indian School and at Grants High, a public school with an integrated student body.

A Good Journey, a collection of narrative poetry, is an evocation literarily and intellectually of my explicit emotional awareness of that time. The book is based upon the oral tradition, specifically the oral voice of stories, song, history, and contemporary experience. Though I didn't write any of it during the time I speak of, a sensitivity about remembering, an awareness of heritage and culture, having a purposeful identity, coming to know I had some control of my fate were all part of forming a commitment to acknowledge and to be who I was as an Aacqumeh person. Although I would not articulate it until much

later in my life, I felt my heritage and culture and how they were expressed were the basis of who I was and how I came into being as a human being. The poetry in this book is styled as a storytelling narrative ranging from a contemporary rendering of older traditional stories to current experience: from Grandmother Spider to my children, from Coyote to being in the Veterans Hospital for alcoholism treatment (which as a teenager I had no idea was going to happen).

A commitment as an Acoma Native American, however, was strong and firm, although at times, like others I'm sure, I was prey to self-doubt and I wavered. Self-questioning was a part of my self-expression in any case, as I've explained before. And by now, I was consciously writing, going back over it, revising, and even showing it to my girlfriend. My dreams and fantasies were less momentary now; at sixteen and seventeen years of age, I was imagining myself, romanticizing the image I'm sure, as a writer later on in life. I may even have been planning books and magazine articles. I was even more of a reader, heavily into recent and current poets and novelists like Carl Sandburg, Dylan Thomas, and Sinclair Lewis, Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers, Sherwood Anderson, Saul Bellow, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, John Updike. I had read or was reading a lot of the American and European classics by Shakespeare, Dante, Flaubert, de Maupassant, Tolstoi, Blake, Eliot, James Joyce, and such. Although I was acquiring wide knowledge of this literature and non-Native American thought, I also knew I would never strive to be anything other than an Aacqumeh hahtrudzai, a Native American of my homeland and people. When I read and ingested the ideas, views, feelings, and visions from this literature, again I strongly felt the stories, songs, experiences, feelings, and visions of my own indigenous people were somehow continued in the aesthetic, intellectual, and emotional experience and knowledge I was gaining.

Stories, poems, histories did not come out of thin air—that's what I came to acknowledge and decide. They came from the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of my people, from their voices, and they came from thoughts, feelings, experiences, and writings of people different from us but who were human beings like us. Shakespeare, Blake, Homer, Nelson Algren, James Baldwin, Richard Wright were human voices and writers. People and experience; people and circumstance—I pondered these for hours, I'm sure with a mix of excitement, dismay,

and too much seriousness. And I wrote my thoughts in my journal, which I had begun to keep again, and in poetry and stories.

As a high school student, I was active and busy with school, athletic, social, community activities and also with work as our family planted and kept a garden, but I always managed to have time to read and write. I was academic-minded; I liked to discuss ideas and be involved with intellectual endeavors. I felt especially an awareness that our Acoma people and culture were in a fateful period of our destiny, and because I had grown up with the indigenous dictum of "helping our people," I began to realize I had a part in that destiny. Though I can't say that my writing was motivated by that realization or came from it directly, there was a notion urging me to express myself.

Because I was pretty impressionable then, when I came across the writings of the Beat Generation, especially those of Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder, I was struck as if by a revelation. It was "experience" I noticed, the idea of experience, writing from and about experience, and writing as experience. Snyder's poetry particularly had aspects of Zen Buddhist philosophy I related to because they were similar in many ways to Native American spiritual knowledge and belief; reading the poetry and having in mind writing as experience, it was as if I'd known Buddhism all my life. And the revelation that was brought to light for me was that as an Acoma person I also had something important, unique, and special to say. I did not, however, express myself in writing immediately about it; then I recognized it and gladly shared a sense of comradeship and association with the philosophy, literature, and the poet. At age eighteen, I don't know how much of my writing was inspired by the Beats but I recall being overly impressed by Jack Kerouac's prose which I took to mean "it was alright to be alright." My writing was then focused on everyday items and topics such as stones, lizards, ants, rusty cans, birds, ordinary thoughts about them, stars that caught my attention, and ideas about fate and future. My beginning fiction, which I wrote more than poetry, was about struggling people, mostly poor, enduring, hardworking, caring, and they were not identified as to ethnicity and culture, certainly not Native American or Indian or Acoma.

Why not?—it may be asked. Isn't that a contradiction? No, it's not, I have to say and answer why. As a Native American I had grown up in a certain way culturally, socially, spiritually, and politically. I was an Aacqumeh person in a community that was tiny compared with the

larger world outside which was American society, the United States. In a sense, as a colonized indigenous person, I was more familiar with the larger society than my own because that society in influence, numbers, and political economic impact was overwhelming. And very dominant, especially in the latter 1950's even though the Civil Rights struggles by African Americans and other minorities were active. Although I identified myself as an Acoma Native American and was aware of minority issues, I have to admit my views and concepts in large part were those of the dominant society. I loved my family, people, community, yet I was also swayed by powerful influences of the outside and even yearned and sought for those "Mericano ways." This is not an unusual phenomenon, as anyone from a colonized people can say. This phenomenon is why heritage, culture, even native languages, and identity are ignored, forgotten, and lost. It is not by choice that it takes place; it is literally by force that it happens. Native American people have experienced it since the so-called "discovery" of the New World as they've run the gauntlet of genocide and enslavement, Manifest Destiny, U.S. citizenship, and assimilation.

You can't help but be persuaded by attitudes, values, viewpoints to a major extent, no matter how loyal you are to your heritage, no matter if Native American elders remind you constantly that you belong to your people. Just as it claimed land and sovereignty, American society and culture can claim your soul. People in my early fiction had souls as hardworking farmers and laborers, but they did not have faces, thoughts, or language as Native Americans, although they were not identified as white Americans either. There was an unconscious contradiction, however—a result I would say of my youthful naiveté: while I knew myself as an Acoma and was inspired by an emerging ethnic cultural nationalism, I did not write about being Native American. This could be taken to mean a denial of my Native American identity and heritage. In a sense it is, principally for the reasons above. Among writings I have on hand, loose-leaf notes, pocket note pads, tablets, typed papers, etc., I find hardly any ethnically identifiable writing from that period. That would not come about until years later when I was in my twenties and had developed a firmer political consciousness. But I was somewhat aware of this unconscious denial; I felt uncomfortable about it, especially in instances when I was being defensive about my Native American identity and outlook.

I recall an occasion which is humorous now in retrospect that occurred when I was almost nineteen and about to graduate from high

school. At Grants High, I was an accomplished student; such things as Boys State, class officer, co-captain of the football team, all-state in sports, Mr. Grants High, and Senior Honor Boy came to me. I was self-conscious about the recognition but I was also proud, as were my mother and father. The town of Grants and the school were mostly all white, and Native Americans were a definite minority along with Hispanics, so part of the pride had to do with my achievement as a Native American. When I was named Honor Boy at a banquet at school, my parents went with me, and we sat among other students and their parents.

We were all kind of nervous as we were the only Indian family there, and I noticed that my beloved mother was speaking only in English. She was bilingual in Acoma and English but she insisted on using only English that evening. At home she spoke mainly Acoma, but at the banquet she conversed with my father and me in English. I was surprised, shocked, and mystified; I wanted her to be natural, the Acoma woman she always was, and comfortable. And, frankly, I was upset, although I didn't say anything. Not till much later did I understand and appreciate what she was likely going through with her nervousness, anxiety, and memories of past experience howchaatya dhuuh in America. Fondly now, and smiling about my own over-eager awareness and defensiveness about my heritage, I recall that occasion with my beloved, proud parents.

Being conscious, and admittedly self-conscious at moments, of being Native American and having formed a sense of purpose about it and by then confirmed in the idea of writing as experience, I made the decision to be a writer. The thought of it as a career, profession, job, or whatever it could be called (I didn't know; I didn't even know what it involved) had been gestating for several years. I also said I would like to be an organic chemist, but I don't think I really wanted to be. Mainly, I wanted to read and read and read and think and discuss ideas and write. Though it's not clear that being Native American had definitely to do with the decision, I believe my pondering, questions, even my self-consciousness sparked the decision and pushed me toward it.

How to become and be a writer I didn't know; I hadn't ever read any writer's autobiography which could give me a clue. It didn't matter; I simply had arrived at the decision over a period of some time, and I knew that's what I wanted to do. But how? Besides reading and studying the writing of others, how did that work? I didn't know and sometimes I still don't know. College? Experience? Adventure? Falling in love? So I went to work in the uranium industry which for several

years had been extracting uranium ore from lands in the Southwest and processing it at several millsites.

Being and Reality

Grants, in mid-northwestern New Mexico, and the region nearby which includes Deetseyamah, Acoma Pueblo, several small Mexican-American villages and towns, and Laguna Pueblo were beset by the twentieth-century corporate industrial age, principally intensive open-pit and underground mining—and ore-processing by the same giant mining and energy corporations, including Kerr-McGee, Phillips Petroleum, Anaconda, and Homestake. Uranium mining had begun in the 1940's in the Four Corners area, and in 1952–53, Jackpile Mine, the world's largest open pit uranium mine, opened on Laguna land. It employed Laguna laborers and semiskilled workers and was a boon to the Pueblo for a while.

By 1960 when I began work for Kerr-McGee, underground mining was at full throttle west and northwest of our homeland. Acoma men and boys as well as others from the region went to work for the mining and processing companies. We were a source of cheap labor because of high unemployment. In decades before, there was a small-scale timber industry, as well as some agricultural employment (mostly in picking and packing carrots), railroad work, and tourism which continues today, but nothing quite like this uranium boom. Aacqumeh hanoh as a whole felt better off financially because of mining wages earned, though I noticed there was less attention given to gardens, fields, orchards, and livestock. Having grown up poor, I know I felt personally better off, was able to help my family, and I bought a car shortly.

Working with men who came from West Virginia, Colorado, Montana, and other mining regions and men from the oil fields of Oklahoma, Texas, and the Gulf of Mexico was quite an experience for me as I was eager to learn about different people. These men were mostly working-class whites, definitely not intellectuals for the most part, who were hardworking, earnest, loyal to their group, even clannish, opinionated and blunt in their speech. They also, I noticed, were not far removed from land-based backgrounds, and I identified with them. In fact, I later modeled some characters in my writing after workers I knew. And definitely *Fight Back: For the Sake of the People, For the Sake of the Land* was set within the context of the uranium industry in the early 1960's. Its stories and poems, although not written until twenty years later, as the industry was winding down, were being

formed in my experience and perception of it in my early adulthood. It was a time when I was aware of being on my own, forming my views, confirming my feelings, and becoming aware politically. I was unsure of myself, of course, and often, with the men I rode carpool and worked with, I found I was shy and awkward. When I was asked a question, especially related to Native American ways and views, I said, "I don't know." I may have known what to answer but sometimes I didn't answer. Saying "I don't know" was a way of hiding, I suppose, and responding defensively. For the first time I was also on my own as an Acoma young person in a culturally and racially mixed society.

Politically, Acoma Pueblo was feeling its way in the dark. It seemed to feel the community was inadequately fit to compete with others, particularly the outside, notably state government agencies and representatives, business, and a federal government that was supposedly our guardian. That is why there was the continual urging by tribal leaders and elders to get educated so we'd be more qualified and have some power and control. I felt this hunger for a semblance of control, especially with regard to land, water, tribal government, and tribal income, and, because there was little evidence of control, it almost seemed like none. Because I was loyal and defensive about my Acoma and Native American heritage, youthfully I asserted a personal sense of control of my destiny, mainly through independent behavior, opinions, and reflections on changes in Native American life, more seriousness about literature and writing, and trying to learn about the American political process. This assertion was clearly from a Native American standpoint, though not yet as a Red Power stance. It was my effort, especially in light of national social changes gaining momentum, to try to understand if American politics were beneficial to Native Americans and other minorities.

Although I felt a pull toward the Civil Rights movement and the Kennedy charisma, I was independent in viewpoint. Mainly, I was concerned about social changes affecting Native American people, changes we were making in the dark because of the lack of education and control due to a lack of a significant part in sociopolitical dynamics. Like some Aacqumeh elders, I felt we had little say-so in the changing social and political swirl around us, and if we didn't speak up and act, we would become dizzy, confused, and swallowed up. Economically, it was the same; though we seemed to be better off, we were also becoming more dependent upon wages, commercial items from the outside, and purchasable satisfaction and comfort. In all, we seemed to be less cer-

tain, solid, and whole as Native Americans. This definitely related to political issues and process which we had to take part in if we were to have control of our destiny.

As a young working man, independent-minded, becoming more aware explicitly and overtly of racial and ethnic discrimination, seeing that Black people as minorities were doing something about their part in social change, and being sensitive, I was angry. Like other colonized indigenous youth, I had been quietly seething for many years. Being obedient usually to authority and respectful of elders, I kept my feelings to myself. Now I found myself more open with views and emotions, though also guarded. (Also I still said from time to time, "I don't know.") I recall the anger at my parents and grandparents, blaming them for not warning us and not protecting us from American life and its people, and I was upset at Acoma leadership for not fighting harder to hold our land and water (That's why, I thought and said, we have so little now!)—and it was all due to not being involved. I was youthfully foolhardy, naive, and impulsive. I wanted us to fight back with a strong sense of our culture, language, and identity, and it seemed to me that we weren't doing so—at least not in my estimation. My concern turned inward and became too thoughtful, alienated, egotistical, and careless. Though I worked with others and was distantly involved with community activities, I was less social. My writing, which I was serious about by then, became a way of being private. And, ironically, though I spoke of speaking out and being involved, I did suppress feelings too, stuffing them, and becoming aloof. I also began to drink heavily for the first time.

Alcoholism I had known all my life. As a child I was traumatically afraid of the behavior of my father and others under the influence of alcohol. I just didn't understand it, yet I knew its fearsome, destructive impact first hand. Essentially, I denied it, which is a way of protecting against it—pretending it wasn't there—causing it to have an unnecessary mystique and a real power psychologically. This power and mystique, strangely, to alcoholics and potential alcoholics becomes a magnet; its very appeal seems to be its fearful nature, which says something about alcoholism being a disease of insanity. I know that I used drinking to exert the independence I wanted; I seemed to feel more capable of individual, decisive action. It made me comfortable where ordinarily I would be uneasy and nervous. Also, as a brash, beginning writer with a feverish artistic burning inside, I was