

# White Shell

*Arianne Baadsgaard Cope*

There are pieces of white shell sifted with the sands and soils of Dinetah that confuse newcomers and outsiders. Tourists look at the shells like puzzle pieces, trying to force them into what they know. A gift of the ocean in the depths of a parched desert? "If they looked past themselves, they would realize the place they stand was once covered by a shallow sea," Mary's grandfather said. "And it is they who do not belong."

Even those who do belong on the reservation survive only if they are able to adapt to the desert's hostile personalities that push forward, turn under, circle overhead like vultures. Few things survive the grip of the sacred land. Grandfather is one of them. His skin is soft and warm like worn denim, the same color as the lofty mesas. His limbs are like the branches of lone twisted trees. His gray hair is as soft as owl feathers. His eyes are patient, slow-moving clouds. Like coyote, spiders, yucca, Grandfather lasts. Mary does not.

Like high passing storm clouds, Mary is forced beyond by encroaching winds before her time. She watches the sacred land retreat from view, afraid it will forget her, knowing her footprints on canyon floors and atop mesas have already blown away.

Mary steps gingerly into her new land from a small gray bus with sagging, rusty bumpers. The bus's engine idles impatiently behind Mary,

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waiting for her to go inside her new home. But Mary only touches her toes to the greenest grass she has ever seen, just off the sidewalk, as if she is testing the temperature of unfamiliar pond water. There are boys with painted faces playing with bows and arrows and slings in the front yard of the new-looking house. It is a long brick house with a low-pitched gable roof. Bigger than the trailer in Snowflake and much bigger than the round hogans Mary is most used to. Up and down the street are houses of similar shapes but different colors. Mary wonders if there are really people in all of them, living so close together.

"Hey!" one of the boys yells. "She's here!" They all run over to Mary, stop a couple yards away. One light-haired ambassador continues closer. He is wearing smears of red face paint and carrying a plastic tomahawk. "We were just playing cowboys and Lamanites. You wanna join? You'd be the only *real* Lamanite we've ever played with." Mary has no idea what Lamanites are. She studies the freckles on the boy's face and figures he is two or three inches taller than she and two or three years older.

Just as the boy opens his thick chapped lips to say something else, the front door of the brick house opens, and a woman steps out, wiping her hands on a white and green checkered apron. She catches one of her black pumps on the top porch step and nearly falls face first into the concrete path leading to the street. "Whoa!" she yells in surprise, then turns and keeps walking, muttering death upon her shoes.

The woman's grimacing face suddenly lights up with what Mary perceives as put-on pleasantness when she makes eye contact. "How *are* you, sweetie?" she asks when she reaches Mary. The woman's eyes examine Mary from top to bottom. With a wave of her hand she signals for the bus driver to leave. "Thank you for your trouble of dropping her off directly, Brother Bean!" The bus driver nods before putting his engine in gear.

As the bus pulls away from the curb with a grinding sound, the woman stoops down to Mary's eye level. She is wearing lipstick the color of blood, and her light hair is done in shiny waves. After a moment or two Mary has not said anything, and the woman speaks again. "Well, Mary. My name is Diane Jensen, and my husband's name is Walter, although he's not home from work yet. He's no doctor, but what we have is yours. We've been looking forward to this day for the *longest* time! Have you eaten? We've already had our supper, but I saved you some. You like meatloaf?"

The woman pauses for a moment, awaiting a response from Mary.

She continues cheerfully when she does not get one. "Just wait till you meet the girls. You're going to *love* it here. Come in and I'll show you all your new clothes and your room." The woman pauses again. "Well, sweetie. Do you like red? I figured you'd have . . . *dark* hair, you know, so a lot of your jumpers are red. Won't that be nice? And the boys, don't worry about . . ." Words bubble faster and faster out of the woman like the jumping of a jack rabbit oblivious to an approaching truck before . . . crunch!

Silence.

The woman's mouth closes and her eyes squint a little. Mary sees it on her face. First confusion, waiting for some kind of response—a "yes," a "hello," a smile even. The woman repeats herself, then becomes concerned. Finally, she says, "Can you *hear* me, dear?"

The woman whispers about it with her husband that night. Mary hears through the barely open door of her new bedroom. "Nobody said she couldn't talk. Should we call her mother? Maybe she's deaf and nobody notified us."

"Would her being deaf make any difference in us keeping her? What would the Savior do?"

"Well . . . *no*," the woman says after a moment of thought. "It won't make *that* kind of difference." Then she pauses. "She does respond," she continues slowly, thoughtfully, "in a kind of *way*, with her eyes . . . when you speak to her. What if . . ."

"Don't worry about it," the man's deep voice jumps in. "She'll come 'round. Don't need to cause her more trauma. She's pretty young. Maybe too young for this kind of thing. Already left her mother and father and home and has to swallow all eleven of us in one shot. It'll just take time for her to . . . adjust, you know, for us to teach her the gospel and good manners. Best if we do it real slow, and . . ."

The man's voice becomes softer now, too soft for Mary to hear. So she climbs into her bed and lies there, staring at the dark ceiling until she hears the radio come on, and the sound of the announcer replaces the woman and her husband's whispering voices.

Mary turns from her side to her back on the fold-out bed, tunes out the radio announcer, and tries to think of something else. The mattress's coils squeak under her weight. She has never slept on a bouncy mattress like this before and feels strange lying up so high. All she had were rolled sheepskins on the floor in hogans with her grandparents or even with Mommy in the trailer. And the bed she used at winter school in Chinle

was made of fencing wire that barely bent at all even when Mary jumped on it.

Mary watches arrowheads of light from a passing car's headlights dance across the ceiling. She is alone in the room. "Just for tonight," the woman told her. "To help you ease into things." But Mary suspects it has more to do with her scraggly hair and the way she smells. A doctor at the bus stop in Richfield extracted a handful of lice from Mary's hair and gave her a shot, pronounced her healthy. But even after giving her a bath, Mary's new mother seems hesitant. She touches her only when necessary and at arm's length, the way Mary imagines one would treat soiled, reeking underpants.

Tomorrow the two sets of bunk beds on the other side of Mary will fill with her four new sisters. For now the girls are giggling in sleeping bags on the floor of the next room with the boys. The woman said Mary would have five new sisters and four new brothers. One of the girls is a toddler who sleeps in a cradle next to the woman's bed. "I won't trouble you with all of them at once till morning rolls around," the woman told Mary when she tucked her in.

Mary plays with the buttons on her new pajamas—a red and white plaid flannel top and matching pants. The buttons feel cool and smooth in her fingers and click clack when she taps two together. She turns onto her side. The bed squeaks again. Someone shuts the radio off, and she hears her new parents' voices progressing down the hall to their bedroom. The rhythmic sound of the man's hoarse laugh penetrates the wall near Mary's bed before she hears the creak of a closing door. The man's face is still foreign to Mary. He has brown hair. That is all she knows because she could not bring herself to look at his face when she was introduced.

A moment later the toddler cries. The sound is muffled through the walls, like a distressed kitten. Violet is the little girl's name. Mary remembers because it matched the pureed plums smeared across Violet's face and high chair when she first saw her.

Mary falls asleep much later, after all the noises—the water running in the bathroom, someone coughing, the baby grunting—slowly quiet like a dying fire and she can no longer even strain to hear anyone's breathing. But she jerks awake after barely slipping into the other side of consciousness. Her body is covered with a film of cold sweat, and her legs and arms are twitching. She is unable to relax again and find the secret place of sleep

without the sound of Mommy's shallow puffs next to her, leading her there with some sense of safety.

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"Mary, I want you to call me Mother as soon as you feel comfortable," the woman says over breakfast the next day. Mary does not like how casually this new mother uses her given name. In Arizona she had been called simply *awee* or "baby." Nearly everyone on the reservation went by a nickname to protect the sacredness of their given names. Mary turns her face from her new mother's smile and looks at the large oak table. There is more food spread out than Mary's used to seeing in a month. Things Mommy and she would have been lucky to find while scrounging in the garbage piles of even the richest Arizona white men. There are two cold bottles of milk, a ceramic saucer filled with country gravy, two plates stacked high with cream-colored biscuits, and a bowl of ripe pears and peaches.

Mary's new mother slides a fried egg on Mary's plate and hands her a pear. "Eat." Mary holds the fruit to her nose and pulls the sweet rainwater smell of its thin, yellow skin into her nostrils. She has the urge to slip it into her pocket and grab another in case there is no food later, but she is worried someone will see her and become angry.

"These are all your new brothers and sisters," Mary's new mother says, introducing each of her children quickly. Mary looks around the table at the communal stare of nine pale, freckled faces. "You may call them your brothers and sisters." Mary feels the almost tangible heat of the children's inquisitive expressions burn rings of embarrassment on her cheeks. She has never had a sibling and cannot imagine calling anyone "Mother" but her own . . .

Mommy.

Mary looks down at her fried egg, stares at the asymmetrical shape of the broken yellow yolk until it blurs, but she cannot keep her thoughts from rolling away like a dropped ball of yarn. Mary remembers Mommy's warm kiss on her cheek before she had boarded the bus in Arizona. A burst of wind had turned the wet, red lipstick mark instantly cold. "It's a long ride to Utah, *Awee*," Mary remembers Mommy saying in Navajo while holding back tears. Then Mommy changed to English, which better masked her emotions. "Be a good girl. They say you'll change buses in Richfield and a nice man will bring you to your new fam-

ily. You just used the bathroom, right? Don't want you making them make any special stops."

Then the bus's folding door closed softly between them and that was all. Mary found a window seat near the front as the bus lurched into gear. She lifted her hand and caged the kiss mark on her cheek as if it were a startled moth. Her other hand reached up and pressed against the window pane as she watched Mommy's body—her arm raised in a motionless gesture of goodbye—shrinking smaller and smaller until it was a dark speck merging with the horizon.

Another child who was going to Utah on the same bus, a boy a couple of years older than Mary, ran to the door after his parents slipped from view. He banged his small fists on the door. Rattle. Rattle. Rattle-rattle-rattle. No one responded. His lost, shiny eyes, like a frightened fawn's, seemed to look right through Mary as he found a seat in the back of the bus. Mary shivered as he passed.

Mary and the boy were two of nine children going to Utah for the school year. Mommy had explained it all to Mary a dozen times before she sent her away. "It's the chance to get educated and get ahead. To fit into the modern world outside the reservation." This was after weeks of exasperated attempts to find out why Mary had lapsed into what Mommy called a "vocal coma" after the return of her daddy from the war.

Mommy left Daddy sleeping on the gold sofa and brought Mary back to the reservation for a few days so that Grandfather—the *Hataalii*, or medicine man trained in healing methods passed down over centuries—could perform the hand-trembling chant used to diagnose ailments. Mary kept her eyes closed through the entire ritual. "It is not her head, her fingertips, her limbs, or the tip of her tongue. She is hurt deep in her spirit," Grandfather said when the ceremony was finished. "Beyond even the reach of the Holy People for now."

So when Mommy returned to the trailer house and two overweight, pimple-faced *Gaamalii* missionaries knocked on their door and explained how the Mormons were in the tentative stages of starting a placement program for Navajo children, Mommy immediately volunteered Mary to be shipped north. "I think they want them to be at least eight years old, and, well . . . baptized," the missionary explained tugging on the knot of his thin red tie. "Honestly, I brought it up only as a way to start talking to you about other things. Have you ever heard about Christ's coming to the Americas? A record left by ancient peoples witnesses that He is the light



and life of the world." The missionary held up a set of scriptures before he continued. "Christ said, 'I am the God of the whole earth, and have been slain for the sins of the world.'"

But Mommy said she was not interested in Christ's coming to America or anything else about a religion preached by young white men unless it could give her daughter food and clothes and education and save her from whatever had frightened her to silence. "She'll be seven this year. She's really bright," Mommy said softly, so as not to wake Daddy and risk chasing off the missionaries.

"Well, seven's still not old enough to be *baptized*," one of the missionaries said, punching his leather scriptures with his right fist to punctuate his pronouncement. "I'm *pretty* sure they're going to require that she has to be eight."

Mommy's eyelids lowered and her chin began to quiver. "Please."  
He would see what he could do.

Three weeks later, that turned out to be good enough. Mary remembers Mommy using an artificial voice of cheery English from then on. "You know, even Snowflake is named after two Gaamaliis with the last names Flake and Snow. And your father's father's sheep still graze on Mormon lands in Aneth. You don't remember when we lived there, do you? Well, you were born on the state line under a half moon with your head in Arizona and your feet in Utah. That was a way to bring opportunity and peace to your life." Mommy stopped speaking for a moment and smiled sadly. "Then we wrapped your little body in sheepskin and placed you next to the fire with your head facing the flames . . . to warm you." Her voice cracked. She paused again, then quickly shook her head as if the memories filling it were marbles, easily rearranged. "They're going to pay for your food, you know, your clothes, and your school. It'll give me a chance to save some money and get out of . . . and come for you." But the only thing that made the news sting a little less to Mary was the promise of summer visits. And Mary's promise to Mommy was to never forget her own family and *Kiiyaa'áanii*, the Towering House Clan.

On their way to the bus stop, Mommy repeated in Navajo "The House Song of the East"—not in the smooth, seamless chant-singing that Grandfather used. She spoke the Navajo words plain, naked. "Far in the east, far below, there a house was made; Delightful house," Mommy said. "God of Dawn, there his house was made; Delightful house. The Dawn, there his house was made; Delightful house. White corn, there

its house was made; Delightful house. Water in plenty, surrounding, for it a house was made; Delightful house. Corn pollen, for it a house was made; Delightful house. The ancients make their presence delightful; Delightful house."

Then Mommy added something not repeated to her by her elders, her voice breaking and her eyes unblinking and shiny. "My daughter leaves me now for better things, a new home; Delightful house." Mommy stopped and looked at Mary, gestured with the raising of her eyebrows for her to join. But Mary remained silent, speaking the words only in her mind. "Before me, may it be delightful. Behind me, may it be delightful. Around me, may it be delightful. Below me, may it be delightful. Above me, may it be delightful. All, may it be delightful."

But now Mary is here at the Jensens' breakfast table with her new Mormon family, and she does not want to remember Mommy any more. She turns her attention toward anything that can snag her thoughts on the present, like the tight feeling of her scalp from the two braids her new mother has made of her hair, how she is unable to wiggle her toes in her new rigid shoes. She watches Violet drop her bottle off her high chair, then cry for someone to pick it up. "Rat-tle, rat-a, rat-ling," Violet says when her bottle is retrieved, shaking it so hard milk comes spraying out the nipple.

The way Violet says the last word, with a glottal in the middle, is like the Navajo consonant sound meaning "grass." This turns Mary's gaze out the window on the other side of the kitchen through which she can see the small half-acre backyard. It is well into September but the grass is still green. She thinks she sees a walnut tree in the back corner of the yard. Grandfather planted a walnut tree near his summer hogan as soon as he received word of Mary's birth. It was her tree, inching up with her over the years.

Mary looks over the Jensens' back fence at the mountains—*nahasdzáánbikáá' niilyáii*. They are splattered with dull patches of rust and copper. It is still a desert here in Utah like in Arizona—Mary can tell by the sparse vegetation in the foothills—but nothing like the sheer rock on the reservation and the parched land that breathes in puffs of orange dust. Mary thinks of her grandparents who are in Canyon de Chelly. They are probably preparing themselves and their small sheep herd for winter. Grandfather's teeth look like the varying shapes and shades of the white and yellow *naadáá* kernels they have finished har-



vesting. The memory of his partly toothless smile sends an aching pang up Mary's spine. But even if she were on the reservation, she tells herself, she would be leaving Grandfather to go to school during the cold months.

Mary pulls her eyes back to the table and cuts a tiny bite of the white of her egg. She holds the fork awkwardly in her fist, it being her first attempt at eating with utensils. Fry bread served as fork and spoon at home. And suddenly, even with all this food in front of her, a piece of fry bread is all Mary feels like eating.

"You excited for school, kids?" Mary's new father asks. He wipes his mouth on the rolled sleeve of his red flannel shirt.

"Yeah!" some of Mary's new younger brothers and sisters say enthusiastically. The older girls sigh with teenage aversion. "That's my gang. Now let's gather in the front room."

The younger children run from the table and through the kitchen's open doorway. Mary's new parents and the older children follow. "Come on in with us, Mary," her new father calls over his shoulder. Mary leaves her nearly untouched breakfast behind and walks cautiously after her new mother into the living room. Everyone is kneeling in a circle and folding their arms across their chests. One of the boys elbows one of the girls, and their father orders him to stop. Then it becomes silent and Mary's new father smiles at her. "Come. Join us, Mary." Mary kneels where she is, in the doorway. "No. Over here," her new father says, holding back a laugh. He scoots sideways on his knees to make a spot for her. "I'll say the prayer today." At that, everyone bows their heads and closes their eyes.

Mary has not heard the word prayer before but quickly realizes it is similar to *sodizin* in Navajo. The others close their eyes. Mary copies their posture but keeps her eyes open. "Our kind and gracious Heavenly Father," her new father says before clearing his throat.

Mary does not know whom he is addressing but imagines it is perhaps a grandfather who is deceased. The boy elbows the little sister next to him again. The girl does not yell but scoots out of range. "We kneel before thee today as a family with grateful hearts," the father continues. "We thank thee for this new day and the good meal we've enjoyed together. We thank thee for providing us with a good home in which to live."

The mischievous boy has opened his eyes, unfolded his arms, and is inching toward his sister again. Because her eyes are now sealed with reverence, she does not see him approaching. "We thank thee for each other

and for the opportunity we have to share our blessings with Mary who has come to us from Arizona." Mary's face becomes hot at the mention of her name. One of the older girls peeks and smiles at her, then quickly, guiltily, closes her eyes.

Mary's new father continues, "We thank thee for the gospel and for Jesus Christ and for the atonement." Mary does not know who Jesus Christ is. She has heard the name before and knows it has something to do with Christian churches. Perhaps it is white people's name for First Mother. "We ask thee to send thy spirit to be with us this day." The boy has reached his sister now and yanks her hair. By the time she screams, he has darted back to his place and is closing his eyes tightly.

Mary's new father does not open his eyes or stop the prayer as she suspects he should. He just pauses and clears his throat before continuing with louder, slower words. "Help us to keep the spirit of contention out of our home. The spirit that Lucifer would wish to prevail here. Help us to know thy will, Father. Again we thank thee for all that we have. And we say these things in the name of our Savior and Redeemer, Jesus Christ, amen."

Mary's new brothers complain all the way to school. The two older girls are in junior high, and the other girls are too young for school. So it is just Mary and three boys heading to the local elementary behind Mary's new mother. They are all in a row at first, like a parade of little ducks, the boys walking stiffly in their new clothes as if their legs are encased in denim casts.

"Will you still let us play night games?" the youngest boy asks. Mary's new mother is staring off into the street, her thoughts on something else.

"Fat chance," the oldest boy says. Then he turns his attention to Mary. "So who is your teacher, Mary? Are you going to be in the same class as Tom? He's a first-grader, too, you know." He points to Tom, the youngest boy who is behind them, untucking his starched collared shirt from his dark jeans. The boy keeps speaking even without an encouraging response. "Do you remember our names yet? I can say them all really fast. Listen." The older boy dives into a list of his brothers' and sisters' names, his own, Bobby, included in one streak of breath. "SherryEvelynBobbyGreg-TomLindaJohnNancyViolet." He dramatically gasps for breath when he is finished. Mary nearly smiles, and this seems to satisfy Bobby. During the rest of the walk to school, they are comfortably silent.

Mary's new mother brings her directly to the office at the front of

the red brick schoolhouse. A short man in a green suit greets her and says, "I'm Principal Douglas. Welcome to Spanish Fork's Reese Elementary." He takes off his glasses and steps uncomfortably close to Mary, squatting down to her level. "It's a great idea the Church is developing. You're definitely the youngest I've heard of, though." He pauses for a minute with a warm, concentrated smile. "Maybe many more students will follow in your footsteps next year, eh?" He stops and rubs his shiny bald scalp as he waits for Mary to nod or shake her head, but she does neither. Mary's new mother smiles nervously. "Well, thanks for bringing her down. I think I can take it from here, Mrs. Jensen."

"Yes. Thank you. Let me know if there are any problems."

Principal Douglas nods, then turns to Mary as if her new mother is already gone. "Let me introduce you to your teacher, Mary. I think you'll really like her."

Mary is in the same class as Tom. Mrs. Minor's little classroom has green tiles for a floor except for one corner where a large red carpet is spread, curled up at the corners. Every student's name is printed on little pieces of blue or pink paper taped to the top of each desk. Mary's name, in pink, has a little blue bird drawn on the top of the "a." She likes it very much. All the boys in class are dressed much like Tom in new collared shirts and dark jeans or pleated tan pants. The girls' scabby knees peek out from under dresses or jumpers, and they wear white knee-length or lacy ankle socks.

Mrs. Minor starts out the day with what she calls singing time. "How about reviewing our ABCs?" she asks, then begins singing the letters of the alphabet. Mary has never heard of things called letters. She knows language orally only, English or Navajo.

"A, B, C, D . . ." Mrs. Minor begins singing animatedly. Her gray curls bob slightly every time she drops her flaccid right arm on the down beat. ". . . W, X, Y, and Z. Now I know my ABCs . . ." Mrs. Minor stops the song early. "Mary, won't you sing with us?" She gives her an encouraging smile. Mary stands silent, her bladder suddenly throbbing with a desperate need to urinate. "Now let's *all* sing."

Mrs. Minor starts another song Mary has never heard. "My Bonny lies over the ocean. My Bonny lies over the sea . . ." When Mary does not join, Mrs. Minor looks at her with raised eyebrows. She stops the singing mid-sentence again, and says, "Mary, when I tell you to *do* something, I expect you to *do* it or there will be consequences." The song starts again, but

Mary does not open her mouth. She feels the warmth of her urine slowly spreading down her white tights and into her shiny black Mary-Janes. Mrs. Minor does not stop the song again.

For the rest of the day, the lower half of Mary's body is engulfed in a hot, itchy sensation as her urine dries. The boy who sits next to her plugs his nose in disgust when the strong odor of old pennies reaches him. Mary holds her legs together as tight as she can to try and keep the smell from spreading further.

"Mary?" Mrs. Minor asks while all the children are picking up their bags and papers at the end of the day. "Do you think you could ask your . . . *parents* to come with you tomorrow morning, a little early. Your mother perhaps?" Mary stares blankly at the wall. Mrs. Minor scratches her wrinkled cheek with one of her painted fingernails. "Or . . . maybe . . ." She sighs. "I'll just try to *call*." Mrs. Minor pats her short stiff curls and pulls her lips into a tight red bud for a moment as if she is considering saying something else. But after a moment she says, "You may go now."

Mary picks up her bag and begins to walk toward the door where Tom is waiting for her, picking his nose ineffectively with his thumb. "Oh, wait!" Mrs. Minor calls as Mary walks out the door. "You forgot your picture, Mary. It's still sitting on your desk. All the other students are taking theirs home." Mary turns and looks at the picture she has drawn with crayons, a black circle swirling like a dust devil around a little blue bird. Then she turns silently and walks away with Tom as Mrs. Minor waves it after her.

That night the telephone rings after Mary has been put to bed. Mary's new sisters are busy having a pillow fight and she cannot hear what is said. But Mrs. Minor pretends not to notice when Mary does not verbally participate in class the next day or any day after that.

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Mary hears the word *Lamanite* again on Wednesday afternoon in a light brick church several blocks from the Jensens' home. Only this time the word is not used in reference to her directly but as part of the lesson in the Primary class where her new mother has brought her. The elderly woman teaching the class—Sister Paulson, she asks to be called—instructs Mary's new brother Tom to read a verse from a plain, black book. Everyone in class has an identical copy.

"And it came to pass that the Lamanites came up on the north of the

hill, where a part of the army of Moroni was concealed." Tom reads slowly and with difficulty. Sister Paulson has to help him with many of the words. Mary does not follow his words, only gathering that they are explaining some major war. Mary has seen churches before but never been in one. She used to wonder what they were doing inside. Dancing? Singing? Eating, perhaps? But she never imagined congregations meeting in musty classrooms to learn about wars, the worst thing she can think of, taking away daddies and sending them back angry.

Tom finishes the verse and the teacher reads a paragraph from her lesson book. No one listens. Two boys are leaning back in their chairs and trying to push one another over. A red-headed girl is prying open the classroom's tiny window. Tom is staring at a large, yellow booger clinging to the end of his pointer finger. After a thorough examination he rolls the sticky snot between his thumb and finger until it dries and crumbles onto the carpet. Sister Paulson sets her book down and asks the children a question about what they have been reading. No one even looks at her, much less raises a hand to respond. The large white clock measures the silence. Mary counts one, two . . . forty-six, forty-seven, before Sister Paulson repeats the question.

Mary is ashamed for the children. On the reservation, she was taught that elders are wise, and when they speak, you listen. Sister Paulson stares at the class with baleful blue eyes. No one notices the warning but Mary. Suddenly Sister Paulson raises her voice, angrily. "Class!" Everyone instantly sits straight and looks ahead. "Do you listen to a word I say?"

"Yes, Sister Paulson. We listen," says one of the boys who had been fighting.

"All right, Wally, then what have you learned today?"

"We're supposed to read our scriptures, say our prayers every day, go to church, and act like Jesus."

Sister Paulson scratches her graying hairline and sighs. "And what does Jesus *act* like, Wally? If he were here, would he make noise in my classroom? *Walter?*"

"Yes!"

All the other children burst out laughing.

"That's it. You can sit in the corner until class is over. The rest of you can open your scriptures and take turns reading the lesson's verses over again." Sister Paulson crosses her legs, sighs, and says under her breath, "You'd think you have no religion at all, let alone the truth."

Mary watches the children open their books and pretend to read for a few moments until they revert to their earlier behavior. She is confused by their conduct and even more by what Sister Paulson is teaching. The word "religion" that Sister Paulson used does not exist in the Navajo language. Grandfather told Mary she was expected to keep her life in harmony with nature, but he did not use words like good and evil.

"Why can't you act more like our new student?" Sister Paulson says near the end of class, surprised when her students listen. They all quiet and turn to Mary, whose face grows hot. "It is her first week here and she has more reverence than all of you." Sister Paulson looks at Mary and smiles with crooked, yellow teeth. Mary folds her arms and looks down with shame, away from the faces of her classmates. Like most Navajos, Mary hates being singled out, especially with praise. At least Sister Paulson did not use her name directly.

While Mary tries her best to seem invisible, Tom leans over and whispers something to Wally. They both giggle.

"What's so funny, Tom?" Sister Paulson asks, adjusting her large brassiere under her blue suit jacket. Tom looks sheepishly at his feet. "What's so *funny*, Wally?"

"Tom said Mary doesn't even know how to take baths."

"That's it! Both of you, stand in the corner," Sister Paulson says heatedly, raising her painted eyebrows. "I'm *sorry*, Mary."

And there it is. Her name.

Mary is more troubled by the teacher's direct approbation than Tom's words. After all, it is true. She had never seen a bathtub with running water before this week. The water that comes out of the silver faucet with such force frightens her.

Just then the bell rings and Sister Paulson sighs in relief. "No running in the halls!" she calls as the boys dart like desert roadrunners out of the classroom. Mary is the last to leave.

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The Jensens are back at the same church on Sunday afternoon for what Mary's new mother calls sacrament meeting. Three older men in suits, white shirts, and ties greet a line of people waiting to enter a large room filled with wooden benches. Mary joins the rest of her new family in line but does not look at the men or shake their hands when she reaches the front. Not just because the men frighten her, but because the



idea of shaking hands as a greeting is intimidating. People don't shake hands with strangers on the reservation. They only touch palms with good friends. Luckily time is short and the men quickly turn their attention elsewhere.

Mary files into one of the front benches with her new family just as the meeting is about to start. They fill the long bench from end to end. An old woman with puffy white hair at the front of the room plays a large wooden instrument. The way her fingers move reminds Mary of Grandmother's fingers working wool through her loom. The younger children immediately pull out coloring books and little bags of corn flakes to entertain themselves.

After a few moments, the three men who stood at the doors greeting the congregation walk up to the front of the room. The congregation's whispering slowly begins to quiet. One of the men, a short, bald man in a black suit and blue tie, steps up to the podium and begins speaking. "Welcome, brothers and sisters. We are pleased to see so many here today. We'd also like to welcome any visitors." He looks directly at Mary, making her heart strike against her rib cage like an attacking rattlesnake.

This same man stops Mary in the hall after the meeting. He gives her a copy of the same book Tom read from in class on Wednesday. "It's yours, Mary," he says smiling. "We're glad to have you with us. I'm Bishop Barlow. Let me know if you need anything, anything at all." He thrusts his hand out and holds it in the air in front of Mary, waiting for her to reach out and take it. She does not. Instead she turns the black book over in her hands. On the spine of the book Mary sees words in gold, but she cannot read them. She is uncomfortable and does not like how the man steps up so close to her and speaks so loudly.

After dinner that evening, Mary's new mother reads from the black book. She explains a little about it to Mary in slow, loud words before they begin, as if Mary is hard of hearing. "This is the Book of Mormon. It's an account of the people in ancient America—your people. You'll probably love learning about their history. The book tells us how to live, and it tells about when the resurrected Savior came to visit the Americas after he died in the old world. We've only just started reading it again as a family. We read from it as often as we can, like the prophet tells us. It's divided into different books that are an account of different times. We're just now getting into the second book."

Each child takes a turn reading a few verses out of the book except

for Mary and the baby, Violet. Even the second to youngest girl, Nancy, who cannot be more than two, repeats the text after her father whispers it into her ear. They read about how a group of people led by a man named Nephi separate themselves from another group of people led by Nephi's wicked brother named Laman.

It seems strange to Mary that this fair-haired, fair-skinned family thinks they know more about her people than she does. She has never heard of the men they are reading about: Nephi, Lehi, Jacob, Laman, Lemuel. They are not Navajo names. There is no mention of First Man or First Woman, the four sacred mountains or the four worlds.

Mary's new brother Greg reads about what God did to the wicked brother Laman and his followers: "And he had caused the cursing to come upon them, yea, even a sore cursing, because of their in . . . in . . ."

"Iniquity," Mary's new father jumps in when Greg cannot decipher the word.

"Iniquity," he continues, "for behold, they hardened their hearts against him that they became like unto flint; wherefore, as they were white, and exceedingly fair and delightsome, that they might not be enticing unto my people the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them."

Greg looks up from his scriptures. "That's where your dark skin comes from, Mary."

"Hush," Mary's new mother says, her cheeks pinking with mild embarrassment. She looks into Mary's confused face and explains, "This happened a long time ago. It was because of this people's wickedness. It's nothing *you* did exactly, dear."

Mary does not understand why her new mother is acting ashamed for her. Mary's skin color is commonplace on the reservation. Of course there were certain places off the reservation that would not serve Navajos, but that was as much for fear of fleas as skin color. Yes, she has already noticed that her skin is different here. It causes the children at her new school to turn and look at her, the adults to whisper. But she has never thought of it as a mark of wickedness like this book says.

That night while Mary brushes her teeth awkwardly, copying the motion of her new sisters, she remembers the words "exceedingly fair and delightsome." She compares her dark skin to the reflection of her new sisters' light skin in the mirror. Mary's top lip is thicker than her bottom. She has no lines on the smooth plane of her face except for a single shal-

low crease on each eyelid while her sisters have dimpled cheeks, lines under their lower eyelids, and two curves connecting the corners of their mouth to either side of their noses. Mary's nose is longer than theirs, flatter. Her eyebrows are dark, straight lines with only a finger's width between them while one can hardly tell her new sisters have eyebrows at all. Mary's eyes—like polished obsidian in the bathroom's bright light—are nothing like the transparent blue of her new sisters' eyes. Mary's high cheekbones are lost in the child fat of her face, less pronounced than those of her new sisters, yet more dominant. She has such a round face. Like Daddy's face, she realizes. An icy feeling pricks the back of her neck and ears. And she feels a little uncomfortable and confused, wondering if these girls' milky skin is something that would belong to her if not for her people's sins. Why did she not look more like Mommy, at least, if not like these girls?

Mary remembers how Mommy tried to act like white people. The way she used to talk about the customs and culture of her parents as outdated. She went by Lily instead of her Navajo nickname, Girl of Slight Form. Mommy said by the time she was fourteen she was wearing red lipstick and short, fitted dresses instead of long flowing skirts like other Navajo women. Mommy hitchhiked to Phoenix every year or so and came back with bags of stylish shoplifted clothes. She called them Betty clothes. "Don't I look like a real Betty in this?" she would ask Mary when she tried something new on.

Mary went to Phoenix with Mommy a couple of times. She helped sneak things out of stores by shoving silk stockings in her underpants, tubes of lipstick in her ratty socks. "Everything in this world belongs to everyone," Mommy explained to Mary. "No one can own anything. Everything should be shared. I help people share their nice things with me. That is the fair way."

It takes Mary a moment on her way to her new bed, but she is still able to recall Mommy's appearance in detail. Her big, brown eyes. Skin that glowed with a golden undertone. She curled her hair, kept it shoulder length unlike the straight, long, windblown locks of other Navajos. Mommy tried to curl Mary's tangled hair once. The black ringlets were straight again within an hour.

Mary runs her tongue over her clean, crooked teeth. Mommy had naturally straight, white teeth—a reservation rarity. "You are the prettiest mother," Mary told her once, reaching out to touch her hair. Mommy

pulled her hand away. Then she told Mary the story of Changing Woman, the lost baby who became *Asdzáán*, the spiritual mother of Navajos. "Changing Woman was constantly becoming new," Mommy said. "So I knew if I was really her daughter, I could change into anything I wanted. Even a Betty."

The only thing Mary remembers about Mommy's appearance that is at all unsettling is her eyebrows, plucked away and painted on in little forged arcs that make her look permanently, unnaturally happy. She thinks of Mommy's long neck, tiny nose, and painted lips, then hangs the pretty conjured image on the wall of her mind and falls asleep gazing at it.

\* \* \*

Mary awakens just after six, immediately alert. Something seems different. The house is strangely still and bright and cold. Safe. The air smells fresh like cold milk. Mary shivers as she pulls back her covers and swings her thin legs over the bed's edge and feels her dark hairs stand at attention to the cold. She heads to the window to discover three weeks of dry November now suffocated in winter. Behind the parted purple curtains, there is half a foot of fresh snow dispersed equally over everything as if it fell as a blanket of bleached wool in one collective thump. Its whiteness is washed silver with the light of a half moon.

Mary tiptoes out of her bedroom, careful not to wake her sisters. She slips out of her pajamas, leaves them in a heap in the kitchen, and slides out the back door. She staggers down the concrete porch steps while bitter bolts of cold shiver up and down her naked body, then pauses for a moment, smiling, as she looks at the backyard transformed. The sun is just beginning to rise over the peaks of Maple Mountain with a hopeful glow of pink and green, outclassing the moonlight with greater glory.

Mary ventures out into the fenced yard and stops near the walnut tree. She bends over and scoops up a handful of snow and starts rubbing it into the goose bumps on her skin. A ritual snow bath. When Mary was too small to scrub herself, Grandmother used to wash her with snow like this to clean her and bring her blessings from the Holy Ones. Mary could never stop shivering. Even when she was old enough to bathe herself, she still hated the coldness.

After her whole body is rubbed red and dripping, Mary stands directly under the walnut tree and showers herself with shards of freezing snow by shaking its branches. She spins—arms open—dancing under the

snowing tree, trying to catch the glinting white flecks on her tongue. Her ear tops, toes, and fingertips burn crimson with cold.

The tree is bigger than Mary's walnut on the reservation. She used to sit under it every morning after completing the age-old childhood custom of running to the sun. The earth seemed alive beneath her, a kind of friend and protector. Mary feels a connection to this tree, too, as if the branches above are reaching to scoop her up and take her back to the sacred land.

After the tree's arms are emptied of their snow, Mary sprints eastward the way she used to on the reservation, with her open arms greeting the new morning sky and its weakening stars. Her lungs suck in icy air and exhale it warm back to the world. And Mary feels for a moment that she is back in the middle of the endless Dinetah instead of on a half-acre plot of patchy, frozen sod. She runs as fast as she did one year before, at first snow, scissoring through the reservation with tiny legs. The sun rising like a bright stringless balloon in the . . .

Thud!

The Jensens' back fence suddenly stops Mary's flight. She clutches a wet wooden post to keep from falling. But she wants to keep running. Until her heart is beating in her thighs and temples. Until her legs buckle under her.

"MARY!" a voice suddenly screams. Mary's heart jumps from the second startle, and she loses her footing. She falls on her bare bottom in the powdery snow and looks up to see her new mother's figure on the back porch. "What are you doing? You're totally naked!" Mary is frightened by the shocked stare of her new mother's face as she pulls her pink robe tightly around her body and marches across the yard in her slippers. "Give me your hand," she orders when she arrives at the fence. Mary sits still with her arms wrapped around her body.

"GIVE me your HAND!" There is a hush, just for a moment before Mary sees her new mother's arm raise high above her head. Then a hot burning smack slams onto Mary's cheek. Her new mother draws her hand back and rubs it slowly. Her words come out in a heavy wave, "Mary, I can only put up with certain things. But this is just . . . outlandish! Don't ever let me find you sneaking out of this house alone ever again. With or without your clothes on." She takes a deep breath that slows her outburst. "Look. I'm sorry. I don't know what they do on the . . . just don't do it here. Here

we *never* take our clothes off where other people can see us." She looks around to see if any neighbors have witnessed the morning's surprises.

Mary's new mother's face is still flushed and frenzied, but she does not yell when she says again, "Give me your hand." Instead of waiting for a response, she simply grabs Mary's icy palm and leads her into the house and down the hall to the bathroom.

Mary is left standing naked next to the toilet while her new mother disappears for a moment. She returns holding clean white underwear and an outfit under her arm. Mary's hand is rubbing her burning cheek. Her new mother sees this and her eyes soften. "Now, honey," she says warmly, repentantly. "Just climb in the bath and you'll feel much better. I'll have a nice hot breakfast for you when you're finished." She hesitates by the doorway for a moment as if on the border of two worlds, while her pink slippers leak puddles on the floor. Then she walks briskly back to Mary, tenderly kisses the top of her head and rubs a big circle on her back. It is the first time she has shown Mary physical affection. But it is the lingering sting on her cheek from the slap—not the tingle on her scalp from the kiss—that tells Mary this woman really is her mother now.

\* \* \*

"How about a haircut?" Mary's new mother asks cheerfully. Mary has just come home from school and knows her hair is tangled from the harsh January wind at recess. "I think all that hair is getting to be too much for you to take care of." Mary has feared this moment for months. She does not want short bobbed locks like her new sisters but dares not protest. Her new mother spreads sheets of newspaper out on the kitchen floor and sets a chair on top of them. "Sit here." Then she puts a large bowl on Mary's head and quickly cuts around it with the same black scissors from the kitchen drawer she uses to cut fat off chicken and coupons out of magazines.

Snip. A clump of soft darkness falls and curls on the ground. Snip. Another. Mary's eyes fill with tears. Grandmother never cut her hair shorter than her shoulder blades. She would be furious if she saw the growing pile of hair lying on the linoleum like a faceless, dead animal.

The whole thing only takes five minutes. "You're done," Mary's new mother declares, pulling the bowl off her head and dusting a few hair clippings off its rim. Then she looks at Mary, and the slits of her smiling eyes pop open in surprise. "Oh, no."



Mary reaches up to feel the fresh, feathery ends of her hair. She realizes suddenly what went wrong. "The bowl must have tipped or something," Mary's new mother says, pulling each side of Mary's hair to her chin. There is at least three inches difference in their length. "Well. Let me even it out. This will just take a second, dear."

Mary begins breathing rapidly as the scissors circle her head again. How much hair is she going to lose? She wonders if she should have run and hidden before this all began.

But then it is over. Mary's new mother dusts clippings off the scissors, then her hands. Mary nearly gasps when she sees this. She jumps down on her hands and knees and begins frantically gathering up the cut hair off the newspaper. Her new mother laughs. "Just fold it up like this and toss it in the trash," she says pulling the newspaper away from Mary. As she lifts it, some of the hairs fall onto the floor. Mary starts picking them up one at a time. "What are you doing, Mary? Here. Just use the broom. If you don't get every single one, it's okay."

Has she not heard of the *yee naaldlooshii*? Mary wonders. Skinwalkers. They look like regular people by day, wear dark cloaks at night while doing their dirty work. Their alliances with evil spirits make them tricky foes. If they find Mary's hair, they will work their evil magic on her. Grandmother always told her, after trimming her hair with a knife, "Just one piece of hair overlooked, carried off with the breeze, can mean your destruction."

Mary watches her mother toss the trimmings in the garbage can. Several hairs fall like shredded feathers. But when her new mother says, "Go play while I get dinner ready. I don't need you crawling around my feet," Mary leaves, filled with trepidation.

She goes straight to the bathroom. Staring back at her in the mirror is a girl with a ridiculous bob just below her ears. The girl in the mirror lifts her hand and brushes her fingers across the blunt strands. Their ends turn out in different directions like spliced wires. The girl's hand drops. Her dark eyes are distant and unreadable. But her heart is humming like a frightened desert swallow.

That night Mary hears a dog bark in the distance and is sure the skinwalkers are coming for her. She pulls her blankets up over her head, but the tiny tent's oxygen supply depletes quickly. Mary tries to breathe deeply to make up for it, but her fear has tightened her throat. In. Out.

Destruction. Disharmony. In. Out. She listens for a long time for the skinwalkers.

Finally Mary cannot take it anymore, and she emerges for fresh air. She opens her eyes and looks around. A little moonlight is filtering in through the curtains. Everything seems still outside. It is quiet except for the breathing sounds coming from her sisters' beds. The water heater rumbles and hisses from down the hall. Mary nestles up against the wall and listens for something else.

Maybe they have not found her hair yet. She still has time.

Mary sneaks out of bed, opening the door slowly so the hinges do not squeak. She tiptoes down the hall and into the kitchen where she gets down on her hands and knees, searching for hairs. Her new mother swept after dinner, but there are still a few trimmings against the wall. Mary opens the pantry door and spends several minutes pulling hairs out of the broom. Then she lifts the lid of the garbage can and peers inside. She sighs, her fear returning. Someone has taken the garbage out. How many hairs could have been scattered on the way to the street? Mary considers venturing outside to search for them, but one look out the back window into the cold darkness is enough.

Back in bed, the gathered trimmings now safely hidden in her pillowcase, Mary wonders why the skinwalkers have not come. The rest of her hair could be blown anywhere by now. Then she remembers her new mother's cool oblivion to Mary's horror after the haircut. Maybe skinwalkers do not trouble white people. The idea is comforting. Perhaps her being in the same home as the Jensens is some kind of protection.

But her mind lurches again. What about when she is wandering alone at recess? Or walking home from school? Will the skinwalkers come for her then? How will she ever be safe?

Mary's question is answered the following week in Sunday School. Sister Paulson reads a passage of scripture about the Lamanites. "And the gospel of Jesus Christ shall be declared among them," she reads. "Wherefore, they shall be restored unto the knowledge of Jesus Christ, which was had among their fathers. And then shall they rejoice; and their scales of darkness shall begin to fall from their eyes; and they shall be a white and a delightsome people."

The other students seem oblivious to the passage, but Mary feels as if a large weight is lifting from her. Lamanites can become white. So maybe if she is good enough, she will turn white. Then the skinwalkers will never

again be a worry. And then, maybe, she can grow roots strong enough to keep from being plucked up and transplanted again.

Mary is not sure what "delightful" means, but imagines that a delightful person is someone everyone likes. She would like to be that too. Mary imagines her new mother introducing her to strangers. "This is Mary. Isn't she delightful?"

Then Sister Paulson's voice interrupts her thoughts. "Why did Heavenly Father take the curse away from these people?"

A girl answers without raising her hand. "Because they stopped acting like their moms and dads." Mary turns and looks at her.

"That's right, Cindy," Sister Paulson says. "They let go of all their old, evil ways."

\* \* \*

Mary is in the bathroom studying her reflection as she has done every night for months. She pulls back her hair, pinches her cheek, squints her eyes. But even under the bright lights, Mary still looks like the darkest person in Utah. Her forehead wrinkles with confusion.

"Mary!" her new father calls from down the hall. "Are you done in there? I'm taking the other kids to get some milk. You can join us." Mary thinks of the rows of candy at the grocer's and excitedly flips off the bathroom light.

They do not stay long. Mary's new father seems anxious to return home. When Mary is about to exit through the store's double glass doors into the early spring air behind her brothers and sisters, a store clerk follows her and taps her on the shoulder. "I don't believe this belongs to you," the clerk says, pulling a bag of M&Ms out of the pocket of Mary's jacket. Mary's new father turns around and frowns.

"Mary?" her new father asks sternly. "Where did you get this? Did you pay for this?" Mary studies the buckles on her shoes.

The clerk thrusts his hands in the pocket of his apron and says, "I saw her take it off the shelf but didn't want to say anything until I saw you leave the store."

"I'm so embarrassed," Mary's new father says nervously. "I can promise, though, it won't happen again. Mary, say you're sorry." He pauses. "Mary, say you're sorry." The store clerk looks at Mary with lowered eyebrows. Nearby shoppers have stopped pushing their carts now to stare at

the confrontation. Everyone, even Mary's youngest brothers and sisters, are quiet, waiting.

Finally Mary's new father apologizes for her. "She really is sorry. She's just scared. She's new here and doesn't even speak to us." He pats Mary on the back like a disobedient puppy.

When Mary gets home, her new father orders the other children to bed and asks Mary to come in the kitchen. "Mary. What you did was *wrong*. Taking things without paying for them with money is against our Heavenly Father's teachings. I wish you would have apologized. Why is it you still won't speak? You're safe here."

Mary clasps her hands behind her back and looks down. No. She is not safe here. Not yet. Her new father sighs. "Now I hate to do this. I really do. I don't want to hurt you. But I spank the other children when I really need to teach them a lesson. So this is only fair." He takes Mary by the shoulders and pushes her face down over a chair, then rolls up the sleeve of his red flannel shirt, and with a swift smacking sound, spanks her bottom with his large hand.

When he raises his arm to strike again, a memory flashes in Mary's mind of her own daddy, two days after he came home from the war. Mommy was gone. Daddy paced in front of the gold sofa with torn cushions. His thin legs hardly looked up to the task of supporting his thick torso, especially when he was drunk and wobbling. Mary watched him closely. He seemed to have the outside world clinging to him like an odor with his new American accent and swear words, the way he moved quickly, jerking, like an irritated soldier instead of a nice Navajo father. Even his name had changed to Harv, a loose-fitting English nickname for his given name, New Heaven.

"You have no idea!" he yelled at Mary. "No idea about my work in Saipan. You think anybody else notices? Hell, no!" He swatted the air in front of him. "Those stinking codes. Everything in the whole stinking world is written in stinking code. I don't know why they needed me to make it worse. Are you listening? Are you listening to me!"

Then Daddy raised his hand above Mary, but she had not had the sense to do what she does to her new father now. Mary turns and sinks her teeth into the arm holding her down. She bites deep but does not break her new father's skin. She runs.

"Ahhh!" Mary's new father screams just as she darts out the back door. "Oh, Mary! Oh, gosh." Mary looks back over her shoulder long

enough to see the curve of little pink marks she has left on his white forearm.

Mary flies down the steps and across the yard. But before she reaches the back fence, she trips and belly flops on the grass under the walnut tree. She does not cry, but her body is shaking. She remains face down on the ground, like a human star, as if she is trying to stretch her limbs enough to sense the earth's roundness.

Mary opens her mouth to say something, but then closes her lips. She looks up at the kitchen window and shudders. Even though she is alone outdoors, she does not want to go back inside, skinwalkers or not.

After a few minutes, the rapid beating of Mary's heart on the rawhide drum of her chest begins to slow. Or is it her heart at all? For a moment, Mary cannot decipher if the beating is coming from her body or the earth upon which she lies prostrate. Th-thump. Th-thump. Mary breathes in deeply and fills her lungs with as much air as she can. Holds it. The ground inflates against her body and the walnut arms overhead bend lovingly towards her. The ground smells like wet newspaper and is cool where it touches Mary's skin. The pointed tips of grass blades tickle her chin and right ear. Mary exhales, and the land heaves in sync as they rotate together a thousand miles an hour towards sunset. Mary closes her eyes and holds on for the ride, her fingertips curling into the soft soil as if gravity has been momentarily suspended.

The night sky slowly unrolls itself protectively over Mary like a thick sheepskin. She does not turn over to see the emerging stars, but their outreach to earth leaves pinpricks of light on her back, like points on a map. Grandfather said the stars were placed on a blanket and flipped into the sky where they stuck in all the right places—a guide to all the laws one must obey to walk in harmony. Mary wonders if the law of taking things when you have no money is written in the stars and if she failed to read it. How many other laws has she unknowingly broken? The sky must have been rearranged on her trip to Utah, and she will have to relearn it before she can transform like the Lamanites in the Book of Mormon.

Mary's mouth opens again. She moves her lips silently as if priming a pump, then presses out a barely audible prayer. She tries to speak the words the way her new family does when they kneel together. "We ask thee . . . we ask to help me be delightsome. And we ask thee to please keep me safe from skinwalkers until I change." The prayer is addressed to no

one specifically—God, Jesus, or the Holy People. Mary just releases the words like a kite to get tangled in whatever heaven they reach first.

She imagines what it will be like to get her new white skin. Maybe she will crawl out of her brown covering like a rattlesnake out of its scales, leaving behind a delicate sheath to dry in the sun and crackle under the feet of some later wanderer.

Until her skin does change, Mary decides even her new God will not detect a glint of her old, evil Lamanite ways. She will hide them so deep that if a fragment ever emerges, anyone, even Mary herself, will see it as only a confusing puzzle piece from eons ago, bleached anonymous and sifted in the sands of her mind.

Mary rolls onto her back expecting the confusing canon of the Milky Way to greet her. Instead, shining straight above is the moon like a fragment of white shell in a sea of darkening navy. The same moon she was born under. The same moon she gazed at on the reservation while Grandfather sang. Mary tries to push these thoughts out of her consciousness. It is not hard. Hovering in her mind is her new father's disappointed expression from the market, his pale face eclipsing the past.

Mary reaches toward the heavens with her right hand, wanting to pluck the lunar shard from the sky. Silvery moonlight kisses her outstretched hand. She bends and straightens her fingers several times like the accelerated motion of primrose petals opening and closing to days and nights. From wide to tight. Changing from dark to light. Brown to . . .

White. Mary smiles.