

Through  
Ancestral Lands,  
Reading  
*An Infected  
Sunset*

~~~~~ *Demian DinéYazhi'*

*Editor's Note:* The following essay is composed of three excerpts from an audio diary recorded by Portland-based artist and poet Demian DinéYazhi' while driving across the United States in the summer of 2018, reading from his celebrated book of poetry, *An Infected Sunset*, published earlier that year. Each excerpt is complete, and the format (i.e. capitalization and punctuation) has been carefully edited by DinéYazhi. The project was commissioned by The Ford Family Foundation, and edited by Stephanie Snyder. For more information about, and to support DinéYazhi's poetry and artwork, visit: <https://www.etsy.com/shop/DemianDineyazhi>.



Through Ancestral Lands, Reading *An Infected Sunset*

By Demian DinéYazhi'

: walking around tulsa

i'm walking around downtown tulsa just left elisa after having dinner with lucas and his friend i believe the moon is full tonight i was walking down one of the streets and saw it peeking out behind some clouds now it seems to be ducking in and out from behind these dreamy clouds i'm walking back to my hotel room which is in an old official city building that has been converted into a hotel i drove an hour and a half from oklahoma city

i'm walking around downtown tulsa and earlier today I was in oklahoma city nothing in this region seems that interesting except everything

i mean in a lot of ways it reminds me of new mexico or albuquerque the city itself seems to be frozen nothing has changed much from the nineties or the eighties even except the device that i'm holding an iPhone the pedestrian walk signs beep intermittently to guide the blind everyone is still living in a colonized country i don't get why people's responses to living under this republican fuck fest are any different than they were for their parents' generation or their grandparents' generation or their great-grandparents' generation or my ancestors all the fucked-up forms of colonial fuckery and the fact that at the end of the day we still have to go through it and endure it still exists that it's still true it doesn't matter to what extent Indigenous Brown Black Queer Trans people liberate themselves and feel any sense of pride apart from some marketable fuckin' pill that we take to feel completely in control of our lives or our sense of community to whatever extent we have pushed toward celebrating our livelihood and our survival in fact the very colonial state we find ourselves in doesn't want us alive that this is true too

i don't get how people can say anything is better when we are in fact having to go through it all again that we once again have to teach children and teenagers and kids effective forms of resistance but yet all we are doing is just conducting the same subversive tactics that have existed for decades at this point and even the effective forms of protest and civil disruption that were effective in the eighties aren't effective nowadays it seems as though they've learned all of our tricks and we're caught in this repetitive act of opposition that doesn't dismantle this empire any faster than it did back then

tracy says that this type of disruption this type of undoing this type of decolonization won't take place in our lifetime

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Demian DinéYazhi'



and I agree as hopeful as I was when i was younger i understand that i understand that in order to survive in order to be level-headed and feel as though I am taking care of myself that it also comes with the realization that maybe we just have to slowly burn this thing down this doesn't mean we can't burn it down in giant swaths here and there but it doesn't necessarily mean that capitalism won't be completely dismantled by the time I'm an old person should I or any of us make it that far but driving around this country you come across young white kids smiling happy living their lives care-free and I wonder do they even ask themselves these questions and even if they do they don't understand it the same way my nieces and nephews do

and i hope they understand it and maybe that's all i can do with my life's work is to help them understand it and furthermore help them to understand how to undo it when I've been incapable or failed

: dream before Standing Rock

today i'm driving away from minneapolis headed to fargo bismarck and eventually Standing Rock it's been nearly two years since i began the poem AN INFECTED SUNSET i feel like most of the poem is inspired by all of the events that occurred during the summer of 2016 primarily the Standing Rock occupation but also just how the entire country could just feel something in america breaking or becoming more obvious transparent even in ways that we allowed ourselves to overlook and feel at peace with even though during the entire obama administration there were numerous acts of genocide and violence inflicted against Brown communities

last night i had a dream i was in my old childhood house or what felt like my old childhood house and we had the blinds drawn and suddenly this gust of wind started shaking the house it was continuous and very violent but i also felt secure in the house i felt secure knowing that we would be safe if we just stayed inside and i don't remember who was with me or who i was surrounded by if it was family members or friends or lovers acquaintances but everything felt familiar everyone felt familiar.

and as this gust of wind eventually died down and there was peace for a while we all contemplated whether or not it was done and where was the origin of this sudden environmental disturbance and we must have been in new mexico and I remember thinking in the dream that it could possibly be atomic bomb testing or some sort of nuclear bomb taking place on the reservation and as we peeked through the blinds we could see all of these cars starting to leave trying to get out of the town or just move down the street and actually it just occurred to me that my mother was there with some of my family members and while all of this was happening

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my father was in town at walmart or some store grabbing things when there was that moment of peace we asked him to come home before it would happen again and as we were looking out the window through the blinds, we noticed a couple flashes coming from the northeastern sky

and before we could feel any sort of environmental resistance or catastrophe or turbulence i think i must have woken up but it was such jarring dream because there was just such a violent presence of nature or to nature a disturbance against nature it didn't feel like a tornado or a hurricane or what i imagine what either of those scenarios would feel like it didn't feel like a natural catastrophe it felt very much imposed by humans some manmade disturbance to the natural working order of the world or what we perceive as nature or even natural i mean who's to say that any of this is safe from any one of us

humans have been violent not just in europe but also in the far east and throughout the americas or the precolonial americas

but i think this is how uranium speaks to me and I don't know what it's saying but i know that it's built into every single one of us and by US i mean Diné i know somewhere inside of us we carry this sacred relationship with a radioactive sacred chemical that was formed within this universe and i don't know what it means the night before driving to a place like Standing Rock that even before the resistance was a sacred site was land that was seen as sacred was Indigenous Land and meanwhile the entire west coast is hazy from forest fire i'm driving through the midwest and there's blue sky everything is green

last night as i was driving down the freeway i was listening to exit music for a film by radiohead as cicadas chirped along the highway my body doesn't recognize this geography i don't know if my ancestors moved through this land i'm sure some of them must have ancestors of ancestors i miss the desert the smell coming in through the window the land just before it begins to rain hell i even miss portland the columbia river gorge opening up and hot springs and my work i don't know where it's headed i feel scared and exhausted and uncertain of what comes next or what to work on next one part excited but mostly i miss my bed

: hard road montana

the closer i drive toward the pacific northwest back to portland the more the sky becomes hazy from the smoke from forest fires in idaho california even washington and oregon it's such a crazy time to be living right now forest fires are such a common occurrence at this point and have such devastating effects on the landscape that can bear it but the

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human population cannot so it's strange to be in someplace like montana where there is so much land between people

yesterday i drove into billings and walked into a convenience store gas station to refuel and also get some water and when I was checking out at the cash register, this very quirky, middle-aged, bald white dude who was cracking jokes left and right noticed my t-shirt from nalgon body positivity it's a t-shirt that has five different Indigenous feminists on it matriarchs and the shirt reads: Indigenous women resisting colonialism and patriarchy since 1492 – i noticed him read the shirt look it over and as he was handing me my receipt and change he said to me: well, you be careful out there – it was another constant reminder on this trip of the racism embedded into communities across this country white families who move into the middle of nowhere and lay claim over an entire region that they know i think very deep down in their souls they have no right to inhabit they have no right taking on that type of narcissistic responsibility and ownership

yet as I leave the gas station walk out the door and get into the car i see two native women snagging on their white settler boyfriends [laughs] and I'm no different so i don't know i don't know what to think about that i don't know what to say about that i question their safety more than mine i question their mental spiritual and psychic wellbeing more than mine and it makes me think of being in portland and living there being out here in the middle of white america makes me consider all of the Brown bodies that don't feel safe here that don't have a community here

entire towns have been built and constructed to comfort white privilege and entitlement and i think to myself what if Brown people were to intentionally move into these communities and make themselves a part of the community's history so that white people would be forced to see the humanity of the other

but then i realize that is not our responsibility it is not our job to be doing that work and when i realize that i realize that there is no responsibility for me to be in portland on the one hand i feel so completely held and supported by various spaces and institutions and people who have been so grateful and generous and patient and loving and it's allowed me to grow and make really important work but on the other hand there's an entire body of work that exists in a place like new mexico or st. louis or arizona or california

and i think back to a line in the new poem i'm starting that talks about big cities like new york l.a. and chicago as spaces for Queer refuge for sanctuary: in the new Queer america we don't need these cities – we can build our identities wherever we want we carry them on our backs at all times and hopefully throughout our existence in whatever communities

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we find ourselves in we are able to build communities and change the way those communities function and i don't think this is a responsibility that we need to take on i think this is something that just occurs

i think that it's just something that is already prevalent within Queer bodies Brown bodies bodies that have not historically been privileged or entitled or deemed superior i'm reaching the end of this tour in terms of what I set out to do a few weeks ago which was to drive all the way to the east coast and make stops along the way to read the poem i had intended to read in seattle and vancouver but i feel it is fitting for me to take a breath and rest after making the offering at Standing Rock to allow the medicine to generate and for some sort of reckoning and healing and enlightenment to occur mostly for the land and the ancestors and the descendants of that space and also for my community

i'm driving to perform my new poetry that speaks to loss and grief and failure and insecurity and anger and love and connections to people that have been severed in reading the piece it continually blesses those relationships those trials and errors those emotions and moments when i didn't have any clarity moments where i was unable to see beyond my own selfish aims and desires moments where i failed at being a friend lover artist child and human

END

Demian DinéYazhi'



Demian DinéYazhi' (born 1983) is a Portland-based Diné transdisciplinary artist, poet, and curator born to the clans Naasht'ézhí Tábaqáhá (Zuni Clan Water's Edge) & Tódích'í'ńii (Bitter Water). Their practice is a regurgitation of purported Decolonial praxis informed by the over accumulation and exploitative supremacist nature of hetero-cis-gendered communities post colonization. They are a survivor of attempted european genocide, forced assimilation, manipulation, sexual and gender violence, capitalist sabotage, and hypermarginalization in a colonized country that refuses to center their politics and philosophies around the Indigenous Peoples whose Land they occupy and refuse to give back. They live and work in a post-post-apocalyptic world unafraid to fail.

