

The Sun, The Sky, The Earth & The Moon
written by Wintersage Santio

The morning sunlight shines through the blinds, beaming the entire room in warm colors of orange and yellow. I felt the sudden cool breeze as soon as I woke up. My eyes fluttered open from the soft wind blowing away strands of my hair away from my face. The brightness of the room blinded me for a second until I rubbed my eyes and let out a big yawn. I noticed my window was open wide with the curtains pulled away. I don't recall my window being opened last night, unless my yayá? was in my room. Every time I'm with my yayá?, she'd come into my room in the morning to pull the curtains and open the window to wake me up.

“xest sk^wek^wst!” a warm and gentle voice spoke.

I turned my head to see her standing by the doorway. A huge smile crosses her face.

“yayá?!” I smiled back.

I jumped out of bed to hug her. Her long arms wrap around my body. The sound of her heart reminds me of the beating drums at the powwows I always went to with my parents. I look up to see her dark brown eyes, like the grounds of the Earth, stare into mine. Her gray hair is long, thick and braided like my own.

“Today is a good day to go outside. Your dad is waiting on the porch. First, you go get ready and come down to eat breakfast before you both leave for the day. Alright, my dear?”

“unex^w.” I nodded.

When I was a young kid, she used to tell me stories about the past. I always wondered what the world was like before. She told me how our people worked together as a community to help the environment by taking action. Raising awareness of the climate crisis, protesting against the system harming the environment, teaching our people our cultural ways, and protecting our lands. It's a long story but after many years of progress, they restored everything. It's difficult to imagine my yayá?, a very kind woman, once raised in a polluted world. Yet no matter what happened, she still smiled. Her wrinkles are all the times she smiled in her life. Whenever I am with her, I always feel safe and comfortable. She is like the Sun, providing light in darkness.

After a few minutes of changing, I ran downstairs to the kitchen where a single plate of food was left in the middle of the table. Eggs, bacon and toast with huckleberry jam. The same jam she bought from her old friend who sells fresh huckleberries. During the summer, me and my parents head to the mountains to pick them. My yayá? once told me the berries rarely grew when she was my age. Even the animals struggled to survive. The bears were slowly disappearing. Now they grow very well in the summer, enjoyed by all living beings. It's always been a tradition my people do as part of our culture. I knew she went outside with my dad drinking her usual black coffee. I hear their laughter from where I stand in the kitchen. Eventually, I finished eating and joined them outside.

“You ready? I have everything loaded in the truck. Let's go.” My dad said.

Before driving away from the house, my yayá? smiled and waved. I waved back as we drove off into the distance, heading towards the mountains. Everywhere is green, bright and fresh. Montana has never been more alive. That's what my yayá? always says. I mean, I was born and raised here after all but I wasn't here when the environment was different. Yet I've never seen anything more beautiful than here at home. Especially the local towns, decorated with meaningful works of art created by our people. As we drove, I looked out the window on my right, observing the fields of grass and colorful flowers, the bright morning sky painted in blue, purple, orange and red. Along with the pine trees we drive by so quickly it's all a blurry sight. Horses and cows scattered in the fields, deers and elk walking in herds. There are some houses we even pass by. Old friends and relatives. Familiar faces. I saw them all sitting on their own porch, drinking coffee, watching the sun rise from the mountains, and listening to the birds singing their beautiful songs. They all seem satisfied. Then I noticed a dark familiar figure flying in the sky.

“What do you see?” My dad asked.

I squinted my eyes to get a better look.

“An Eagle flying above us.” I responded while watching the magnificent bird.

“Must be your sile? watching over us.”

My sile? was a firefighter back then. There were always wildfires in the summer. The fires would spread through the mountains, destroying almost everything it touches, including the plants we use for medicine. The smoke damaged his lungs. Yet my sile? died just when the climate was getting better. My yayá? was heartbroken but she still had her son. My family planted trees in honor of my sile?, where it's now known to be an eagle's nesting site. Even though my dad never got to know his own dad, he still looks up to him. His spirit is like the sky, endless and free. Something my people look up to and admire.

A few hours passed already. My dad is still playing old, nostalgic powwow songs on the radio. It reminds me of my childhood. Dancing and singing along with my parents. I still have my jingle dress my mom made for me in my closet. His fingers tapped on the steering wheel, matching the rhythm of the drums. He used to be part of a drum group before I was born. My dad was a drummer and my mom was a dancer. It used to be dead empty. These days now, the powwow grounds are surrounded by tall grass and pine trees. We dance with the wind. We sing with the birds. Thinking about those memories made me smile. Suddenly, he stopped the truck. The radio went silent.

“Where are we? Are we here already?” I asked.

“Come out and see.” He said as he got out of the truck.

I followed along. I felt the same breeze blowing through the forest from earlier this morning. The sounds of the trees flowing from the wind echoes through the mountains. The air felt cooler. One smell of fresh air and pine calmed me. I instantly knew we were way high in the mountains. I wasn't familiar with the surroundings though. Until my dad walked towards the edge of a cliff.

“Look down there.”

Carefully walking to the edge of the cliff, standing right beside him, I finally saw what he wanted to show me. The entire place of my home. I can see our house, the neighborhood, the towns, the mountains, the flathead lake, everything I ever knew as home right below me and my dad. In fact, I recall a Polaroid photo my sile? took of the same view when he was alive. This must be where he took the photo. I remember the way the entire place looked before. There were barely any colors showing. The sky was blank. Empty towns, empty fields. Black smoke covered the mountains. The photo showed everything slowly dying.

“You know, our people fought so hard to protect our home, our culture. Including your yayá? and sile?. They did everything they can to provide a future for us, even you. I was taught by my parents and elders. I was taught how to speak Salish, how to hunt, how to bead, how to harvest, how to dance, all the knowledge from our ancestors passed down to me,” He stated while observing the wonderful view, “Now your mom and I pass that knowledge to you. We keep ourselves alive by keeping our culture alive. It healed all living things. What you see in front of you, this is your home, daughter.”

My dad is like the mountains. Tall, strong and mighty. Surrounding the people as a protector. We hiked the mountains for a few more hours until the sun was setting. Eventually, we went back to the truck and drove down from the mountains, listening to the same powwow music earlier ago. We arrived in front of the house. I spotted my mom's car in the driveway. Immediately, I ran inside the house. There she stood in the kitchen with my yayá?, helping her cook dinner.

“xest sčlux”, how was the trip?” She questioned.

It's satisfying to hear her kind, quiet tone. Her gentleness puts me in a good mood. I'm thankful to have a mother like her. My mom is like nature herself, nurturing and peaceful. Giving life in her world. I told her everything we did during the day while eating appetizing stew made with warm potatoes and vegetables from the garden, including the savory deer meat. Everything we eat and grow comes from the ground. Fresh, tasteful, savoring. She also made her good frybread with her own soft hands. Her cooking is just as good as my yayá?'s. My stomach stretched big like my dad's tummy. We spent the night eating, laughing and talking until we became tired. That night, we all peacefully rested.

The Moon rose from the mountains. Bright like the stars that sparkle the night sky. The birds became silent, the deers hid in the tall grass, and the people slept in their beds. Now the coyotes come out of the shadows, howling and laughing in the middle of the night. I am like the Moon. Bringing light in darkness, roaming freely in the sky, looking after life on Earth. My home.