



MYA FLORES

Grade 11

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Remembering From The Water Showed Me Love

My grandmother's hands always smelled like damp earth, weeds, and dirty sheep. Long before I understood the whys and hows of her work. I understood the sound of the water. On my grandma's farm, in the middle of the Navajo reservation, mornings weren't always quiet. Instead, they were filled with a low, rhythmic gurgle from the ditches she carved into the dirt and the sound of her tractor plowing through the fields. As a young girl, I used to follow her around. In the early mornings, my small boots sank into the mud, watching as she moved a rock or pulled out a weed or two to guide the irrigation's flow. She didn't talk much while she worked; she instead showed me with her actions.

Joy Harjo writes that it is possible to understand the world by studying something as small as a leaf, and that it is also possible to travel the globe and learn nothing. I didn't need to travel far to learn. I learned by watching my grandmother, by listening to what she had to say about plants and how to care for other living things. Every day from morning to evening, she'd be in the fields. All the while, I'd swim in the irrigation ditches, not unnoticed, though, as she'd quickly catch me and warn me to shower or my knees would ache for the rest of the week.

Moving to Albuquerque as a teenager was a different kind of experience, the kind that feels empty. I'm an indigenous girl in a city of people who are more Hispanic than Native American. In a new world where I couldn't cuddle up to my grandma and cry about how she couldn't come with me, I had to accept the new cultures and foods I wouldn't have ever found in Farmington. I found out quickly that, in the city, instead of having water easily accessible, it was distributed through pipes and dirty water fountains. Yet, when the river experienced its drought, to me it felt as if a part of New Mexico disappeared with it. Our ancestors were gone, replaced with the dry emptiness of cracked dirt beneath the river.

Months passed, and seeing the Rio Grande fill again wasn't just a "relief," it was a reminder. That water doesn't forget where it belongs; it finds its way back home. In a sense, I slowly realized that I was doing the same thing. Adjusting to my new surroundings and connecting to the other side of my history. In the city, surrounded by concrete and the hum of traffic, I look at a rainstorm and feel my knees ache. Which will always remind me of my home on the reservation, now replaced by the big city. For me, this was the familiarity I needed to feel as if I fit in. To finally know that I belong.

Aldo Leopold once said, "The ignorance of asking 'What good is it?' about nature." In the city, I see ignorance everywhere, from our governors to students, especially from people experiencing homelessness. To them, water is just a utility, something to be used and discarded, not valued or protected. But on the reservation, the water is our livelihood. It is the corn that ended up in our lamb stew, the squash that filled our plates, the fruits my sisters and I would devour in a night. Those meals weren't just "food"; they were the physical result of my grandmother's effort, her unconditional love, and the relationship she had with the earth and us.

She's gone now, but I still hear her when it rains. The sound of water hitting the pavement, rushing through the city drain pipes sounds a lot like the water moving through the dry soil, her laughter when we prepare new meals, and her soft spoken words of endearment with every achievement in our lives. It's a heavy memory, full of grief, but also full of love and warmth. To me, water is just as irreplaceable as her love.