

Las Desaparecidas en Albuquerque

by Janet Ruth

I.

A woman walking her dog found the first bone.
Eleven women and an unborn child,
buried in shallow graves,
were painstakingly exposed
among the sand sage and blowing trash
in a 100-acre patch of desert on the West Mesa —
the largest crime scene in Albuquerque's history.
They began disappearing in 2001,
 unnoticed until 2005,
 at least by anyone "important."
 Nothing happened
until February 2009.

Remnants of lives
 unvalued by the predator, discarded
 like abandoned skeletons of wrecked cars
 rotting along the roadside,
bleeding rust into dust.
Mother Earth wrapped her arms
around their broken bodies.

II.

Who stood up to ask who they were?
 to ask what happened to them?
 In newspaper photos, the victims' eyes
 look out from faces in warm shades of
latte and cinnamon, mahogany and midnight.
Would the response have been different
 if they had looked like me?
 if they had been well-dressed?
 college-educated?
had lived in 2500-square foot homes in the Sandia Heights?

The victims were daughters,
 mothers, sisters, aunts.
They were loved.
Families reported them missing,
 searched for them,
 asked the police over and over,
 "What is being done?" Parents waited,
like silent mothers and grandmothers
 in the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires,
like families in white T-shirts
 emblazoned with photos of their daughters in Ciudad Juárez.

It doesn't just happen "somewhere else"
in Latin America, Africa, Asia,
but here in the land of enchantment, opportunity, and equality.

Newspapers associate them with a "certain lifestyle"—
frequenting the seedy part of town,
working the streets,
using drugs, tied to gangs.

The unspoken theme—
perhaps they took their lives
in their own hands
with their life selections—but
they didn't choose to die this way.

Whatever poor options they chose,
these decisions did not define them.
They laughed, loved their families,
struggled with the same
demons and angels we all face.

We *know* these women —
our own mothers, sisters, daughters, friends—
there but for fate,
the grace of whatever god we worship,
go the women we love.

III.

Meet them —
scraps of information gleaned from newspaper articles —
the victims had names, beautiful, musical names.

Virginia's family tried to find her,
pasted her picture to the cab of their truck.
But the darkness of losing a brother to violence,
a boyfriend to a car accident was too much.

Syllannia was 15 when she ran away
from foster care in Oklahoma.

Michelle dreamed of being a singer,
hugged her dad on the last day he saw her.
Her naked body, wrapped in plastic bags,
embraced her 4-month-old unborn child.

Jamie was 15 when she and her older cousin
Evelyn left for the park.

Both disappeared.

Evelyn liked camping and the outdoors,
taught her daughter how to roller skate.

Monica loved jokes and taking care of babies.
Victoria's mother and stepfather held out hope
that she would be found alive.

Doreen was a high school cheerleader,
loved jewelry and fashionable clothes,
threw extravagant birthday parties for her daughters.

Julie loved chile peppers and jump rope as a child,
worked with Job Corps as a teen.
Veronica was 27 when she went missing.
She had five children.
When Cinnamon didn't place the birthday phone call,
her mom knew something was wrong.

IV.

I stand on that dreadful spot on the West Mesa.
The wind thrashes its way across miles of sand sage to the west
seeking an obstacle, pummels my back,
twists my hair across my face,
maintains a hollow howling of sorrow in my ears.
No evidence of the ghastly discovery
remains. Bits of yellow crime scene tape
lie buried beneath blowing sand.
Plants that love disturbance —
tumbleweed, scorpion weed, broom snakeweed —
hide the scars in the earth where their bones were recovered.

Among the windblown trash, plastic bottles,
splintered glass, discarded televisions and scraps of rug,
seven years later, personal family memorials perch in the rubble —
a small glass jar encases a candle,
two small wicker baskets with white lacey trim,
yellow silk daisies and pink lilies,
topple among the tumbleweeds.
Carefully placed atop a mound of sand and pebbles,
a small plastic mermaid with purple hair,
a shiny turquoise dress,
and a green fishy tail
stares up into the wind.

These tenacious bits of private pain are placeholders
for the unfulfilled promise of an official memorial.
Sand gusts against a neat, respectable
wall of stone surrounding, protecting
—nothing—
a No Trespassing sign warns of prosecution for violations.

V.

If I lie face down in this dirt of memory,
will I hear their screams?

When I rise,
will my shirt be stained with blood?
My heart echoes with whispered
appeals to honor their stories.

The wind is at my back, the abyss behind my eyes,
while the low afternoon sunlight shines on this place of death
and flows on to glint from the windows of Albuquerque,
warm the massifs of the Sandias and the Manzanos.

I am alone here, safe in the light, and yet
 something clenches in my stomach
 when a smiling man
 jogs by on the path,
a passing car slows.

There are more.

 Women are still missing.

 We, all of us, are culpable;

 we, all of us, are witnesses.

We must remember.