

New Mexico *Revisited*

Day One



Inside

40x30x30 = more space than I want to calculate.

How to fill it, occupy it, with just me.

Do I allow the space to dictate the work

Or intimidate me? *A studio any artist*

only dreams of was what I was told.

Imagine

A blank page that size in public

And you, a writer, expected

To fill it--golden.

Would you dare leave

It blank?

Out



In a pebbled corner outside the glass wall of windows that insulate this space, delicately balanced, attached to each other for support, are chamisa. Some would call them weed. Refugee from some other wind, now they rest gracefully.

I envision a room of them pedestaled. Nothing to be sold to a collector or kept for posterity. Seed spread, delicate, beyond issues...deserving a place in the world. In this land of adobe against blue sky, I take a plastic bag, go collect debris, save the flaxen stem.

In my room against tan walls they're barely noticeable. Today I will approach the studio again.

Think BIG! a friend says, but I am a creature of little things, overlooked, broken.

little, I think, little

let space surround



The Wall



They have created a wall--albeit adobe with earthy red wash where it shows and chain link at the back where it doesn't--around the campus. To keep out coyotes, a staff member explains. To keep out homeless riffraff, a student says. Ex-Peace Corps volunteer that I am with another forty years experience between, I believe the riffraff version, despite that the college was founded by Franciscan monks over a century ago. Faith can be diluted over time, or at least the acts that sustain it.

On the other side is the rear of a strip mall where students shop. Those who can--and most do--climb over the wall rather than walk the extra eight blocks around it. A shopping cart tipped on its side and plastic milk crate mark crossings on the shopping center side. No such clutter or convenience disturbs the college wall's symmetry. Those less able find a two-minute walk transformed to twenty.

What of people on the other side? Were they silent? As for the homeless, there is little question. It is a beautiful wall, I admit, Santa Fe Southwest style, an architectural element to enhance the site. Look what can be done with earth and straw and dung. But dung is dung, no matter how you color it.

Climbing the Wall

Balancing on a tipped over shopping cart hoisting myself to the ledge and over the adobe wall with arms that won't sustain my weight and one leg that won't bend far enough and has foam covered rod instead of flesh and muscle, I tell myself that truly I am too old for this.

Faith in myself is what I was told I'd develop by climbing ropes and canyon walls and rappelling down cliffs. I was twenty and foolish enough to let my desire to succeed in evaluators' eyes overcome my fear of heights. I tried, and except for my arms refusing even then to lift my body weight, I did it. I was better going down than up; gravity helped.



Why I took so long to return? Perhaps because I feared what I'd find, that nothing could stay as good as it was. Now that I'm here, I don't want the wall--beautifully curved and colored as it is—to deter me. I'll go beyond the city limits today, the first of February. The walls I find, my own making.

Drink Water



If this were a heart transplant, the doctor would say my body's rejecting it. Foreign environment whose names even are foreign *arroyo - chamisa*. Air thinned blue, the sky, my blood oxygen sucked out of it. All curves--the foothills, the buildings, the walls. The walls can't keep the sky out.

Are my shoulders rounding, my back humping to become landscape? I would be absorbed except the ground is too arid to accept me. I'd imagined a parched, cracked earth, patterned like the geography on the back of my hands. But to crack, there must have first been water. Water is missing here.

Drink lots of water. Powdered dirt that won't even take the track of bobcat on the arroyo slope. Like herbs hanging upside down, the earth has lost its color--what once was ochre, now nondescript. *Drink water.*

Why does the sky without oxygen grow bluer at this altitude and the earth without water lose its red? My heart pumps, my body a bridge between earth and sky.

Day Two

Unsuitable Terrain



Why did I think I was returning to a friendly land? We fought forty years before. Like a lover looking back, I remember the passion, mistaking it for love...

...Was that what we had or was it the land that bound us together? Inhospitable heights, mountains that moved from underfoot, leaving a body off balance, blood thinned blue as sky. I hung on the edges.

I was the youngest; you, the blackest, protective. Why do I hesitate to write of race years later? We were before King, riots and Watts. We were the cusp, the assassination of Kennedy, yet part of his dream.

I came back to see what and why. Perhaps the mistake was coming alone. Perhaps the mistake was coming... ...Altitude sickness. Too blue, too black. Parched earth. How deep is the heart planted?

Low Pressure



First, clouds- not nebula or strata- the large cotton cumulus, tinged with gray, signaled the change, and what should have been rain came as wind, whipping the bleak day like an old woman beating her rugs.

I came back heavier than I left-silt crusted scalp, eyes red rimmed, dust powdered skin sanded like a pine board. Yet, leaning into the wind, my body sent a message: *This is familiar. This is the New Mexico I knew.*

More than architecture, more than sky, my first days blessed by a blue people here paint their gates to keep evil away, this wind's wail and buffet speaks to me.

Outside the City Limits



Away from the galleries and gift shops and strip malls, all camouflaged in acceptable Santa Fe adobe style, outside the city limits I find what I am looking for--chamisa lined dirt roads and dry arroyo beds. Walls wrinkled like the face of the old woman selling katchinas from a cardboard tray in a Santa Fe French creperie

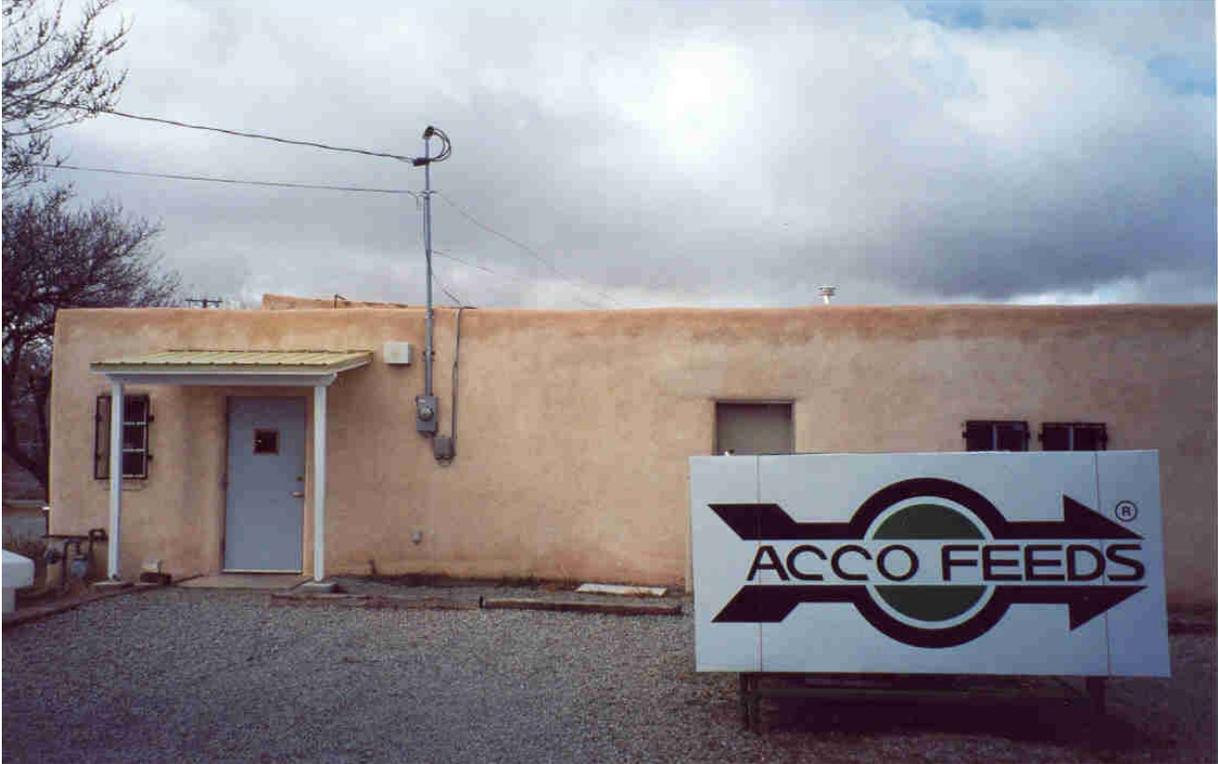
I breathe slower, in rhythm to the earth. My shoulders slump in not quite correct posture, but one mimicking the low hills, like when two people in deep conversation unconsciously mimic the other. Walking, my back assumes the curve, as, ignoring sky, I scour the ground for rock and shards and bone.

At twenty I was not a gatherer. I took unsteadier paths, climbing walls of shale shifting underfoot, setting out to get where I was going. I climbed because I was afraid of climbing. I still am.

The single bobcat print--too thin to cast--leads me to a blue-green scholar's stone and past an odd patch of yellowed millet and its paler yellow dry shocks tinged with earthen red. Beauty enough to fill this day.

Day Three

Feed and Fuel



A low adobe store with a pole barn out back. A small sign pointing the opposite direction from an unmarked door to enter. Once inside an ancient man wrinkled by weather and age greets me as if I'm no stranger, and his son, no longer young, welcomes me and asks how he can help. His English speaks of one born and raised here, but its tone and rhythm hints of Spanish spoken in the home.

This mustached man with eyes I am comfortable meeting sings Merle Haggard right on key, sees no foolishness in my wanting salt bricks clean and unchipped, not for licks but for carving. He doesn't ask my business, but takes his time in the back room to find the best.

Still carrying his tune, he hands them over with good humor and a story of the woman who came in the day before, wearing a tee shirt with an American flag. He was brought up to respect the flag and told her so, and how and why--I suspect with a few bars of Haggard thrown in. We are in accord --and near enough the

same age-- to have learned the proper way to raise and lower and fold the flag each day, making sure it never touched the ground and how to protect it from rain--and lowered half mast, we understood something was serious and sad.

It seems odd now he never mentioned the Pledge, but maybe that went without saying. He's sure that children would behave better if they were taught to respect the flag-- (All the while the old man was overseeing his granddaughter with dark, free-flowing hair standing above on a stepladder, arranging leash cinches meticulously by size.) and here is where we diverged—

And on the war thing with Iraq, we should go over and kill him and anybody agreeing with him...Trust our government. He's as bad or worse than Hitler. If I were young, I'd have enlisted right after what happened in New York. The trouble is we have too many rights....Freedom of speech has gone too far. If you can't support our government, leave the



country....All said with the good spirit of a man who gives voice to his passion. Of course, by now, I wasn't just listening, but partaking in a spirited conversation. All this while he was writing out a receipt and wrapping the bricks so they'll stay clean.

Handing over my change, he says, *I enjoy a good argument!* He comes around the counter and walks me out the door. *A fine car you have. I like the blue.* He smiles. Again, we agree.

Day Eight

Santa Fe Art Institute

February 8, 2003



Dear George,

I am here in a room not so different from the dorm rooms we had at the university in Albuquerque. It is quiet; I feel quite alone in this modern building designed by a Mexican architect with a courtyard for its heart.

This morning my heart is with you. I want to dance once with you--wildly. Or walk holding hands, quiet, like we walked from campus thru Albuquerque, the streets and we both empty, on the day of Kennedy's funeral.

Santa Fe was just a stopping off place on our way to Taos and the Lawrence Ranch. Next week I'll have a car and will go there--not driving off road like our jeep training or horseback in the foothills. But I'll be there, visit the pueblo and walk the ground outside the city limits.

I still feel I am on the outside...and without you to laugh with and to bring me into the circle to dance or stand with me at the perimeter, I am not connected. How must it have been for you then? Even now this is a land of whites, Hispanics, and Indians. Black men are few whatever the recent spate of books and movies on black cowboys. You were handsome, more purple black than the brown you are aging into, and muscular. But your eyes still laugh. I wish you were here laughing with me now.

Trekking old paths, I am tempted to call, tell you to leave D.C. and whomever you are interviewing, come here and be with me. This journey was not meant to be taken alone. We could rent a plane again like when we celebrated the end of our training. And this time you'd be licensed to fly! We were such a pair, part of such a group - Brazil VII, Voluntarios da Paz , 1963-65.

Peace,

The Living

The sand and the curved adobe convince almost that this is a good place to live. A good place, it is. Poverty hides behind the walls. With roads and streets, and towns christened with Hispanic and Indian names and government officials bearing them, too, discrimination seems to be erased.

But notice who tends the college grounds and who teaches there. Who sits under the portal of the Palace selling and who buys. And, if that is too general, who lose their jobs without a day's notice, like the café worker Maria with decades of experience or the custom photo shop developer who redid my order last week without being asked to make it better and whose unmuffled sobs I hear behind the curtain this morning while someone new, the owner I presume, tells me they are accepting no more orders--today is the last day they will be open. The young Hispanic clerk's sample enlargements of her three year old son are missing from the bulletin board.

Where will the fifty-year-old women go in February in Santa Fe except to the unemployment line? And the young mother...? And what of human dignity? You know you do not matter when there is no courtesy of goodbyes.

A beautiful place, but I know with whom I identify. Not the fashionable people artfully tasting their way up Canyon Road. I am still the daughter of a carpenter and a non-union factory worker, the granddaughter of an immigrant coalminer.

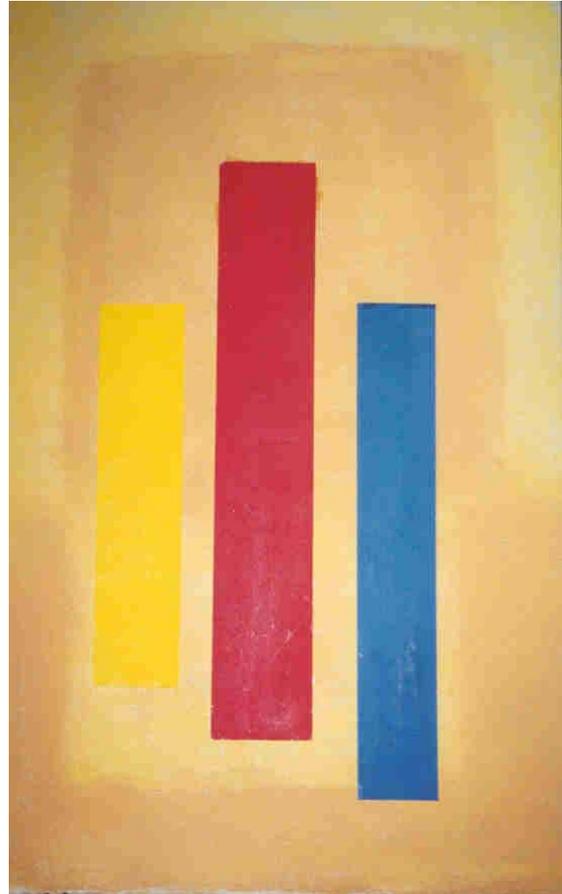
This week the city council will vote on a living minimum wage.



Geometry

We sat in a circle. This, a Women's Leadership meeting where clearly there was a leader and eight women followed her lead, each telling the story of a pivotal moment in her life.

To what end I am not sure, except that there was a recounting of alcoholic fathers and mothers, drug-usage, out-of-wedlock child, cancer, bulimia, the curse of growing up normal in suburbia, early recognition that art could save. How good it was to suffer. Pain = Self Discovery. It was more like an ad for SM. Was it coincidence that most of us were raised Catholic with a measure of Jewish weighing in on one side or the other? No wonder we sit in coach while the boys fly first class.



Perhaps it was a bonding experience. Is it a myth that women bond naturally? But there has to be more than the strength to survive to celebrate. Mentors were mentioned. Values, in passing. Perhaps we should have practiced sitting at the corporate style, solid wooden table with its ornately carved wood and leather chairs--straightening our backbones, just to get the feel of it.

Day Thirteen

Rain

My body has become a part of this landscape more than I imagined. Waking this morning, rested, I discovered the courtyard's flagstone red with rain, the horizon-edge pool overflowing of its own accord, matte silver chairs almost matching the slate sky--even yet blue, and my body quickened.

The skylights, not quite as good as tin, mark the rhythm of the rain. (Last night I dreamed watering plants, a raised bed, with a trickle from the hose. No time to puddle, the sinking in as if pulled from beneath. A dream which would have remained buried except for the rain.)

Yesterday I admired the straw in crumbling adobe. I would like to run my hands over it today. What makes the unfired clay resistant to rain? Or maybe I could play near an arroyo, make mud houses of my own with twig ladders and stick vigas. Greedy with the possibilities, I want a whole pueblo with beehive stoves for baking bread

My urge is to stand in the rain and just be wet.

This is not a drenching downpour, but the finer steady growing kind (why is there no name for it?). No run-off, though cisterns are filling as I write.

Outside a car marks its way with the extra splash of tires turning on pavement's wet. How right the only boots to be had are cowboy. No umbrellas. No raincoats. How right the rain. February 13, Santa Fe.



Our Lady

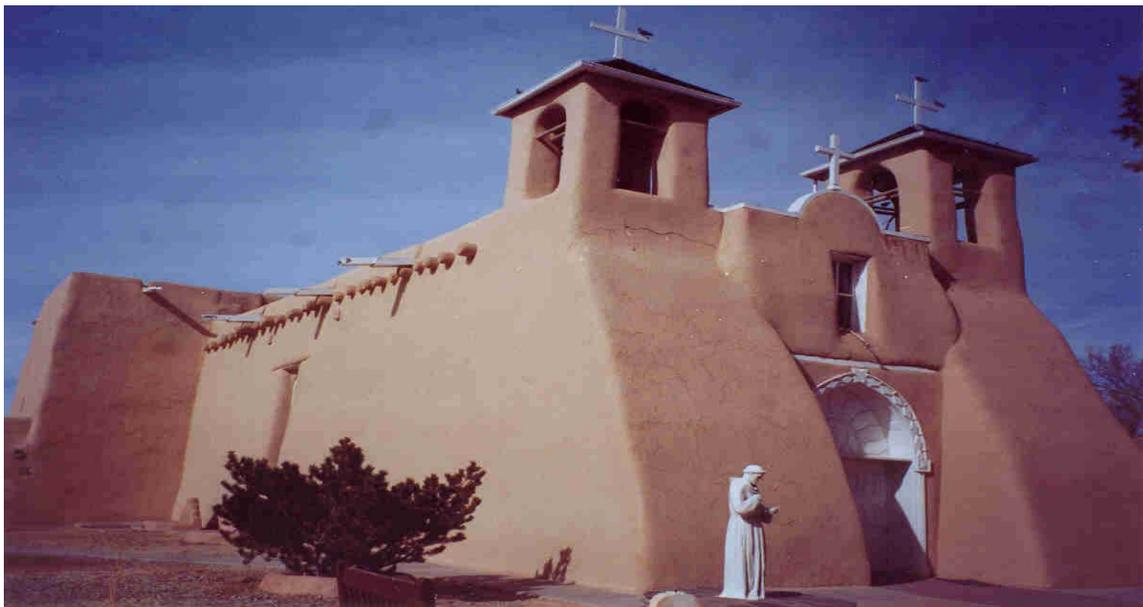


I brought her home with me, Our Lady of Guadalupe radiant, ringed with maize yellow, standing on an angel's wings, robe falling in turquoise folds over a clay red gown. Covered from head to toe, only her face shows, lighter than I would have expected. How can its two dots and slash create so much feeling? The cherub's face upon whose wings she stands elevates her. We know she is no longer earthly.

Her pure colors and simple lines drew my eyes to her. But when I held her, it was my hands that took her to my breast. It might have been the smoothness of the enamel pink. I like to think it was the carver's hands, shaping and sanding, feeling his way. The clerk at St.

Francis de Assisi's gift shop wrote out his name, *Leo Jeantette*, local to Ranchos de Taos.

A blessing from Our Lady on us both.



Evening Pastel



For days I play with pastels, loving their color and their impermanence. Temporary is how I feel. Here time passes, rather than I moving through it. I don't say, *Wait! Let me catch up!*

All day I fuss, float scraps of casein on surfaces I prepared, child simple sketches of yesterday's trip to Taos, Rancho de Taos, more precisely. First, Our Lady of Guadalupe. Then a falling wall. Finally, the church of San Francisco de Assisi and the sky that defines its shape and shadow.

I end with the stonewall outside my slatted window, wet with welcome rain, red and brown, yellow and black, rimmed with golden stubble of winter grass.

Pastel may be too soft, smudges unforgiven. Casein rises like cream to surface. Heavier and lighter, simultaneously.



Day Sixteen

Where Robins Gather



I question, why this grove of trees lining the library walkway? Hundreds of robins gathered, or so it seems. I've felt no need to take a count. They cluster here days bright or gray.

Their song...what first brought them to my notice, vibrant under sun. Muted today as they pick away at winter dried red fruit and berries, which presence I didn't note the other day when they first announced their arrival amid flutter and fluster of settling in and congregating song.

Two flags flap in the wind. A student paces, waiting for the library to open. The weather, indeterminate. Concrete, textured to look like adobe, steel and glass, slate sky, tan

ground--an unnotable day, seemingly with nothing much to sing about. But if I walk among them, the robins will stir to song. Whether in protest or to mark their places or simply to be heard, the sound is sweet.

Day Eighteen

Cobalt 57



What first drew me to the boxes was their wood and their proportion, 22x22x2”, hinged to open flat. I envisioned collage – Cornell would have loved them, the contents secreted. A couple had the lead lining intact. The outside labels were an unexpected bonus: *Radioactive Cobalt - 57* circles. I couldn't resist bringing them to my studio.

For two days I lived with them, an uneasy collaboration. *Radioactive at box edges* a larger black box warned. *Amerash* and *Dupont-Merck Radiopharmaceutical Cobalt-57*. Even placed on a table, ready for cleaning, I stopped to check on the Web. *For gamma cameras, 270 days half-life* - the numbers didn't reassure. What about the other half?

And then the way one thing leads to another, I read *Cobalt-57, Experiments added to B-12* -and a footnote, a page listing *human experimentation with radioactive materials, 1960's*, referring to a federal government agency. I tried to access it and was not surprised to find it blocked, a note saying it was my computer's failure to link. I know those kind of links, echoes of another presidency, another time, and I wondered will this attempt plus the Cobalt-57 hits be tracked?

The numbered boxes are gone. Too dangerous, I decided. Cobalt: The blue that kills. Pure, rich, the color of my coffee cup. The blue that costs so much painters die for it.



Cemetery Site

On the northern edge of Taos between Highway 285 and the Pueblo road behind a wire fence of no particular distinction except disrepair lies a cemetery with names like Torres and Oliphant and Garcia. Even inside, graves are fenced in groups by family.

Here, fences rise, ornate wrought iron next to dog pen wire, but nearly all are distinguished by flowers. Plastic and silk bouquets run riot; gravestones obscured; fences erased. No zoning ordinances forbid families from honoring the dead.

Here, Matisse would paint.



Dinner Party



Striped cushions.

Painted pottery and blue-rimmed glasses.

Turkey, tuna, beef and beans. Red salsa and tortillas.

Kaluha and wine in bottles with yellow kangaroos.

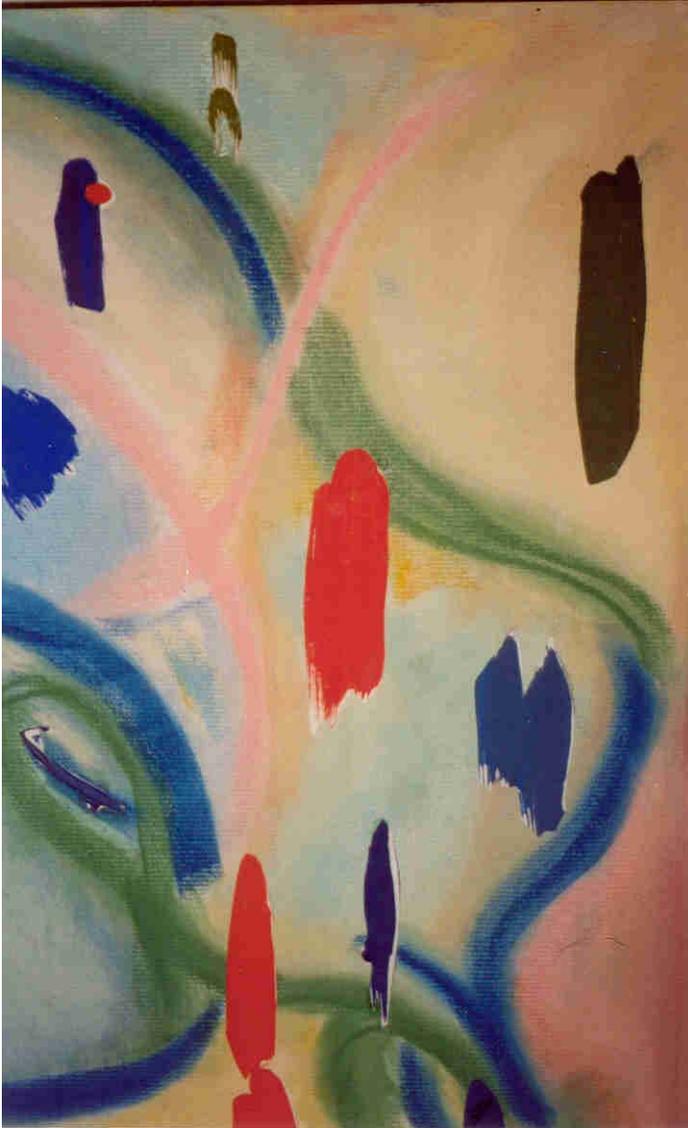
Classy Callas, Astrud Gilberto from Brazil, and somebody Allen who lives in El Paso.

Props for nine people seated companionably close.

The kind of dinner where you sit down and three hours have passed

by the time you take the last bites of fresh pineapple and double-dare chocolate cake.

Letting Down



Stripping off my bra
and dumping it in the bathroom trash
may be the best thing
I do all day.
Why willingly wear
a harness -
so that I don't jiggle
seductively or unbecomingly?
Frankly, I like to be
seductive - at least once more
before sixty. Unbecoming -
well, I suppose that is
what I'm doing now.
So why not take advantage of age?
Undo all the hooks and eyes -
Eyes ahead.
Add a bit of bounce
to my walk
along the way.

Day Nineteen

Landscape



The fire ten feet from my door left charred hummocks and black grass laid in waves as if cut by a scythe. It is this death that urges me to re-create the New Mexican landscape.

From there I work backward, gathering the seed grasses left standing, then the sticky brush of tumbleweed. I have six glass slots to fill (and on the seventh day she rested). I choose pebbles that pave the earth and the red clay earth, as well. Juniper will complete the creation. I snip foliage full with blue berries.

Returning, I pass rows of dormant roses, orange hearts attesting to last summer. The leaves are gone, but dried heads hold on. These ordered transplants have no place in my piece, yet I harvest all. The roses of winter, an Homage to Love, preserved in three bottomless, clear glass cylinders: Lost , Unrequited, Remembered.

Ten Thousand Waves

Naked in a wooden tub

Bubbling

With ordinary talk

At 6000 feet

Serene

Surrounded by stick

And stars, satellites,

Planets.



fence

Venus bright

30 degree night

Ten thousand waves

And one.

Day Twenty-one

An Afternoon

I want to believe I've found the scapula of a dinosaur, a small coelophysis, since he was the major inhabitant of what O'Keefe called the Red Hills.

I had assumed artistic license accounted for the yellow and purple in her paintings, but those colors striate the wind- chiseled rock, which itself is more sand than stone.

The fossil bone could be sister to the one I unearthed near a spring in Northern Michigan. The shape is that similar, but the northern one is white and heavier. But here I found just one "bone".

My leather knapsack is heavy with what might be carved animals and miniature paint pots and those purple and yellow and red rocks whose pigment I will grind and screen.

I never walked the hiking trails to the Boxed Canyon or Mesa. I did stroke the thick skin of a majestic dead tree and lamented its passing.

Silent, time wrapped itself around me. I spent the afternoon and traveled twenty yards and millions of years.



The Paint Waits; The Stones Talk.



I make a ritual of opening my leather knapsack: Prepare a table, spread the newspaper, fill a small bucket with water. One at a time I take out yesterday's gleanings and try to recall a paleontology map. Failing that, I close my eyes to see the cliffs and the order of their lines...red, purple, yellow. I separate the sand stones by color and make a separate stack for the mixed yellow/red. I think time is not so neatly divided as we pretend. Past, present, future blends.

Certain stones I set aside: The red angel, the one who supports Our Lady of Guadalupe; others which look and feel like they have been shaped deliberately -- no accident of nature. These gathered in one spot, an ancient treasure trove. And last, what I found last, a scapula shaped stone, my dinosaur bone. There is one more I carried separately, a stone shaped for a wall, judging by the flatness of both sides, 3' x 10 x 4", smooth and heavy. All day I rub stones against each other, strain the granules to use for pigment in my paint.

At least that is what I think I am doing until I notice how shapes emerge from the larger stones - the curve of a raccoon, bird with beak tucked into wing, a miniature mountain, all capable of being cupped in the palm of my hand.

Day Twenty-four

Greeting the Living



Perhaps the reason I spoke my mother's name when the priest asked for other intentions of the Mass was because there at the church in the pueblo of San Ildefonso the dead are not separated off in a fenced corral to be visited on holidays or anniversaries - or not at all. Here the graves of the dead line the walk to the front door. They are the churchyard. Nor are they flat and swept clean like the plaza beyond the low adobe wall.

Each grave rises in greeting, its mound marked with a cross of stone reaching from head to toe. Red, blue, yellow plastic flowers pay tribute, too. And so when I walked past them and recalled that this time last year, I flew home to see my mother for the last time, she stayed with me inside the church throughout the Mass.

I recognized Maria Martinez's descendents in the pews; the photographs of her daughter and son-in-law on a striped blanket covering the table with their pottery black bear and candle holder. The vessels holding the Body and Blood of Christ, Native American. The bleeding Crucifix, statues and arches, Hispanic. The congregants, from the pueblo and outsider whites, like me. The collection baskets far from full.

Though it had been years since you had attended Mass, Mother, you would have liked it here. Before communion, yours was the last name said, *Frances Goodrich*, and it echoed in the adobe, its sound still there far from Michigan, but reaching you, I pray.

Sunday Afternoon at Santa Clara Pueblo



When the herd of cattle thundered into the plaza, the memory of a yearling heifer bearing down and hoofs trampling me at a cattle auction years before propelled me to a niche of a wall - the very strategy that was my downfall the time before. I worked my way into a pueblo shop and watched as two young girls waved arms in delight and moved the heifers.

In fact, this is Santa Clara, not Pamplona and the running of the bulls. Nor am I Hemingway. Nonetheless, I was an impressive coward, and while the dust settled and the cattle milled, the shop owner telephoned I presumed the owners of the cows. But no, he called next door to warn the woman there that the cattle had defecated near her front door and someone might track it in....

When I left, she was there with broom and dustpan. The plaza was empty but for the two girls climbing a pile of fallen adobe bricks like the conquering heroes that they were.

Epilogue

Almost Spring

A lone crow calls...

I want the early robin. The one seed-bobbing in roadside thickets for last year's leftovers to tide her over until earthworms rise above the thawed frost line. Was this eastern robin heartier than her western cousins I saw weeks ago arriving en masse, self-celebratory with song?

Here with snow slipping back to wooded shadow her approach is cautious. Natural for a loner used to making her own way. Oh, she will mate, selectively after skunk cabbage time. Today I surprised my grown children by making reservations to go west to Oregon to see my father. My motives are not pure—not entirely to ease my conscience after his death, nor to please him before it—or just to set



an example for my son and daughter that blood is blood, that I am he, even though I can count on one hand the times I've seen him since he left home a half century ago. This is beyond reason. What needs to be done. I place my trust in western robins and raven and river rocks for company.