

Chamisa: A Journal of Literary, Performance, and Visual Arts of the Greater Southwest

Volume 1
Issue 1 *Identity, Culture, and Art in New Mexico*

Article 31

2021

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Recommended Citation

Rottschafer, Shelli L. PhD. "Let's Sing For Your Granma." *Chamisa: A Journal of Literary, Performance, and Visual Arts of the Greater Southwest* 1, 1 (2021). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/chamisa/vol1/iss1/31>

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Let's Sing for Your Granma

by Shelli Rottschafer, Ph.D.

Johona took Granma Nola into the doctor today. Rather than walk back into the kitchen to begin a pot of coffee on the wood burning stove, Grandpa Tony sits outside humming sadly to the dog. He waits for Ash, his grandson, to roll from the couch, run his fingers through his hair and scratch the crust from the corners of his eyes. Ashkíi sleeps on the sofa, wrapped in an army surplus blanket. That has become his usual spot since he has returned from Afghanistan.

Ash knows it is time. Time to do something other than what he is doing now, which isn't much. But, with the lockdown in place, he doesn't have a choice other than to keep doing what has become his routine. Wake. Plant his feet on the cold linoleum floor. Walk around the couch—past the metal folding table used as the dining-room table—pick up a split piñon log, open the cast iron swinging door to the stove, and rekindle the morning fire. Ash fills the Stanley coffee pot from the purified water jug on the counter. He sets the metal filter in place, loads Folger's grounds, and adds an extra tablespoon to strengthen the brew.

Lobo rises from Grandpa's side to scratch the screen door. He wants his breakfast. The dog runs like clockwork. He is more consistent than any alarm.

“Grandpa, what do you want with your scrambled eggs? Jimmy Dean or Oscar Mayer?”

Ash opens the door to the refrigerator and mumbles as he sifts through its innards. “For how many people eat bacon, Oscar Mayer must be a millionaire.”

Ashkíi lays a slab on the metal table; from the cupboard he slides a skillet from the shelf. Cast iron meets cast iron as he swings the heavy weight onto the stove. The bang of the pan with the burner echoes the bang of the screen door as Grandpa Tony steps into the house.

“So it's to be a house of bachelors this morning. Ash, Lobo, and Oscar Mayer.” Upon hearing his name, the dog whines from outside the screen.

Ash shouts toward the door. “Don't worry Lobo. You won't be forgotten. I will save you some bacon grease for your kibble.”

“That dog is spoiled. I thought Johona was bad. But, since you've gotten home Lobo has put on weight. He can't run the sheep like he used to.” Commenting upon the triviality of everyday is easier for Shicheii than verbally acknowledging that his partner of fifty-one years had left for the emergency room.

After the meal, breakfast dishes are pushed to the side, and the men sit in silence. They are the quiet ones who opt to eavesdrop on Johona and Shimá sání's conversations that inform them of the usual

goings-on. Comfortable with their pause, Ash picks up the dishes, sets one in the tub to soak, and then scoops a cup of kibble onto the other from the bin next to the door. As the door squeaks open, Lobo comes from under the stoop and sits at Ash's feet as he places the dish on the ground.

"I'm going over to Win's. I'll do the dishes later."

Grandpa nods in answer and says, "You know, you'd make a good short order cook at Earl's. You should ask Yanaha about it. She's a waitress there right?"

Ash sniffs the air and juts out his chin in the affirmative, a trait he has learned from his shicheii. "I'll think about it. She told me that hours are few over there. Everyone is cut back because of the COVID. Even she is just manning the door, ringing people up, and bringing them their take-out orders. Mostly green chile cheese burgers or Frito pies to go."

"Ya, but you make a mean burger Ashkíí, just like your Granma."

Ash turns behind the house directing his feet toward the hogan that once was the family home. The octagonal log constructed and adobe chinked house is empty except for storage. Granma Nola keeps the dirt floor raked bare and lines one wall with bins of meal for her animals. Shelving units hold canned peaches and preserved jam. Others are a catchall of Grandpa Tony's discarded tools or dissected car parts waiting to be used in the untold future. It is clear whose side of the hogan is whose.

Ashkíí enters the hogan, lifts a bin, and scoops out meal into an old Folger's coffee can. He walks around to a ramada that shades a corral of sheep. They start bleating once they see the can. Ash pours the meal into a cradle, and then thins out a half bale of hay on top. The sheep trot over and the grey one with the clear-blue blind eye nudges in first. She is their toughest and oldest ewe. The one that does not tolerate Lobo's nips to keep her in pasture and kicks indiscriminately whether it is Ashkíí or the canine who meets her blow.

Ash finishes the morning chores so that Shicheii can sit on the deck in the shade. The dog instinctually leans into Grandpa Tony's thigh, letting Shicheii know he is not alone. Ashkíí knows that Grandpa Tony worked for a long time. When Shicheii was young, he went military too. He was in Korea. When he came back, he returned to sheep herding like his father before him. He had seen enough of the outside world to realize he was content with the traditional life he thought he left behind.

When Ashkíí and Johona were real little, Grandpa Tony and Shimá sání took them in once their parents died. Their parents' pickup truck had been hit head on by a drunk driver returning to Kayenta on Highway 264. They had gone to the Inter-tribal Ceremonial to sell Navajo tacos and *sopapillas* from their auntie's stand during the rodeo and Pow Wow. Unfortunately, they never made their way home that August sundown from Red Rock State Park. The other driver swerved into their lane as he leaned down to grab another cold one.

Shimá sání and Shicheii tried to instill Ash with tradition. Yet, Ash resented that his parents were gone. They died way too young. Johona was more receptive. She is younger. But while in high school, he started hanging out with the wrong crowd. After his first year at Gallup High School, and being caught one too many times with pot, Grandpa Tony and Granma Nola signed him up to attend Rehoboth Christian School. Ash was not having any of it.

Although Rehoboth tries to right the wrongs of its boarding school past, their reputation remains. Because of their past, the school helped create a lost generation of elders who no longer believed in the Beauty Way, couldn't speak Navajo, and had assimilated into becoming a stereotypical "apple." Ash wanted nothing to do with appearing red on the outside, but white on the inside. Ashkíí was surprised his Diné grandparents would want him to go to Rehoboth, but it was clear they were at their wit's end.

Ash paid his penance for two years. Grandpa Tony drove him to the bus stop every morning in the dark, before the sun was up. The bus took him to school, along I-40. He sat in class bored out of his mind. His only outlet was playing ball. Ash played basketball in the gym during Phys Ed. He played hoops outside in the wind before the bus drove the rest of those who lived off Highway 491 home. Ashkíí played Rez Ball, on an unpainted backboard with a metal drum lip for a net, just before walking down the dirt road to his Shimá sání and Shicheii's trailer. That was high school, until one day, he got caught for smoking pot beyond the dumpsters instead of playing hoops before the bus home. This time, it was his last strike because of his previous history before attending Rehoboth.

As a result, Ash finished at Gallup High School, where he had begun. His sentence was to occupy a desk in Mr. B, the Physics teacher's study hall. Mr. B was okay. A tall bilagáana, not from New Mexico originally, but who had married a local nurse and had chosen to stay. Mr. B gave subtle advice, making you think you were making the decision, but leading you in a good direction. He also turned a blind eye to the fact that Ash mostly wanted to be in his study hall because Yanaha Nez went to study.

Yanaha is smart. She studied Physics; she could do stuff like that. Ash on the other hand, did not get all those numbers. Yanaha went to the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. Well, at least for a while; and then things happened. Now she's back in Gallup, waiting tables at Earl's like her mom did, and taking care of her kid Jonny.

Ashkíí's education was the Army. Mr. B had tried to dissuade him from that.

"Ash, why are you going to fight a white man's war. There are so many other things you can do."

But, Grandpa Tony said signing up for the Army was an admirable thing; especially for those who needed some discipline. Shicheii explained, "If we can't be warriors for our own people, because there are no more wars to fight, then we could fight for our other Nation, the United States of America." He hoped Ash would come home changed, a warrior hero. Honored and respected, like Grandpa was after Korea.

Well, Ash's war in Afghanistan was not his Shicheii's war in Korea. Instead he learned to question, "Why should brown people be fighting other brown people?" They were fighting a settlers' war. This time to be colonized in the name of new gods which were money and oil.

These are the questions Ash has concluded with in hindsight. He now can articulate them after talking things through with Win. Winslow Wilson is the Chees next door neighbor, who is nearly as old as Ash's grandfather, yet has a really different perspective on things.

Ash stands outside Win's trailer door and claps loudly three times. That is the way he announces he is there, instead of walking up to the door rapping loudly, like he used to. COVID has changed a lot of things. You cannot just go over with a six-pack of Tecate in hand to sit on someone's couch and watch basketball. One, the Lobos are playing the Cougars now. The University of New Mexico and Brigham Young University are both shut down, gone on-line, and no sports. Same for the L.A. Lakers.

And, the State of New Mexico has made it really clear, everyone is supposed to be social distancing. It is hard here, on the Rez. People live multi-generationally in their houses. Like Shimá sání, Shicheii, Ash, and Jo. Diné live communally, helping each other out; like Ashkíí going over to Win's to make sure everything is alright.

But really, it is the other way around. Winslow is the one helping Ash come out of the silence where Afghanistan has put him. Ashkíí does not talk about his time over there. What happened only comes out in random statements like the fact that he admitted to Yanaha that he cannot really sleep. He just tosses and turns on the couch. His nightmares wake him and the only comfort he has is to go outside, in the cold, and look up at the night sky until the dog comes up to the deck from under the stoop. What reminds Ashkíí that he is here, and not there, is the warmth of Lobo's skin and how his fingers bury through the mats behind Lobo's ears until Ash finds the sweet spot that makes Lobo's hindleg twitch.

Today, Win comes out with a Dr. Pepper in hand. He sits on his front stoop as Ash leans on the picnic table out front. They talk to each other lowly, making sure they maintain their distance.

"I saw Jo drive into town today with your Granma."

"Ya, her cough got bad. Johona took her to the hospital. She thinks Shimá sání will have to stay."

"That's hard. Jo probably feels like she is leaving her behind, all alone. But your Granma. She's a strong woman. She knows Tony, and you, and Johona are praying for her. Your thoughts, that energy. That's what makes her strong."

Ash nods, not sure what to say. He rests his chin on the palms of his hands, his elbows bowed as they rest on his thighs. He is bent in pain.

Ash mutters; “I remember, when I was over there. It reminded me of home. How it looked. Same landscape. Rocks. Red earth. Small withered trees. But, it didn’t smell the same. It didn’t have the herbal scent of piñon. It didn’t have the iron metallic aroma like before a curtain of monsoon rains hit. It wasn’t the same, even though it looked similar.”

“That was Coyote trying to work it out in your brain for you. He is always the constant trickster. Don’t believe that inverted reality. Shed it. You are here now. You are stronger than you feel. And because you are, you need to be a warrior. A warrior for Jo, for your Granma.”

Win wonders if his words are landing where they need to. He understands Ashkíí’s need for a sense of place, something that is tangible and rooted. He craved a sense of belonging, too, when he was in Vietnam.

Drafted in 1967, Private Winslow Wilson endured basic training at Fort Pendleton in California. One morning during roll, there was a call for chaplain volunteers. The guy behind Win whispered to raise his hand, and reassured him that he would tell him why later. With this advice Win slowly raised his hand. The whisperer had knowledge that a chaplain’s assistant had a lower chance of getting shot.

What Winslow didn’t realize in becoming a chaplain’s assistant, was that one of his main duties would be to write home to all of the families of the soldiers who had died. And so began Win’s training. Training to type. Training to be succinct. Training to divorce yourself from emotion. Training to be there in body, but to allow his mind to travel, back to where he really belonged.

So, Winslow practiced his typing. The ding, ding, ding, pah-ching of the keys hitting the paper. Coming to the end of a page, resounding with a bell, and whisked back to the left-hand side. This rhythm, over and over again created a perfect mantra. A prayer that led him back to the drumming circles at the Ceremonial Pow Wow.

At night, Win would take his portable typewriter back to the barracks to practice. Tóhajilee.... Kinlichee.... Chinle.... Tsaile....

The soldier in the bunk next to him grew tired of the ding, ding, ding, pah-ching of his typing.

“What the fuck?” He looked down at the letters Winslow punched onto the paper. “What’s this nonsense? Lukachukai.... Teec Nos Pos.... Dennehotso.... Kayenta....

“I’m practicing.”

“But why are you practicing this? Quit making up nonsense words,” the private said.

Winslow did not respond. He continued typing. These weren’t merely words, they were places. They were his places. Shonto.... Moenkopi.... Wupatki.... Chi Chil tah....

By practicing this rhythm, Win meditated. By practicing, he created ceremony. He respected the warriors that came before him and those that were then in battle. He remembered those people he

typed for in Vietnam. He knew his writing, “We regret to inform...” perfectly nailed the coffin shut. And he feels for those, like Ashkíí who are still fighting their battles.

This practice is why Ash comes to Winslow now. Win is respected. Some would call him a Medicine Man, because he follows the Beauty Way.

Winslow looks across the yard to Ashkíí seated at the picnic table. Ash has taken out his cell phone, and is hen pecking away. Win thinks to himself, “These kids these days. None of them know how to type. None of them know how to talk. They just sit with their heads bowed.”

“Ashkíí, let’s do this the right way. Let’s sing for your Granma.”

Win walks back through the door of his house, and comes back outside with his cowhide stretched drum and stick. He sits back on the porch, and Ashkíí straightens his body upright to look at Winslow.

Drumming the rhythms, Win begins the beat. It is the same ding, ding, ding but instead of the pah-ching, it is a deeper thud as he wails the stick against the hide. Ash taps out the same rhythm with his fingers along the bench of the picnic table. They both begin their lament. “Yah-ta-hey... Ya’ `át` ééh,” and repeat themselves; until Lobo hides under the Chees’ porch.

Shelli Rottschafer completed her doctorate at the University of New Mexico in Latin American Contemporary Literature (2005). Since 2006, Rottschafer has taught at Aquinas College, a small liberal arts college in Grand Rapids, Michigan. She is a Professor of Spanish and teaches Spanish Language, Chicanx and Latinx Literature, and Film and Gender Studies. She also has published two collaborative poetry Chapbooks with Swimming with Elephants Publishing out of Albuquerque, New Mexico. Rottschafer has published Place-based Creative Nonfiction in *Wanderlust Journal of Travel Essays*. Her poem, “My Mother Had” was published in *Hebraria 3.0*. Her novella, *Stay North* from Atmosphere Press in Austin, Texas is forthcoming (2021). Her short story, “Let’s Sing For Your Granma” demonstrates that creativity heals. The story follows Ash, a veteran who returned home to Gallup on the Navajo Reservation. His readaptation to civilian life is met with the challenge when his grandmother is hospitalized for COVID-19. He learns to sing once again, for himself, for his elders, for his community.