

Native Ways

Category: Poems

written by Jan Jahner | November 24, 2017

Jan Jahner ~

They came up from the center of the earth, The People
where sky speaks to corn,
speaks to cottonwoods, to runoff in the wash.
Living beneath black-slashed canyon walls
home to sheep and weavers.
He is one of them, my patient
one of the ancients; leathery face carved and quiet
she is his daughter, fingers on the covers,
ready should he wake.

He is dying and we can't say it.
Soft sounds unknown to me, their language of wind, cottonwood and wool
in the center of this circle is knowing and not saying
the medicines continue
but we turn, bathe, suction and weave the fibers close.

Our blankets now of time
and timing
medicines less strong than his walk in Beauty
our bedside wait the weight of ages
as he wanders his way home.

About the poet:

"With thirty-four years of nursing experience, primarily in end-of-life care, I continue to find intrigue in the family encounter. I sought out chaplaincy training in order to better enter the spiritual dimension of serious illness, and I am now on faculty for the Being with Dying training offered at the Upaya Institute and Zen Center, in Santa Fe. I've lived either on the edge of town or in the surrounding countryside most of my life. Landscape and nature offer a particular guidance, as do the Native and Hispanic families of New Mexico."

About the poem:

"In my role as a palliative-care nurse at the hospital in Santa Fe, I routinely encounter Native people who are seriously ill. I've been awed by their reverence for life, their dedication and their respect for elders. The families are usually large, and usually present; one needs to round up enough chairs. Blankets from home are likely tucked about the loved one.

"This poem was inspired by a family who maintained a hopeful stance in the face of imminent death and taught me about 'coming alongside' their hope. I'd just returned from Canyon de Chelly, a Navajo holy place that can only be

entered in the presence of a Native guide. We'd visited a weaver who pursued her entire livelihood deep within that canyon, completely off the grid. The lessons the patient's family taught me felt like the wool on her loom: grown, spun, dyed and woven all in the same place."

Poetry editors:

Johanna Shapiro and Judy Schaefer