

L. M. Lopez

Ahalani

Ahalani was the word she first knew for beautiful. Like the hills folded in soft pleats around the bridge. Beautiful as the hushed breathing of the children asleep on the slashed gray upholstery and yellowed ticking that was the back seat of the car. Beautiful as the rainbow arching over the hills and pouring into the water tank of Woman Who Lives On the Reservation and Off.

It was a good day. She could remember the tales of the old men. Their faces smeared with grease and shining around the fire at night, when they laughed and sang and spoke about the past. They told about the mornings when they were young men breaking camp. Their ponies would snort steam and dance nervously in makeshift pens. Horses, they said, can smell blood, and they weep when they are afraid. It is a good day, they would tell each other, if the sun was full in rising and the sky pure. It is a good day, they would call to one another, as they slipped blankets on their trembling mounts and sheathed their knives. It is a good day to die.

It felt fine to drive the old car over and over across the curved bridge. She drove poorly. Gears groaned against metal. The ancient Buick bucked and sputtered. But when she sped over the highest slope of the bridge and coasted swiftly down its swaying grade, it was almost like falling in a dream.

She turned the car around in the field near the ditch edge. Deep in the ruts dug by the tires, she spun the steering wheel and aimed back up the bumpy hill and forced the car up over the bridge again.

Ahalani had been her brother's name for her. It had been a joke meant to tease her about her pitted cheeks and sunken eyes. Ahalani, bring me water. Ahalani, come with me to town.

She would hitchhike to town with him, often catching a ride on the back of a pickup. They would arrive on the main street dusty and windblown. Ahalani, take care of me, her brother would ask before slipping into the cool darkness of the Silver Hat. Watch out for me.

Once a photographer from the city had watched her brother leaping from a truck bed and rolling into the dirt road. He had been struck by the young man's erect posture and fierce good looks. He jogged after Ahalani and her brother as they headed for the Silver Hat, his camera bouncing against his chest. He asked courteously if they would allow some pictures. Ahalani's brother shrugged.

The photographer used many rolls, sending the yellow film boxes tumbling in the wind as he dropped them in his excitement. He took nearly a hundred pictures, it seemed to Ahalani. She lost count as she sat on the curb, watching. Finally brother said, Ahalani, your turn. She stood and smiled, but the photographer hesitated. She could see his eyes, impatient, turned inward. At last the black eye of the camera winked. When the film was developed, he sold the pictures to a magazine and sent brother a small check, along with the print of her photograph. In it, she stood pigeon-toed, her skirt too long and her face twisted by shadows.

She would walk slowly through the main street, stepping over the wobbling knees of the drunks sitting on the sidewalk. She would stare avidly into curio shops and western wear stores, ignoring the distorted reflection of her eager face in the plate glass.

Once a gritty wind had lashed at her bare legs and face, driving her into a drugstore. She wandered to a wire rack with pockets that held magazines. She pulled one out and flipped its glossy pages. She saw soft lips, limpid eyes, smooth cheeks and brows. None of it connected. There was nothing for her in it. She fanned through the pages again. The print etched mysteriously and forbiddingly like twisted bits of wire. The druggist stepped out of his booth and warned her not to loiter. She dropped the magazine to the floor and pushed herself out into the wind again.

The children rolled from one door handle to the other, their mouths open and eyelids squeezed shut. They had eaten sacks of hard candy at the dance the night before and loose black strands of hair stuck to their cheeks. She glanced at them in the mirror and thought to wake them. She thought she should put them off on the road.

"Let me keep the children," her mother had offered. She had approached stealthily from behind and startled her daughter.

"I can take them," she said, without looking at the old woman.

"They are so tired. Poor little ones."

"They go with me."

Who would love them, she wondered, their father, strapping their thin legs when they giggled? She cringed, rubbing her tongue over a broken tooth. Her mother, faded and weak as a ghost, could she give them care? The old woman had barely the strength to push the food into her sunken lips since her son drowned, drunk and beaten, in a puddle behind the Silver Hat. Ahalani, watch out for me.

Who would love these children with their brown bland faces?

"They go with me."

She turned the car around again at the other side of the bridge. She glanced at the gas gauge. The needle wavered past empty. She felt afraid for a moment, then brave. Ahalani. The old car chugged up to the high part of the bridge. With her eyes wide open and unafraid, she yanked the wheel in a sharp circle. The brittle railing made a splintery noise, then she heard the sound of glass popping. It was exactly like falling in a dream.