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Caitlin A. Piserchia

University of Montana - Missoula, capiserchia@gmail.com

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Dibe' Bikee' Deya: Following Sheep in Coal Country

Morning

I wake up at 6:30 AM to darkness in the Navajo Nation, roll to cold concrete floor, slip on shoes, kneel in front of the cast iron stove. This morning I light some brambles on the third try. Twigs in a lean-to on top, quickly, some wood chips thrown in. I watched Mable, elderly matriarch of the Benally family, do this before, tossing pieces in, the fire igniting at once.

Inhale. Exhale. The twigs catch. I prop up a larger log, position some smaller branches directly over the fire. I close the stove door, turn the knob to let in air — the fire is blazing now.

The fire grows quickly now and inside temperature increases to sauna levels. I go from shivering to sweating in half an hour.

There's some yellow on the horizon when I go out to dump the ash.

Return, bring potatoes and eggs from the cool outer room, return, stoke the fire. The donkey is awake now. The sun rises. The water on the stovetop rises in a boil. With lukewarm water in a blue basin, I kneel outside the cabin and splash my face.

The sun is two fingers above the horizon when I move on to the sheep.

The Family and the Visitors

Danny Blackgoat: son of Roberta Blackgoat, internationally-recognized Navajo activist, passing through the area on his way to a conference with Fern

Mable Benally: matriarch, owner of the sheep, former weaver

Daniel Benally: husband of Mable, retired mine employee

John: son of Mable

Fern: daughter of Mable, activist and chapter house representative

Norman: son of Mable, activist

Caitlin: Anglo college student, volunteer with Black Mesa Indigenous Support, “shepherd,” doesn’t speak Dineh

54 sheep: off-white sage-grazers, descended from Mable’s family herd

33 goats: white grazers, especially fond of juniper and cacti, descended from

Daniel’s family herd, lumped under the umbrella term “sheep” in common parlance

Black Mesa

Black Mesa, undergirded by coal, rises out of a semi-arid grassland. Part of the Colorado Plateau in “Arizona,” the mesa is a ragged landscape of yellows, reds, and browns. Sage and cacti claim the canyons, and pinyon and juniper grow on the hills. This is Dinetah, Navajoland.

Black Mesa is where Daniel Benally’s family has herded sheep for generations, and it’s also the site of Peabody Energy’s Black Mesa Mine. Until

Black Mesa Mine closed indefinitely in 2005, this area was home to two of the most productive coal mines in the country, operational since 1964. Until 2005, Black Mesa was also known for hosting the world's first coal slurry pipeline, a high pressure pipeline that transported pulverized coal and water from the Navajo aquifer through 243 miles of desert, to Laughlin, Nevada. There the coal was separated out and used to power the Mohave Generating Station, which in turn powered Las Vegas.

Black Mesa is also the locus of the Hopi-Navajo land dispute, now widely considered a made-up conflict created by politicians and lawyers hoping to profit off of indigenous coal reserves. It's the land from which thousands of Navajos and hundreds of Hopis have been forced to relocate.

A sequence of chance events led me to this place. An email appeared in my inbox from someone I don't know, asking for shepherd volunteers in Navajo country. I had no reason to respond besides an impulse to visit a hotbed of environmental and social conflict and an idealistic image of what shepherding would be like. I was accumulating adventure at the time, springing from job to volunteer position, trying to find a sense of grounding and orientation before returning to school.

Dibe' Bikee' Deya

The land here folds me in its rhythms. I wake up when stars are still out, I give the horses hay, follow the sheep for seven hours, nudge them back into their

corral, feed the horses again, make dinner, go to bed, rise early. Whenever I close my eyes here, I see sheep.

Before I came, Derek from Black Mesa Indigenous Support talked me through the process of shepherding over the phone. *You walk behind them. They walk away from you.* It's not that complicated. *If you want them to go left, circle around to the right. And vice-versa.* The website for Black Mesa Indigenous Support was equally simplistic, but the pages on preparation and cultural sensitivity were extensive. There was a long page with Dineh vocabulary; I wonder how many volunteers have gotten that right. I said "shi masana" so quietly the first time I greeted Mable, I don't think she even heard it. One piece of advice that made me warm up to BMIS early on was the admonition against asking too many questions. Listening is more important than coming up with clever questions.

That said, my days are filled with questions. I spend a lot of time parsing anxiety. What does the family think? What do I need to be doing? What am I supposed to be doing? What am I getting wrong? How do you deal with knowing, for sure, that you're going to mess up? When I first came, I was afraid of not bringing enough food, not doing enough to be worthy of the space. Of course, there are ways in which, as a newcomer, I was bound to be in the way. I require introductions, wood and water.

My usefulness here feels related to how well I can herd the sheep. But all of the family members seem more relaxed than me.

Dibe bikee deya. Through canyons, over shallow creeks, up sage-covered hills, I follow the sheep. This claim is much more accurate than saying “I herd the sheep,” since my control over them is mostly theoretical. The illusion of control does hold most days, though, as I haphazardly prod them in one of many seven-hour circles, eventually back to their corral.

I nudge them from time to time, *shhh shhh shhh-ing* at the limit of my lung’s capacity, sometimes like a maniac, aware that a critical mass of sheep going “in the wrong direction” is forming, a tipping point is near. If the crowd tips into an unfortunately-placed canyon, I will have to chase them for an hour.

I run at them when they start down a slope in the “wrong” direction. They get used to it, regard me as a harmless intruder. I am glad for the silence and emptiness of the hills as I flap my arms and start at each contingent of unruly sheep, *shhhhhh-ing* them in a voice that makes me worried for future parenting abilities.

There is no map for shepherding. You make it yourself, or you memorize the land. When the family first sent me out to herd, I was terrified of getting lost.

A compass without a map is only so useful. But then you discover that the land has a certain logic to it. I had never *felt out* the layout of a place before herding in Black Mesa, allowing myself to learn the land with fresh eyes, without the preparation of maps.

When I first came here in 2013, I made myself a mental map. The long, flat mountains in the distance are south. The closer, tapering mountains, as well as the coal plant a quarter-mile down the road, are to the east. To the west are more mountains, more rounded than the others. And the shepherd ranchhouse marks the northern edge. The land to the south, broken only by small hills and the dips of deep canyon, was my designated expanse for herding sheep.

The coal mine is close to the shepherd cabin, it's close to the homes of all the family members. It becomes a landmark for herding. Depending on which way you're roaming, the coal mine means east. Or it means north. Or south. It's reliably there, defunct, waiting. If you're lost, you might want to follow the noise of the trucks that circle it at regular intervals. It's easy to become reliant on the presence of the coal mine.

Now, two years later, John tells me I'll be herding sheep north of the ranchhouse and suddenly, all my past orientation work is moot. But the land has a certain logic to it. I've learned to start in unfamiliar directions and find my way back to familiar ones. The coal mine helps.

Coming back to the sauna-cabin, I found water canisters in the driveway, water on the stove, a lid on the ash bucket outside. The wood pile outside the cabin was transported from miles away, juniper that was cleared from the land for mining.

The Coal Mine, or What I Saw

From a canyon, or from some of the hill tops, Black Mesa mine is overwhelmed by the curves and ridges of the landscape. The coal mine is noticeable, but it looks small in the context of the desert. It doesn't rule the landscape.

This morning, I wake well before dawn for John's tour of the Mesa. He drives me around the area in a two-hour loop to visit the active mining areas and then return to Black Mesa mine and the family's land.

He shows me the two active Kayenta mine sites, both in Navajo Partitioned Land, in the area encompassing the Benally's home. Dragline lights shine in the dark as Peabody employees scrape at the rich, black rock undergirding the mesa. Dragline excavators are already scooping out the soil, "the overburden," which front-loading trucks hauled away. John points out the conveyer belts that would pull the coal towards transfer stations. Railroad tracks run behind one of the transfer stations, ready to move the coal to the Navajo Generating Station over fifty miles away. There hasn't been much mining yet on Hopi Partitioned Land.

The names of these places are only decades-old. You won't find the words "Navajo Partitioned Land" and "Hopi Partitioned Land" on maps prior to 1974, when Congress passed the Navajo-Hopi Land Settlement Act, also known as "the relocation law." What had been "Joint Use Area" for one hundred years was suddenly divided, and the people who found themselves on the wrong side of the fence were ordered to move. As we near the boundary line, Aaron points to a valley in the "Hopi Partitioned Lands." "That's where my mom's family used to

live,” he said. Thousands of other Navajo families were forced to relocate after the law passed. The hills are mostly forested, but we pass another settlement on the way. “The Begays,” he explained. The Begays maintain their homesite in spite of pressure to move, one of the few Navajo families steadfastly remaining on HPL.

The political lines of the “Executive Order Reservation” formerly known as the “Joint Use Area” coincide almost exactly with the underground boundaries of rich coal reserves. Mining began in 1968, but it wasn’t until the relocation law that it penetrated into the areas with the richest coal reserves. Division of the Joint Use Area made it possible for the Hopi and Navajo Tribal Councils to sign off on mining by an outside company.

Some people will tell you the Hopi-Navajo land conflict was a fierce battle, that the coal mining popped up independently. Newspapers in the 1970s ran colorful illustrations of the land conflict suggesting the Joint Use Area had become a free-for-all. Navajos were slaughtering Hopi cattle. It was a bloodbath that needed outside management.

Others argue that the issues are interwoven, even that Peabody Coal and politicians hoping to profit off Peabody manufactured the whole thing. It’s long been common knowledge that lawyer John Boyden covertly represented both Hopi tribe and Peabody in the shaping of the legislation. For my part, I initially figured Hopis and Navajos must have been going at each others’ throats over the land if Congress could justify relocating thousands. Sure, non-natives might co-opt a

conflict for their own benefit. But I thought the conflict between Navajo and Hopi must have been contentious in order to justify such an extraordinary measure.

I am straining my eyes for more evidence of mining when John makes our first actual stop of the tour at the snaking, barbed wire fence that runs through Black Mesa. He jumps out of the truck. "I'm in HPL now!" he proclaims, stepping over the cattle grate and the already stomped, low fence. He notes the bearing tree, the ground, and then crosses back over into Navajo proper, or "Big Navajo," as he calls it. He requires me to get out of the truck and note the bearing tree, the meager barbed wire. Most of the HPL land hasn't been mined yet. Trees and thick undergrowth grip the ground on the HPL land. I can't see any settlements from here, but the undergrowth is preventing me from seeing very far. John watches me take it in, then something catches his eye. "Tracks. You don't see this much on the Navajo side," he says offhandedly. I'm confused. There aren't any livestock on that side of the fence, he says. "Hopis don't keep livestock?" I ask. All the Navajos who used the land have since relocated, and the area is almost devoid of people, he explains. "There are no Hopi for miles."

What is Lost in Translation

There's no word for relocation in Dineh. To leave your homeland means to disappear.

I asked John why his family was against the mine. He smiled a little, furrowed his brow at this question. "It's home!" If Peabody were to resume

mining in the area, it would be on the family's land. If they mined this land, he would be like a lost dog on the road.

Why were other people against the mine, if it wasn't on their land? John said some were promised things they never got, in return for their support. Others favored the mine until they saw some of its impacts. He stops talking for a moment. He's carefully considering his next words. " 'Environmental' is a strange word," he says. It has certain implications for people, and it can mean other things. He seems to be avoiding saying that people turned against the mine once they realized its environmental impacts. It's more than that. "People turned against it once they realized the impacts on their land and their home."

He says some people "got used to it." If you grow up around it, you think, oh, things could be worse. People got jobs. The mine produces benefits. Dineh employed by the mine earn good wages. The income goes a long way in a place with no property taxes. Some people were able to put their kids and their grandkids through college. John and his siblings have all been through college.

John's dad, Daniel Benally, worked for the Black Mesa mine for years. He also got arrested, along with Mable and some of his children, in the '90s, to protest the same mine. This land is his ancestral land. In the '80s, they lost 80 sheep.

Peabody used to keep the blasting materials around here, and the sheep drank from a pool of chemicals.

According to John, older people who remember life before the mine tend to be against it. There is sometimes a communication gap, then, between those for

and against the mine. In Dineh, there are layers of nuance. John says his mom's reasons for opposing the mine are more beautiful in Dineh.

Mable has been a primary opponent of the mine for a lot of years. Norman, one of Mable's older sons, got deeply involved in going to meetings and writing complaints about the issue partly because of her, because he saw that there was a lot lost in the translation.

Norman said the empty land around them used to be full of settlements. He would be herding sheep and suddenly run across a neighbor's flock. The neighbor would call out, ask him to send their sheep back up. Now, there are many empty houses on the NPL. People disappeared. They were torn from their roots. It was, Norman said, a holocaust.

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After I've finally delivered the sheep to Norman, I rush to Fern's house, stomach sinking as I take in the silhouette of a man in a ten-gallon hat, shirt tucked neatly, already waiting for me. He meets my panting with an assured calm and asks if we should start the interview here.

I mumble that I was planning to offer him food, but it's at the cabin where I've been staying. He invites me into his truck and we drive to the cabin, stopping at a locked gate 50 yards away. "I guess we walk," he says, and I shuffle up the driveway alongside him, embarrassed and vaguely annoyed about the locked gate.

It's strange to have an appointment after shepherding, let alone with Danny Blackgoat, son of the famous Roberta Blackgoat. His mother refused to

leave her ancestral land and became one of the best-known “resisters” on Hopi Partitioned Land. I was supposed to get the sheep back to an arroyo, the “wash behind the house,” so a family member could take over. I was supposed to walk back to the cabin and have food ready for Danny. I was late.

Inside my temporary home base, I split kindling, light multiple matches and watch as they blow out too early. When the fire is started, I set the pan with lentils, potatoes, and onions on the cast iron stove, adding an egg to the mix.

Danny sits in the chair with drooping cushions, waits. His long gray hair is pulled into a ponytail, and he isn’t smiling or unsmiling.

I realize I am unprepared. It’s midday. Should the light be on? Do I keep the door open? The wood stove will make everything hot. Dust blows in when I open the door. As I scurry around the cabin, he asks me about what I do, about how long I’ve lived in Missoula, what I’m studying. He’s done as much research on me as I’ve done on him. And he’s been to Missoula, where I attend University of Montana. I switch on the tape recorder.

He speaks slowly, purposefully.

Yes, he’s a Big Mountain, or Black Mesa, resident part of the time, he confirms. His mother was one of the best-known “resisters” on the Hopi Partitioned Land, land “that’s been given to Hopi, but we consider...ancestral lands.” She refused to leave her land when agents from the Bureau of Indian Affairs ordered her to. Since she died, Danny has been keeping up her homesite, while also living

in Winslow, more than a hundred miles away. “I try to live in two worlds,” he says. “The modern world and the traditional Dineh lifestyle out here.”

I’ve been paging through the books I brought, trying to learn all I can about Roberta Blackgoat. I tell Danny what I know about his mother. Roberta Blackgoat was one of several elderly Navajo women who rode to DC in a “Longest Walk” caravan in 1978, to protest the 1974 Public Law 93-531, the relocation law, and speak directly to Senator Barry Goldwater. Public Law 93-531, according to Judith Nies in Unreal City, transferred Navajo land to Hopis “who did not live there and had no plans to live there.” Roberta Blackgoat also fought the coal slurry, the use of Navajo aquifer water to move coal with water, in the desert. She once said Washington was taking things from the culture without asking. You can’t survive within the imposed limits on the Hopi Partition Land, and that is the entire purpose. She said Navajos are being starved. “People just support us now, those of us who live here.”

Her son waited patiently for me to stop talking. She fought for environmental justice, he said. She spoke out against whatever she felt was not being addressed, “the mining of uranium, coal, natural gas, and the taking away our water supplies.” He said she was fighting for human rights, against “how we were treated as third class citizens even though we tried to say, ‘you’re taking our natural resources.’”

Danny grew up on what was eventually labeled Hopi Partitioned Land. He was fourteen when the Black Mesa mine was built and didn’t think much of it at

the time, he said. “I didn’t realize... that my way of life was to be terminated. I didn’t realize that, and that’s what happened.”

His mother didn’t think her speech-making around the world on behalf of indigenous rights had done much good. “She was doing a presentation down in Flagstaff and I was a translator for her, and she could barely speak out loud enough to be heard, so I was her added volume and translator to what she was saying. And right before the [forum] was gonna start, she leaned over to me... And I looked around and everybody was looking at me, and I had to translate for her and she says, ‘I’ve been traveling around saying these same things over and over. Is anybody listening?’

He speaks slowly, eyes focused, hands folded around a mug of tea.

“What she was saying, it’s being heard.” A couple decades ago, she was invited to lead the Martin Luther King Jr. day parade in San Francisco, as recipient of the House of Blues award, and as they were marching, a guy in a three-piece suit raced to a flower shop, then handed her a bouquet of a dozen roses.

I ask him if he thought the conflict between Navajo and Hopi was made up. He says, “It’s both ways. For the most part, I think it’s fabricated, yes, and then part of that became reality....The more you say it and then the more you practice it, it becomes reality.” He said traditional Hopi tell Navajos to go on living on the land. But the progressive Hopi want the resources.

Danny said the simplistic understanding of the issue is a feud between Navajo and Hopi. Evans and Associates in Salt Lake City took pictures of

livestock and horses caught in the fence and cast Navajos as the bad guys. The 91st Congress saw the pictures and many were convinced that there was about to be a war between Navajo and Hopi.

I ask him direct questions, expecting direct and specific answers. He responds with stories.

When I ask about what it was like growing up on HPL and how livelihoods there have changed, he tells me this:

“Right before my father died, we were sitting down for dinner, and we had.. my mom and dad went to the Hopi and they brought back a little box of piki bread— I don’t know if you know what piki bread is— it’s like rolled up paper with cornmeal. We were sitting down in the evening... and the piki bread, we were dipping it in coffee or just plain eatin’ it, and I got this piki bread— I went without dunking it in my coffee, I went ahead and start eatin’ it, and there was a spring to it, and I took it up and it was a double-edged razor blade, and we all stopped eating and we just went out.

And then right over the Flagstaff Mountain, there was the shape of a fish [in a cloud]. And I remember my Dad saying... things are gonna change, that it’s not gonna be the same anymore... It was a car, I think, hit him...He had a flat late at night, about 9:30 at night, and he was shining the light to where they were changing the tire, and that was it. Killed him. The car threw him 146 feet. Definitely, things change.”

He pauses, returns to his tea.

As I walk Danny out to his truck, he tells me to say hi to Missoula for him. He travels a lot. Caught up in my anxiety about keeping him long, about asking the wrong questions, probably, giving naive answers, I am surprised when he hugs me. People aren't so quick to hug here. He steps up into his truck and backs out, disappearing down the road.

Things Change

The sheep were taking their sweet time on the gently sloped, sage-covered open hill, but they're racing now, down into the canyon, into thick brush. They're almost galloping, stiff legs bending to their maximum capacity. The goats' hair swishes past as they follow down after, onto one of a dozen paths already worn into the ground. The shrubs I'm now ducking under are gray and bare and scratch my sleeves. Nothing interesting here for sheep; all of them beeline through the first thirty feet of brush, straight to the partly frozen creek.

You can't see beyond the creases rising out of this basin until you climb back up the steep facing hill, and that we do. From here, in every direction are both mesas and roads. To the east is the mine complex.

We have a long trek ahead, loosely following ridgelines, crossing a wash and a road, circling back to the corral. When I get back to the ranchhouse, smoke will be wafting from the chimney and the sun will be setting behind me, leaking pink out on the horizon. The particulars change, but the rhythms of herding have been part of Dineh culture for hundreds of years. Navajos are adaptive, Danny

said. They've always been adaptive; it's part of Navajo culture to incorporate new elements. It's just that now, they've been pushed too far.

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One of Mable's daughters has severe asthma from living next to the coal mine. In 1989, Mable lost 80 sheep when the mine released chemicals into the surface water. Fern, another daughter, talks about the disappearing natural springs. Climate change and the mines, she says, are responsible for the dryness, the invasive plants, many of the plants that have disappeared from the area.

In 2005, the Black Mesa mine shut down for a mix of reasons. One link was the 2005 Clean Air Mercury Rule that required Mohave Generating Station and Black Mesa Mine to cut mercury pollution. Mohave Generating Station was also struggling to meet its 2005 deadline for upgrades that came out of a 1999 lawsuit. When MGS couldn't afford the upgrade and shut down, Black Mesa Mine stopped operating as well, because MGS was its sole customer. In 2008, OSM granted Peabody a new Life-of-Mine permit for Black Mesa complex, which was challenged by multiple groups and individuals, including the Sierra Club and Grand Canyon Trust. And in 2010, an Administrative Law Judge withdrew the permit.

Norman was one of the individuals who challenged the Life-of-Mine-permit. He was in shock when the judge overturned the permit and no one challenged the decision. "Each side, I thought, had dug their trenches for a long, drawn-out battle in federal court when it happened."

Protesting the mine is a long-term battle; Peabody has been trying to reopen Black Mesa Mine since it closed. Norman takes a long view. “I think a lot of the mining companies, they feel that, over a long period of time, they will eventually win. they just kinda wait you out... until you capitulate. Either that or you die, I guess.”

Norman said other families aren't speaking out publicly because “...it's a tough situation to be in all the time, because you're a high-profile individual, and the people who do support Peabody will attack you, verbally or even physically.” There is a lot of fatigue and fear. Norman is tired too. But he's also been answering my questions for three hours.

The family is involved in resisting the mines in different ways. Several of them have been arrested. Mable's husband, Daniel, now retired, herds the sheep in and around the coal mines. Her children also take turns, along with her grandchildren. Norman attends every public meeting he can, talks to media, and writes official complaints. Fern is a representative to one of the chapter houses and is part of Black Mesa United, a group dedicated to restoring “the natural order and harmony” for those living in the Peabody Leased Area. Black Mesa United sprung up after the organizations fought to get the slurry down. Fern says the Black Mesa mine shutting down gave her hope. She wants the return of their grazing land and she wants to guard against future mining, but she has new energy to fight for this. Even though the mine is closed, the land is still marked for

mining. She wants people to have running water and to feel empowered to protect their land.

Hope is in Reclaiming Agency

I felt this immediately, in doing the work of keeping sheep alive by steering them towards food and then towards shelter, in doing the work of keeping myself warm and energized by building fires and cooking for myself. Nothing is so simple, or straightforward. But it is when I'm moving through the landscape, walking, walking, then running. You just have to do things that need doing, and when you fail, laugh, do it again. I need to keep track of sheep, make fire for warmth and eating, feed horses. Sustenance is work.

When there are so few distractions, when I'm not listening to music or podcasts or using the Internet and when I have a lot of time to myself, things I'm afraid of feeling, baggage I've brought with me, starts leaking out. I've been afraid of that. But when it comes full force and I let it, the canyons can hold it. I can dwell in it as I let it slowly get soaked up. In its wake is a sort of lightness, some ability to experience my own senses again. I rest. I make a fire. I follow sheep. I rise early.

This morning, I woke before my watch alarm. I watched rays of light come in through the door, stretch across the room, to the other wall. My body wants to be awake and moving. I feel like I'm just a little more part of the world, more able to feel my way in it. I could subsist on handshakes and herding sheep, easily.

Roberta Blackgoat may not have thought anyone was listening, but she had hope that someone would. Danny said she kept “[h]oping that somehow that change would spread along the way... just hoping upon hope that things might be better this afternoon, tomorrow, maybe people will change their minds. Because life is moment-to-moment decisions that we make. Life changes, and that’s what she was hoping for, that somehow people would eventually hear her message.”

You could say that the Benallys have always been fighting an uphill battle. Right now, loudly opposing the mines is not an easy position to take. Hopi and Navajo Nations now get a large percentage of their income from coal and water royalties. The idea of replacing the mine with solar has been floating around for a while, but the Benallys are opposed. They want the return of their grazing land. And John said, something about it seems too easy. There’s probably something wrong.

It’s not an efficient use of life energy to counter very powerful interests in standing against coal mining and against relocation. But, then again, efficiency misses the point entirely. The wrongs are far from being undone, and the Benallys are fighting for home.

Sheep is Life

My affection for sheep and goats has grown tremendously. This morning, the sheep and goats are chewing their cud like gum, still enjoying yesterday’s partially digested food. All of them have colds and are sniffing with snot

dripping. The mornings are slow as they're slowly persuaded to stand up and leave the corral, then things pick up speed, then slow again. In the spring, the goats and the sheep will hide and give birth. Goats will be easier to lose because they stray much farther.

The sheep and goats hurried across the road but then saw how close they were to their corral, went to the edge and just stared. Some turned around and walked defiantly in the other direction. Some reluctantly started in, but they noticed the rebellious majority and turned back. If most sheep are turning, it's not hard for them to resist the shepherd.

Sheep care very little about self-preservation in the long run, but, fortunately, they do have short term survival instinct. I tried to move a group of them apart from the others, and they called for each other. They bleated, stayed steadfastly on their ground. They walked towards each other.

In my weeks of herding here, I've never come across another flock of sheep. I've seen hitchhikers and the cousin who showed up at the cabin one night and the security guards and the Navajo Sunkist juice truck driver who stopped mid-transport as I vainly tried to hurry the sheep across the street. He laughed and took a picture of us.

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I don't know Navajo culture. I do understand what it feels like to chase after sheep, through canyons, to strain my knees, to breathe in too much ash from the woodstove, and feel exhausted and grateful for all of it. I know that sustaining

a livelihood from sheepherding is very difficult, especially at this point in time.

But living should take work. Herding sheep, albeit for only a few weeks at a time, is more deeply fulfilling than most things I've done. It's about putting life back in balance.

Before I left, Mable gave me a necklace with blue beads and cedar berries. The cedar berries, also known as ghost beads, are meant to protect the wearer. Mable has cancer. I gave her a small jar of water from the Atlantic, water my grandmother considers healing.

Her granddaughter translated some of our conversation, laughed when I objected that she didn't translate half of what I wanted to say. "You'll have to learn Navajo."

Somehow, all of the daughters and sons of Mable and Daniel found their way back after college, to live alongside their parents and claim their space. For this one family, a reuniting happened after dispersal.

They are the main resisting family on the lease lands, the main family speaking publicly against Peabody, and their home is full of laughter.