

“In Bloom”

Visual prompt – Segó Lily

Wasatch Iron Pen Competition

If you head west on the state road out of town eventually you will come across the single wire fence that slashes our reservation out from the Land. Our low ranch sits on the edge of this allotment, our pastures fenced in by mountains on the far side. We didn't need much; our herd of quarter horses was modest. My father's real talent lay in tooling and carving leather for elaborate saddles. He would hand make them over the long winter, and our mom would sew rows and rows of fine turquoise beads, each no bigger than the head of a pin. My sister Sage and I had just turned 7 the year that Ma and Pop left for town. Folks there go crazy over “Gen-U-Wine Native” goods. Only our father came back. We watched through a crack in our bedroom door as he boxed up her books and dumped them into a pile in the yard. That night red flames jumped outside our window and upon our inspection the next day the ground was still hot. Sage scooped up a small pile of ashes and saved them in a mason jar under the kitchen sink.

From then on Sage and I worked the herd. I rode well enough, but one day my horse Penny spooked, sending me over the reins. My two front teeth jabbed through my lip and blood, mucus, and tears ran from my nose and mouth. Pop took me into town and Doc closed the holes with 5 black stiches. That night I woke up and Sage was sitting on top of me staring at my lip. Her knees were on my wrists and she leaned forward and pressed her two thumbs to either side of the gash, splitting it open under the stiches. The next morning Pop inspected my lip, washed the blood off with his hankie and coated it with Vaseline. “Let it be, Segó” he said. The next night I woke to Sage again, and the next day my father scolded me harder. “Leave your stiches alone Segó” as he coated it with Vaseline. Eventually Sage lost interest in the wound and I was left with a thin white scar, nearly as long as a child's thumb.

We sold a scrawny pony the first year after mom was gone, to a farmer who must have taken it in his heart as charity. Eventually my eye for breeding got better and we started getting off a few decent ponies every year. In that way we kept the ranch going after Pop stopped making saddles. One night when Pop was off the res drinking again and Sage and I were bored, we snuck into his room. We messed around looking through his things for a while, trying on his long shirts and imitating his drunken stumble. Then I slid open his bureau drawer. Next to his loaded sidearm lay a book. A field guide to the wild plants and flowers of the American West. My mother's scrolling handwriting marked the inside front cover, a sprig of dried sage and a segó lily pressed between the pages. On the entry page for each plant her hand noted “good for a baby girl” and some words were underlined “Grows on open, exposed, sterile soils” and “hardy, ranging from mountain to desert”.

With Sage and I working the herd and improving the breeding our stocky cattle horses had finally given way to slender, fine-legged racing ponies. Pop helped us mark off an arena in the pasture and one night he came home dragging two barrels from the res. Sage and I raced each other in endless figure eights. Sage was a fearless rider, and exhausted her mare every night. Pop kept time on an old watch

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that was his father’s and started eating dinner with us at night again. We spent that winter dreaming of being famous barrel racers. “Watch! Segó and Sage ride the fastest ponies in the west” we dreamed the barker would shout.

Summer came early that year and our fields bloomed full of creosote, rabbit brush, buckhorn cholla, indigo, and lilies. We were awoken one night by the sounds of a stallion neighing and moaning and a mare carrying on. We grabbed a lantern and raced outside to see that our fence line had been breached by John Cottonwood’s stud, Salty Pete. Sage’s mare had gone into heat and the air was filled with her tangy scent. Pop left for the Cottonwood place and we tried to bribe off Salty but it was too late, Sage’s mare was already pushing him off. A hunk of mane hung loose from her neck where Salty Pete had gripped on and her flanks showed scuff marks. When Sage’s mare didn’t come back into heat I ran the ultrasound on her. A black blob appeared on the screen, about the size of an apple. And then another. Our mare was pregnant with twins. I called Pop and Sage to the barn. “You have to hold her while I reach inside”. It was hot in the barn. Sweat ran from my armpits and thighs as Sage and Pop struggled to hold the mare. I slide my arm into the mare up to my shoulder, feeling the uterine walls as I went. Locating the smaller fetus I rolled the thick muscle between my fingers, pinching hard to dislocate the membranes. Twin pregnancy in horses, unlike humans, is nearly almost fatal.

The mare foaled on a bitter cold day in March. Sage, Pop, John Cottonwood and I attended the birth, and when the filly dropped to the ground it was generally remarked that birth is an everyday miracle, like the flowers coming back every spring. The little filly had a white starburst on her chest and was on her feet in no time. Pop left the barn and went back to the house. He came back with a little book in his hand; our mom’s field guide. He showed us each our dried flower and we looked through together to pick a name for the filly. We settled on Skyrocket. Later that summer we took to walking the fence line in the fading light of dusk and when the Skyrockets bloomed Pop, Sage and I pressed some new flowers between the pages.