**Singing it Under**

Robin Stone

Every year I went to look; I told my family I was hiking the desert, but they all knew.

So, this year my daughter, 18 now, told me she was coming too. Melanie. Together we walked the two grey hills land looking for anything that could be a grave after 27 years. A pile of rocks, scattered now, a place where a soft rotting infant could have nourished many sage to sprout together.

When they took my firstborn from my belly he was already still, a tiny bean of a child pale as the moon. In my grandmas’ houses death is not spoken of easily, and they silently took him away, his hair a soft wet puff, the last thing I saw through the doorway.

No one spoke about it afterwards. Lips were tight and eyes slid sideways when I came close to saying something. The boy loved me, he loved my voice, but he only looked down after that. We didn’t talk anymore. I think he was ashamed. When he got older, I heard he joined the army, then when he was back at Shiprock he had a bad car crash and died too.

Four months after the baby, I left in a green truck for the city and started my other, noisy life. Evening school where I met Shawn two years later, wedding, job, two sons and a daughter, traffic every day and sleeping late on Sundays. Years of homework and bank accounts and different cats all named Rosie. A minivan that started out shiny and ended up with coins and smashed crackers under the seats and dog nose marks on the back windows. And conversations, laughing, yelling, and singing swirling around the car seats. Swirling around the kitchen of the house. Floating out of the cracks in the door and windows in the winter and the screens in the summer. It felt like a big life, loud and happy mostly. Shawn understood, and I tried, and we were lucky together.

But always underneath it all I heard the tiny chirp, the cry that should have been, that should have rushed at me with an avalanche of joy.

So, Melanie and I walked. We knew not to ask anyone. My daughters long black hair lifted like a curtain in the wind, her eyes quietly watching me. She was a funny one, this one, especially when she was little; always having to know what was on the calendar, what was in the bottom of the grocery bags, underneath the bathtub, in the pit of my heart. She used to drive me crazy with her questions until I would sing to her. That made her breathe again, and sleep. It was my only trick.

I knew, I really did know, that I wouldn’t be able to tell from looking where the little bean was. I guess I thought, somehow, I would feel it through my feet if we came close, or a change in the air, or see myself at fifteen, hear something, or some other crazy thing.

I thought of the boy, his cheeks and smile. I knew him forever, his grandma and sisters, but I didn’t care till later. Then one afternoon walking home from school there was a sloppy kiss. My first. So much spit, I was disgusted! But I held hands with him anyway for the rest of the way back. We both dropped arms when we came closer to my place, no need to get teased and mad. Soon we couldn’t wait to get to the dry creek bed and get all tangled up. Pressed up against his soft boy cheek, laughing and whispering, sex after school every day till it got too cold. What did I think was going to happen?

So. Now there was my beautiful daughter and I on the stony ground, moving along in the silence that only the desert wind can remind you of.

We played with the little bells we brought with us to warn rattlers, tossing them back and forth. I thought of the boys, my boys, both in college now, one no longer drinking because he can’t. So proud. They are both so full of love and silliness, each though with a tiny splash of black on their souls. I know I put it there for both of them, thinking and never telling them about the first one, and the silence was a dark hole.

It was so beautiful out there in the desert, endless, the black crows on the black rocks and the black stink bugs raising their butts to us. I started to sing.

Melanie sang too, and we did rounds. Old songs, new ones, ones we made up. Then I told Melanie all about it, the whole thing, and the memory poured into her liquid dark eyes. She listened as we walked, and said she already knew.

We walked up a rise, a mound of sand and yellow broom, and gazed down into a sunken tuck in the earth. The sage at the bottom looked soft and blue. There was no wind down there. “Let’s make it here, Mom” my daughter said.

And suddenly I saw that every chosen spot on the earth is a resting place. It was the looking, not the finding, that mattered. We wove grasses into braids and made a circle, with little stones in the middle like a nest. We sang a lullaby, and Melanie sang another, while I thought of how I would like to rock the spirit of the boy with the soft cheek, my first love. I told them both to rest, but they had been all along of course. They were both tucked under, safe in the dark.

Melanie and I felt the wind and the late sun pushing us gently all the way back, hiking east towards home.