

The Arc and the Sediment

A Novel

Christine Allen-Yazzie

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For further information, including author interviews or appearances, please contact Kathleen Kingsbury, publicity/marketing, Utah State University Press: kathleen.kingsbury@usu.edu, 435-797-1202. Review copies available.



In 2001 THE ARC AND THE SEDIMENT was awarded the Utah Arts Council prize for best novel and won the Utah Arts Council Annual Writing Competition Publishing Prize. The novel also was a finalist in the James Jones First Novel Competition in the same year.

Praise for *The Arc and the Sediment*

by Christine Allen-Yazzie

"THE ARC AND THE SEDIMENT is a dark and lovely novel, the story of a woman lost in the territory mapped by Camus and Duras, in those colonies without a motherland who have forgotten that they were colonies. Gretta lives between cultures, trapped in moments without succession, defined by broken bits of time that litter the great sad wasteland of the American West like potsherds from a lost civilization. Out of these pieces Gretta tries over and over to invent herself through suffering, regret, defiance, sometimes laughter. Christine Allen-Yazzie has written the true story of a great new figure, a Burning Woman who for a few hours illuminates the outlands, the deserts where the forgotten of the earth walk in solitude."

— Francois Camoin, author of *WHY MEN ARE AFRAID OF WOMEN*, winner of the Flannery O'Connor Award

"Christine Allen-Yazzie's novel is terrific. A serious book, artfully written and crafted, it is contemporary in its writing, and it is contemporary in its subject matter ... The story the book tells, the characters it portrays, the plot it unfolds, and the jigsawing of time and place and circumstance all come together in remarkable ways, in ways that are pleasurable to deal with ... It's a work of art. The voice is what makes it fresh; the voice carries the novel ... [W]hat makes the novel remarkable is that language is foregrounded (not lavish or outlandish language, but precise and exacting and energized language) yet the plot keeps us moving forward at what I feel is excellent, if not pitch-perfect pacing."

— Darrell Spencer, author of *BRING YOUR LEGS WITH YOU*, winner of the Drue Heinz Literature Prize

"Highly original and extremely complex and a wonderful read of a novel. Truly a work of serious and profound vision. [It] is extremely well-written and effectively organized ... The conclusion of the novel is dynamic; heart breaking, but truthful if not a little hopeful."

— Helena Maria Viramontes, author of *THEIR DOGS CAME WITH THEM* and winner of the Luis Leal Award

"Christine Allen-Yazzie has given us a novel that is gutsy, sad, and disturbing. Her book is a commentary (and improvisation) on race, love, and commitment. Gretta's song echoes the last days of Billie Holiday. Where is Lance, her husband and loverman? The landscape of *THE ARC AND THE SEDIMENT* is a witness to what gin can't bury or destroy. Gretta is not certain of her destination as she goes looking for her husband. Did she do the right thing by marrying someone who isn't white? What is the voice inside her head saying? Why won't you be able to put this book down?"

— E. Ethelbert Miller, author of *HOW WE SLEEP ON THE NIGHTS WE DON'T MAKE LOVE* and winner of the O. B. Hardison Poetry Prize

Synopsis of *The Arc and the Sediment*

Gretta Bitsilly, a gin-steeped mother of two and self-proclaimed expert at standing outside the margins of ethnicity and peering in, has been all but eclipsed by the world that eludes her—as a wife, a writer, and a skeptic in "the other land of Zion," Utah. Gretta has set off to Fort Defiance, Arizona, where she hopes to convince her Navajo husband, who has escaped not from his family but from alcoholism, to come home.

Over a sputtering two-steps-forward, one-step-back desert journey, Gretta is diverted by chance, seizures, an inconstant memory, and the disjointed character of her irresolute quest.

She is fueled by a volatile mix of rage and curiosity and is rendered careless by ambivalence toward her marriage—she knows a welcome mat will not be waiting for her, "that white girl" who can't seem to get anything right. On route Gretta finds herself lost in the landscape, in strange company, or in her own convolution of language and inner space. With a dictionary and a laptop she attempts to write herself into a better existence—a hopeful existence—and to connect points of intellectual, physical, even spiritual reference.

This tale, though dark and difficult, is infused with tart, twisted humor. Confused, disheveled, self-deprecating, and self-destructive, Gretta is also sharp and funny. Here, first-time novelist Christine Allen-Yazzie breaks apart her own narrative arc but with gritty reality seals it near-shut again, if in rearrangement, drawing us into Gretta's wrestling match with herself, her husband, her addiction, and the road.

Author Biography



Christine Allen-Yazzie lives in Utah with her husband and two daughters. Her collection of short fiction has been recognized with a Utah Arts Council grant and by the Drue Heinz Competition with an honorable mention. Her stories have been published in a number of literary journals, among them *Eclectica Magazine*, *Black River Review*, *Whiskey Island Magazine*, *Slow Trains*, and, most recently, *Dos Passos Review*. She has an MFA in creative writing from the University of Utah. She may be reached at christine.allenyazzie@gmail.com, (435) 753-4952.

Excerpt from *The Arc and the Sediment*

There is something beautiful about a golden naked woman lying in the sand, which is why Gretta is stretched out here in the not-terribly-hot late-afternoon sun. But she is not a golden naked woman looking beautiful in the sand. Her face is swollen from drinking gin and blazing vermillion like the redrock around her. Her sunglasses pressure her temples and the pajamas wadded up beside her smell like the janitorial closet of an old Canasta-addicted smoker. Her hair is tangled and salty, her doughy belly an aurora borealis of two long, nearly unendurable pregnancies. Peering through the window between lens and cheekbone, she sees that she is shaped like a crevice, like a V, and at the bottom of the V is hatred lying fallow, which is not, by definition, beautiful.

In the front pocket of her army-surplus pack is the whistle, wrapped in an orange-and-white bandana. She takes it out, uncovers it to see that it's still real, and looks at it without touching. She removes her sunglasses. Not a glimmer. The whistle, broken in two pieces, is dry and inanimate. What once braced the weightless wing of an enormous bird of prey now clacks top end against bottom, protected only by bandana from her trembling hand.

She doesn't know why Lance trusted her with the thing. It was given to him in an event that involved days of praying, fasting, and sweating for reasons presumably too great, too indescribable, too *Indian* to share with her. Maybe this oddly placed trust is why she hopes to make amends with her husband. Maybe it's why she doesn't trust him.

Pneumatic. Is it a word?

She'll be glad to be rid of the thing, of the responsibility of it, but as yet, she still hasn't thought of something appropriate to say to Lance, and the detour she hoped would inspire the words is, rather, making her sleepy. She wraps the whistle back up and tucks it into the front pocket of her pack. She fumbles around the main cavity—four books, a few tampons, a stack of credit cards (both good and bust), a driver's license (technically invalid, given that her neurologist refuses to declare her seizure-free at this time), receipts, more receipts, a bra, cigarette butts (stinking up everything—she smells her fingers—*Jesus*), a dictionary, a beat-up flip phone.

No reception. She climbs an outcropping of rock. She slips, scrapes a knee and an elbow, bleeds, but finds herself oddly in range.

A lizard skitters close, assesses her with pushups. She takes a photo of it with the phone. Her daughter might forgive her if she brought home such a thing, worthy of any second-grade show-and-tell—such delicate hands, a blush of blue spreading from underbelly to soft pulsing throat, curious half-closed eyelids. She could keep it in something for now—

The console? The glove box?—then buy a cage in Moab.

Gretta lunges. She is rewarded with a discarded tail.

Ice cream it is, she thinks. It's just as well—the Navajo in her daughter isn't supposed to handle reptiles. Of course, now that Lance has left her, Gretta may have to reconsider the zodiac of cultural prohibitions they sutured together between the two of them and settle on which ones remain pertinent. If he doesn't return, he will be responsible for seeing through his own.

"Thank you for calling Moab's own Golden Granary Pharmacy, where customers always come first. Para Español, marqué uno. To order refills by phone, press two now—"

It's not like her meds will work with as much as she's been drinking anyway. A voracious bender presented itself some five days ago and will end, in all likelihood, this afternoon—hopefully at a Laundromat. Once Lance is in-hand, or clearly not, she'll get her Dilantin. At least she has Zolof. *Just breathe. Just breathe now.*

Pneumatic. This is how it is: A word drifts from the ether into her nostrils, her ears, permeates the membranes of her eyes, and she must look it up, given the limited pool of language a Utah railroader upbringing and four and a half years of state college have afforded her.

Pneumatic—pneumonia? "Moved or worked by..."

She sets her dictionary down and weaves across and around patches of cryptobiotic soil to the truck, heckling herself—she drove a couple of miles off the off-road, after all, probably over yards and yards of the fragile stuff, and now she tiptoes. One day, she will be an environmentalist in more than just theory. Maybe she'll even be a vegetarian, except that she will eat fish, because fish, she is willing to believe, are too stupid to contemplate their own demise.

She will be a woman whose socks match. When they get holes in the heels, she will throw them away and buy new socks—thick, soft knee-highs, not the junk socks she buys at Wal-Mart. *Hell*, she thinks, *you won't step foot in a Wal-Mart*. Instead, she'll pontificate on the moral depravity of superstores.

One day she will teach her kids Tulip and Braden to eat bran cereal rather than Cap'n Crunch. She will eat bran cereal, or at least she will make bran muffins. She will lock her doors at night. She will expect her children to brush their teeth not once, but twice a day. She will brush her teeth twice a day. She will wash her hands rigorously after every pee.

And if she is divorced, she will make serious efforts to use the term *Native American* instead of *Indian*. Unless, of course, her children bristle at her use of the words as her in-laws always seem to have, in which case she will be all appeasement.

One day she will be sober—for good. For now, she yanks her laptop's power cord out of the inverter and returns with laptop and pack to the outcropping. She makes an office of a pocket of sand. The laptop burns her thighs as she types, heated by sun and inverter both.

WordsforLater.doc

Pneumatic: Moved or worked by air pressure. Adopted for holding or inflated with compressed air. Having air-filled cavities. Of or relating to the pneuma: spiritual. Having a well-proportioned feminine figure; esp., having a full bust.

The whistle is Lance's pneumatic Leatherman, his tool of potentiality. It opens, it sharpens, it seals, it heals. But it's selective. It allows only good intentions to pass through it. Lance rarely uses it, but the possibility awaits him like an obedient dog.

Gretta wants a tool. She has a laptop and a dictionary, and they serve her well, but hers are not of the spiritual variety—any positive renderings are arguably incidental. The idea behind the whistle is that it can make everything right, or at the very least say thanks, because that's what it was meant to do. She considers whether she is capable of saying thanks—wholeheartedly, with feeling.

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Occident: To fall, to set.

Occidental: Of, relating to, or situated in the Occident: western. A member of the Occidental peoples: a person of European ancestry.

Occlude: Obstruct; to come together with opposing surfaces in contact; used of teeth.

Of teeth? As in the sand grit grinding around between my molars? Proof that the laptop and the dictionary don't make everything right. Instead, the cursor and the word reveal the world to be frightening and inconclusive, and they give form to just anything—murder, desire, self-defeat, love. *Infidelity*.

She imagines James, Lance's brother, standing on the deck of the *USS Reagan*, shielding his eyes from an unrelenting sun to watch inky black clouds billow into the sky from the oil fields of a foreign shore.

She sets the laptop aside, lies on her back, covers her eyes with an arm. With or without words—or, for that matter, blue-bellied lizards—the world is a gaseous place.