



Manhattan is a Lenape Word

Natalie Diaz - 1978-

It is December and we must be brave.

The ambulance's rose of light
blooming against the window.
Its single siren-cry: *Help me.*
A silk-red shadow unbolting like water
through the orchard of her thigh.

Her, come—in the green night, a lion.
I sleep her bees with my mouth of smoke,
dip honey with my hands stung sweet
on the darksome hive.
Out of the eater I eat. Meaning,
She is mine, colony.

The things I know aren't easy:
I'm the only Native American
on the 8th floor of this hotel or any,
looking out any window
of a turn-of-the-century building
in Manhattan.

Manhattan is a Lenape word.
Even a watch must be wound.
How can a century or a heart turn
if nobody asks, *Where have all
the natives gone?*

If you are where you are, then where
are those who are not here? Not here.
Which is why in this city I have

many lovers. All my loves
are reparations loves.

What is loneliness if not unimaginable
light and measured in lumens—
an electric bill which must be paid,
a taxi cab floating across three lanes
with its lamp lit, gold in wanting.
At 2 a.m. everyone in New York City
is empty and asking for someone.

Again, the siren's same wide note:
*Help me. Meaning, I have a gift
and it is my body, made two-handed
of gods and bronze.*

She says, *You make me feel
like lightning.* I say, *I don't ever
want to make you feel that white.*
It's too late—I can't stop seeing
her bones. I'm counting the carpals,
metacarpals of her hand inside me.

One bone, the lunate bone, is named
for its crescent outline. Lunatus. Luna.
Some nights she rises like that in me,
like trouble—a slow luminous flux.

The streetlamp beckons the lonely
coyote wandering West 29th Street
by offering its long wrist of light.
The coyote answers by lifting its head
and crying stars.

Somewhere far from New York City,
an American drone finds then loves
a body—the radiant nectar it seeks
through great darkness—makes
a candle-hour of it, and burns
gently along it, like American touch,
an unbearable heat.

The siren song returns in me,
I sing it across her throat: *Am I
what I love? Is this the glittering world
I've been begging for?*



“Having been a professional athlete, I believe I have a different lexicon of the body. A specifically textured vocabulary that moves beyond the five or six senses we tend to limit ourselves to in Western thinking. This also comes from my Mojave culture. I don’t only feel with my body, I think with it. Even text is a physical space for me—it is not merely ink or font or symbols. Writing for me is no different than playing basketball, it’s my body moving among and pushing up against and being moved by other bodies of language and the energy of language.”

“Text is a way of voice, a speaking to the ear and to the eye. Letters were once bodies, are bodies now. They are not symbols, are not static. Nothing is static; nothing is unmoving. Not ink, not thread. Everything is energy. Text is a happening. In some moments, letters become an extension of my physical body: when I am writing them, or thinking them, or when I am pressing my eyes over their dark bodies on the page. A page, like a letter, has a sound. It speaks. It moves. Once spoken, once touched with the eye, it is loose—an energy from a cage to which it cannot be returned. It goes on forever and will outlast its maker.”

6 things from Natalie Diaz:

- What if you think of your eyes as touching rather than seeing?
- I know what it is like to lose a word forever.
- In my desert you can see a storm coming from hours and hours away.
- I know what it is like to know your body has reached a limit, and then to move beyond that limit, to a new body, one you didn't know you had.
- Language is energy.
- Sometimes race, means run.

Natalie Diaz was born in the Fort Mojave Indian Village in Needles, California. She is Mojave and an enrolled member of the Gila River Indian community. She earned a BA from Old Dominion University, where she received a full athletic scholarship. Diaz played professional basketball in Europe and Asia before returning to Old Dominion to earn an MFA. She is the author of the poetry collections *Postcolonial Love Poem* (2020), winner of the Pulitzer Prize; and *When My Brother Was an Aztec* (2012), which *New York Times* reviewer Eric McHenry described as an “ambitious ... beautiful book.”

The name *Manhattan* derives from the Munsee Lenape language term *manaháhtaan* (where *manah-* means "gather", *-aht-* means "bow", and *-aan* is an abstract element used to form verb stems). The Lenape word has been translated as "**the place where we get bows**" or "place for gathering the (wood to make) bows".

Lenape means *The People*