

Preface

“Mabel McKay: Weaving the Dream”

By

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Preface

“Everything’s going to burn,” Mabel said. “That’s what I see now.”

She was looking at the very dry, late September hills near Highway 80, just east of Fairfield. We were on our way back to the Rumsey Wintun Reservation, where Mabel was living at the time, after she’d given a talk to several students and faculty at Stanford University about her doctoring and basket weaving. It was late in the day, early evening, and the thick autumn light had turned the hills ocher red. The ocher red color no doubt called up her Dream. She’d talked a lot about her Dream lately, and I knew enough to know what she was referencing: her vision of what would happen near the end of the world as we know it.

“‘Everything’s going to go dry,’ Spirit said. ‘No water going to be anywhere.’”

“What can we do?” I asked. “How do we live?”

Mabel began laughing, chuckling to herself out loud. “That’s cute,” she said, then, mocking me, repeated, “What can we do? How do we live?”

I was used to her making fun of me, of my countless questions -- as used as I was to her talks about Dreaming.

“No, seriously,” I countered. “If the world’s going to dry up and burn, what do we do?”

She turned to me, took a moment to make sure she had my attention, then she answered plainly, “You live the best way you know how, what else.”

As I write today, some twenty-five years after that autumn afternoon with Mabel, the signs of global warming are everywhere; daily we hear frightening prognostics from the scientific community regarding global warming worldwide. The United States is

experiencing its worst drought in recorded history. Lake County, where Mabel was born, is suffering two major fires, and smoke and ashes from those fires can be seen from my home on Sonoma Mountain, in Sonoma County fifty miles away. Among the Pomo Indians of Northern California -- Mabel was the last surviving member of the Cache Creek Pomo Nation -- there were many prophets, locally often referred to as Dreamers, and Mabel McKay was certainly one of them. According to many people, she was the last of them. Her great-uncle Richard Taylor saw "roads into the sky, people going to the moon." Essie Parrish, the late Kashaya Pomo Dreamer, seeing pitch suddenly dripping from one of her baskets in the 1950s, predicted "a horrible sickness thirty years hence, first seen in young men then in multitudes."

Like Mrs. Parrish, Mabel McKay was also a medicine woman, as it would turn out, the last of the sucking doctors among the Pomo, doctors who extract pain and disease through sucking. She was a world-renowned basket weaver -- the Pomo are considered among the finest weavers anywhere, and Mabel was often thought of as the best among them. But what remains for me, and I think for many readers of this book over the years, isn't only the remarkable enough attributes and accomplishments of Mabel's life, but her uncanny, if not at times jarring, ability in conversation, in stories, in responses to questions -- to open up the world such that we come to see ourselves fully in the world with her, and long after. We not only get glimpses into her world view but, in doing so, become more conscious of our own. What is she then, in my experience of her, in the pages of this book, but the best of life teachers whose stories and lessons become indelible in memory?

To illustrate Mabel's unique ability as an interlocutor, I have often told to friends and written about Mabel's telling a colleague from Stanford about "the woman who loved a snake." I had taken this colleague, a fellow graduate student, to visit Mabel, where upon Mabel began talking about a woman she once knew who lived with her husband in

the hills above Nice, in Lake County. The husband worked nights, tending cows and young calves, and one night after he left the house, as the woman was finishing the dishes, she heard a knock on the door. The woman was alarmed; she sensed something peculiar, even wrong. Against better judgment, she opened the door and found, to her surprise, a handsome man, quite tall and dressed in black. She let him in.

As Mabel put it, I guess one thing led to another. When the husband returned in the morning, he found a small black snake coiled up at the bottom of the vase on the kitchen table. He took the snake outside and let it go in the brush. The next day, the same thing happened -- the husband came home in the morning and found the snake in the vase on the kitchen table. Two more times it happened this way -- the husband found the snake. On the fifth morning, he said, "Something is wrong here. I'm going to kill this snake." Holding the snake in one hand, he reached with the other hand for a knife from the kitchen sink, and then he headed to the door, at which point the woman broke down in a flood of tears and confessed her infidelity with the tall handsome man dressed in black. "Well then," the husband said, "now I'm really going to kill the snake," and he went outside and cut the snake into several pieces. But, as it turned out, the snake was there the next morning, and each morning after, again and again.

Mabel stopped talking, and my friend, writing her dissertation on some aspect of Renaissance literature, asked Mabel what the snake symbolized.

"I don't know nothing about symbols," Mabel answered.

Mabel then recalled a warm summer evening in Lake County, when, parked in a car, she saw a tall man dressed in black come out of the grocery store in Middletown. He was carrying a bag of groceries; and, instead of taking the road, he went down into the dry creek bed adjacent the store and began walking northward, toward the hills.

"I think that was the man -- the snake," Mabel said. Then she added with a chuckle, "And he was -- he was real handsome, that guy."

My friend, her question still unanswered as far as she was concerned, became all the more frustrated. "I mean, Mabel, was it a man or was it a snake?"

Mabel appeared to think a moment. Then she looked at my friend.

"I don't know," she answered, "but it was a problem."

Stories and then more stories. Mabel's stories and our memory of and retelling of the stories -- how many times have I told about "the woman who loved a snake"? -- not only challenge the confines of our thinking, but, as suggested, help us to understand ourselves as thinking, cultured beings in a world we share with other people and all forms of life. Consequently, we can begin to think of ourselves anew in place and time. We can open ourselves and, when necessary, change, heal, or as the old saying goes, find ourselves. Certainly, my very writing of this book -- my writing Mabel McKay's life story -- became just that for me, a finding of myself.

It has now been eighteen years since the first publication of this book. So much has happened. "The world, it happens," as Mabel would say. I sometimes wonder what she would think of things today. The son she raised, Marshall McKay, the exemplary leader of the Rumsey Wintun Tribe, known today as the Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation, is not only an important collector of Indian art and basketry, but also serves on several boards for organizations and institutions preserving American Indian art and culture, including the Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C. Clearly, Mabel's influence can be seen in the person closest to her. Likewise, Violet Chappell, in carrying on her mother, Essie Parrish's teachings and instructions, incorporates Mabel's songs in "prayer sessions" held on the Kashaya Pomo Reservation. Mabel's baskets remain on display and in permanent collections throughout the country. Her art and songs are timeless. No less, then, her life, from which these things came, and what we can glimpse of that life yet today -- timeless, transformative.

It was by looking at the land about my house this morning -- and seeing the smoke and soot in the sky -- that I got my answer about how to start this preface. I was walking in the garden, wondering what to write, when I found myself distracted by the hazy sky and began worrying about the dry brush outside my yard -- I worried about fire on this mountain. My lavender, which feeds so many bees, looked dry; the mimosa tree that draws the hummingbirds, wilted. Mabel came then, clear as a bell. I heard her talking about her Dream. And more: "You got water in your well, don't you?...Well then, water the lavender, water the mimosa."

Sonoma Mountain

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