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Ularia's Curse

Deborah A. Miranda

"Pero la maldición de la Ularia cayó en la familia de los Sarchens" ["But the curse of Ularia fell on the Sargent family"].

—Isabel Meadows to J. P. Harrington

Editor's note: "Ularia's Curse" is an excerpt from *Bad Indians*. In this selection, drawing on the testimony of Isabel Meadows, Deborah Miranda tells the story of the Esselens' removal from their land by the settler rancher Sargent. The old woman, Ularia, curses Sargent with the help of a river which ten years later takes revenge on him for the people. We include this excerpt as a direct extension of Miranda's book, meant to reflect *Bad Indians'* collage-like and intertextual character. In addition, "Ularia's Curse" was read aloud by one of the contributors to this issue, Melissa Leal, at the symposium and is an important reference for several other authors in this collection, especially in the way Miranda approaches the prevalence of gendered colonial violence and nonhuman relationality.

Isabel says it was Ularia's curse that killed Sargent. The American ran Estéfana and her children off the land at Rancho El Potrero—that same land awarded to Estéfana's parents, Fructuoso Cholom and Yginia María Yunisyunis, by the Mexican governor Alvarado after the mission was shut down; the very land where Echilat, the village of Fructuoso's mother, his maternal grandparents, and his great-grandmother, had existed long before the mission was a gleam in Padre Serra's eye. The American told Estéfana, "Those signatures are no good anymore; Indians can't own land."

Estéfana and the other displaced Indians she had taken into her home carried their few belongings to the banks of the Carmelo River. They camped there a few days, paralyzed by grief and anger, [and] wept themselves hollow with frustration. "And then," Isabel says, "they dispersed."

Ten years later, Sargent fell into the Carmelo River while herding his cattle across during a storm. He became ill, and a few days later, he died.

Isabel says what happened was Ularia had cursed Sargent that day ten years before, sitting there on the banks of the river, her worn skirts heavy and wet with rain and mud, her hair burnt short in mourning. She didn't have much left to work with—no bundles of mugwort, no roots, no cocoon rattle, not even a clapperstick. She was just an old Indian woman, beaten by soldiers, chastised by priests, her last grown child hung from the big oak as a horse thief by the Americans. She was cast off, discarded. She wanted to abandon her old woman's body, even if the Spaniards *had* killed all the two-spirited *joyas* and left not one to carry her past the dangerous male and female gods that guarded the path to the Ancestors.

But out of habit, Ularia leaned down, her spine crackling with age, and scooped a handful of Carmel's clear water in her palm, brought it to her lips, drank it down. She tasted the cold roots of mountains off to the north. She felt the sharp grit of river sand in her worn molars, sparkle of a stray flake of gold, scales of a little fish on her tongue. And Ularia remembered: the river would be here long after she was gone.

"Will you miss us, River?" she wondered. "Will you miss our feet on your riverbed, our twined fishing nets combing your waters, our sacrifice of the first salmon every year?"

Isabel says the river must have said yes, because where else would Ularia have gotten the idea? She reached down, plucked a smooth round stone from beneath the water, spoke to it in the old language. She gathered salt from the estuary to the west, a gritty sand mixed with ocean and fresh-water spirits. She added charcoal from that last fire built on the river's banks by the refugees, great oaks reduced to ashes. She smudged the curse in the scent of toasted chia seeds made for the journey away, the scorched redbud of the basket that held them. Ularia made that curse of mud, the decomposing body of our mother, black and thick enough to trip even a strong stock horse; she made that curse from slick water weeds that can tangle a man's legs, pull him down beneath the surface; she made that curse out of a rainstorm's rage, conjured waves ten years hence into heavy walls that would fall like the stones of a church in an earthquake.

The Americans say Ularia cursed the river. But Isabel says no; Ularia wouldn't do that. Isabel says Ularia gave the river the idea to curse Sargent. But rivers tell time differently than people, and so it took ten years before the river finished what Ularia had begun. Ularia was long since dust on the day the river took Sargent, took his life from him like that, drank him down, and cleansed itself of his greed.

Isabel says [that] wherever they are, she's sure Ularia's bones are laughing.¹

NOTES

1. Deborah A. Miranda, *Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir* (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 2013), E40–42.