

A place for pioneers



Nora Boxer got tired of taking parts of her novel in progress to her postgraduate creative-writing workshop, so she decided to write a short story and present that instead. It was a good move, because the story, titled “It’s the song of the nomads, baby; or, Pioneer,” recently won the prestigious Keene Award for Literature. The prize (a \$50,000 cash award) is one of the world’s largest student literary prizes. It is awarded to a University of Texas student who creates the most vivid and vital portrayal of the American experience.

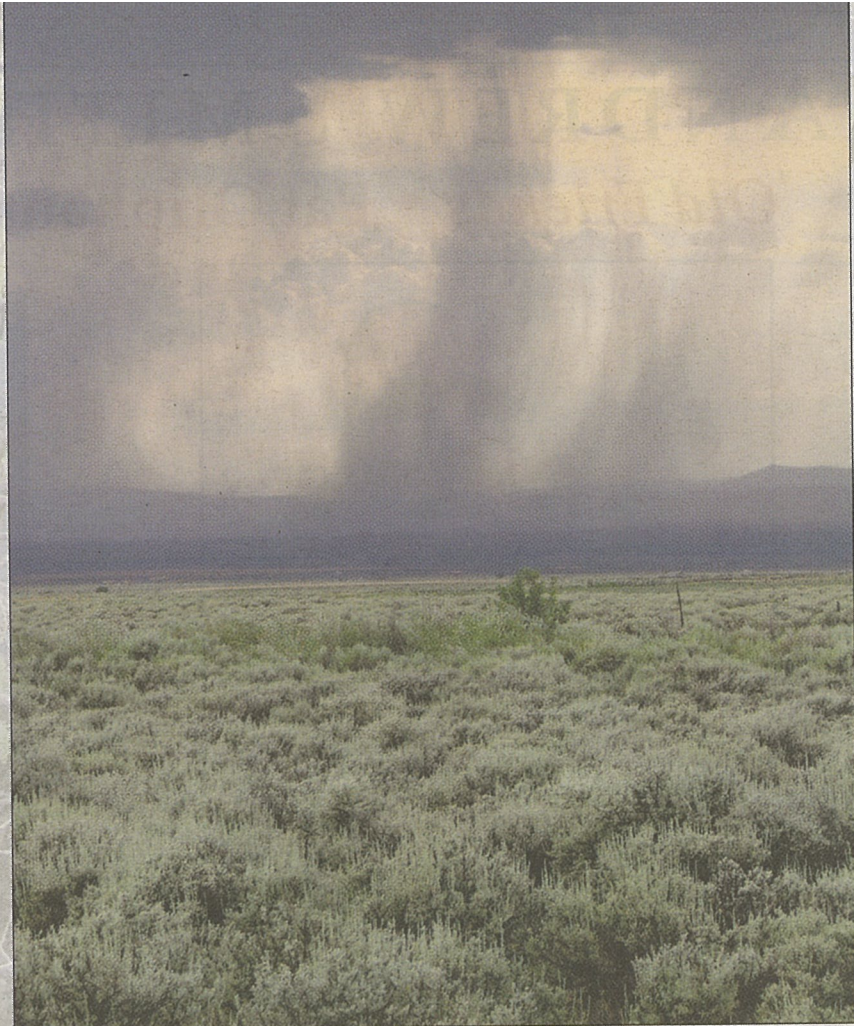
Boxer’s story, set on the mesa outside the city limits of present-day Taos, paints a vibrant picture of the alternative, sustainable lifestyles the city is known for. She writes a sometimes-bleak account of humans striving for community. “I have an interest in ways people are trying to head toward alternative communities,” she said. “And also an interest in ways that we are failing at doing that. There’s a lot of great stuff happening in off-grid or alternative communities, but life in Taos is hard, and it’s a harsh climate.”

Boxer’s protagonist, Adrienne, and her partner, Theo, arrive in Taos eager to experience a semi-self-sufficient lifestyle. The newly pregnant Adrienne finds a job in a coffee shop at the north end of town, where she meets ski bums, artists, and the mesa dwellers known as “mesa rats.” After a Halloween party at the compound where she and Theo live, Adrienne finds herself suddenly single. Roxy, another barista at the coffee shop, sets Adrienne up with a new home on the mesa in an Airstream trailer that belongs to the enigmatic Crow, a jeweler who also owns the compound. The challenges of life on the mesa, where running water and public utilities are nonexistent and the conveniences of Taos are 35 minutes away by car, makes Adrienne realize how an off-grid lifestyle affects the people who live it.

Boxer comes by her story honestly. She arrived in Taos for a monthlong writing retreat in 2004 and ended up being part of the community for four years. “Right when I got to Taos, I was hypnotically drawn to the mesa,” she said. “When I decided to stay in the area longer, I looked at a place to live out on the mesa, and that was the first time I saw a functioning off-grid community. Over the course of my stay in Taos, I ended up meeting a whole bunch of people who live out at Three Peaks or Two Peaks.”

“It’s the song of the nomads, baby; or, Pioneer” is made up of facets of many people she knew in Taos. “As I was writing the story, I thought about all the people I really love in Taos,” she said. “And I wrote a little detail in it for each of them. So it became a really lovely writing process.” Adrienne, however, is not modeled on Boxer or any of her friends. “I know a lot of single mothers in the Taos community, and I have a huge respect for what their lives look like.” Boxer is drawn to writing about women’s trials and tribulations when they choose a nontraditional life experience. “I’m really interested in writing for those women,” she said. “I feel we don’t hear enough of their stories in literature.”

The landscape is such a vivid character in the story that Boxer worried jokingly that she might inspire a sudden influx of new people to the mesa. “I was interested in the mesa as a mythological place but also a real space,”



Nora Boxer

she said. “The way people live in Taos feels really human and feels really shaped by the land. As I was writing the story, I just kept thinking, This is a love song to Taos.”

Anyone who has driven up through the canyon from Santa Fe and popped out to see the magnificent view of the Río Grande gorge splitting the landscape will appreciate Boxer’s sentiment. She renders the town itself as a beautiful footprint at the base of a sacred mountain and evokes the got-to-want-to-live-there feeling of the mesa as a collection of unusual dwellings looking out over the shimmering town.

During her time in Taos, Boxer started writing a novel, *Detail in a Round Globe*, about an HIV-positive woman from San Francisco who moves to East Africa. She found a patron who offered a round-trip ticket to anywhere in the world to the winner of a writing competition; Boxer won the writing competition and spent six months in Kenya researching her novel and doing nonprofit HIV work. “I want to write as a representative from the world of ... alternatives,” she said. “For most of my 20s, and even my early 30s, I was very interested in a subcultural lifestyle because I had a lot of idealism. I think when I started to write this piece, it was originally a way for me to unpack some of my disillusionment with subculture. That’s what this character’s journey is about.”

The Keene Award will allow Boxer to work full time to finish her novel, and she has a plan for how she’ll spend the rest of the money. She’s working on the idea of a nonprofit project, The Resourcery, a sustainable artists residency. “Residencies usually offer a place to live,” she said. “But if you weren’t taking people out of their existing homes, then you could offer them money — as if you were giving them a salary to be artists who give back to their own community.” Her plan provides funding for the residents so that they can live in their own homes and studio space where artists can work.

It’s no doubt that the ideas around community building, gifting, and culturally creative places that Boxer has experienced in her life so far are at play in The Resourcery. Boxer could easily return to the mesa and buy a small parcel of land to live on with the rest of the money. “It would be easier to embody those values personally,” she said. “But I feel this commitment to try and take that experience into the public sphere.” ◀