

## THE GREAT EQUALIZER

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As I did research for this poem

I never imagined I'd begin with a quote from a

larger-than-life storyteller turned cultural example of resilience

despite all odds, addictions, and encounters with the law

now a social media meme that begs the question

What kind of world are we leaving behind for Keith Richards??

and you might ask what the heck does Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones

have to do with this occasion we are gathered here to celebrate??

just as I asked myself how I share anything in common with an aged British rock star??

I've known his music all my life but never his reverence for libraries

as I learned that he once stated

"growing up, there are 2 institutional places that affect you most powerfully:

the church, which belongs to God

and the public library, which belongs to you.

The public library is *a great equalizer.*"

Though I begged to differ on the church belonging to God

having grown up in its literal shadow

I am nothing if not for equality and

its school library was my universe and books my world

as a child well versed in story, I was unshakeable

the stillness of a library

was something the restlessness of my home with 5 kids would never know

it was where I went when feeling alone and confused and

as difficult questions about God were my specialty

*malcriada* seemed to be my middle name

I felt the weight of societal shame for being a girl with a way with words

thankful that in parochial school I found not abuse, but understanding in

Sister Angie

the librarian who lifted the weekly checkout limit from 3 books to 15

but only for me

as she grew tired of watching me through the library window

run home to drop off my school bag and run right back

to exchange the three books I had just checked out the previous day

but I digress

this is not a story about Keith Richards or me and my affinity for the library

it's about what this library can do for you

but let us first acknowledge the land on which we stand  
as the traditional homeland of the Tigua pueblo peoples  
land stolen  
land which has always been a corridor  
natural and cultural  
way before Route 66 guided headlights headed westward on through  
a story of her ocean of prairie lands where  
herds of bison, antelope, elk, bighorn sheep and wild mustangs once roamed  
grandmother Mountain, our great keeper of direction and watermelon time  
northern edge for jaguar, southern edge for snowy lynx  
where the spruce, fir, aspen, ponderosa pine forests of the highlands  
whisper in song carried on winds to the piñon and juniper lowlands  
cottonwood bosques that oversee and protect our waterways  
just as she oversees and protects the integrity of her peoples  
Grandmother Storyteller  
who understands wisdom comes into the world  
not because of stories spoken, but stories heard  
wisdom she's anxious to share with the children gathered around and listening  
a chorus of grandchildren chanting  
grandma grandma tell us a story!  
they climb in and crawl up on her lap  
push and fight for the position closest to her beating heart  
to feel the vibration singing from her soul  
as they seem to recognize the lesson and  
truth of the story is vested in people old enough to remember  
this is she, your new library  
the spirit of a great Grandmother Storyteller  
fully aware of your struggles to exist and persist within her circle of life  
the circle of stories  
as she has seen it all from her perch on the porch of this vibrant neighborhood  
persistently perceived as the War Zone  
home to communities of  
Fair West, La Mesa, South San Pedro, Trumbull Village, Elder Homestead, Siesta Hills, Expo  
New Mexico  
elementary schools Emerson, La Mesa, Hawthorne, Mark Twain, Sandia Base, Wherry, Whittier,  
and Zia  
middle schools Wilson, Van Buren and Hayes  
and of course, the mighty mighty Hornets of Highland High  
a story of place  
a place sold in the media as  
the worst neighborhood in NM for the health and well-being of children  
a loose-jointed carnival of sex, drugs and booze  
the most violent place in the city

full of ruffians and bad vibes and out of control  
where gun violence and crime alluded to be the only equalizers  
the stories of this place called the war zone  
or International District in our politically corrected consciousness  
even though the notion of an international zone  
should conjure images of borderland spaces  
where individuals experience human rights protection gaps  
unlawful profiling  
gender based violence  
torture and ill treatment  
dangerous interception and arrest practices  
prolonged and arbitrary detention  
a saturation of policy enforcers who themselves are allowed  
ignorance of the law as a defense to their behavior  
but its citizens are not allowed that defense when  
unlawfully profiled by them  
arrested by them  
beaten down by them  
gunned down by them  
no benefit of their humanity  
a place where low-cost shelter  
makes it a home for immigrants, newcomers, refugees from multiple countries  
among its original families  
prosperous black businessmen homesteaders  
redlined out of home loans and purchases right here  
black GIs coming home from World War II  
prohibited from using their GI Bill loans to purchase housing right here  
we acknowledge them as well  
a story about equity and the belief that  
communities regenerate not from gentrification from the outside in  
but through its residents working from the inside out  
wherever we work with the intention of love  
rather than to import solutions that perpetuate  
poverty and addiction  
punishment and crime  
violence and fear  
solutions that come from the people most affected by the problem  
problems that can all be solved with the wisdom collected within these walls  
a wisdom under threat right now of book bans and burnings as  
libraries protect your rights to access information for free  
housing the widest possible range of viewpoints, opinions, and ideas and  
yet right now, because of that  
libraries across the country are under attack

of an unprecedented spike in censorship attempts  
with a focus on eliminating books with stories that address  
the voices and lived experiences of people  
just like you  
that span the spectrums of color and gender  
histories rewritten to less offend the offenders  
censored when freedom of information is  
fundamental to a just and American way of life  
so let's protect her right back  
as this one and her stories belong to you  
don't let them mislabel or erase you.  
Libraries help communities tackle economic divides by  
promoting literacy  
helping us develop skills needed to survive and thrive  
front line defenders in a global information society  
full of landmines of mis and disinformation  
Libraries preserve history  
and truth  
keeping us informed with facts  
rather than confused with political fiction  
as all people deserve free, open access to our shared culture and heritage  
that no moment in time that measures value only in monetary gain could ever erase  
libraries remain the true equalizers  
in a country with more guns than Americans  
libraries are a zone of peace in a world where that is a precious commodity  
leveling the playing field by serving people  
of every age, income level, location, ethnicity, physical ability  
providing the full range of information resources  
needed to live, learn, govern, and work  
a place where communities come together to revitalize struggling neighborhoods  
to learn, share, celebrate  
where they live  
who they are  
what they want to become.  
Grandmother storyteller here  
has recorded you in the annals of time  
has a lifetime of experience to share  
as living witness to how quickly times change  
she knows her audience  
offers advice and stories told with love  
without judgment of those who seek her wisdom  
this place, your library and  
the hoard of storied treasures that lay within waiting for your discovery as

she will never run out of stories because it is time to replenish her with yours  
that are just as good as the old ones and  
better than the stories they tell about you  
who better to tell them than you who have experienced them  
those stories will only be known  
so long as they are told  
so I will end with a couple of shorts of my own  
taken place in this exact spot, this lot where  
my daughter Angelica in Highland High school cheerleading uniform  
on her way home from a basketball game  
was jumped by some girls over a boy  
at this very bus stop  
then pepper sprayed in the face by the APD cop who responded  
because he claimed he'd learned early on "not to come between a girl fight"  
and my sister Yvonne who once lived right behind here  
who rode the bus back and forth to UNM  
dodging cat calls of "vamos a bailar!!"  
from the bus stop outside the Caravan East  
from where music always spilled out into the streets  
from musicians in range from Willie Nelson to  
the Godfather of NM music himself and  
the crush of my daughter Amanda's life  
Al Hurricane  
who she helped walk onto stage at his final show in that festive place and  
I will never forget how with the phone call of a friend to come out and play  
our neighborhood kids would gather just across the way  
to make the hike down to WalMart  
to help one mom carry groceries back home  
when she was injured at work, lost her job and her car and  
I will stop here because I have so many more just like  
Grandmother Storyteller here who asks  
what kind of world are we leaving behind for the most precious of us?  
It is beyond time to rewrite the myth  
reword your legend  
reclaim your destiny  
change the narrative  
remember  
show them who you truly are as  
this library is the glue that will gather generations together  
and like her  
the story of this place  
is the face of love  
the house that love built as

Dr. Cornel West once said  
*justice is what love looks like in public*  
today  
in this space  
the war zone has found her justice.  
And the look of love suits her ever so well.

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