



# TESTIMONY OF A SHIFTER

EMMA PÉREZ

“For fans of Ursula K. Le Guin and Margaret Atwood, *Testimony of a Shifter* is the queer, feminist dystopian novel readers have been searching for.”  
—*Booklist*

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**SHIFTER**

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Recovering the past, creating the future

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Cover art by Adela C. Licona, *Touching Terrains*

Working from shared perspectives on the body and its relationship to the natural world, scholar-activist-photographer, Adela C. Licona, photographs scholar-dancer, Cara Hagan, in the dried alkali lakebed of Summer Lake, OR. "Touching Terrains" is an image from the "Shedding Skin" series of photographs that use the lakebed context to explore environmental desiccation and human/terrestrial relations. Assuming there is always more to see, this collaboration searches for ways of experiencing the world through a visual expression of relational inseparability. "Shedding Skin" is a visual production of and for developed intimacies with the land undertaken to cultivate conditions and possibilities for rekindled kinships and sustainable co-habitations with the human and non-human world as these shifts and are reshaped.

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Para Luzia, *m'ija preciosa*,

*Y para mis sobrinos y sobrinas,*  
Miguel, Elyse, Teodoro, Almita y Azul,

always hope.



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There's no one like you, *mi'ja*. *Te adoro*.

# PART 1

“Amputate my freckled Bosom!  
Make me bearded like a man!”

—Emily Dickinson

“I have always wanted to be both man and woman . . .  
. . . to share valleys and mountains upon my body  
the way the earth does in hills and peaks.”

—Audre Lorde

FEBRUARY 9, 2058

Let me tell you how my body shifted. Just shifted. As a young boy, I couldn't control it. Even when I thought I'd figured out how I transformed, I hadn't. One second, I was a straight-up boy and without warning, poof—I stared in the mirror and there stood a brown, lanky girl. Me. A girl. But only for a few minutes. Once for a full hour, but as I said, I didn't know how, and soon enough I was a boy again. I thought, okay, it happens when I think certain feelings, and if I wanted to change back I'd focus hard, but nothing. The ashen-faced, stout boy I was had to wait until I was older.

All that changed. What I want you to remember, Yareli, is that you're brave. You're our brave daughter. Like your mother and me, you come from a line of proud Descendants—brown and black soul folx from native nations all over the globe. And don't worry about those who hate us, *mi'ja*. They just fear change. Well, there's more to the hate than that. The Woke Wars happened. The Woke Wars salted wounds with bitter hate, and that's when Descendant shifters were rounded up, put in cages, or left for dead. But we learned how to hide and oftentimes we hid in plain sight. Damn Woke Wars. We didn't start them, but we plan to finish them before they finish us.

On days like today when they take me away from you, they put me in a dark interrogation room with a single bright bulb dan-

gling from the ceiling. The Counselor, who plays judge and jury, stands above me while I sit on a plastic, rickety chair. Shadows on his face amplify his pallid skin. He's a pasty looking man whose sole duty is to persecute me.

I tell him my story. The one he wants to hear. He scrawls notes on an electric pad, pokes my shoulders and upper chest with a digital pen, scrawls more, pokes more and stops. He gawks at me, glaring at my gray eyes.

"You're not very pretty, are you? Alejandra?"

I mumble.

"Answer me," he says.

"No sir. I'm not."

"Not what?"

"Not very pretty."

"For a shifter female, you're very masculine, aren't you?"

He studies the file with my birth name, Benito Espinoza.

"Says here you know secrets, Benito."

With the digital pen, he shuffles through pages and pages of an interactive screen.

"Says you know Grand Library secrets," he goes on. "Reserved for the real Residents. Not for the likes of you."

I twist in the flimsy chair. I'm still sore from the last beating. Finally, he nods at the White Guard standing nearby.

The White Guards are the police division trained to keep an eye on us, meaning they watch us, follow us and lock us up when ordered. It's an intimate relationship that they can't resist. Dressed in a white, thick, padded uniform, the Guard on duty prods me with the wooden stick he uses to beat me on the sly or as a command from the Counselor. The club digs into my side, forcing me to stand, and I stumble as he shoves until I fall and rise again. He digs harder into my body, pushing me to our twenty-by-fifteen-foot steel cage in the basement. There're no windows in the building, and dim lights muddle my vision. He

chucks me inside, locks the door and bangs the steel web with the wooden club.

“You and your damn stories,” he says. “Shut the fuck up.”

He’s gawky with brown skin, brown hair, brown eyes. I know his type. He’s probably the son of someone like me, but in here, he’s an imposter. Betraying his own kind. He swaggers away, hitting the steel cages, cussing under his breath.

Now I can start my story for you, Yareli.

AUGUST 24, 2044

I'd been studying in the Grand Library with old men when I saw a woman carry herself with such daring that I wanted to know her name. On that day, she scoured the Library's halls searching for a gray-eyed man.

Let me be clear. I wasn't an elderly man but I considered myself an elder because I was among the greatest of books with the greatest of men in a building with architecture modeled after the grandest of archives. I sat on a red satin, plump high-back chair at an antique desk in a well-lit corner by a window. At the time, I had only seven books in print, and although two were brief one-hundred-page texts, I'd received fair reviews for my beliefs on metaphysics and things invisible and sensory. Of course, the Grand Library's Foundation valued quantity and length, and Residents who had published over twenty hefty volumes were worshipped. My membership was unusual, but the Foundation had been pressured to recruit Descendants, although it turned out we were nothing but show pieces required to uphold the Library's biased principles. You could say I was an experiment recruited to demonstrate that Descendants could be trained to better ourselves, but in the eyes of the Foundation, we'd never be the elite.

That this woman had been permitted in the room for Residents was unusual but not uncommon. She had petitioned the

Head Resident to be allowed to investigate the Egyptian blue scarab. He at times permitted outsiders to visit when they were hunting for a rare book.

From my peripheral vision I spied upon hair so black the light glinted a purple hue upon long, crimped strands. She wore a yellow cotton dress with floral print. Her dusky brown skin glistened, and the fleshiness of her body hummed as she rifled through bookshelves, tossing aside books that seemed to annoy her. As she approached me, I couldn't help but stare at her wide, magnificent hips fluttering the yellow flowers. She slammed a book on my desk, the reverberations echoed throughout the room's high dome of gold lamé lilies.

*"Pinche libro,"* she said.

I wasn't sure why she was swearing but I didn't care. Peering into her ebony eyes woke me so abruptly, I crossed my legs. The excitement of nerve-endings resurfaced after nearly a decade of numb detachment. Fortunately, on this day, I wore my robe. All Residents wore white robes in the grand room and, while the robes were not required, they were one of those traditions we enjoyed.

Tamaya, whose name I didn't know yet, opened the book, pointed to a page, looked down at me and asked, "*¿Qué chingaos quiere decir?*"

Of course, I understood Spanish. Almost everyone understood Spanish, but no one spoke it publicly unless they wanted to be punished or ostracized or told to go back to where they came from, which was usually within a twenty-mile radius. I endured the blue eyes of Residents upon me, and their stare raised the hair on my neck. I gazed up at her hoping she'd stop cursing although I was sure that if I asked, she'd defy me. Obviously, she was the disagreeable type and seemed to be testing me. How would I respond? How could I respond?

"What do you people mean?" she asked rhetorically.



I glanced at the graph, relieved she had reverted to English. On the page of an outdated journal, an outline of racialized classifications from the 1790s ranked people by color and social position. The categories were caste designations from “Español” and “Mestizo” to “Mulato” and “Coyote.” Skin tones were classified in a color-coded order, which meant that the closer one was to blanced, sallow, pale ivory, the closer one was to a sanctioned God.

Tamaya wiggled her index finger down the column to “*mulato*” and “*coyote*.” “*No somos animales*,” she said.

I wasn’t about to contradict history’s judgment that had also offended me. “I’m aware,” I responded.

She smiled. “¿*Tú eres el Benito Espinoza?*”

“Yes, I am,” I answered, puzzled that she knew my name.

“*Soy Tamaya*,” she said.

She placed her warm hand on mine. I couldn’t move. I was mesmerized by this mortal, who bulldozed into the Grand Library seeking my assistance. If the other Residents hadn’t reacted when she slammed the book on my desk, I would’ve thought I was imagining her. But here she was looming over me. Her skin and mine differed in color and texture. She had bronzed, dark flesh that shimmered next to my gray-brown hue, and when her silky forearms brushed against my bumpy skin, I was embarrassed. But she didn’t seem to care. Weaving her fingers inside mine, we clasped hands. I stood up, my nerve endings so stimulated that I had to piss.

“I have to go relieve myself,” I confessed.

“I’ll go with you.”

I led her to the spa room where women were not allowed. Residents had their daily massages in the private quarters that hid the elderly men who used the spa for secret shifting. If you peeked inside the windows of the closed doors, you could see well-known, well-established Residents shifting sexes, becom-

ing female in sex and body with a young male shifter brought in from the outside. It was all illegal.

No one noticed I escorted a woman into one of the steam rooms reserved for an intimate rendezvous. They were wrapped up in their own private parties. As soon as I shut the frosted glass door behind us, she pulled me to her, and at that moment, I realized how much I needed her.