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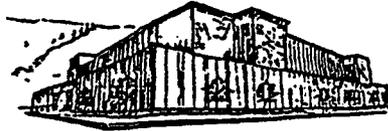
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Phoenix Suites

by

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for the degree of

Masters of Fine Arts.

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To the Magician's Tomb, an Ars Poetica

I will give you the landmarks,  
and if you should find  
the magician's tomb the Sinagua built  
somewhere in the maze  
of cinder cones and scrub,  
keep quiet about it.  
His talismans and skeleton  
are in boxes in Washington.  
Only you would want to know  
the way to a robbed grave.  
Find a slow chain  
of rail cars pushing on  
beyond the withering  
tennis court.  
Follow their clattering  
shadows and graffiti,  
through town,  
past the curio shops,  
live bate and ammo,  
the Napa Auto  
and the Mormon church.  
You will reach  
a frontage road.  
Take it as far east  
as you can stand—  
power lines will hum above you  
until ponderosas  
dwindle to junipers  
until junipers dwindle  
to salt bush—  
until the sun ends  
and a gas lamp appears  
in the clouded window  
of a derelict school bus.  
The man selling  
ersatz Kachina dolls  
will be the first to tell you  
he is your last landmark.  
Where he carves his bauble  
is the best place  
to step off the plateau  
and begin.

**I**

## You Must Drive to Phoenix

I'm sorry. Turn off your air conditioner. I know it's humid and the drivers are angry. Roll down a window, remove the face plate of your radio and throw it into a canal. Talk radio won't help you now. There is a way to understand one wild secret: I'm asking you to sleep

in a vacant lot in the center of a city. To rest on the belly of wilderness, you have to lie on bull-head thorns that poke through a dead softball diamond. Find

a field where cotton and alfalfa won't grow, no matter how much water is pressed down upon them. Only a backstop twists and rusts where sports and grass failed. In a hall of the San Carlos Hotel, refer to an aerial picture of this place. It shows the faintly dug creases of the Hohokam who grew corn and tepary beans. You must sleep where their water wouldn't cross, a small dry square between mountains. Canals still give it a wide berth. Cattle tear their hides in cat-claw acacia at the shake of a rattle. You have

only a rusty backstop and a raggedy pomegranate tree to go on, but don't sleep near these characters. They are bad companions, false ambassadors, visitors like yourself. They have worn their welcome to rust and tattered fruit. Ants make better bed fellows. Watch the swifts

perch in the holes when the metal cools at dusk. An elf owl will make a racket blinking in the branches of moon-lit, gutted pomegranates. Along an avenue, park and lose your hubcaps. Leave your car unlocked, and into a row of dead trees enter.

## My Father's Harvest

As my father died, he tended to the strangest obsessions.  
I found him in the garden instead of bed.  
Shooting gophers, he'd stand in slippers, blue  
checkered robe, 16 gage low on the shoulder,  
a Burpee seed catalogue pressed under an arm.  
He dragged the drooling desert hose on to the peas  
and forgot to take pills, or at night when the beat

of his slippers troubled him, when the dog's slow  
collar moved along the tile, when it couldn't  
lick where it stung, fire arrived at my window.

As my father died, he let the thrush pick the cat,  
and the dog's arthritic hip worked through the bleak  
afternoon doorways, the side of the house  
where the bottlebrush bloomed outside my room,  
where the wasps had attached a nest beneath the roof.  
They had a field day on the dog's hide  
and made him twitch. God knows why.

As my father died, he touched a torch to the eaves  
where wasps had built a city of drifting anger,  
where, late on a school night, I put a face  
to the red pane and watched their quick wings

turn on them like angels made of hair  
slow to find the ground. The side of my father's  
checkered shoulder and face were held in a light  
I thought set aside for the lighting of candles,  
not the hive girdled in flames, the strange flower,  
an omega gardenia afloat in his glasses, where his eyes burned,  
transfixed and pleased with his handy work.

Phoenix Suites

*By the sandy water I breathe in the odor of the sea,  
From there the wind comes and blows over the world.  
By the sandy water I breathe in the odor of the sea,  
From there clouds come and rain falls over the world.*

*A desert O-o'dam salt chant.*

I.

Imagine the first tired horses in the Salt River Valley and  
their last legs falling through grass as high as a Spanish bridle.

Our fathers' prayers and songs spun out over the waters are lost;  
the desert has devoured them like old ball courts and beetle-polished bones.

Cicadas grow louder in the hills surrounding the house,  
and like coyote or worry, it could be a lone singer or a swarm.

What has the helicopter found to make it scour the same stretch  
of Indian School Road— the engine and light crashing through the palms.

A construction worker finds a shell the Hohokam patterned with bands,  
villages inside valleys, desert worlds inside worlds. Forgotten lines travel inside his palm.

Is there something old in us that wants to dig holes and fill them?  
To attract the dead, dig a trench in the lawn and fill it with oxblood and mescal.

I don't know where I'm from-- a flood plain, a warning, a family tree,  
the lines in my grandfather's hands— , and the shells testify to this.

## II.

I've taken out a map to speculate where on the Verde River the divers found  
the hermit's body. On his desk, spider webs and an old mask— the hemisphere of a face.

The Central Arizona Project, the canal, the water gossamer Phoenix hangs by,  
is hemmed in with chain link warnings: no swimming, no fishing, patrolled by aircraft.

Camping by the old mines, I am startled out of my bag to grope for my glasses.  
Wild donkeys, descendants of failed endeavor, are laughing at the stars.

He hiked with a shepherd's crook, and led me to mariposa lilies, to ruins  
along volcanic saddles, to rings of saguaro fruit we picked with clumsy poles.

The ruins nestled in the rocky hills that ring the valley must have been  
a lonely and sleepless promontory. One tired eye was always on the water.

The dead here enter a world choked in old mesquite: sooty survivors,  
whose roots touch hundreds of rocky feet, touch caliche. Touch the water table.

### III. *Palimpsest*

Only some of the story is hidden: the old irrigation buried beneath sewers  
and avenues poke through the dirt. Phoenix keeps pace with its skeleton.

She is trying to hide on Indian School Road late at night with a wet towel  
on her head, and she dreams of ether and a good sleep on the bottom of a canal.

How did we get here? The teeth of the spillway are full of tricycles. Red lights  
shoo aircraft away from South Mountain. On-ramps lead to dusty oblivion.

Take me to where you were born, the arroyo turned orchard turned office space.  
They have started the foundation. Bring a blanket. We'll descend into the hole and floodlights.

The wilted man in the parking booth takes my money, lets me out of the structure.  
When we drive, we obey. All night, lanes converge. Horizons scatter— we obey.

I've been reading the birds: a trio of Harris' hawks hunt the lap dog. A turkey vulture  
heaves a sigh in the violet tufts of jacaranda trees in the gated community.

Old creases emerge in the desert floor. The plane pushes through a dust storm,  
and the swimming pools are ersatz stones set in the temple door.

IV.

*Open the dam, flood the river valley, float for us a resort, we want  
an arena, we want a riverboat rez casino. We want the Lucky Squaw.*

The O-o'dam trekked across the Sonoran Desert to gather salt from the gulf.  
A people without lakes, rivers, or brooks, prayed and waded into the waves.

The drive-through lube is a hole in the ground the car rolls over,  
and the man with the grease gun dreams about worker's compensation.

In the shade of the bottlebrush, a mocking bird turns an eye to me  
and opens its beak. I've forgotten what I wanted to say.

A line of cars stretches from Baseline Road to the Sea of Cortez, and we  
have no reason to gather salt. Nothing to tell the sea foam.

When I hear my name out loud for the first time in weeks, I am given  
an air filter. Wheels and axles crash through a world of lubricants and belts.

The surgeon forgets my name; the nurse shaves and marks the correct leg.  
In a stranger's hands I fall asleep and drop my keys. He may keep them.

The flash flood finds us. When it ends and leaves us with sunlight over the resorts  
and avenues, the stranded cars shimmer in the current like coins in a well.

V.

Northern, soothsayer skies. Black Mesa coal is burning,  
pushing water uphill to trickle through the circuits of Phoenix.

66 pounds per cubic foot, roots probing the calcite depths,  
mass of weighty thorns, the ironwood is still related to the pea.

No one is running to the mission to pray inside the adobe walls;  
the weathered Jesuit bone settles in the scrub and dirt.

The neighborhood sleeps on hot pavement. Searchlights badger  
a rock named Praying Monk. One climber falls; another holds on.

A storm jars me from sleep, and curtains of dust take  
the White Tank Mountains from the horizon in one gulp.

3000 gallons a minute. If you walk far enough and listen,  
water will begin to prophesy in the liquefied slurry of crushed coal.

Rolling blackouts. What haven't we bent to our will? The storm  
is spreading like oil, and power lines beget power lines beget power ...

**II**

## How Phoenix, Arizona Names Her Dead ...

On the corner of Bell Road and 19<sup>th</sup> Avenue,  
behind the glass and frames that hold the glass,  
inside the rusted grates of swamp coolers  
breathing life into the buildings, the dead  
are not within eyeshot. One glass building  
is named Cadillac Chiropractic, and silver guns  
wait for homes beneath the smeared countertops  
of a pawnshop named Tough Luck Pawn.

On the jukebox a slow ranchero tuba takes its time,  
and the man singing with the tuba is shameless  
about what he would do if he found Mariana alone.  
But this man has been dead for years. I forget his name.

Gabriel Celaya says to name something  
is to summon it from a great distance,  
and as I gaze into the onions and jalapenos  
on the dish, I want to say your name  
and rive dark meat from the bone, but I say  
Phoenix, Arizona, and the tuba slowly trots  
in the buckling heat.

The adult boutique is named Paradise.  
A horse track in the desert is named Turf Paradise,  
and the motel that has been converted  
into a church is still named Desert Breeze.

The last time you said my name,  
we took a room there. The one window,  
crowded with insects and screens,  
overlooked the canal. We made love slowly  
in the heat of the day and listened  
to the cicadas and traffic until we grew  
tired of our bodies and of how our names  
had become little sounds we fired at the walls  
and forgot. As if we had known each other.

I should cross Bell Road as the city's token pedestrian,  
100 degrees in the shade, the wilted car lot flags  
waving at vacant upholstery, and I should kneel  
in the sanctuary that used to be a honeycomb  
of small carpeted rooms. The man  
with hooks for arms who looped us our key  
will be rubbing a vacuum over the altar.  
In a pew two boys will listen to a police scanner  
babble numbers. From the empty church office,  
a television at full volume will call roll  
for the missing and will name every name.

## The Radish Garden

Sunday morning, my father is yelling in a voice reserved for when I make mistakes, for when I feed the dog pork bones or when I leave a sprocket set scattered in the rain. *Get out here, boy. Quick.* I am barefoot, running across bullhead thorns to the chicken wire fence I had helped him build. He is bent over in the garden with his wrists in the ground. A brown radish, split and thick as his arm, is between his hands in the soil. As I run up— the soles of my feet peppered with thorns— he says, *Watch!* and pulls the fat radish from its grip.

Death--the quick taste  
of a bitter and split root  
left too long in the earth.

Summer, my father introduces me to his mistress, and my mother begins to bury herself in the needle work and red earth of Oak Creek Canyon. I ask him what he does when he goes to work, and two doors swing open: there, beneath powerful fans, lights, and eager young doctors, lies my first corpse— a brown man with frizzy gray hair. I am nine years old. The saw cuts through the skull like butter. My father brings the heart on a board, places his finger on spots where it has failed. *Boy, tell me what you're thinking right now.*

By a fluke, an owl  
over the pitch lot—  
where's the light for such shadows?

In the studio of his mistress, two men share a narrow love seat with a boa constrictor coiled between their arms and necks, weaving them together in a shimmering and patterned band. Against the walls lean paintings with baffling titles: one, a green murk beneath a tuft of scrub she calls *Soldier*; another, a bloodied sliver of moon mingled with starfish, conches, and jellyfish she names *Constance*. There's no place to sit, and I grow tired under the confused paintings and try not to watch the couple wound inside the snake. The men drink milk from Pearl Beer glasses we used to have at home. *Don't tell Mama we came here, and What do think of the two men playing with each other? Do you like girls or boys?*

Cicadas in a storm  
by the gravel road  
sing infinite and brief names.

After my father's funeral, I am watering the garden and wearing Sunday school slacks, without a shirt, socks, or shoes. I drag the hose over a shoulder, and ants stream from the hose onto my back and neck. They storm my vacant shoes. I've flung a collared shirt onto the sticky leaves of the summer squash where the ants enter and exit pockets and sleeves. Their angry ant minds are baffled by my absence. The house outside the garden fills with people, and the strike of hard heels on distant kitchen tiles enters the chicken wire like dust on butter beans and plants heavy with split

and dull tomatoes. I close the gate, leave the running hose to hang from the arms of a scarecrow.  
The vegetables go begging on the vine.

Persimmons, pristine  
and high in the tree—  
keepsakes for an empty house.

The family flies to Honduras for a wedding, and the plane rattles and sinks into a valley of green decay, low thunderheads and ditched cars. In the seats around me, my brothers, mother, aunts worry and hold hands. The plane jerks and sinks, and they repeat: *we're ok, we're ok, we'll be ok..* A stranger in the seat next to me falls apart about a baby daughter in Tulsa. Beyond the wing approach trees for which I have no name. I take out pictures of the family I brought to show the new in-laws. The photographs shake in my hand: my baby face covered with sand; the brothers jump motorcycles in the desert; smiles and cans of beer surround a table 1979; my mother squints in the sun of her wedding; my father stands alone on some Mexican shore as the light from the Sea of Cortez holds him in the frame. His square hands cradle a gnarled head of driftwood, and as he stares into it—the ground rising now beyond the quivering wing—his white hair reaches out to the wind.

Dark cedars moan,  
and a grackle on the lam  
pauses for their voices.

## Drinking in the Daytime

The young man is splashing cold water on his face.  
Mirrors brighten inside his body.

The day is submersed in oil, viscous copper—a distortion  
that buckles the air and men's room and old piano

that is locked, but you can look at it and hear  
someone coughing, someone saying

*sober up all you want, no one is going anywhere.*  
*Tengo sueno*, a girl says, which means

she is either dreaming or  
bored with him, and soon, her heels are firing

away from us into the street, out to the workers  
in their holes, to their laughter and laying

of fiber optics. One failure usurps another  
like mandibles missing teeth, vacant skulls

above us that ripple and grimace  
among our chrome reflections and a local

news story about thirst and heatstroke,  
and hidden in our rapt expressions, there is

the conviction that nothing can keep us  
from swimming to the surface of this place and rising

through the pressed tin ceiling  
into some lake world we have been dreaming about

where dimly lit cabins along the shore harbor  
other lives, where we are up to our necks

in a voyeur's warm water and gazing into  
far away rooms, where we can leave

the agitated fire inside the glass words,  
CERVEZA ESPECIAL

and leave the orifice of the puma's skull, the cracked  
and fragile sobs of the man three stools down,

the rubber grapes, socketless fathering only dust,  
the bottles saying Creme de Cacao and Blue Guracao,

the x-ray of someone swallowing water on the screen  
with laboring tongue, whose bones

are no more important  
than gossamer or smoke or the old man

wandering into the yucca to vanish or electric spades  
and hearts turning

poor blue guracao inside  
the machines along the wall.

Zopilote Love Poem

Walking in the wet creosote bush all morning  
we come to the turkey vultures—  
a purging of what is tangled inside us—

where we vanish into each other,  
into a savoring and slipping of sharp knots

beneath our skin—hungry noises  
we once knew as our names.

Zopilotes,  
*cathartes aura*, breaths of persistent air,

hesitate and hang in shallow arcs—  
their circles awkward and tilting.

Winged reflections crowd puddles in the trail  
as new comers arrive and confer

like monks in the limbs.  
Nothing is completely lost

of the bull on its side—  
felled by lightning,

one horn  
buried in the roots of a juniper,

its black flanks swaying at their tugs,

in a desert now blooming  
with their small and naked heads.

## Flagstaff Aubade

Leave now. The snow floats through the open door  
and vanishes on your body like our name.

Ponderosas cling to the frozen weight, dawn  
anonymous as chainlink. Freight traffic  
sweeps cinders into our eyes.

A train muscles its way through town without you  
and won't stop until New Mexico. Smears and automatic  
doors have shut behind us, and hollow point rounds  
mingle with pills at the table.

Take the truck  
and prozac winter with you.

The cup is on its side,  
and the window behind your head is an angry knot  
of power lines, transmitters, and sunlight.

You have cleaned your gun. Go.  
The black tide is pulling out.

## New Roils

**roil** (roil), v.t. [[rust, robigo, akin to French rouiller, ruber, RED]] 1. To render (water, wine, etc.) turbid by stirring up sediment. –syn. 2. Annoy, fret, ruffle, exasperate, provoke, rile, vex: *to be roiled by delay* [P]—v.i. to be agitated. 3. v.i. To make (a house) cloudy, muddy, or unsettled by stirring: *The storm blew open the doors and roiled the house.* 4. FIG. To render (a house, household, family, etc.) cloudy, muddy, or unsettled with an intent to annoy, fret, ruffle, exasperate, provoke. *The drunk father blew in from Mexico and roiled the house with the unexpected storm.*

**roil<sup>2</sup>** (roil), v.t. 1. To gather (child, clothes, keys) and flee. 2. (Americanism) to disturb or disquiet; irritate; vex (neighbors) by screaming in the front yard of a house. *The father and mother roiled the neighbors shortly before dawn.*

**roil<sup>3</sup>** (roil), v.t. 1. To move (child, self, clothes) to a trailer home in a canyon by a creek. 2. (Americanism) To fire bottle rockets into a creek or stream. 3. -adj. *Ichth.* To be fired upon by a bottle rocket. *The roiled trout suffered a case of the nerves.*

**roil<sup>4</sup>** (roil), v.i. 1. To fall off a cliff in San Carlos, Mexico. 2. v.i. To wake up in a Guaymas hospital with a head shaved and stitched up like a baseball. 3. To wake up in a Guaymas hospital convinced that nuns singing in the dark are two tents on a camping trip where one's absent family is having a good time. 4. (Americanism) To regret. 5. [Now Rare] To repent. *In the hospital bed and darkness of the nun's hymn, his father roiled and roiled and roiled.*

A Child's Piano Lesson and Dust Storm

Dust and clouds  
    are claiming  
what the teacher

asked you to repeat last week:  
    small sounds  
you must find

among the many—  
    arpeggios maybe  
that should leap

    up from the lacquer  
on cue, but you have only  
    the instrument,

foreign and vast  
    before you, alkali flats—  
a wasteland the faces

    of student and teacher  
must float in: you wait there  
    on the bench

until her fingers  
    find the dark keys  
you forgot. You listen carefully

    to the angry cinnamon  
gallop of gum  
    in her mouth and

blood shooting in your ears.  
    The wind is  
trying to lift

    the house again,  
lose ends like trash  
    or even tiles

head skyward, and you  
    would very much  
like to be a plastic bag

    above the houses and trees.  
Motes hang  
    before the windows,

waiting for you

on the stand  
is sheet music

you don't understand—  
it is your turn  
to fidget

before the keys again  
and try to remember  
what you have heard,

but the ants are caged  
inside the abacus,  
and the muted hammers

will not fall for you.  
Flats and sharps  
vanish into the drapes,

into the body  
of a sleeping dog.  
A pot murmurs

on the stove; the storm  
dazzles a bush—  
you hear every note.

### **III**

## Looking for Federico

### *Parque Federico Garcia Lorca, Granada*

If a gray mare were here to lower her head  
into the arms of a wounded rider,  
and if from some distant promontory  
officers of the Guardia Civil were raising  
binoculars to stone faces, and if you  
found yourself privy to a young man  
weeping into his hat, you would  
be either in the world of elegy  
or among the curios they sell at the gate,  
each plate a shimmering cliché of the poet  
smiling in a plaza or playing piano for Dali,  
*Romance Sonambulo's* refrain in gold  
across a cigarette lighter, sixty wounded riders  
loving the green, but in the center, the house  
is a wind-polished bone one could overlook  
for the roses that crowd the paths  
and well-tended rosemary, and the people stroll  
in the gravel after a siesta, yawning,  
answering tiny phones in their coats.  
From the poet's doorstep you follow  
them in their circles as if they were workers  
grinding a mill—these citizens content  
to turn left or right until the light narrows  
and they must leave. You may search  
the wrought iron if you want. Is there a trace,  
a *duende* of circumstance? A boy  
is planting bougainvillea, and as he  
turns the thorny strands, the lavender  
blossoms begin waving to you  
like the gloved hands of children.

## The Lover of Snakes

*For Geoffrey Platts*

For weeks I've been trying to evoke  
the lover of rattlesnakes,  
monkey grass, mariposa lilies  
in the rocky basalt above the canyon,  
packrats in the yucca outside his cabin,  
jojoba --more nutlike & bitter than berry--,  
the zone tailed hawk as much  
as the turkey vulture it copies,  
the zopilote nest he found  
in northern Mexico, saguaro fruit  
we picked with polls he took  
from land surveyors, lichen, elf owls, moss,  
what's left of the humpback chub,  
the desert five spot, a small spring I swore  
I would show no one (where blackberries  
and a diamondback thrived) catclaw  
acacia, creosote, ant lions, the tarantula  
that paid us no mind in the trail,  
gnat catchers, Harris' hawks he hoped  
no falconer would tame, mesquite,  
bark scorpions, the jeweled and docile  
gila monster's slow and secretive ways,  
scrub oak,  
    words-- precise as coyote scat  
full of berries and prickly pear (thorns and all)--  
atop a pile of stones,  
the small coyote he saw leap  
from a juniper branch in the middle of a storm  
(the air around him--rich with ions, lightning, and lusty plants--  
was delicious, he said),  
    *and Madrecita*, little mother,  
Earth--to whom he said aloud,  
thank you.

Two Letters

*(The Poet and Photographer)*

Dear Mark, I can see  
the wash of peach  
light that might

be the flower girl's breast  
or the firm hemispheres  
of the swimmer's back, and

I recognize the delicate  
and pedaled shadows  
gathering leaf-like as...

what's the use? You  
could have taken this picture  
through a sandwich bag,

or from space. Somehow  
you have rigged your Nikon  
to an electronic microscope.

Forgive me, but is this  
a picture of your lover  
or the magnified surface

of an egg?  
Your friend and poet,  
Miles.

enclosure

Dear Miles— Thanks  
                  for your honesty  
                                  and poem, "Midnight Snack  
with Lorca," but as much  
                  as I enjoy the skull  
                                  in the ewe's milk,  
the harlequin cats  
                  going at it  
                                  in the walls, and even  
your hidden monks  
                  arming themselves  
                                  in the pharmacy—  
the monozygotic moon

and hobbled pony  
in the rosemary  
throw me  
for a loop.  
The lavender gloved boys  
are neither menacing  
nor visceral,  
and that's no way  
to describe a flower  
in the wind! I just don't get it.  
Munch crackers  
in moonlight  
with some other martyr  
for a change.  
I'd be happy  
to show you  
what bougainvillea  
looks like.  
Yours,  
Mark.

The Song of Saint John of the Cross

Water I cannot bring myself to drink,  
windowless privy of thriving flies, light  
from a slit three fingers wide, I must eat  
what the vicar's man brings me. From the wall,  
a cat in heat howls, pacing the yard,  
and calms herself for the crier of hours.

I drift and waste in howling shifts, the hours  
called out like names of the dead. Dare I drink  
what the vicar brings? Hemlock in the yard  
pitching spades across the page, steals the light  
from the breviary. Words fade to walls  
and dull echo. Canticle droplets eat

through the niter seep. Rise now and eat  
the miserere, the canonical hours  
called out, my voice cracking against the walls  
of friars. The cuts of their canes say, "drink  
from the gall, brother"-- refectory light  
gutters like swallow shadow in the yard.

Still, the bride song beckons me from the yard,  
and in the whisper of the cane that eats  
me, she is pleading: *where are you, my light,  
my little Seneca. Like seeds, the hours  
fall— my fruit is left writhing with drinking  
wasps.* I can hear her howling from the walls

until the friars pitch slop, and the walls  
reek and fall silent. Unwinding the yards  
of thread my gaoler gave me, I must drink  
from the mind the lover's talk. I must eat  
their clusters of grapes gathering like hours,  
and scrawl in the privy's derelict light,

for she is calling me into the light  
to lower a stone, and measure the wall,  
to loosen the bolts, and tie the sheets for hours  
in braids, so I may climb into the yard  
and leave the Vicar General to eat  
my wondrous knot of rhymes, *for I have drunk*

*his wine and milk. Eat, friends and drink until  
you are drunk with love.* Light slips from the cell,  
the yard, the walls, and with it, I will follow.

Jorge Luis Borges Falling Down the Stairs

National Library, Buenos Aires, 1969

Destiny has its way  
with Borges, cruel symmetry in repetition  
to forever elaborate useless ways,  
all the way  
to the bottom of the cellar. This is  
a pure diversion of my will, a way  
through laborious cosmology, to exult  
in yet another circular solitude.  
The ineffable core is always solitude,  
illusion of pain in mirrors, the way  
the ceaseless stairs offer but a slight change in the series  
now and then, a sharp turn in the well, the series

resumed, some feeble artifice of Borges lost in a series  
in a wool suit, way-  
ward limbs straining toward the repetition—  
to halt the spectral series  
of collisions, the stairs and Borges,  
to forever elaborate the series  
of jars and pitching dramas, is a series  
within series of death and an a rethinking  
of history's landfill of metaphors.  
Stop thinking and the stairwell may come to an end; think,  
and the steps stretch toward oblivion, your solitude  
complete. The core is always solitude, always, always

Borges falls. What does Borges fall to?—some perfection  
of a series  
created by the world it bounds, a dizzying idiosyncrasy  
no doubt—the only place where all places are, solitude  
seen from every angle without overlap with each way  
exulting in another,  
Borges falls toward Borges, who, in falling solitude  
takes the shape of a man pointing in ecstasy  
both to heaven and to earth, a spiraling  
gesture showing the lower world's dark solitude  
is the map and mirror of the higher. The thinking  
Borges moves toward the tornada inside a thinking

and signifying Aleph, whose thinking  
conjures all stars, all lamps, pure ecstasy  
without confusion begetting  
stars, minerals, plants, every series,  
mutation, every secret and property, thinking  
no more stairs, Borges—but  
alkaline flats, planes, pampa, a single mattress, a way  
out of this Shih Hwang Ti of stairs, a short way

to the bottom of this cycle,  
some two bit fruit of delirium, some ecstatic

grackle numb on berries is no delirious ecstasy  
as it flies into a mirror image. I have become  
the letters in a closed book, an ecstasy  
of iotas and dots, the characters lost in  
happenstance, but the stories gather in the solitude  
of the binding, and they keep Borges falling  
as one in vertigo, oneiric tigers bounding in ecstatic  
talk down the well. This series  
of forking rivulets, eternal and tied series  
of actual and ersatz stars,  
that a nearby accordion might  
grind its way into the labyrinth of Borges' ear, O be  
done with me.

Antonio Machado and I

*after Del Camino XXII*

Inside desire, the paths  
are tangled & mixed--  
they can't be trusted,  
but we travel

as the pony's bright fly  
ends its majestic life adrift  
in the folds

of night flowers. Black gates  
of the park pitch  
shadows at the calm.

I can't tell memory  
from bauble,  
stars from destiny,  
the runt of the litter  
from puppets.  
I recognize the pilgrim

in so much as he  
travels in the shadow  
of a spent old man,  
and somewhere, there's a  
fragrant turn in the road,

where the terrible  
takes its course,  
maybe half goat— horns strung

with roses, set in stubborn  
motion. Maybe far off broods

a dispute, personified  
in the mind  
like a finger of smoke

in the olive groves.  
One certainty, Antonio,  
where we walk  
is bitter.

Antonio Machado and the Trees

*Baeza 1915*

The poet is eavesdropping on the sycamores  
at dusk. They talk with the copper light, the wind  
they trap with long, knotted fingers--  
their shapes racing against the chipped walls  
of the village where he has banished himself at forty  
to live with his mother, now that his child bride  
has been two years in the grave. In the light  
and chatter of the trees, the poet is resolved  
to die teaching children French,  
to live out what's left, years shipwrecked in a sea  
of smoldering olive groves, the small pleasures  
of regular verbs and nightfall in rural Spain.  
He has only to read the gossip of the cruel trees,  
their talk of the lost bride. *Leonor*, they say, how fragile  
she was when they married, and how consumption  
riddled her away from him. The sycamores know  
there was so little left of her that he secretly wanted  
to carry her coffin like a guitar case  
against his chest, with neither company nor ceremony,  
all the way to the grave. As the day fades, the trees  
mutter in their ranks before the last light leaves them.  
The conversation is over. The poet, ashamed,  
exposed on his hill, shivers  
among the silent arches, the dark plaza,  
where lions bite down on the brass rings of the doors.

## IV

## The Quail

Dusk is swollen with old stories, and behind the wheel  
there is no remembering them. Sensors trick on  
halogen lights. You leave your car  
along the interstate and shuffle off the bright shoulder  
into the arroyo where summer is over and cicadas  
are sleeping, where the wellspring of coyote laughter—  
sudden and kindred—sinks in. In the brambly watershed,

white thorn acacia and silence hold you with nettled hands.  
Mesquite tufts fork like cracked alkali flats  
against the sky. The feather bush is still and dark.  
From hummingbird trumpet, the sphinx moth twitches away,  
and the night's distant fluttering is like sea water  
flooding the workings of your father's watch, or as when he called  
out to you from a lone ironwood tree

and you rose from an uneasy sleep to run barefoot  
and terrified to his voice. Inside the thorny mass, his hands  
held a buff-collared nightjar tangled in the branches.  
His fingers beneath the flashlight spread the dead-leaf patterns  
of a wing. *This*, he said, *is a mystery*, and he bloodied  
his wrists to free it from the thorns— where, tonight, you find  
yourself pushing through the brambles to a house,

hollow and beached in its yard. The last of the powder light  
ripens around the weathered riggings, and beyond the gate,  
a cluster of trees you cannot name compels you to enter  
their world of murmuring birds. Each tree a family,  
a hemisphere of dozing quail. At your step,  
into rivulets of stars, penumbral boughs  
with startled wings, they scatter.

Cazorla

Taking off your shirt in that strange little room  
overlooking the valley at dusk, the woven terrain,  
olive groves, frail vineyards, I remember  
the wispy tails of control burning. On the gentle slope  
of your breast, you had tattooed a bright fish,  
flame red with long whiskers and a man's face.  
We were making a mistake together  
in a sandy bed by an open window,  
the only view in the small rooming house  
of seasonal laborers. We had been  
holed up together for a week, waiting  
for friends from Madrid. We were bored walking  
through the village, the blue electric streetlights,  
the tall quick glasses of Alcazar beer,  
the men, dusty from beating the olives  
from the trees. They watched us with a tired ardor,  
their backs to the bar. You put your cold hands  
into my pockets and wanted to go back to the room.  
I wanted to ask about the fish I  
nuzzled with my mouth, but you asked me to stop  
and listen for a second to the bats  
that lived in the cliffs surrounding the fields.  
I heard only the spring flowing from the moss  
and rocks that fed the sea-bound Guadalquivir,  
the river that carried nightmare, the first  
conquistadors. I woke up cold with the smoldering fields.  
You were coughing and putting on a sweater,  
wanting coffee and cigarettes. The friends  
arrived, and we crowded the little tavern  
with English. The subject of piercing and  
painting came up, and I slipped  
from our noise into the street, found our river  
and sat listening with the bats at the mouth  
of a mule trail and a spring, while you told  
your story of a wise fish that wrestled  
a fisherman who had lost his faith far at sea.

Semana Santa: Procesión de Silencio

A crowd of twenty thousand  
buries the moon.  
Children dressed like sailors  
on their papas' shoulders  
block the light above.  
Hooded *penitentes* and their candles  
glide by under a dark cross.

The plaza breathes  
and moves their feet.  
Prayers misfire in my head  
as thirty flames float  
through limbs and coats.

A perfumed shadow  
puts a hand on my neck  
and mistakes me for her husband.  
"Quédate," she whispers,  
"Quédate quieto."

Feverscape

*Florence, Arizona*

Lightning splits the pepper tree outside  
my window, its halves flapping sparks against  
power lines. The night begins in a harvest  
of harlequin bugs and velvet ants where  
once eggplants and chilis swelled like blisters.  
Fields harbor strange cats and search lights

fanning into the empty dust. The lights  
must be looking for an inmate outside  
the razor wire. Tonight my blistered  
body crops up in a canal against  
the main spillway's rusty grates, where  
river water trickles and harvesters

fling alfalfa dregs and dust-- a harvest  
of spores and strains of valley fever-- light  
enough to travel entire counties. Where  
can you hide in a barren field, outside  
of digging a hole into the blight? Against  
the tractor leans a broken and blistered

eucalyptus. Monsoons of dust blister  
the wallpaper, the witless flag, harvesting  
scrub and shallow rooted trees. Against  
the dark backdrop of storm, prison lights  
scour the void, and they will find me outside  
chain-link, beyond aqueducts, where

vultures have begun on the mind. Where  
can anyone hide in this world? Blister  
beetles riddle sheets and my dreams. Outside,  
the prison looks as empty as harvest.  
I hear a distant alarm and tumble lightly  
through search and thunder. The dog against

the house thumps a frightened tail, and against  
my better judgment, I let him in. Where  
would I try to run? The tree flicking light  
through gauzy curtain wisps blisters  
my tongue. Gusts sway the house, and a harvesting  
owl drops upon a shadow's plot. Outside,

blistering holes against the blight, where  
we hide inside gated worlds, where I harvest  
and sweat beneath tower light, I step outside.

Swimmers

A dog, a deck of cards, and eight ball  
side pocket—clean,

which means the ball touches nothing on its way to the  
hole in the sand the player falls into, where,

on this piece of paper, you have begun to answer  
the counselor who brings you

your shallow paper cup and pen . *write for me*—  
he reminds you—*and this is not*

*a test—ten things you value most—*  
priorities, he calls them,  
the stars, for one,

that you cannot see from here,  
that cannot leave their obligations to no one,

even when two brothers  
--in the back of a pickup

driven by a drunk father—  
gaze at them: tack holes, lost and random

that when connected  
are called Hercules, Scorpius, Crux,

bottles rolling  
back to us in the truck bed on turns,

headlights from oncoming freight,  
narrow lanes...

>>>

and I was afraid. Add that  
fear to the list, add the dog

that dug beneath the chicken wire

and into the summer squash,

add that morning my brother ran with it in his arms

to hide it from the ax, add the father

behind the ax who made me

fetch a switch for my brother,

add the eucalyptus I climbed  
hoping I would disappear into its branches...

then I'd consider the sky a priority I climbed into,  
whose illusory buckling of air the heat evoked

reminded me of flashbacks on sitcoms. I thought  
the Phoenix sky would make everything

a dream, or at least a memory I could later be grateful for,

but the world only grew sharper: the swamp cooler rattle,  
doves in teardrop leaves, murky pools in yards,

windows and brick behind which  
I knew my father had the dog and my brother

And down with a whip  
like he had asked,

>>>

you are falling, but not far,

onto a sandy shelf inside  
a spent mine you didn't know existed,

that you wish were merely a trope,  
not a place where the sky is a fissure—

this clearing of dust and moonlight.  
You have shot a thousand rattlesnakes  
whose heads now float in baby jars

because they fit there  
so that we may see their eyes

looking at nothing  
in the formaldehyde murk,

and you have shot your share of mockingbirds  
in mid-gaze to be here—  
beneath a patch of Earth that has given way

>>>

now holding still as a fugitive's fingers, your brother's fingers  
are bridging a pool cue

the day he took the five thousand dollars the recruiter gave him  
and abandoned boot camp in Oklahoma.

He wanted to see the Pacific and kept saying today had been  
the greatest of days.

*On the lam, he said, you notice everything,*

and come San Bernadino and a dust storm,  
his attention ran out. San Bernadino,

and it was getting late. He had hoped to throw himself

into the water and to keep going,  
but he confessed he would, at best,

throw his hemostats into the waves

before turning himself in,  
and when he left them

hanging like gut from an elk antler,  
you shot the game out alone,

taking your time on the eight,  
thinking of him that morning:

weak stars surrendering to the west, and dawn exploding  
in his mirror and in the glass of the trucks

and in the bottles— the chiming Indonesian parade  
he carried inside him.

>>>

The faces of trigger fish  
are not our faces,  
but they are faces  
born as arrows,  
as glass-eyed  
trajectories

now in heaps  
    upon the deck—one fish  
turns itself over  
    in the alien air,  
                    and you have  
another eye— nearly  
                    another fish,  
and the father's  
                    one good eye  
                    bids us  
clean these changelings  
                    pumping nothing  
                                    in the sunlight;  
a day's sail from nowhere,  
                    near a rock in the Sea of Cortez  
named Monserrat,  
                    the boat adrift,  
  
sharp jib shadows  
                    drawing slowly as a blade in the worthless air.

>>>

At dawn, Quonset huts were burning in alfalfa fields,  
in some side drama exhausting itself beyond the mile markers.

Add fiberglass, add oxygen,  
add all that luxuriates in an inevitable absence.

>>>

Again, add the father,                      a red face card,  
who is speaking                              over his shoulder  
in a jack's regalia,                         his one good eye  
commanding you                              to swallow the fish  
  at the bottom of the cup

                                    that are sometimes there,  
and that are other times  
                                    hard to find

inside the lithium hum of the ward, where the brother lying next to you in the sleeping bag must  
circulate a bulwark of chemicals to keep the silence of the cards in his hands, where there is one boy  
in the back of the truck. One shooter at the table all night. Talking to himself.

>>>

Add the brother that isn't there, a swimming pool,  
one son, one father, who, in a sway of dust and spores,

slips into the water and throws weak circles  
around his failing body.

As he reaches the edge closest to you,

add the moment  
a stranger surfaces

and invites you in.

Thirsty Ghazal

From the dam comes a diverted trickle—a lifeblood gone,  
and at the Turf Cantina, the sign reads: *BE GOOD OR BE GONE*.

A dust storm opens my door, and upon creosote tresses, she sets  
half the desert upon my chest: *there will be no flood*, and she's gone.

The abandoned dog track rises in the sandy flats. Above rows  
of empty seats, it whispers from a flapping metal hood: *be gone*.

Into the water park's chlorinated depths, our children slip  
from the mouths of bug-eyed pirates and toads and are gone.

Padre Kino drove his desert slaves to craft a grand abstraction  
from cottonwood: a ship. Both people and cottonwoods are gone.

*Planet of the Apes* was filmed on Lake Powell. Across miles of tap  
water, the astronauts paddle like alien driftwood and are gone.

Moonrise at Wukoki

Saddled without rider the mare followed us to the ruins,  
and the crater-scarred moons shifted in her haunches as she walked.

The high walls opened to the sky, and the earthen floor held me before  
row upon row of stacked and mortared stones, everything ending in stars.

They buried their dead in the floors. I've cared about few graves,  
their square stones, names sunk into the wet grass, until now.

We were brave to make love in the rock walls, and the cold fell on my back  
from Cassiopeia's Chair. Perhaps the bones of a child held us in place.

We resisted making stories about the horse and marveled at her  
careful and curious strides in the scrub, and we drove away in silence.

*Take the blanket to the great room. I remember. You left the shutter open  
to expose the arriving moon. I'll meet you there.*

## When the Water Leaves

After bedtime, the boy forgets something, a bike left on its side  
in the scrub behind the yard, plastic soldiers left in the arroyo, loose ends

that keep him up and send him into the desert to gather the pieces in his pajamas  
and sneakers, and there, beneath a degree of moon and shadow, he finds his father

moving a chair well into the night on the edge of the property, a voice, the ember  
of a mail order cigar in a shadow's hand, the surrender of ice in the bourbon.

The boy continues to forget and doesn't sleep, even when the chair grows  
empty, and the house fills with standing strangers and covered dishes,

dress shoes strike the tiles after the service, the minister's hand arrives,  
the garden falls into itself from neglect, the chair behind the fence fades

in the heat, the water table drops, the mountains beyond the yard sprout transmitters,  
and the horizons brown with homes and roads. He is awake with the sound.

When the water leaves, what remains is for the taking. The tide will never come back in,  
and the moon moves through an Earth gone brittle beneath his feet, a desert

of seeds without edges, a powder beneath tires, a color under the finger nails  
of landscapers, an irritation in the throats of bulldozers. The desert has become a dust

that keeps the eyes from ever crying. He can hear the television sets  
of his neighbors, the radios behind car windows, someone coughing in a kitchen.

He is awake behind the yard and builds a basket with what dies:  
a cowboy's barbed wire, the hair of a pony struck by lightning,

cottonwood root, mesquite, a dried strand of yucca, his father's  
leather belt, old pajamas, creosote, a scratchy strand

of lawn chair, Christmas lights pulled from the tree, a hip bone  
that plagued a German shepherd, a strip of sail from a sunk catamaran,

the feather of a bird he'll never see again. From the debris of a vanished tide,  
he builds a basket with what dies and shoulders it off the property.