

Our Lady of the Water Gallons

*Un mensaje a mis compañeros*  
Arivaca, Arizona

I etch black line Sharpie *Virgenes*  
on plastic water gallons: one arc,  
Ichthys in the sand at travelers' feet;  
one post carving, hobo's mark  
on the road. The *Virgen* speaks to faceless  
shadows traveling when the land is dark.  
I etch black line Sharpie *Virgenes*

on plastic water gallons. One arc  
is the bridge between L.A. and Arivaca,  
liquor store murals and water drawings,  
dogs on lawns and dogs trained to attack a  
man and woman darting up Hippie Mountain.  
They've hiked this far from Guatemala  
on one plastic water gallon, one arc.

Ichthys in the sand at traveler's feet  
is the tale of a man left shirtless and shoeless  
beside thorny mesquite. *Como un pez sin agua*,  
he is fished off the road limp and nearly witless.  
In the arms of *compañeros* he asks,  
"¿Es esto sentir la muerte?" Barely conscious  
he is Ichthys in the sand at traveler's feet.

One post carving, hobo's mark,  
would mark our "angel food" with a cross,  
but cross signs feel wrong to fingers  
wanting a symbol with less power, more loss,  
like desert flower blooms, or a growing belly  
beneath blue robes of water and gloss.  
I need one post carving, hobo's mark.

On the road, the *Virgen* speaks to faceless  
suffering. A woman seven months pregnant  
hikes with garlic-lashed calves (snake safe-guard).  
Bleeding and cramping, body bent  
to ground, she makes mud salves and prayers  
to Our Mother: *keep my unborn daughter radiant*.  
On the road, the *Virgen* speaks. To faceless

shadows traveling when the land is dark,

I say, I see the fresh footprint in the riverbed,  
the torn blanket ditched on the hillside.  
At a rest stop shaded by oak, I tread  
slow, count empty gallons, read what remains.  
I promise you are not invisible, nor discarded,  
people traveling when the land is dark.

I etch black line Sharpie *Virgenes*  
to cloak rocky paths in stars  
and hope one will guide you home.  
When muscles spasm and farm lights appear too far,  
know that I built this poem with safe spaces.  
But because no words can erase your scars,  
I etch black line Sharpie *Virgenes*.

to chew empty spaces

Arivaca, Arizona, August 25, 2011

She craves conversation  
to chew empty spaces  
where flash-images:  
red gashed maple arms,  
vacant raisin eyes,  
mounds beneath blankets,  
(heartbeat to throat)  
rise like dead.

But Catherine remains  
relatively closed lipped  
like grandmother at Lent,  
showing reverence for ghosts  
that refuse to be swallowed.

“We sleep on cots  
gathered in open  
because it’s better than  
being alone,” she said.  
“Because it’s better.”

I sleep in one-person tent,  
  
swat foot of my sleeping bag,  
listen for hisses and rattles,  
but hear revs and calls  
of 4-wheeled drug pickups  
in gulch below.  
My thoughts circle  
with helicopters over head.  
I close eyes  
to visualize color blue,  
quench of water.

Yesterday, I walked Catherine  
to Byrd’s ranch, carrots in hand,  
to help her feed horses.  
I watched yellow bees drink  
from troughs, listened to buzzing.

Here is where she shared

story of girlfriend  
abandoned in Brooklyn  
along with apartment,  
one broken into  
while they were home  
awake.  
“She thinks I left  
her for another woman,” she said.

Catherine is like that apartment.

She and I sit side-by-side  
on roof of silver Silverado  
and enjoy sun’s return over  
teeth of jagged night.

This is my final morning.

We share cigarette  
and note flash of storm  
rumbling our way.  
I think, *desert is ocotillo*  
*calling rain open-mouthed*  
*with too many tongues,*  
but Catherine already knows this,  
and I say nothing

because it’s better.

## Nobody Wanted a Mountain to Hate Him

If one man killed another in a battle  
he would quickly turn away  
from the man's sacred mountain  
before the mountain saw his face.

--Byrd Baylor

If one man conquers another's land,  
he quickly turns away from new borders  
scratched in sand so as not to look  
into the eyes of those he means to forget.

Nobody cares if he is hated, or maybe  
it's better to say, it is impossible to be hated  
by what no longer exists.  
What was once sacred no longer exists.

I once climbed a sacred mountain and rested  
at a pass known only as Dead Man's.  
Dead Man should consider building a fence  
around his pass if it is truly his and he means to keep it.

Nobody wants to be without  
one free pass, especially a dead man.  
Nobody battles and kills many things  
he never learned how to hold.

The face of the mountain scowls at what  
has happened to its land. The sheer granite  
face of the mountain erodes, erasing  
all emotion because it is tired of hating.

The sheer number of dead men is enough  
to make any mountain turn its back.

## Sophia Shuts the Water to Listen

Torn, cotton underwear hang on tree branches  
like fake gold trophies with fake swollen muscles,  
like streamers pushed by winds into desert dances.

Sophia bathes naked, tanned skin with splashes  
from a farmhouse garden hose. Red water puddles.  
Her soiled, cotton underwear hang on tree branches.

Dark period trickles down her thighs. Memory flashes  
charred trees and shredded skin of raw knuckles  
like streamers pushed by winds into desert dances.

She temporarily forgets wailing ghosts in long grasses.  
Ground water soothes cramps and images of shiny buckles  
and torn, cotton underwear dangling from tree branches.

Sophia's buzzed, blond hair shimmers and catches  
the sun, but her button blue eyes gray with troubles  
like streamers caught by winds in desert dances.

Sophia shuts the water to listen beyond Arizona ranches  
for muffled cries of women that everyday double  
because torn, cotton underwear hang on tree branches  
like streamers pushed by winds into desert dances.

## I Didn't Know I could Love the Desert

Abiquiu, New Mexico

Maybe I always heard the desert calling my name  
in the middle of the night keeping me restless.  
Maybe that's why I didn't know I could love,  
I was grumpy from lack of sleep.  
I didn't know I would want to hug the rounded cholla.  
Cholla, if I could I would sew a felt and string teddy bear version of you  
with stubby arms and purple flowers to hug at night.  
You look so full and content.  
I didn't know cactus could be content.  
I didn't know cactus had more than one name: barrel, cholla,  
nopal, saguaro. I have yet to write a poem for the saguaro!  
The tall and proud saguaro honoring the sun with outstretched arms.  
I love outstretched arms!  
I love to dance with arms stretched out to the sky.  
Arms feel light like that.  
Sometimes I wish arms never had to come down.  
I do not love the come down  
and hangovers that demolish the brain  
leaving trembles in hands like after a bombing.  
I shouldn't compare Sunday morning wrecks to world destruction,  
but I can't help being a narcissist now and again.  
The wind kicks up dust and little white bits of soft dream.  
I want to float on one of those bits escaped  
from the branches of a cottonwood.  
I want to be a bit of white soft nothing floating between junipers  
at sunset free to lift all the last bits of light.  
In Arizona there is nothing light and delicate.  
But sometimes in the middle of a heat stroked day,  
there can be laughter. I love laughter.  
Tanya found a cross-color Rasta hat in a black hefty bag  
of donated clothes from old church ladies.  
She put it on and did a little jig in Byrd camp.  
She momentarily forgot border patrol trucks patrolling the road  
just outside our gate.  
I momentarily forgot just being with Tanya was a crime.  
And we laughed— just a little bit.  
I didn't know I would love Tanya.  
Mesas are for New Mexico, and canyons are for Arizona.  
Freeways are for L.A., and everything is covered by an epidermis of dust.  
Dust on tablets, dust on toes, dust in eyes,  
dust on cars, dust on windows. Dust sticks like guilt.  
Somehow, I think I could love the dust too.

