

THE WILDLING
(Felis concolor)

All men called him names he didn't know.
Tribal elders proclaimed him "Spirit
of the Canyons," secret as a Shoshone shaman,
going and coming like a dust devil. He watched
his world through smoky quartz: arcane fire
embered in his jewels studding quiet gold.

Down from the rimrocks he came, a warm shadow,
moving the same way lava once flowed,
remembering how obsidian cut his footpad
when he caught his first vole-- barely a chink
for the huge hunger hole he carried constantly
after his mother drove him from the cliff-hollow.
He missed his home creviced by juniper roots,
screened with fallen limbs and acacia shoots where
he cut teeth, signed the bark with budding claws,
lost his dark spots somewhere in twisted shade.
Up there, in sight of his tree,
he watched a sego lily grow tall as his eye
till his compulsion to taste it. He made toys
of pill bugs, learned how porcupine grass
tests an inquiring nose, learned the noise
of a diamondback, saw it strike his sibling.

He missed his mother's tail tip signals.
Now he was more fur-sheathed power than she,
but new, unpracticed in the ways of jackrabbits
and solitude. Surrounded by drought, his gauntlet
was scorched arroyo, sanded playa,
a rancher's buckshot. Shimmering brightness
closed down his eyes, hummed along his nerves.
Harried by emptiness, he wandered past cholla
and yucca, hurried by scent-claims of his kind
telling him to move on.

stanza break

(cont.)

The chaparral rustled with deadness, no safe bed.
His nostrils began stinging, his mouth tainted
with something unknown. His eyes burned
from an outside source. Ahead, scrub oak
and manzanita seethed and whistled in flames.
He zigzagged flaring brush and blowing ash.
A stone exploded, pelting his rump with shrapnel.

The swirling black ceiling broke, a sudden sieve
releasing more water than he had ever seen.
A smoke-blinded quail darted toward him. Hunger
overcame fear. Rain washed feathers off his face.

Four more days a migrant, prodded
by noon-baked smells, moonflash of alien eyes.
He paused to take in the sweetness of sage,
the lowered stars, scurrying skinks
patterning the transient surface.
He caught a white-footed rat. It wasn't enough.

He entered piney half-light,
became a half-tone crouch crossing straw carpets
and centipedes, past mariposa yellow
and jabbering jays that couldn't keep a secret.
A coyote tucked behind buckbrush
saw the ancient rite of passage,
understood another role was being filled,
knew something would be spilled but never wasted.

All the hungry muscle meshed in ritual rhythm,
arched, elongated, aimed by his mother's tracings
on his brain. The mule deer felt nothing; shock
was swifter than fangs, a plan long perfected.

He was whole at last, auditions over,
the part his. He stretched, considered his stage:
strangled shapes of wood and jutting agate
streaked with russet, citron, mauve.
He sat like cast bronze on a carved plinth,
watching twilight rise from the low waiting places,
content to know his niche. High desert held
his triumphant scream. Ocotillo, beetle,
the stream struggling to continue
beyond the sand and straggling trees,
everything that curved around his sound,
was his.