

On Blood & Water

When people speak of my city's river, they say: *declined*. What they mean is: *dry*. Only modern cities can survive on the promise of water. Early people settled just east of the river, on the fertile floodplain that offered easy access to water, mud, fish, grasses, all the necessary components to forge a life in the desert. In the summer, I imagine cool breezes.

Tucson lies in the valley between four mountain ranges, so each range becomes a landmark. A trained eye can decipher a way through the desert on these mountains alone, though a trained eye must also see the line of cottonwood trees to find where water runs silently underground, the river long buried under a bed of pummeled stone, sand, bits of mica.

What I have known all my life: the mountains' shape in the sky.

A trained ear can distinguish predators' calls in the echoes of the valley—say, a wolf from a coyote.

The news is a gray wolf has been spotted at the North Rim of the Grand Canyon, the first in seventy years. She is alone but scientists are hoping she is pregnant. What they can be sure of is that it seems miraculous, this appearance of her after so long.

Miraculous: a marvel, a wonder, appearing in English in the mid-15th century at the same moment as much of the rest of the Latinate words in Catholic doctrine, including, *immaculate*: free of pollution.

What I have also known: the power of a story is held in who believes it as much as it really exists.

You put something in the earth and hope for a return.

Farming in the desert is as much a negotiation of water and weather as it is anywhere else, but the margins of error are smaller here. My father, buying and selling water.

My father is a man for whom stories are social currency and a souls' nourishment. This is something we share: a desire to place oneself in time and action, an opportunity to affirm a keen observation, our sense of humor; we share all this, and also, a desire to be understood.

This one lonely wolf. If she is pregnant, it means she'll have travelled 500 miles to find the nearest wolf for mating. Somewhere in Wyoming, Montana, there's another gray wolf, howling.

You put something in the earth and hope for a return.

My father has found cows, horses, even human bodies in the ditches. The police department and fire department in a rural desert town are used to pulling parts from the mud.

Immaculate: mid-15th century, pure, bathed in white light. My father's stories like standing in the light.

What I have known all my life: the earth coming off my father's boots was always red.

The Santa Cruz River (translation: *Holy Cross*) flowed consistently until the late 1800's, but stopped due to "a combination of human errors and natural disasters."

You put something in the earth and hope for a return; some years it works and some years it doesn't.

Venturing wolves often meet their demise through hunting, car strikes, or other human interactions—"the people component." —T.H., *The Grand Canyon Wolf is Dead*, February 12, 2015

Scientists had named her Echo.

In Catholic ritual, some water is holy, sacred, blessed by the priest. Twice in a life, you'll be anointed with water: baptism and the anointing of the sick, more commonly called last rites.

Not an echo, but a howl.

Each hospital visit, my father is visited by kind, Catholic volunteers who want to offer him communion, another sacrament. He has written his religious affiliation on the intake forms as "Catholic" once again.

Not an echo, but a call-and-response prayer. You put something in the earth. Return.

My father refuses communion by saying, "not today, thanks" as if tomorrow is his usual day for receiving communion. I doubt he's received the host in a decade, maybe more. But I do not judge his priorities. Instead, each time, he strikes up a conversation about farming. How he can turn the thread of conversation towards his work is impressive, and everyone has a story about the farmers they once knew. Everyone enjoys talking about the past, like participating in a sacred rite. What's important here is that the volunteer will leave the room feeling the good work has been done, though the body and blood of Christ remains in his fanny pack.

Echo was never pregnant, but in her two years tracked with her radio collar, she walked 1000 miles.

My father, walking the rows, red dust blooming at each step.

In the comments section of the online news article, people calling for the hunter to be shot. An eye for an eye. Is all life equal? All sacred?

Even the trained eye cannot always see what is before it, will confuse one image for a more recognizable one. Though a grey wolf is double the size of a coyote, and lacking the telltale red-brown haunch fur of the coyote, a hunter can put an animal in his sight.

The remaining photographs of Echo are pixelated but clear. That blue tint to digital images. The collar. Though she was tracked for two years, scientists have yet to find her den.

This hospital visit, my father's face, depending on the light, glowed white or yellow, paler than usual, like an old bruise. With half his blood supply replaced—four pints in twelve hours—his skin flushed pink in patches, the color returning as water irrigating the fields: each row filling with water, then spilling into the next.

Not an echo, but the rush of water just at the river's edge.

Light: Radiant energy. In Old English, a source of joy or delight, meaning, "to be the light of an eye." Related: *apple of one's eye*: Old English, a symbol of what is most cherished, the pupil. (See also, 20th Century: Stevie Wonder, 1972, "You Are the Sunshine of My Life," a daughter to a father.)

What I have learned: my father's stories as well as my own. To see his face within mine. How the light from the hallway can ring a hospital room like a halo.

Not an echo, but a return.

Late summer, driving away from the hospital, I see a single coyote saunter across a city street. We lock eyes, and then she turns down an alley, as if she was never there.