

Chihuahua Desert Love Song (published *AGNI Online*, March 2006)

Joni Tevis

Dawn

Down by the river stands the little brown burro on haunches narrow and trembling
as a girl's.

Morning

Although the river here is shallow enough to wade, men launch their dented
aluminum boats into the current, poling across with long staves. For two dollars
apiece they ferry travelers over and back, peeling change from a roll of sweat-
damp bills. We travelers stay dry, the men make a living; this is a good
arrangement. So the morning passes.

Midday

By noon the sun's an anvil pressing down on my nape and the bleached wall of
the Sierra del Carmen stands out sharp as a theater backdrop. Creosote's oily
yellow leaves radiate their sharp smell, and the boke button's single flower bares
its bright throat. Horse dung drying on the trail is grass and the earth where
grass grows. Nothing is wasted, nothing unclean. The desert is silent as a sheet
of paper; when you blink, I hear it, eyelids' fluttering kiss.

Afternoon

Across the road from a dead century plant, twenty-foot bloomstalk bent on the ground, yellow leaves splayed like a dropped hand of cards, a silversmith sits in the striped shade of an ocotillo-cane ramada, wares spread on a draped table. Though I have no money, he hands me a ring set with polished agate. "Mail me a check when you get home," he says. "There's not enough trust in the world." Surprised, vaguely flattered, I slide the ring on my finger; tilting the stone, I can just make out the marks of the polisher's wheel.

Sundown

When the wind kicks up, the pads of dead prickly pear clatter like bones. Dark falling fast and hard, we walk to camp, passing beneath the single telephone line. Invisible, crackling, the telephone wire hums with talk, carrying conversation to the end of the line, where the river marks the border. Above us, the stars slide coldly towards dawn. That night I dream of needles pulled, red, from calf and palm, and wake aching on cold ground.

Morning

Leaving, we find a bleached coyote skull, teeth brown from its last kill. When I stumble, careless, the barbed end of a lechugilla rives my shin, lodging close to the bone, a hard lump. I tape the salvaged wound closed. Twelve days. When I pull the risen splinter, the wound weeps water, unmixed with blood.

Afterwards

Something says, you can make a place here, if you are careful. Others have: witness the telephone line's crackling current of talk, battered boats scraping the river bank. Candelilla and yucca, hedgehog cactus and dog-turd cholla; jackrabbit, roadrunner, Chihuahua raven; the tiny-hooved, myopic javelina, foraging near the riverbed. Also two tall cowboys in tight jeans and jingling spurs; I watch them walk into the general store, their eyes hooded against the strong sun. The sandstone hoodoos along Panther Gap road change a little every day, usually in ways too small to measure; wind gnaws deeper in a curve, or grates a few grains of rock from the ridge; but once, a ranger tells me, a pillar there one evening was gone next morning, a heap of boulders where it had stood. Wind working in a rotten seam. That dust has drifted, now, into the pleated yucca, settled in the part of someone's hair, swirled downstream where I can't go. Desert mosaic of many-colored pebbles. Ribbed barrel cactus swelling and shrinking in rain and drought. Look at all I've smuggled out, splinter rooted under skin, silver band circling my finger, silence hid beneath my tongue.