

A STORY INTERRUPTED

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POEMS

Connie Soper

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*for Cris
and
for Marguerite*

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ONE *Mapping Boundaries*

ANTHEM

Joshua Tree National Park

Bend to one knee
or stand with hand over heart.
Sing an anthem or don't
voice one at all.

Just claim this desert as your own,
with its hard white light
and punishing heat. Claim the boulders tumbled
into a wonderland
baked to umber and ochre
until the sun dissolves into the washes and fissures
and nothing is the same but nothing has changed.

Name the Joshuas for that seeker of the promised land
who raised his hands in prayer.

Praise your own god
or worship the dogma of the sun. Tell me
how you cherish this creation
as it is meant to be: unviolated and whole.

Allow yourself to tremble within the holy
soul of the Mojave
gobsmacked humbled unbruised.

AMANDA'S TRAIL

In 1864, Amanda De-Cuys, a blind Coos woman, was removed from her home and forced to walk some 50 miles to be relocated at the Coast Reservation near what is now Yachats, Oregon.

It was her way to embrace circles of seasons
in an abundance of bulbs, roots, berries;
to harvest mussels in the low and salty estuary—
until she became a refugee in her own homeland.

It was her way to lay the dead
in canoes hung from branches, always
facing west. Those boats would sway
in the breeze as souls rowed into the next world.
Which of us wouldn't enter eternity like that?

It was her way to leave gifts
for that long journey: basket, knife, blanket—
until those gifts were stolen for souvenirs.
It was her way to trust the shaman,
until the diseases came and there were no more
living to tend to the dying.

Today, we lace our boots and ready packs
to step into forest's ripe and sudden smells
on the flanks of Cape Perpetua.
The same cliffs, chasms, streams, rocks.
The same churning waves in the distance.

The path before us curves like the parenthesis of history.
We can't see its end as we cross over a bridge,
traverse switchbacks, follow twisting trail
to pause at a knoll overlooking the expansive sea.
Cedars press green spirit-weave against the sky—
dappled with light, rooted in darkness.

AMERICAN LOGGERS, 1939

after Dorothea Lange

The deep green river chokes
on backwoods bounty, churning
its industry downstream to the mill.
In the creamy fading light of day: silence.

No more rhythmic thump of axes, their report
startling birds from branches. Quiet enough
to smell pitch bleeding from pines
and the sweet perfume of felled wood.

Five men rest calloused palms on long-
necked tools, rooted to stillness.
The youngest poses hand on hip, eyes
on tomorrow's prey: treetops grazing the sky.

He sets a rigging, straps the harness, cinches
buckles to shimmy feet-first up the scaled hide
he will climb, higher than the owl's nest,
to amputate mossy limbs one by one—

with forest's enormity at his feet, count
its rings: 200, 250, until he loses track.

IN THE COMMONWEALTH

Montpelier, Virginia

Perfect green hillocks rise between hedgerows,
amid stands of black walnut.
Cedars of Lebanon, seeded in France,
still thrive on the mansion grounds;
fence slats define a pastoral tableau.
Horses—descendants, perhaps, from DuPont's stables,
fatten in the field as they consider tourists
with bucolic indifference.
We cross the mowed path to the portico
strong with Roman columns.
In the dining room, cardboard cutouts
form an animated theater around the table:
Jefferson, Franklin, Jackson, Dolley with her teacup.
Madison's manservant stands in the corner,
holding a tray—Paul Jennings, sold for \$200 in 1846.
*Imagine the conversations, the docent says,
a polite discourse of gentle persuasion.*

Up the carpeted stairs, pink-flocked walls
adorned with ornamental sconces—
to the library replete with books by learned men.
Supple leather spines suffused with warm shades
of butter, bourbon, cherry. In this very room,

Madison conjured a republic born of ideals,
plucked from measured words
of poets and philosophers. Here, he overlooked
Blue Ridge vistas, fertile soil and great expanse
of his plantation. All that he owned.

ARCHAEOLOGY

Corbridge Roman Museum

Cropped paths maze the curated grounds past
reconstructed stone walls, aqueduct

and ancient granary to River Tyne, where
the Romans bathed. Picture placards reimagine

the city, its tranquil industry after the conquest.
Timelines on the museum wall catalog

inventions of war:
spear, sword, catapult, pistol.

Weapons arranged under glass cases
like fine works of art. Caltrops, hand-forged

to hobble enemy cavalry, resemble huge jacks,
a children's game. Arrowheads unearthed from

the dig and still lashed to their spears, crafted
chamfron to protect a horse's head—copper filament

twisted into shapes of dolphins and eagles.
How beautiful and bronzed they must have looked—

men and horses decorated in battle costumes
adorned with belts, straps and slides,

ornamental buttons and hip fasteners. All those shiny
objects glittering in the sun as they rode away.