

In Bisbee, Arizona, which was a ghost town, was a very thriving place at the turn of the century. It was a copper mining town, and it was a fashionable stop for trains from New Orleans to San Francisco. There was a strike there in 1917, which was put on really brutally and people in Bisbee don't like to talk about it now. What they did, first it was put down, then all the surviving male members of families were put into box cars and sent away to the New Mexican desert 100 miles away. And so their families had to leave Bisbee to look for these men and there are pictures of the trains, it looks like a scene out of Nazi Germany. And it's called the Bisbee Deportation of July 1917, that's what they call it. So the poem is called "The Keeper of the Dead Hotel". And there is this marvelous hotel in Bisbee called The Copper Queen Hotel. So there is a mixture of fantasy and fact in this poem.

The Keeper of the Dead Hotel

In one room upstairs

 he reads late
into the night. Afternoons wake him

to voices speaking in webs. Nights
he lights the desk lamp in the lobby,

then walks into the bar and touches
the piano.

 Drunk senators once gambled
here while their wives blurred

the balconies with silk. One,
an actress whose smile was an era,

came down the steps, turned
like the century to look at herself,

then vanished from the mirror
of the pine hatstand.

 Letters arrived
for her years after. When he reads them,

he hears her whisper: "Something
has happened. What is it?"

 No one answers,
but each night a voice cries out: "Fire!"

The copper mountains echo with rifle shots:
men on strike are being killed

in the mines, the survivors forced

into boxcars and left in the desert

without water. Their women are leaving
the city.

Each night he sees them depart.
Each night he hears laughter from the balconies:

braceleted arms, glasses filled
with the moon's dry wine. Each night

she still asks:
"Something has happened. What is it?"

But who will tell her? She is furiously
brushing her hair. Her shadow,

through the transom, is soft on the ceiling.
Who will tell her?

Every silence in the world
has conspired with every other. Unanswered

she is leaving this city again, her voice
pressing him back into the silence

of ash-throated men in the desert,
of broken glasses

on the balconies,
the moon splashed everywhere.