

I lived in Tucson, Arizona for four years, and I thought after Kashmir I would never really see a dramatic landscape. I find New York, and Pennsylvania, and all these places are pretty, but there is nothing on a lavish, grand scale. And I think after Kashmir, the first thing I saw was the American southwest, the Grand Canyon, and the deserts of the southwest, and the canyons are absolutely tremendous. Anyway, my youngest sister, whose name is Sameetah, which in Farsi means a string of pearls (continues on in Urdu). She was visiting me in '87 and I had to take her to the airport in the morning. And when we woke up in the morning I saw, it's very unusual to see snow on the desert, and that had been a heavy snowfall, so there was just snow all over. Okay that's one fact you need to know. The other is the Sonoran desert, where Tucson is, was an ocean, 200 million years ago it was an ocean, this is a fascinating fact. Then they had these incredible cacti, called the saguaro, S-A-G-U-A-R-O, the saguaro cactus is sometimes as tall as this building, and it has arms and they are real giant presences, with arms...you know they just look very human in some ways. And it is illegal to cut down a saguaro cactus in Arizona, even if it is your own yard. Then there is a reference here to a book called *The Desert Smells Like Rain*, that is reference to the Papago Indians, a Native American tribe. And then at the end you now the rest. "Snow on the Desert", it is in three parts.

"Each ray of sunshine is seven minutes old,"
Serge told me in New York one December night.

"So when I look at the sky, I see the past?"
"Yes, Yes," he said, "especially on a clear day."

On January 19, 1987,
as I very early in the morning
drove my sister to Tucson International,

suddenly on Alvernon and 22nd Street
the sliding doors of the fog were opened,

and the snow, which had fallen all night, now
sun-dazzled, blinded us, the earth whitened

out, as if by cocaine, the desert's plants,
its mineral-hard colors extinguished,
wine frozen in the veins of the cactus.

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The Desert Smells Like Rain: in it I read:
The syrup from which sacred wine is made

is extracted from the saguaros each
summer. The Papagos place it in jars,

where the last of it softens, then darkens
into a color of blood though it tastes
strangely sweet, almost white, like a dry wine.
As I tell Sameetah this, we are still

seven miles away. "And you know the flowers

of the saguaros bloom only at night?"

We are driving slowly, the road is glass.
"Imagine where we are was a sea once.

Just imagine!" The sky is relentlessly
sapphire, and the past is happening quickly:

the saguaros have opened themselves, stretched
out their arms to rays millions of years old,

in each ray a secret of the planet's
origin, the rays hurting each cactus

into memory, a human memory —
for they are human, the Papagos say:

not only because they have arms and veins
and secrets. But because they too are a tribe,

vulnerable to massacre. "It is like
the end, perhaps the beginning of the world,"

Sameetah says, staring at their snow-sleeved
arms. And we are driving by the ocean

that evaporated here, by its shores,
the past now happening so quickly that each

stoplight hurts us into memory, the sky
taking rapid notes on us as we turn

at Tucson Boulevard and drive into
the airport, and I realize that the earth

is thawing from longing into longing and
that we are being forgotten by those arms.

...

At the airport I stared after her plane
till the window was

again a mirror.

As I drove back to the foothills, the fog

shut its doors behind me on Alvernon,
and I breathed the dried seas

the earth had lost,
their forsaken shores. And I remembered

another moment that refers only
to itself:

in New Delhi one night
as Begum Akhtar sang, the lights went out.

It was perhaps during the Bangladesh War,
perhaps there were sirens,

air-raid warnings.
But the audience, hushed, did not stir.
The microphone was dead, but she went on
singing, and her voice

was coming from far
away, as if she had already died.

And just before the lights did flood her
again, melting the frost

of her diamond
into rays, it was, like this turning dark

of fog, a moment when only a lost sea
can be heard, a time

to recollect
every shadow, everything the earth was losing,

a time to think of everything the earth
and I had lost, of all

that I would lose,
of all that I was losing.