

Rivers of Arizona

This story ends in moonlight,
the riverbed flooded with it, a flat glint
off the muddy trickle down the center.
These rivers of my childhood speak
the language of light, midday sun
or moon glow filling them more often
than rainwater which fades out,
dries out, goes underground
into the sandy soil. These rivers
should teach us about borders—they cross
paperless, cottonwoods bursting out,
money-green alongside. Lined in concrete,
my childhood rivers are forced into a channel
so similar to charnel, bone-dry,
pumped, nothing left. When the rivers
flood in Tucson, traffic stops.
I've known women who take their children
to see the water running, muddy
and strong as anything free.
I've known men hunkered in the bushes
upstream from the waste-water recharge plant
shooting ducks, a blue ripple
off a wing now pinned to their wall at home.
Trash traces the lines of the riverbeds.
Thousands of bats bed down beneath a bridge,
at dusk a stream of them curling up like smoke
or like water seeking a path across dry ground.
We'll escape, river to river on a raft,
the German POWs planned. U-boat sailors
shipped to the desert, they sought
a way out through what they thought
they knew best: water
unto water until the sea. And they did
escape the camp. They dug through our hard soil,
they walked through the night and found
only moonlight between the banks.
What did they do? What do we do
except surrender to the light which marks
the paths of what we crave most.

From *Pennsylvania Furnace* (Unicorn Press, 2019). A lifelong Arizonan, I spent two years living in central Pennsylvania that radically changed the way I saw our desert rivers when I moved back to Tucson again; after many false starts, this poem came together following a hike along the San Pedro River just north of the border.