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, filling them more often or moonglow which fades out, than rainwater goes underground dries out, 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.