

THE WILDLING  
(Felis concolor)

All men called him names he didn't know.  
Tribal elders proclaimed him "Spirit  
of the Canyons," secret as a Shoshone shaman,  
going and coming like a dust devil. He watched  
his world through smoky quartz: arcane fire  
embered in his jewels studding quiet gold.

Down from the rimrocks he came, a warm shadow,  
moving the same way lava once flowed,  
remembering how obsidian cut his footpad  
when he caught his first vole-- barely a chink  
for the huge hunger hole he carried constantly  
after his mother drove him from the cliff-hollow.  
He missed his home creviced by juniper roots,  
screened with fallen limbs and acacia shoots where  
he cut teeth, signed the bark with budding claws,  
lost his dark spots somewhere in twisted shade.  
Up there, in sight of his tree,  
he watched a sego lily grow tall as his eye  
till his compulsion to taste it. He made toys  
of pill bugs, learned how porcupine grass  
tests an inquiring nose, learned the noise  
of a diamondback, saw it strike his sibling.

He missed his mother's tail tip signals.  
Now he was more fur-sheathed power than she,  
but new, unpracticed in the ways of jackrabbits  
and solitude. Surrounded by drought, his gauntlet  
was scorched arroyo, sanded playa,  
a rancher's buckshot. Shimmering brightness  
closed down his eyes, hummed along his nerves.  
Harried by emptiness, he wandered past cholla  
and yucca, hurried by scent-claims of his kind  
telling him to move on.

stanza break

(cont.)