

# DESERT TORTOISE

## Addresses the Washington County Commission About a Highway Proposed Through Red Cliffs National Conservation Area

Where vast sagebrush sea  
laps the uplifted edge  
of cliffs, the red rock plateau,  
yucca and live oak grow  
in clumps, sparse in rain shadow  
of the Sierras, perfect  
zen garden of xeric shrubs,  
cacti and deep-rooted trees  
that reach hidden water.

Over years I've come to know  
how it pools in stone – tinajas  
that reflect heaven's face,  
each who drinks, a way the cosmos  
attempts to glimpse itself, its nature –  
and dewdrops gather on leaves;  
composed a mental map of best  
locales to burrow in sand  
eroding down mountains  
in alluvial fans  
to survive swelling heat,  
avoid coyotes, snakes  
and fox.

Like you, I hope  
to live my three score and ten  
in prosperity and peace. Here  
in shade of silvery green mesquite,  
feathered as a flight of birds  
that return to roost each year,  
I wait out the drought, allayed  
in sudden flare of petrichor,  
ozone and creosote oil,  
the velvet earth after rain.

We share the resplendent sky.  
From these hills streams run  
to rivers, passerines praise  
across valleys, borders  
are just lines on maps  
but a highway is a wall –  
incursion of expansion,  
facilitating sprawl.  
Some species invade;  
others are invaded.

Forgive my native tongue  
that tastes the air of one place  
season after season  
to learn it – no language  
exists for this knowledge.

With some luck, my progeny  
will speak the slow syntax  
described by amber plates  
of patterned shells across their backs –  
same as your wish for thriving  
children after you are gone.

Dear Madam and Sirs,  
you gave us your word.  
Honor your promise.  
Does that mean anything?

Rachel White





Photo by Adam Elliott