



Sego Lily

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I.

Humble desert flower, emblem of spring,
Sign that once again winter is over,
Since time immemorial, tribes wandering
Badlands and basins would uncover
The root, white bulb like a pearl
Onion – ‘sego’ the Shoshone word for it –
And this is what kept the Mormons alive
When crickets ate every last bit
Of grain—Indians heard their appeal
And shared a gift of buried treasure with people
About to starve, knowledge that helped them survive.

II.

The Native response to the Mormons’ plight
Argues that human nature is basically good
And kind. Unaware of the coming blight,
The unrelenting western advance, they could
Just as easily have shown the Saints
The death camas instead, often found
With the sego, growing side by side—
Eat it by mistake and your heart faints,
Then stops; they look the same in the ground,
With similar leaves, the sego’s slightly round—
Would anyone say it was unjustified?

III.

The Shoshone are still refusing to be paid
For their land, for it was never for sale.
No surprise: the Supreme Court betrayed
The Treaty of Ruby Valley, told a tale
Of title being extinguished over time
But that’s a legal fiction—the fact is some
Saw the world’s mosaic as empty space
To settle, missed the interset sublime
In the sego’s satin cup, much of its home
Paved over, the purple-stained bloom
Remains, pushed to the edges of this place.