

SAVING MY SKIN FROM BURNING

There was a hole in the ground once; there was a manhole
I used to get inside. I lowered a rope
and kicked my way down. The walls were two feet thick
and there was at most a foot of leaves where somehow
the wind had crept in, but there was no water. I felt for
the pipe, there was a little ledge—with matches.
I tried to get out. The truth was I fell. My mind
was on vipers, I called my enemies vipers, it was
an old honorific word but now I shook,
they were not just snakes—they were adders—their bodies
were flat, their fangs were huge, my enemies
strike like they do—their heads are triangles,
their eyes are in their skulls. I screamed for rope,
I needed rags, I had to save my skin
from burning—my chest and upper arms.

The hole

is our greatest fear; I grab the air behind me
and stiffen my legs. The greatest joy is rising,
the greatest joy is resting your arms on the ground
and getting ready to swing your body up
and seeing the clouds again and feeling the wind
on your white legs, and rubbing your eyes. I ran
to touch a tree, I stroked the bark, there was
one stone, it was half-pitted, the sun had turned it
into a pillow; I lay on my back recovering.

R FOR ROSEMARY

I heard a fluttering—just inside the door
of my *casita*; it was inside a bush,
a kind of pine, a kind of blue rosemary,
and since I saw two doves wandering under
my window yesterday and over my stones
I thought there had to be a mourning dove—

or two of them—puffed up and asleep,
living inside that bush, one of them frightened
by my loud steps. But I will know them later
by their sweet smell, whether they stretch their necks
or stick their chests out, getting ready to soar,
for they have made the mistake of living in rosemary
and they are spies for now and carry the stench
of betrayal on them. I could have reached inside
and heard them scream and watched the bushes shudder
with terror, but I let them go. More
and more I do that. Why did I wait so long
to let them have their darkness? I rub the leaves
under my chin and over my wrists. I know
the smell will last. I crawl up under my window
and try my keys. I'll have to pull the blinds
and close the curtains, those doves are so rotten; they are
such eavesdroppers. We listen to each other
through the glass, we preen in our mirrors; their cooing
is absurd, it is the noisy sound
of Codex International; I know
the tapping, I know the turning of the head;
and it is odd to watch them stretch a wire
between their beaks and under my windowsill,
then walk off unaffected. I put powder
over my shoes. I know that trick. I called it
blue rosemary because of the flowers, I should have
called it lavender; it was my color
when I was a boy; there were *two* doves; we wandered
from bush to bush, it was a disease of the spine
that took the other one; she was a dove. If I
spend year after year explaining it is because
I was left without her. I have a sprig
of the dried-up plant, the leaves and the flowers have mixed,
the color is greenish-blue, almost an olive;
it has some weight, the woody part is heavy,
it is itself a kind of flattened tree;
it is a bookmark; it is a perfumed wing.