

## WHAT IS THAT DEAD BODY?

*What is that dead body?*

*A man?*

*A woman?*

*A woman*

—an 11-word story of the Tongva tribe

Subtly,  
spring leaves

know long-lived wood will burn.

The desert is born in the flower,  
fire in the hollows of nests.

Scorched,  
one can never tell if it's  
an antler or a branch.

The rock's lost friend  
is death.

What wildfire did to this land:  
return its omens.

Ignore the snakebite; look for the snake.

It's a glittering glass trauma  
hidden in aquablack soot—  
trade blood;  
make a pact  
with the footprintless;  
bask in the sun who taught this planet burning.

The pump of blood pushes harder  
in sun.

In sun,

the heat pumping harder pushed a planet to life:  
smoldering stone, arboreal silhouettes of frosted pith,  
I hear the serenity of burnt beings choosing next:

spiny palm eggs

buffeted by fire but not by heat;  
snow mounds with warm thoughts

*(winter is when the ash gets wet);*

dotted manzanita, scarlet smooth as ever,

cracking the bone back, black and white—

what was fire once

but a signal to come?

A place is in ruins only once its guardians have fled.

*What is that dead body?*

I cry over the rockface,  
but the tears hiss and never touch the ground.

*A man?*

Slithering through the labyrinth,  
the treasures at its center have caught flame.

*A woman?*

Without anything left to die for,  
the snake blows on my wound  
while I stare down the shadow  
I used to cast before

all of us were blinded by smoke.

*A woman.*