

WINTER SOLSTICE RISING

Light is beginning to come to the stage on which I sit. The sand sage's frosty gray-green feathers seem to toss even though there is no wind—a snapshot of some past breeze remembered. Around me flutter occasional *chips* from waking white-crowned sparrows. Across the valley lies a metropolitan insomniac—Albuquerque—her lights glittering like a river of fallen stars at the base of the Sandías. The illuminated cube of Sandía Casino glows at the northern edge of the city like a large luminaria. I sit here, freezing in the back yard, not just to give the neighbors something to talk about (if any of them are even awake), but to take part in one of nature's most significant annual events. Winter solstice—the longest night, the shortest day of the year—has been celebrated by many cultures since before history was written. Earth's northern hemisphere has tilted on its axis as far as it can from the sun as it orbits.

Now it will begin circling back toward summer. As a result, the sun will begin rising farther and farther north along the spine of the Sandías.

Its chariot race across the heavens will pass higher and last longer each day. But this is just the beginning of winter. There is a lag in the seasons. Our watery planet takes a long time to warm up, even after days begin to lengthen, just like it takes time to cool off when days shorten after summer solstice. In the growing light, patches of snow cling, luminous, to the north-facing buttresses holding up the Sandías.

Today will be sunny, but there is a chance for a white Christmas here in the high desert. Crows are calling to each other from their winter night-roosts in the Río Grande bosque. A solitary ebony-feathered spirit flies *caw*-ing across the face of the misty moon. Thin wisps of clouds are drawn across the ice-blue morning sky. It's colder now, just before dawn. A dark-eyed junco kisses the frozen air.

At my feet lie tattered, remnant bits and pieces of summer. Twigs and tiny fragments of feathery sand sage are strewn beneath the shrubs. A desiccated prickly pear pad stalks across the sand on stiff spines like some sort of desert sea urchin. The pencil cholla stands erect, its thorns impale the sky. My fingers, writing this, are cold-stiff. With a shiver, I look up.

The Sandía Crest is now crowned with rose, as if a solar forest fire is climbing into view, consuming the conifers on her east-facing slopes. The clouds passing east above me are a flock of sheep with woolly pink faces already gazing at the sun, trailing fluffy purple tails. One wispy strand of cloud, ice crystals sailing higher than the others, shines gold—already fully sun lit—as a west-bound jet stitches the sky overhead with a straight, silvery contrail. Barely above the rooftops, a white-winged dove rockets north—silent. The dry *spit* call of a yellow-rumped warbler taps at the silence.

It is 7:07 a.m. and all around me it is light, but the sun has not yet arrived. The pink on the mountaintop fades as *Wankwijo* (Old Wind Woman), the Pueblo wind spirit who lives in the Sandías, wraps a cloudy purple shawl around her shoulders. I am not going to see the moment when the sun opens its eye over the rocky ramparts.

The avian world is awakening. Five red-winged blackbirds fly north, *chuck*-ing; then another forty wing their way east to greet the sun. They chuckle and trill as they fly—the latter is a sound I have not heard from them before. In the distance, the gargling, Pleistocene cries of sandhill cranes herald their lift-off from safe night roosts on river islands to forage in Corrales fields. House finches chirp, lesser goldfinches whistle, and a northern flicker screams *CHEER!* A sudden chill of sound heralds the arrival of a Cooper's hawk, flap-gliding silently above, hunting. The cold has insinuated clever icy fingers beneath my down jacket and woolen shawl. I am tempted to retreat to the house's warmth as an amorphous bank of bruised purple clouds gathers strength in the south and threatens to engulf the Sandías. But there is pale blue sky among the sheepish clouds to the north.

I continue my watch to the east, certain that the sun has already risen above the rim of the earth. Masked by gray and silver clouds, the mountain seems to harbor a glory—my shivery hand tried to write “glowing”, but my translating eye sees “glory” and that is so much better! I glance at my feet and there, lurking in the shadows near the creeping desert sea urchin, is a single, burnt out, ruined planet. Or perhaps it is a fallen star with all its points. A fruit from the sacred datura has exploded its planetary depths to spew life—seeds—across this sandy universe.

In the silence that follows, Gambel's quail, house sparrows, diminutive bushtits, and my neighbor's chickens creak and chirp, whisper and cluck questions about the shivering stranger crouched among the four-winged saltbushes.

-- Janet Ruth, published in the inaugural issue of *Pearl River Quarterly* (Winter 2020).