

Canyon Fall
Eric Hoefler

The bleeding red of the pebbled rocks
scatter on the lip of the canyon,
where I sit in the curve rubbed by rain
and wind and time, and try to listen.
Dry air brushes warmly over me,
into my hair, pulling up sage, sand
and juniper from the canyon floor.
Sagebrush rattles a song with the wind,
a song of prayer, and hope, and protest—

and also pain, and loss, and dying.
The sun deepens, darkens into night
at the keeling of the red-tail hawk
in the sudden warmth of all that air.
And the sand is drinking the shadows.
I pick up the broken sheets of rock
and toss them over the canyon's edge—
a space or two from where I sit—count
... six, ... seven, ... and think I hear them hit.

I have crept down into this stone cot,
an imitation Navajo rug
wrapped around me as I lie face down
and dip my hands into certain death.
The cool night air scurries over me,
and the seven hundred feet of air
beside me pulls me nearer the edge.
But the air is also full and thick
and keeps me comforted, for a while.

My friends stand or sit nearby, talking
their Anglo talk—my talk—while I let
images shift in my memory
from the last few weeks here in Chinlé,
crawling through ruins in this canyon,
crawling through the symbols of this place,
of these people—not my people—and
their history—not my history:
Hogan, and *ma'ii*, and *kachina*.

I have heard the voice of these symbols—
rattling and crying and howling
in the searing heat of the sweat lodge,
under the heavy spread of the sky,
through the lips of the *Diné* singer—
have watched as others move through them
to Unity, but for me they don't
open the door to the Universe,
and my language is not their language.

I swing my legs around and over
and lean back into the shallow cup
of this canyon wall—this narrow ledge
that holds me, not quite a sacrifice,
over the mough of this Grand Mother
that is for the *Diné* the birthplace
of this world and home to its axis—
and listen to the pulse, the pounding
of all this dark, empty, silent air.

My symbols have no power like this.
They have been cleaned, buffed, and polished,
set on shelves, safe from death and silence.
I lean back, spread my arms, and breathe deep
the trembling air—filling, surrounding.
The stars, now blazing in the night sky,
seeming nearer that the canyon floor,
linger over this sacred canyon,
where I would linger, too, if I could.

But my cot soon grows cold, and too hard,
and I feel the canyon's grip slipping.
I shift, move, and that watchful hawk
senses and pounces and I am caught.
I know I will fall ... six, ... seven, ... and hit,
and the air will not be thick enough.
In my lungs the air is expanding
too thick in my throat, and choking me—
and my fingers can't hold this sandstone.

Caught in the claw of the red-tail hawk,
a mouse with no breath, choked by talons
larger and older than the canyon,
I hear the wailing *kachina* flute,
see the flashing white of *ma'ii's* grin,
and fall back against the ledge, gasping,
laughing, wanting more of this canyon—
this canyon that pounced on me and let
me go because it's not my *hogan*.