

Lectures on Death at Chaco Canyon, New Mexico

Pamela Porter Hamblin

The ranger stoops to toss a stick away
and points to a narrow hole dug in the mud.
"Snakes," she says, "are plentiful this year;
there's some bubonic plague in rodents here."

Just north, Pueblo Bonito's senescent rooms
sit roofless, open to the ancient sun.

"Snakes sense your heat by flicking out their tongues."
The ranger flicks her own toward the wind.
"Wear high boots to guard against a bite.
Thicker boots: snakes sense a larger height."

Peñasco Blanco's cliffs are painted red
with frozen comets and one still hand.

"As for the plague, don't touch a rodent here.
Don't feed them, and be wary of the squirrel
that draws too close or falters as it moves.
Don't go poking into holes or roots."

"The sun is fierce here, even in the spring.
Wear cream to guard your skin, or wear a hat.
Rainstorms come in tantrums to the hills.
Watch the clouds; avoid a sudden chill."

Back toward Crowpoint the sky holds rain,
moist as shadows on a kiva floor.

"Go then, be safe, you won't go wrong."
She turns to fluster dust up with her jeep.
We turn to hike past yucca in the heat,
less aware of blooms than of our feet
intruding where others yesterday have gone.

In the ruins, time's teeth gnaw brick;
adobe crumbles dustward bit by bit.
The wind embodies shadows on the walls
and whispers witness of what went before:
"Death is real, inevitable," it says.
"And its testimony is the dead."