

# Ski Basin Poem Analysis

## MUSHROOM HUNTING AT THE SKI BASIN

Driving up the ski-basin road, I spot purple asters  
and know it is time; near a blood-red, white-  
flecked amanita, I dig two red-capped boletes  
out of the earth; green-stained *Lactarius*

and yellow-capped *Cortinarius* vanished decades ago,  
but, hunting mushrooms, I deepen through repetition.  
A dancer repeats steps until she no longer knows  
any steps; a violinist plays notes until he is living

in the marrow of silences. When clouds gather  
and gather, I cannot predict lightning and rain;  
I step on dry topsoil but sense moisture beneath.  
In this life, if you do not know what you are looking for,

how can you find it? A great horned owl  
perched on a branch sees into a world at dusk;  
a bee hovers over a saguaro blossom  
in noon heat. Foraging among spruce and fir,

I wander over an unseen web of mycelium  
connecting all roots and branches;  
a thrumming in my bones marks  
an underworld beginning to burst into sight.

—Arthur Sze

Which ski basin does this poem refer to

The poem "*Mushroom Hunting at the Ski Basin*" by Arthur Sze likely refers to the **Santa Fe Ski Basin** in New Mexico. Arthur Sze lives in Santa Fe and often writes about the landscapes, flora, and phenomena of the region. The mention of driving up the "ski-basin road," the presence of spruce and fir, and the poetic focus on the local ecology align well with the Santa Fe area, particularly the route up Hyde Park Road into the Sangre de Cristo Mountains where the Santa Fe Ski Basin is located.

Why saguaro blossom

The mention of a **saguaro blossom**—a cactus flower native to the Sonoran Desert and not to Santa Fe's high-altitude forests—stands out intentionally. Arthur Sze often weaves together **disparate ecological zones and metaphors** to reflect the interconnectedness of the natural world and inner perception.

Here, the saguaro blossom in "noon heat" contrasts with the **cool, forested environment** of mushroom hunting. It suggests:

- **A broader ecosystem of perception:** Just as the owl sees into dusk and the bee hovers in the desert heat, the speaker senses moisture beneath dry soil—each is attuned to subtle signals in their own domain.
- **The expansiveness of attention:** The poem becomes less about a specific place and more about a state of attunement across different worlds—forest, desert, underworld.

- **Symbolic resonance:** The saguaro blossom is rare and brief, like insight or discovery. It mirrors the elusive nature of mushrooms—and meaning—in the poem.

So, it's less geographical accuracy and more poetic vision, connecting **mycelium to cactus**, **forest to desert**, and **sensing to knowing**.

Even if it was Flagstaff ski basin road, are there saguaros at that altitude in flagstaff

No, even if the poem referred to **Flagstaff's Arizona Snowbowl** (on the San Francisco Peaks), you **would not find saguaro cacti** at that altitude.

Here's why:

- **Saguaros (*Carnegiea gigantea*)** typically grow **below 4,000 feet (1,220 meters)** and are native to the **Sonoran Desert**, especially southern Arizona.
- The **Flagstaff area** and its ski basin sit at around **9,000 to 11,500 feet (2,750 to 3,500 meters)**—an alpine environment dominated by **fir, aspen, and spruce**, not cacti.
- The saguaro's **ecological range** ends well south of Flagstaff; you don't see them naturally north of Sedona.

So whether the poem is set in **Santa Fe** or **Flagstaff**, the **saguaro blossom** is not a literal presence—it's a symbolic or imaginative leap, connecting ecosystems and states of awareness rather than describing a specific, physically accurate scene.

Are there any back cacti species on lower ski basin road on Santa Fe

Yes, there **are cacti species** along the **lower part of the Santa Fe Ski Basin Road (Hyde Park Road)**, though not saguaros. As you descend below 8,000 feet toward the **foothills and high desert** zones (around 6,000–7,000 feet), you begin to encounter **desert-adapted flora**, including:

- **Cylindropuntia spp. (Cholla cactus)**
- **Opuntia spp. (Prickly pear cactus)**
- Occasionally **Escobaria vivipara (spiny star cactus)**

These cacti are native to New Mexico's **piñon-juniper woodlands** and **upper desert scrub**, which are present around the **lower elevations of Hyde Park Road**, especially near **St. John's College** and the **Ten Thousand Waves area**.

So while **no saguaros** grow there (they're too cold-sensitive and need the Sonoran Desert), you do find "**black cacti**" (likely dark-colored **cholla** or **prickly pear pads**) in shaded or volcanic rock areas, especially on **south-facing slopes**. They're hardy and adapted to Santa Fe's dry, rocky lower slopes.

Which have blossoms

Both **prickly pear** and **cholla cacti**—common along the lower Santa Fe Ski Basin Road—produce **striking blossoms**:

## 1. Prickly Pear (*Opuntia* spp.)

- **Blossoms:** Bright yellow, orange, or magenta flowers.
- **Bloom time:** Late spring to early summer (May–June).
- **Habitat:** Common in piñon-juniper and desert scrub zones, including the foothills around Santa Fe.

## 2. Cholla (*Cylindropuntia* spp.)

- **Blossoms:** Can be purple, pink, yellow, or greenish, depending on species.
- **Bloom time:** Also late spring through early summer.
- **Notable species:** Cane cholla (*Cylindropuntia imbricata*), widespread in northern New Mexico.

So yes—these **native cacti** near the lower Ski Basin Road not only survive the high desert conditions but also **blossom vividly**, adding seasonal color to the rocky landscape. Their blooms, while not as iconic as the **saguaro's**, are just as ecologically and poetically powerful.

Which cacti would be at elevation with spruce and fir

Cacti generally **do not grow at elevations where spruce and fir dominate**, as these conifers typically mark **montane to subalpine zones** starting around **8,000–10,000+ feet** in the southern Rockies. These zones are **too cold and moist** for most cacti, which are adapted to **hotter, drier** low- to mid-elevation habitats.

## Quick ecological match-up:

- **Spruce (e.g., Engelmann spruce) and fir (e.g., white fir, subalpine fir):**
  - Elevation: ~8,000–11,500 feet
  - Cool, moist climate

- Found in upper montane to subalpine zones
- **Cacti (e.g., prickly pear, cholla):**
  - Elevation: typically **4,000–7,500 feet**
  - Dry, rocky, sun-exposed slopes
  - Found in desert scrub to lower montane zones

### Exception:

- **Escobaria vivipara** (spiny star cactus):
  - One of the **most cold-hardy** cacti
  - Can grow **up to 9,500 feet**
  - Found in dry, well-drained openings within spruce-fir forests, though sparsely
  - Tiny, low-growing with **pink to magenta flowers**

So if there were *any* cactus species coexisting with **spruce and fir**, it would likely be **Escobaria vivipara**, and only in **open, sunny patches or rocky outcrops** within the forest—not in the deep shade or moist soil.

It's rare, but it adds to the poem's resonance: a hidden underworld, even where you wouldn't expect it.

Are spiny star near ski basin road

Yes, **spiny star cactus (Escobaria vivipara)** can be found **near the lower to mid elevations** of the **Santa Fe Ski Basin Road (Hyde Park Road)**, especially in **open, rocky, well-drained areas** transitioning between **piñon-juniper woodland** and the lower edge of **ponderosa pine** forest—typically around **6,500 to 8,500 feet**.

### Key points:

- **Habitat:** Dry, sunny slopes with thin soils and good drainage.
- **Elevation:** Up to ~9,500 feet, making it one of the few cacti that could **coexist near the lower edge of spruce and fir zones**, especially in **south-facing exposures** or clearings.
- **Appearance:** Small, round, and low to the ground with tight spines and **bright pink or magenta flowers** in late spring or early summer.

So yes—while not abundant or obvious, **Escobaria vivipara** **does occur near the Santa Fe Ski Basin road**, especially in the **transition zones** just below where the forest becomes dominated by fir and spruce. Finding one while mushroom hunting would be rare, but not impossible—fitting the poem’s theme of subtle, hidden life.

Do they look like baby saguaro

Yes, **Escobaria vivipara** (**spinystar cactus**) can *superficially* resemble a **baby saguaro**, but with important differences:

### Similarities to baby saguaros:

- **Small, round or cylindrical shape**
- Covered in **dense spines** arranged in regular patterns
- Grows **solitary or in small clusters**, low to the ground

### Differences from baby saguaros:

- **Much smaller overall**: spinystars are typically just a few inches tall and wide
- **Denser, whiter spines** that often obscure the body more than on a young saguaro
- Saguaros (*Carnegiea gigantea*) have a **columnar, ribbed structure**, even when young, and are more green and upright
- Escobaria may **resemble a "pinecone with spines"** more than a ribbed cactus

### Blooming difference:

- **Spinystars** produce **bright pink-magenta flowers** at the crown
- **Saguaros** bloom white and much later in hotter desert climates

So yes—if someone unfamiliar with cactus diversity stumbled on a **spinystar** in the high desert, they might mistake it for a **baby saguaro** due to its shape and symmetry, especially if viewed from above. That said, in the ecological context of **Santa Fe’s high elevations**, it’s the **closest analog you’d naturally encounter**.

What is the last line meaning

The last line of Arthur Sze’s poem —

**“an underworld beginning to burst into sight.”** — is rich in layered meaning:

### Literal layer:

- Refers to **fungi and mycelium**: the hidden network below the forest floor that connects trees and roots. It's usually invisible, but after the right conditions (rain, season), mushrooms "burst" into view — literal fruiting bodies of a vast, unseen life system.

## Metaphorical layer:

- Suggests a **moment of revelation**: after attentive wandering, sensing, and attunement, something previously hidden — a truth, a connection, a pattern — starts to emerge.
- The "**underworld**" can symbolize the subconscious, the past, buried knowledge, or forgotten connections — now surfacing into awareness.

## Poetic/philosophical layer:

- It echoes the theme of **deep perception**: like the owl at dusk or the dancer who forgets her steps, insight comes **not from looking harder**, but from **being present and attuned**.
- The "underworld" here is not sinister — it's **fertile**, generative, and ancient. What was hidden is **now surfacing** into perception.

It's a moment of **transformation**: when **the invisible becomes visible**, and the poet — or the reader — begins to see more than just mushrooms.

Connect the bones wrt marrow of silence earlier and a thrumming in my bones later

Beautiful catch — the "**marrow of silences**" and the later "**thrumming in my bones**" form a subtle, resonant thread across the poem.

Here's how they connect:

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## 1. "the marrow of silences"

- Occurs in the context of **deep attunement** — like a violinist playing not just notes, but feeling into the **spaces between** them.
- "Marrow" evokes something **deep inside the bone**, the quiet core of being — **interiority**, intuition, the deep listening beneath surface noise.
- It's **stillness**, not absence.

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## 2. "a thrumming in my bones"

- Comes after a long journey through observation, subtle perception, and ecological interconnection.
  - "Thrumming" implies **vibration**, resonance — a kind of **awakening or activation**.
  - The same bones that held silent **marrow** now carry **sensation, awareness**, as if touched by the underworld's pulse.
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### Connection:

- The poem begins with **silence in the bone**, and ends with a **thrumming in the bone** — a transition from **inward stillness** to **embodied resonance**.
  - It mirrors the journey of the speaker: from the quiet repetition of mushroom hunting, to being part of the **mycelial web**, to feeling the **invisible world come alive** inside himself.
  - The marrow is **receptive**; the thrumming is **responsive** — an arc from **listening** to **feeling**, from **potential** to **manifestation**.
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The bones hold both silence and sound — just as the earth holds both hidden networks and erupting mushrooms.