



Saguaro's on the Ski Basin

Arthur Sze <asze@cybermesa.com>
To: Stephen Guerin <stephen.guerin@simtable.com>

Tue, Mar 25, 2025 at 3:06 PM

Dear Stephen,

Thanks for your note!

In response to your question, I'd like to let readers interpret the poem for themselves, but my opinion is that, although the poem starts at the Santa Fe ski basin, it moves through reverie out into the world, and then comes back to the ski basin. The poem moves out into the world at the following passage:

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.

The "great horned owl" looks but hasn't found anything yet. It could be located in Santa Fe, or it could be, for instance, somewhere in the Southwest. The "bee" that hovers over a saguaro blossom could be in Arizona or somewhere else. (It actually comes out of my memory of being at Stanford earlier that year when I was a visiting poet; I walked through the Southwest Arboretum on campus and saw a bee hovering over a saguaro blossom.) I just wanted, through the example of the bee, of something in nature finding something. In any case, the poem moves back to the ski basin after this passage.

By the way, thanks for sending the link to Feynman. In the late 1980s, I was a friend of Murray Gell-Mann (he named his book on complexity and complex adaptive systems, The Quark and the Jaguar, after a phrase from one of my poems), and, once, at dinner, Murray recited the word "sokol" and said it meant "falcon," in Slavic, and then he recited the name of the bird in nine more languages. A few days later, Dick Slansky, director of the T division at LANL, laughed and told me that once Murray and Richard Feynman were walking across the Cal Tech campus and Murray spotted a bird. He recited the name of the bird in ten languages, and, according to Dick, Richard replied, "You may know the name of that bird in ten languages, but you don't know any more about that bird than I do!"

I have two books coming out in a week: a new book of poems and another book of interviews and essays, so it's unfortunately not a good time for me to do a short interview on this poem. But I'm glad you enjoyed it!

All best,
Arthur

From: Stephen Guerin <stephen.guerin@simtable.com>
Date: Tuesday, March 25, 2025 at 11:55 AM
To: Arthur Sze <asze@cybermesa.com>
Subject: Saguaro's on the Ski Basin

Arthur,

Mushroom Hunting at the Ski Basin recently published in the New Yorker came up on a local Santa Fe Facebook thread of Nater Downey.
<https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1APxhxFf1a/>

First, what a beautiful poem. I have been contemplating it all morning. BTW, I am also interested in the Daoists and Neo-Confucianists, esp ideas around wuwei, li and qi as the relate to Complexity as studied at Santa Fe Institute with nearby concepts of constraint, free energy, and least action.

The thread kicked off on the "misidentification" of the saguaro (maybe a spinystar cactus instead with the spruce and fir elevations). I suspect this might have been intentional as it was the bee that new the 'saguaro" blossom through its senses and not its name. And you were more discerning of the mushrooms. And if it was intentional, you were echoing a little bit of Feynman about knowing the names of things doesn't mean you know the thing itself.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ga_7j72CVIc

As you are a 50-year resident of Santa Fe, I was guessing you wouldn't use the term saguaro loosely and had intent. Though spinystar cacti do look like baby saguaro.

Any thoughts? and it's ok if want to let the community interpret it for themselves. Or would you be open for a short 10-minute zoom interview that we could publish about the poem?

Thank you for your time!

-Stephen

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