Ophidia

The constellation Ophiuchus is said to represent a man in the coils of a snake, and though both the celestial equator and the ecliptic pass through it, but it is not counted among the signs of the zodiac.

The days were already burning when we crossed the river east toward Quartzsite, mini-mall of rock hounds and geode hunters, smalltime gamblers in the flea market of open sky. We slept out on BLM land among a colony of rubbertramps in the desert, nothing but nebulae to watch for, dark matter fallen from under the eyelids of stars.

Out here our Ophiuchus was made of serrate and spike, or had a venomous bite. It held the dark in its mouth limp as mammal holding a smaller animal might slip unseen.
past someone with a .12 gauge, pockets rattling with shells as the teeth of a coyote rattle in their sockets when its skin, sun-tanned, peels back at the places insects no longer swarm. I gave food to a man I saw sleeping in a gully by the dunes who seemed to speak no language at all. Three days later, I found him walking a highway that crossed a cleft in the mountains, and our faces lit to see each other. Do you need anything, I asked? Water, a little money? No, he shook his head gleefully.
He was on his way to Houston
for a check, he’d be back for another
the next month, and his dead brother’s
unclaimed disability pay

was waiting already in a P.O. box
in Palm Desert. The day meted

out its veil of heat, shimmering
over the blacktop, singing

in the rails of train tracks
that ran gleaming beside us in the sun.

How can one lonesome ghost,
I wondered, spin his own rope

to rappel us in the end
into the underworld, and keep himself

well-enough fed on bread
and sardines at once? Somewhere
a man is picking birdshot
from meat. Somewhere

he’s catching moths
in his two cupped hands. The flame

of a match that flares
at the tip of his cigarette

before he draws in his breath
depens the darkness

that falls just beyond
his illuminated face.
Valediction

Poem that begins with an image from Octavio Paz’s childhood, taken from an interview

My earliest memory
is aboard a train, drowsing. My mother
covers my eyes
suddenly with her hand, startling
me awake. Light spills
between her fingers, then a long shadow,
hanging from a pole.
Flag of civil
wars, swaying
on its rope. Anyone old enough
to understand
grew into something like a beggar
without his bowl, a thief
in a county where no one’s pockets sing
with coins. I still can’t slip
out of the skin
of the dead; will I always feel washed
by moonlight
on a battlefield where even now
the luminous effigy of war

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is burning? A young boy steals
   from the house where his family waits
in darkness. A seam of light
   seeps from the mouth of the well,

and he lifts its cover. Peering in,
   he finds the moon
guttering on dark
   water. He inhales, emits

a dim glow as algae
   illumines water in the wake
of a boat. Soldiers
   are stationed watchkeeping

along the roads of his county. They lie
   asleep as animals
bedded down
   at their tethers. One covers

the back of his neck
   with his hand, as if warding away a blow
in his sleep.