

# THE CHIRICAHUAS



POEMS BY DAVID CHORLTON

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*Presa*: On the Way to San Simon

*Pudding*: The Pack, Mine Trail

*CircleShow*: The Trails Beneath

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## NOTES FROM THE EDGE OF THE ROAD

Mountains balance on a stream of light  
behind a dry expanse  
with winter's grass  
and yucca stalks  
breaking through the bristling shadows  
where afternoon slopes gently  
into the first chill  
that comes to earth at sunset.

\*

In the walnut grove  
December sun  
flows between the rows  
of silence where two ravens  
bend a thin branch  
with the weight of black.

\*

Mesquite shadows bleed  
across the road  
with frayed edges  
reaching east. The hills behind them  
darken, but  
for the lines marking  
their contours the colour  
of luminous straw  
on the cooling air.

\*

A loggerhead shrike  
watches day shade  
into night from a fencepost  
while the sky  
becomes a mountain.

## OWL AT DUSK

On the slowly darkening slopes  
of oak and juniper  
a barn owl flashes  
pale as a vow of silence  
casting off its robes.

## WINTER CROSSING

One day in December, a silence falls  
onto the creek bed  
and bites into the earth between  
the stones. Every clock for miles around

has stopped. The bridge  
across is floating through the mist

with metal handrails inside which  
the cold connects one bank  
to the other. Trees hold  
their secrets close, like breaths

turned into cloud  
after being exhaled  
during an exchange of confidences.

## ANNUAL COUNT

In the softly drumming air  
between the empty branches  
spread against a white winter sun  
and the evergreens' rough bark,  
jays shadow woodpeckers  
who follow the goldfinches  
when the siskins have left nothing  
but busy calligraphy  
on the dark, loose soil. We are counting  
every kinglet, every dove,  
to bring the books  
in order for the date  
which hold the record  
of who flies to the edge of a range  
and who returns  
year after year  
to certain corners in the shifting  
universe we chart  
by the opening, closing,  
fanning wide, and folding  
back against the body  
of wings  
with the click and whisper  
of feather and bone.

## **CHIRICAHUA NIGHT**

Close to the smugglers' path  
a moonlit fox  
looks back  
through the loop in his tail.

## MINE TRAIL

A stony trail leads from the road  
where a coati printed its tracks in the dirt  
over those of a deer

to an abandoned mine  
with tailings piled at the mouth  
and a history of echoes

winding into darkness  
that runs its silky course  
through layers of rock

to the vein of silence  
that never loosened even  
when the miners drilled

into the mountain until it hurt  
and came back to a light  
too bright for them to see

the sparrows bouncing in the grass.

## THE PACK

Between patches of snow in the shade  
on a dry stream's bed  
where it runs between oaks and white  
sycamore, somebody discarded  
a backpack in the night. It leans  
against a rock with nothing  
inside to give it a shape  
except that of a breath  
exhaled at the end  
of a strenuous climb. Turn it over  
and it opens  
along the zipper's teeth. Move it  
aside with a foot  
and it collapses. Pick it up  
to hold against the backdrop of the trees  
and it loses the shape it used to have  
when filled with a change  
of clothes, water bottles, even a map  
that shows the trails  
across these mountains, or  
just a cold meal and a lucky charm.  
Or leave it  
right where it lies  
to stiffen with the next hard frost,  
thaw back into a memory  
and have the coming year's rain  
work it into the earth  
after unraveling the thread that holds  
the parts together; perhaps  
a few strands will line  
an oriole's nest in spring.

## MINING THE SKY

First they came for souls  
and then for gold;  
later it was copper  
when the tracks were laid  
to carry it down  
from where forests grow  
into the sky. They came  
with mules  
to bear their weight  
while they blasted secrets  
the mountains had kept  
to themselves  
through millennia  
while the desert  
lowlands were too wide  
for anything but birds  
to cross and they saw  
hummingbirds each time  
they crawled out of  
the darkness. They spoke  
with hammers and drills  
to forge themselves a language  
all could understand  
wherever they were from.  
They arrived with a thirst  
and slaked it with water  
until it turned to madness  
which they slaked  
with whiskey.  
They came  
without intending  
to remain; they took  
and took and gave back nothing  
when they left.  
And their appetites  
survive them  
like the rust that eats  
the machines  
they left behind.

## THE TRAILS BENEATH

The vegetation shifts from green to darker  
green along the stony rise  
that crests between prickly pear and juniper  
where the view tumbles down  
between dry grass and yucca stalks  
to a valley that leads to the country's end.  
Whoever climbs slowly

and travels with no set destination  
will find each trail runs from here  
along its secret way, disappearing for a while,  
and coming back where it is least  
expected to. One slips through the forest;  
one goes only as far as the eye  
can see; one is the loop

adventurers took when they  
were brimming faith, but found  
that it returns every lost soul  
to the source of his discontent. Whoever  
scrapes away a little earth  
as they go may discover  
something left behind: a broken piece

of a whiskey glass or the needle  
from a compass that pointed  
only back to where its owner  
started out from.

## ACORN WOODPECKER

Red cap, clown face, pupil in  
a bullseye framed in black  
that flows along the wings and down  
its back, white  
that flashes when it flies,  
beak that beats  
a steady rhythm in the bark  
as it works to store away a stock  
to last: the bird

is always busy. It never  
makes itself scarce  
among the oaks next  
to streams running fast  
in the spring  
and its voice is a screech close  
to chattering so constantly

that observers hear  
the scents around them in its call.  
There's one  
on a yucca stalk, another  
clinging to  
a dessicated stem,  
and another bouncing

on sunlight. I once saw  
a lady from Texas  
with bouffant hair and high-  
priced binoculars  
look away because  
she wanted something rare  
to be her long awaited,

breathlessly anticipated,  
five hundredth life  
bird.

## ON THE WAY TO SAN SIMON

A landscape hangs from the fencepost  
along the road cutting through it

from thorns in the foreground  
to the buttes too dry for trees

and the skyline with no two shapes  
alike. The colours are all shades of brown

until the ragged mountains catch  
some winter sun that sharpens all

the edges and tucks their canyons  
into folds of rock. Whatever is flat

tilts, and where the land buckles  
it exposes the underground, with layers

of stone and fire grinding against each other  
until the surface breaks on a calm

morning when someone passing through  
with time enough just happens

to stop and look, and sees what  
the world could have been without them.

## **SAFE PASSAGE**

The wayward leaning of a yucca stalk  
is all the direction these mountains offer.  
Whoever would pass through here

must first become a fox,  
then an owl, then a deer, then  
a ringtail cat. And if that

doesn't work, when the common belief  
is that you're earth now, or one  
of the shrubs that grow between the stones,

be the jaguar stepping back again  
from the dead on velvet steps  
with frost melting on your breath.

## CHIRICAHUA SPRINGTIME

### *Night Wind*

After dusk, the wind tumbles  
out of the sky, bounces  
off a rock face, slips  
between the bare limbs on an oak,  
skids along the stream  
in Turkey Creek, and whets itself  
on stones until  
its edge is sharp enough to fit  
between a window and its frame.

### *Cold Front*

A mountain vanishes.  
A hummingbird appears.  
Sunlight turns to sleet.  
Underneath the house  
a black-tailed rattlesnake  
coiled in winter's dust  
is a long, slow pulse  
waiting out the cold.

### *South Fork*

A leaning sycamore repeats  
the same long note when it scrapes  
against a pine turned black  
in last year's fire beneath bright  
rock walls that wash up against  
the sky, with the weight  
warmed out of them  
by afternoon sun.

### *Leafing*

For the first ten feet  
from the ground up  
the tree is hollow bark  
large enough for standing in  
and charred, then the edges  
come full circle where the trunk  
resumes its slender  
passage from an unbroken root  
to an unfolding leaf.

## *Warmth*

The midday warmth has coaxed  
the snake out of her darkness.  
A few scales spill  
onto the grass where it touches  
a break in the foundations.  
She nestles her face  
on her rattle for as long  
as the light soaks into her, then  
peels herself back out of sight  
from the first inch of shade  
to pass over her face.

## DESERT WALK

Our presence leaves no footprints  
on desert slopes  
built on long spells  
without rain,  
where we turn over stones,  
snag on a waist-high  
branch that snaps,  
or tread down a clump of grass  
as we maneuver to a place  
with a better view  
of the green-tailed towhee  
that flew from a mesquite  
and dipped out of sight.  
For a person to disappear here  
on a bright day like this  
would be the natural thing,  
leaving nothing but a scent  
after passing through  
his own mirror without  
causing so much as a crack.

## AMONG THE TRAILS

One trail is gravel, one is mud,  
and one runs under water  
while another is no more  
than grasses trodden down each morning  
by the deer. One trail

goes back in time  
to the miners  
who followed it unsteadily  
with drink in their feet, and one  
climbs to the crest

of the mountain and turns  
down along a slope made barren  
by fire. After a storm  
there's a trail that feels its way

with closed eyes  
through the forest, while whoever  
wants to find where winter's heart  
was buried must take

the trail of ice and sunlight  
to the fallen leaves the fox  
disturbed, and the hollow she made  
in the ground when she dug  
to unearth it.

## CHIRICAHUA THUNDER

When the thunderclap unfolds  
it empties itself out  
onto the mountains beneath it

with red stones for the dirt road  
running from the north,  
cones for the pine trees  
that grow on Silver Peak,  
scales for the rattlesnakes  
with black lightning for a spine,  
carrion for the vultures  
waiting out the falling rain,  
a mantis for each window  
closed to keep away the storm,  
orioles, hummingbirds  
and hail

that strikes the tin roof  
of the house  
no one has lived in  
for a hundred years,

where a mouse has made a nest  
in the boots beside the stove.

## TURKEY VULTURES IN A STORM

The massing of clouds over Silver Peak  
is the first sign. A rumbling  
from inside the mountain  
is the second, and the vultures

know it's coming  
as they spiral slowly down  
to perch. While the mountain  
tilts and the dirt road peels away  
from the ground,

they are still. Electricity  
charges the air around them, the tree  
to which they hold  
is straining at its roots,

but they fold themselves tight  
and offer their backs  
to the sky. They soak in the night.  
They're the prayers  
someone pinned to a tree

in hope of deliverance.  
And when sunlight returns,

they spread themselves wide  
and bathe  
in the mist it coaxes  
out of the grass.

## SEEING THE MOUNTAINS

A mountain is in the eye of the beholder.  
When the hawk  
hangs on a thread of light  
the land beneath it wheels  
in unsteady circles, the trail

the deer cross  
on their way to water  
is a secret twisting into a stand  
of trees so dense

anyone could hide there  
while waiting for a contact to arrive  
or for the wish  
of a better life to come true,  
and the pines

in last year's canyon  
are the memory of a fire  
bright enough to have been  
called beautiful.

## THE YEAR AFTER

Up to where the trees are black and thin  
the winding road climbs with a view  
through empty branches of the ridges  
and the ridges beyond them  
leading the eye away  
into the flat, blue valley fire  
didn't reach. Another turn, another  
stand of pines stripped to their final rings  
all the way from a stream  
to the high edge where they line  
the April sky. Oak, ash, or juniper  
were the same to the flames  
when they ran uphill and down with such a roar  
that the song of one warbler  
is wrapped for safekeeping  
in the silence it left behind.

## LEAVING THE CHIRICAHUAS

Follow the road through what's left  
of the town; go past  
the sign that says you're leaving  
and trust

in the way forward winding  
through jay calls and oaks  
all the way to the chill  
in the bark of the sycamores  
shining from the banks

of last summer's creek. Look  
as you go for the shiver

of light on the butte  
pressing out  
from the winter green trees;  
part rock, part earth, and part

sheltering wing with its broken  
bones showing  
through muscle and time. It is

bare as any memory  
you could smuggle from this place,  
and nothing on it grows  
high enough to cast a shadow.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Chorlton has lived in Phoenix since 1978 when he moved from Vienna, Austria, with his wife. Born in Austria, he grew up in Manchester, close to rain and the northern English industrial zone. In his early 20s he went to live in Vienna and from there enjoyed many trips around Europe. In Arizona, he has grown ever more fascinated by the desert and its wildlife, and especially enjoys the mountain ranges of southern Arizona, a region that appears frequently in his writing, including The Lost River from Rain Mountain Press, and two Slipstream chapbook competition winners; also full length books, including A Normal Day Amazes Us from Kings Estate Press and Waiting for the Quetzal from March Street Press. As much as he loves the Southwest, he has strong memories of Vienna, and that city is the setting for his first work of fiction: The Taste of Fog, from Rain Mountain Press. The Devil's Sonata, from FutureCycle Press, is his newest collection of poetry.

## ABOUT THE PRESS

Seven CirclePress was founded in 2008 by New England poet Seth Jani.

It publishes both online and off, and aims to create a collective of the best voices from the independent literary scene.

It commits to no prescribed esthetic but has a strong inclination to view art as a means of promoting unity and meaningful interaction.

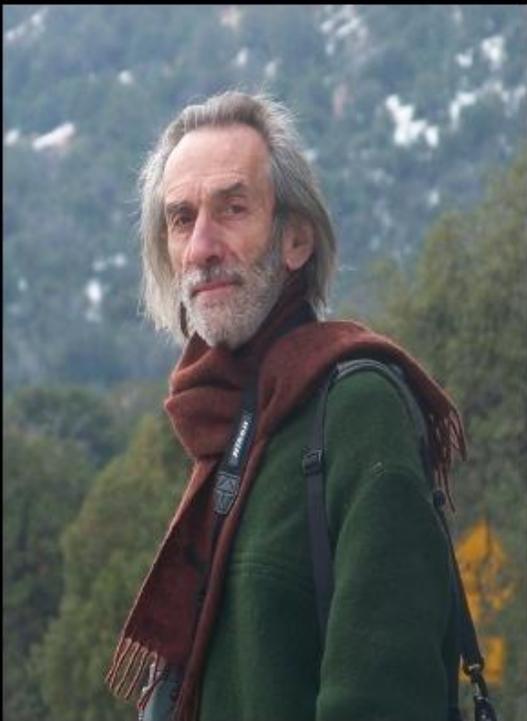
It has a strong online presence with the amount of visitors growing daily.

SCP publishes a select number of books/chapbooks a year as well as *CircleShow: The Official Journal of Seven CirclePress*, released biannually.

## PRAISE FOR THE CHIRICAHUAS

Chorlton writes like an icy stream, so crisp and clear, he gives life to not only the plants and animals in these poems, but to the abandoned mines, the stony trails and the mountains as well. Even the weather becomes alive on this beautiful journey to places we would never know without Chorlton as guide. There is no doubt we will come to learn in a deep and moving way the abundant and varied elements celebrated in Chorlton's poems. These poems will leave their mark in our bones.

*-Tobi Cogswell, Co-Editor, San Pedro River Review*



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