Saguaro

By Brenda Hillman

Often visitors there, saddened by lack of trees, go out to a promontory.

Then, backed by the banded sunset, the trail of the Conquistadores,

the father puts on the camera, the leather albatross, and has the children imitate saguaros. One at a time they stand there smiling, fingers up like the tines of a fork

while the stately saguaro goes on being entered by wrens, diseases, and sunlight.

The mother sits on a rock, arms folded across her breasts. To her the cactus looks scared, its needles like hair in cartoons.

With its arms in preacher or waltz position, it gives the impression of great effort in every direction, like the mother.

Thousands of these gray-green cacti cross the valley: nature repeating itself, children repeating nature, father repeating children and mother watching.

Later, the children think the cactus was moral, had something to teach them, some survival technique or just regular beauty. But what else could it do?
The only protection against death
was to love solitude.


Source: Fortress (Wesleyan University Press, 1989)