Shadows on the Sandias

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SHADOWS ON THE SANDIAS

By HARVENA CONRAD RICHTER

Eons into starless nights
the gods wrestled
with this rock,
casting, shaping, smoothing
the molten mass:
carving the giant figureheads,
turrets of ancient fortresses,
and Pharaoh's pyramids.
Now the cliffs are weathered
and the faces gaze with dimmed eyes
across the sand hills,
like aged chiefs at sunset.

The arid soil has yielded
piñons and cedars,
staunch on conical red hills,
ovens of a race of giants that is gone.
Where once was spilled
a profusion of rich ores,
now fir and spruce silver the dark hills—
walking among the clouds—
holding company with
the blaring sunflowers that follows the arroyos—
shadowing the scarlet tongues
of Penstamen toreii and asters, colored
like distant mesas against the reef of sunset.
High on the wind-swept ridges,
paved with natural flag-stones,
fox-pines battle the storm
above chrome aspen trunks that stoop to tell
the story of the winds.
Indian paintbrush,
purple monkshood,
a profusion of spectrum colored flora
sprinkle the grassy slopes above timber line.
Under the rim
aspen bloom in shaded clefts,
swarming down the canyons
until they meet the yellow pines,
lifting their vigorous cinnamon boles
into the heady air.

Here Indians came from Acoma
to fish the waters of this rock,
to track for deer this virginal, high-pointing forest,
these Titan, rotting trunks made soft by moss.
Now white men have scratched ant trails
where the moccasin left no scar.
Sawmills have despoiled these plumed slopes
where now only scrub oaks
paint their ochres and sepias
when frosts ride down from Colorado.

Civilization has reached these solitudes.
The spawn of man
haunts the rugged canyons to play cards,
destroying the echoes
with inane laughter.
God cannot build barb-wire fences
to keep them out.