

BUILDING ON RUINS

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Second Place, Poetry

(A response to Brad Kahlhamer's exhibit, "Let's Walk West")

1

For the young ones, past and present collide
in a conflagration of time.
Pieces fly everywhere.
In their heads, only remnants of the stories
that tell them who they are.
Shelters of buffalo hide, terraced adobe, mesquite,
give way to government housing.
Sacred corn, beans and maize are replaced
by Fritos and Coca cola.
They grow up with one foot on the land,
the other in Albuquerque, St. Louis, Cheyenne.
They have Mexican, Irish and cowboy grandfathers.
Who can tell them which skewed path to follow?

2

The old ones got lost, too.
Nobody knows where they went
except Mountain,
and Coyote, maybe he knows.
The archeologists dig in the mounds
and under the crumbled walls.
They dust the past from fragments they find,
agate points, potsherds, scraps of moccasin,
and spread them on the ground.
Then pack them off to museums
to be stored in drawers and closets.
Do they think the pieces will grow back together
there in the dark?

3

Some things we do know.

When the eagles disappeared carrying legends
in their beaked jaws, they returned
on paper bills and coins in slot machines.

In each of us the heart drum chants
of buffalo and bear, squirrel and javalina
even if we are not listening.
When we leave the land the Walkers follow
and haunt us with visions of stone mesas
stained with our blood.

And we know this:
The bones of death are always there,
just under the skin.

4

The Acoma makers search crevices
in the Malpais for ancient pots.
They say the spirits are still in them.
If they powder the sherds and add them to the clay
the new pots will be stronger.
That is what they say.