

THE ORANGE ALERT

Picture the upturned millipede, dead,
and see the streets of Altadena:
palm tree rows against the concrete, stiff
to the horizon.

There have been no birds big enough,
we are comforted, to pluck
the chitins from before our yards
and vanish
into the sun like dog-fighting MIGs.
War bears litters of similes.

Altadena, smog hugs the foothills like mustard gas
where our rich peer through their blinds
into ravines, Santa Anas sway the mustard plants, yuccas
bob, some man—his cigarette,
a full gas-can, an itch. We've known
the orange alert, fires reaching for helicopters
like cartoon cats clawing at panicked birds.

Yesterday, fire engines and HAZMAT trucks
jostled at Alameda and El Molino
like beetles eating a four-legged spider.
That morning, radios warned of orange.
Neighborhood kids watched officers climb in
and out an open manhole,
consulting the entrails of the great dead millipede.
We watched the ground;
the sun hotter than all year.
The mountains hid Santa Anas,
The smog went orange with dusk, the growing shadows
of lingering birds.

—Douglas Kearney