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Pah Tempe

Sally Stratford

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Pah Tempe

(Paiute for “water from the rock”)



Sally Stratford

After another day hiking the desert,
I lock the door of my car
and turn towards the hot springs
in the cool night.

On the gravel trail
I'm wrapped by stars,
rehearsing the legend of
the woman kept from cancer
by the water.

Hard to believe
that the Virgin River
shaped this jagged canyon.

Terraced pools seep down
to the river, I slide in
and the sulfur water
holds my body, hot, sandy.
I see Pete, the naked regular
through the rising steam.
My first time
he asked, “Why are you here?”
He comes after a day of drinking
then returns to his flickering trailer
healed.

I want to soak naked
the whole time too,
not just alone in the cold river,
to wash sand out of my bathing suit,
but I'm not a regular yet.
Under the waterfall
I rinse caked mud from my hair
and off my white arms.

I return to the pool and find Pete
leaning against the rock, asleep
like a little boy exhausted
from crying in the dark.