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## Places

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The River of the Desert

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# The River of the Desert

Jose de Prada



## Original Project Proposal

*The River of the Desert* is an extended spatial poem about life and death spreading between horizon and horizon. Structurally, the work is a 900' transparent corridor set in a flat desert—a corridor that begins and ends in immensity—a transparent nothing caught between infinities. The structure is a visual parallel to a fifteenth-century poem by Gorge Manrique, “Coplas por la muerte de su padre,” “Ode on the Death of His Father.” This luminous tunnel is a reversal of time: the beginning of the poem is the end of the poem, and vice versa.

The project concerns the translation of language as words into language as action. The integration of thought and act in a daily ritual may serve as a model for restructuring new awarenesses of living. The area of El Moro is a hinge cultural area. Spanish, several Indian tribes, and the recently arrived Anglo-Saxons. For this reason, we think it is a symbolic place for a universal poem impossible to translate into words. The project may interest people in the communications arts, actio-poetry, and ones impressed by the beauty of nothingness and the universe.

I Photograph by Christopher Mead.



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### Coplas por la muerte de su padre

Recuerde el alma dormida,  
abive el seso y despierte,  
contemplando  
cómo se passa la vida,  
cómo se viene la muerte  
tan callando;

cuán presto se va el plazer,  
cómo después de acordado,  
da dolor,  
cómo, a nuestro parescer,  
cualquiera tiempo passado  
fué mejor.

### Ode on the Death of His Father

O, let the soul her slumbers break!  
Let thought be quickened and awake,—  
Awake to see  
How soon this life is past and gone,  
And death comes softly stealing on,—  
How silently!

Swiftly our pleasures glide away:  
Our hearts recall the distant day  
With many sighs;  
The moments that are speeding fast  
We heed not; but the past—the past—  
More highly prize.

Pues si vemos lo presente  
cómo en un punto se es ido  
y acabado,  
si juzgamos sabiamente,  
daremos lo no venido  
por pasado.

No se engañe nadie, no,  
pensando que ha de durar  
lo que espera  
más que duró lo que vió,  
pues que todo ha de passar  
por tal manera.

Nuestras vidas son los ríos  
que van a dar en la mar,  
que es el morir:  
allí van los señoríos  
derechos a se acabar  
y consumir;  
allí los ríos caudales,  
allí los otros medianos  
y más chicos,  
allegados son iguales,  
los que biven por sus manos  
y los ricos.

Dexo las invocaciones  
de los famosos poetas  
y oradores;  
no cuero de sus ficciones,  
que traen yervas secretas  
sus sabores.

Aquel solo me encomiendo,  
aquel solo invoco yo  
de verdad,  
que en este mundo biviendo,  
el mundo no conoció  
su deidad.

Este mundo es el camino  
para el otro, que es morada  
sin pesar;  
mas cumple tener buen tino  
para andar esta jornada  
sin errar.

2 Photograph by Jose de Prada.

Onward its course the present keeps,  
Onward the constant current sweeps,  
Till life is done;  
And did we judge of time aright,  
The past and future in their flight  
Would be as one.

Let no one fondly dream again  
That Hope and all her shadowy train  
Will not decay;  
Fleeting as were the dreams of old,  
Remembered like a tale that's told,  
They pass away.

Our lives are rivers gliding free  
To that unfathomed, boundless sea,  
The silent grave:  
Thither all earthly pomp and boast  
Roll to be swallowed up and lost  
In one dark wave.

Thither the mighty torrents stray,  
Thither the brook pursues its way,  
And tinkling rill.  
There all are equal. Side by side,  
The poor man and the son of pride  
Lie calm and still.

I will not here invoke the throng  
Of orators and sons of song,  
The deathless few;  
Fiction entices and deceives,  
And sprinkling o'er her fragrant leaves  
Lies poisonous dew.

To One alone my thoughts arise,—  
The Eternal Truth,—the Good and Wise:  
To Him I cry,  
Who shared on earth our common lot,  
But the world comprehended not  
His deity.

This world is but the rugged road  
Which leads us to the bright abode  
Of peace above;  
So let us choose that narrow way  
Which leads no traveller's foot astray  
From realms of love.



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Partimos cuando nascemos,  
andamos mientras bivimos,  
y llegamos  
al tiempo que fenescemos;  
assí que cuando morimos  
descansamos.

Este mundo bueno fué  
si bien usássemos dél  
como devemos,  
porque, según nuestra fe,  
es para ganar aquel  
que atendemos.

Our cradle is the starting-place;  
In life we run the onward race,  
And reach the goal;  
When, in the mansions of the blest,  
Death leaves to its eternal rest  
The weary soul.

Did we but use it as we ought,  
This world would school each wandering thought  
To its high state.  
Faith wings the soul beyond the sky,  
Up to the better world on high  
For which we wait.

Unos, por poco valer,  
¡por cuán baxos y abatidos  
que los tienen!  
Y otros, por no tener,  
con oficios no devidos  
se mantienen.

Los estados y riqueza,  
que no dexan a desora,  
¿quién lo duda?  
No les pidamos firmeza  
pues que son de una señora  
que se muda;  
que bienes son de Fortuna  
que rebuelve con su rueda  
presurosa,  
la cual no puede ser una  
ni estar estable ni queda  
en una cosa.

Pero digo que acompañen  
y lleguen hasta la huessa  
con su dueño:  
por esso no nos engañen,  
pues se va la vida apriessa  
comosueño.

Y los deleites de acá  
son, en que nos deleitamos,  
temporales,  
y los tormentos de allá,  
que por ellos esperamos,  
eternales.

Los plazeres y dulçores  
desta vida trabajada  
que tenemos,  
¿qué son sino corredores,  
y la muerte la celada  
en que caemos?

*Ten Centuries of Spanish Poetry*  
(Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University  
Press, 1955), pp. 81–83.

Some, the degraded slaves of lust,  
Prostrate and trampled in the dust,  
Shall rise no more;  
Others by guilt and crime maintain  
The scutcheon that without a stain  
Their fathers bore.

Wealth and the high estate of pride,  
With what untimely speed they glide,  
How soon depart!  
Bid not the shadowy phantoms stay,—  
The vassals of a mistress they,  
Of fickle heart.

These gifts in Fortune's hands are found;  
Her swift-revolving wheel turns round,  
And they are gone!  
No rest the inconstant goddess knows,  
But changing, and without repose,  
Still hurries on.

Even could the hand of avarice save  
Its gilded baubles, till the grave  
Reclaimed its prey,  
Let none on such poor hopes rely;  
Life, like an empty dream flits by,  
And where are they?

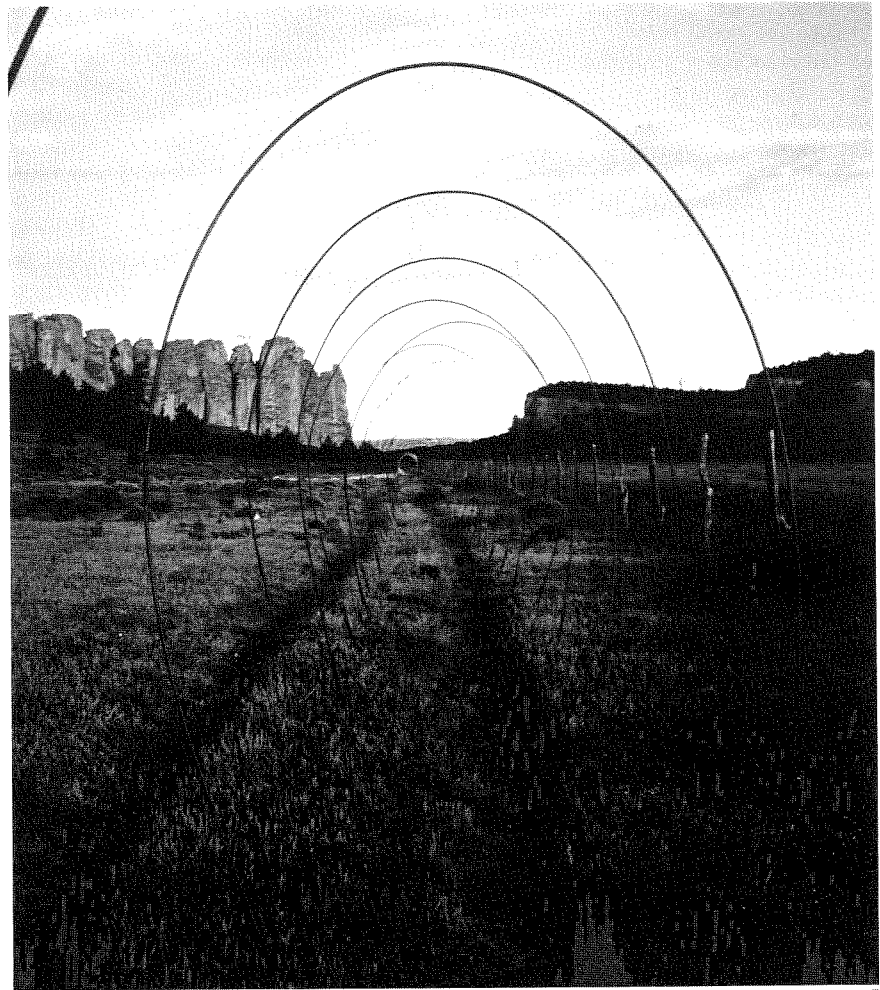
Earthly desires and sensual lust  
Are passions springing from the dust,—  
They fade and die;  
But, in the life beyond the tomb,  
They seal the immortal spirit's doom  
Eternally!

The pleasure and delights which mask  
In treacherous smiles life's serious task,  
What are they all,  
But the fleet coursers of the chase,—  
And death an ambush in the race,  
Wherein we fall?

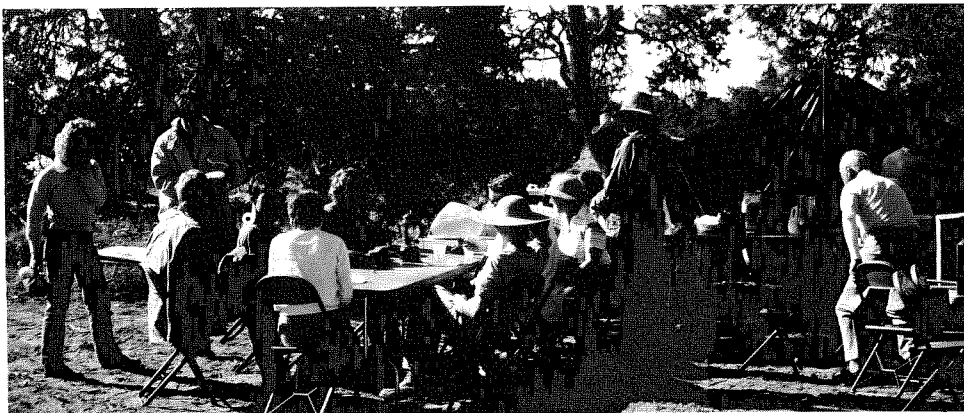
Gorge Manrique

**Specific Material and Equipment  
for the Piece**

- 200 rebar arches (Ø ½", length 21')
- 56,800.0 sq. ft. polyethylene film (1,000 g. width 21')
- 5,400 yds. nylon rope (Ø ¾")
- 170,000.0 staples
- 8 industrial hand staplers
- 400 rebar sticks, one end pointed (Ø ½", length 24")
- 7,000.0 yds. wire (Ø ⅓")
- 2 metric tapes (150')
- 650' rope (Ø ⅓") for measurements
- 5 scissors
- 20 lbs. nails (Ø ¼" × 6")
- 4 hammers
- 5 mazes
- 4 screw drivers
- 5 appliers
- 4 wrenches
- 2 shovels
- 3 ladders



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4 Photograph by Jose de Prada.

5 Photograph by Jose de Prada.

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