

Alkali

They say that *alquili* is Arabic for wood ash
And denotes hydroxide and carbonate
Salts of sodium and potassium—
And while I've seen the small branches
Of shadscale, scruboak and cedar
Burned to a fine white ash
That kept the shrunken form of twigs
Until disturbed into powder,
I cannot say it's true.
I only know alkali as the blanched coat
That covers low ground
That has no streams
But only flat dry lakebeds
With hard, bitter soil
Supporting scattered sagebrush
And the poisonous weed halogeton.
Somehow it's not like soil at all—
It's more like salt or quicklime
That makes a white runway
Between the sage for pale jackrabbits.

—John Sterling Harris