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A blurred desert landscape featuring several saguaro cacti. The scene is captured in a soft, hazy light, likely during sunrise or sunset. A thin horizontal line is positioned near the top of the image. The word "Home" is centered in the middle of the image, written in a black, cursive script and underlined.

Home

*Welcome on a Monogrammed Cactus Flower*

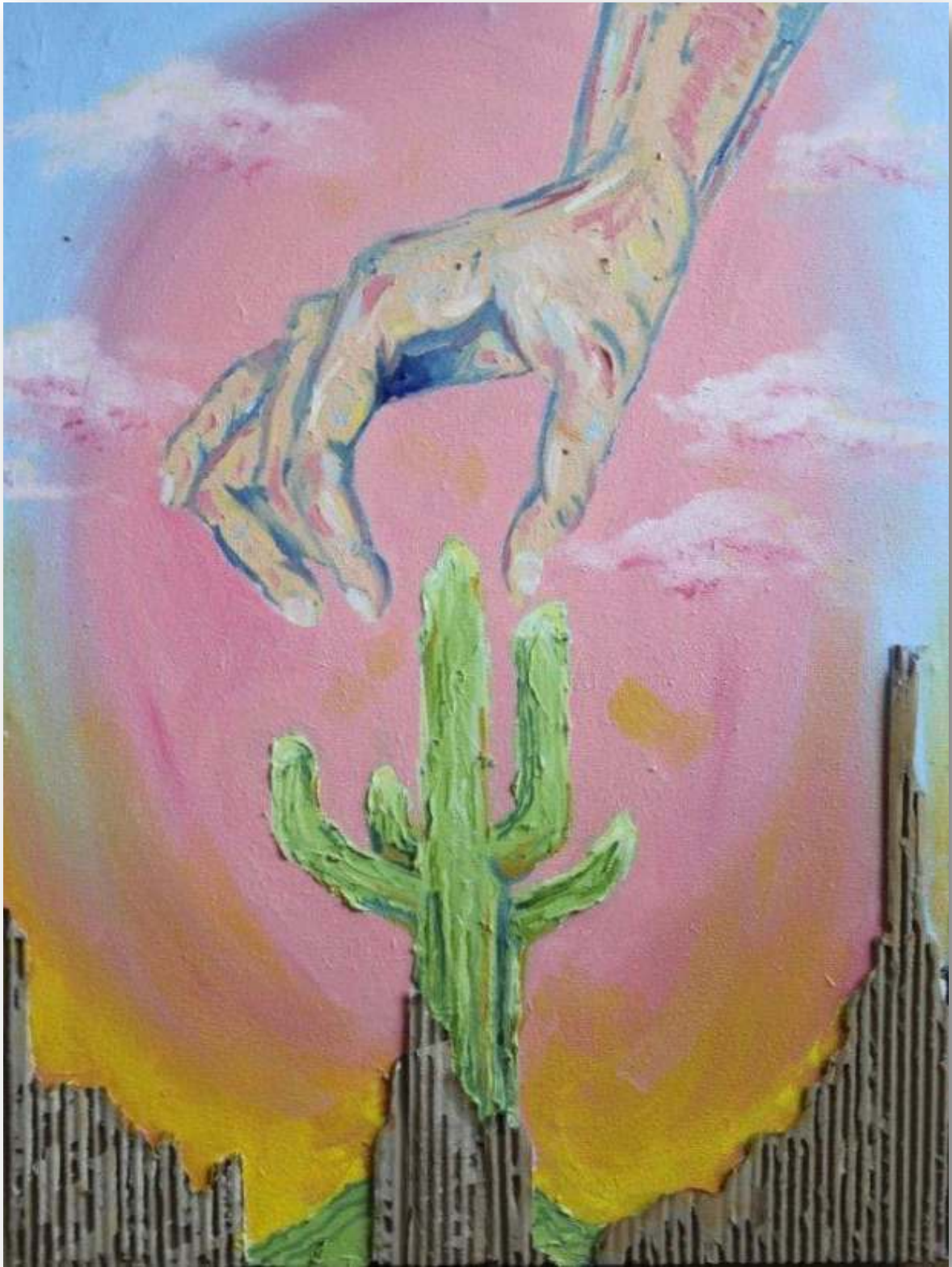
Come burrow in and hide  
In this fortress standing tall  
This home is welcome

To the birds who drill  
Through my harsh skin to my heart  
Where you may find peace

In a piece of me  
In many spines, dull now  
In the summer rain

See this bright color  
Paint dust in impassioned spring  
And say *I am here*

Please come in, I will always wait for you  
Build a cactus home like we used to do



*Saguaro Picking*. 18" x 24". Oil and cardboard on canvas.

## SAGUARO NATIONAL PARK

I am sitting in the honey-colored heat of the afternoon, and while I will not be self-righteous enough to say that this is the place that raised me, I would like to think that it still is a part of me. I am trying to paint this self portrait of myself in these saguaros, in this stream that's barely running but so thrilling, a burble in the quiet cooing of the day. I'm sitting atop this rock and cannot help but try to see my features in the landscape, in the pollen that I know will trigger my traitorous allergies, in the ebb and flow of the cascading hills to the East. I don't know if I can, but I am trying.

I will not be self-righteous enough to say that these saguaros are what raised me, that cuddled me with thorny limbs and brought me up in the embrace of the desert. I could say that the forest of cacti is as much a home to me as any cookie-cutter building ever will be, but I will not. Because, sentimental as it could sound, it is simply not true.

Instead, when I look out at this army of green giants underneath a cerulean sky, the sun finally on my skin like a tattoo and I feel it searing, the thought of sunburn smelling like aloe already, I don't see home. I see a refuge, an escape, a wonderland of these curious creatures rising up from what might look like a barren earth. And I've forgotten how nice it sometimes can be without all those towering trees in the way of the clear sky. Still, it is a magic that I *have* been minutes near all my life, though I would never venture to call this painted breeze something of the everyday.

I remember once when one of my rare extended family members visited from Oregon, we hopped into a smushed car and headed through the hilly part of West Tucson to make a spectacle of our very own everyday. I remember his shock at how many cacti there were, and thinking to myself how strange it was that someone could come to a place named for Saguaros and not expect to see more than a few. Then again, I am speechless in any forest, in any new world I discover, in any brand new place. But when people think of Tucson and aren't from here, it's not a spiked forest or

the smell of creosote in the rain or the look of purple snowcapped mountains behind a vista of faded green cacti that they imagine. When people think of Tucson, I think that the general imagination consists of snowbirds sitting somehow in a barren desert right out of the colored memory of Wile E. Coyote in the tan desert blowing himself up while a tumbleweed moseys on by. I'm always happy to talk to people who are surprised, who come out of those Saturday morning cartoon induced illusions and open up their eyes to the truly unique landscape.

It is helpful, sometimes, to let yourself forget about home. Looking through that brand new perspective of surprise and wonder, those cactus blossom colored glasses that say *wow, this place is something special*, and let yourself be a tourist.

My whole childhood, I remember complaining that there was nothing to do here, though now I don't know what I thought I was talking about. Growing up, I was always drenched in sunshine, covered in needles from adventures gone awry, covered in dirt from exploration into the vast unknown of my greater backyard. My grandma's house is only a few minutes from the East side of Saguaro National Park, perfect for impromptu picnics or weekday drives on the winding dirt road towards nowhere around the same echoing loop. When I was younger, this natural wonder in our midst was the site of all my grandpa's favorite trails, and this loop with its reverberating memory sounds like giggles on Sunday afternoons with nothing more to do than be together. My worry here, spinning round and round in this constant loop, climbing up and up from one rock to the next, the saguaros growing taller and taller in their divine ascent to the sky surrounding me like barbed wire, is that, one day, it will all disappear.

When they first established the park, according to the information set out for curious tourists, there were countless more cacti in the area than there are now. I've never, until very recently, read all of the informational signs in Saguaro National Park. When you're little, you'd rather ogle at the landscape and play in the seemingly roaring streams than wonder about conservation in

the park. When you're an adult, I would say that it's much the same. How must it feel to have so many visitors, gawking eyes on an otherworldly landscape, and no one to care about the inside? I imagine that it would feel desolate, being a place that is admired but seldom understood. As a national park, Saguaro certainly isn't as innately popular to visit as the Grand Canyon or Yosemite, and yet it has its own quiet beauty in its unparalleled scenery and wildlife. But a quiet life leads to a quiet collapse.

The two primary environmental issues impacting Saguaro National Park are invasive species and, yes, climate change. These killers, too, are silent.

Buffelgrass as an invasive species is one of the greatest threats to the natural ecosystem of the Sonoran Desert. This weed, like many of the problems facing our national parks as well as our environment as a whole, was brought to this region by humans. Never considering the impact it would have, farmers brought buffelgrass to the desert to feed cattle and help themselves, though it now has created one of the biggest issues in caring for wildlife in this area. Rather than helping the environment with erosion like many people had thought it would, it instead competes for water and nutrients, starving out the native vegetation. As for the anthropogenic impact of climate change, I don't think it necessary to go into detail. However, in spite of the barren-desert-narrative of common misperception, cacti need a certain climate in order to grow. With rising temperatures, they will migrate, seeking refuge in cooler areas, and disappearing from Tucson altogether.

Quietly, their home will be stolen.

Quietly, we will let it.

I am trying to paint this self portrait of myself in these saguaros, but all I see is arms as green strangling limbs wrapping greedily around this landscape and squeezing until there is nothing left. All I see is legs which plow over the hills, crushing and uprooting, flattening the world to one plane

of gray. All I see is these selfish hands, child's hands, picking a flower because it is beautiful. But when it is picked, the flower dies.

I used to build things out of nothing. I made clothes out of paper, made circuses for crickets, made houses for fairies out of spare bark I found on the mountain. I still do, sometimes.

I never made anything out of a cactus, and I am not sure that you can. Because there is nothing like a saguaro, nothing that it can be other than what it is. It is these unique things, these untouchable unbelievable things that exist in the every day that we must protect.

Though they are armored with thorns, armored with a defense on predators that may attack, ready for any scenario, they are not made of barbed wire; they are vulnerable. And maybe this is where humans can find some mutuality, some sense of understanding.

After the thorns, after the rough exterior, a saguaro is a home.

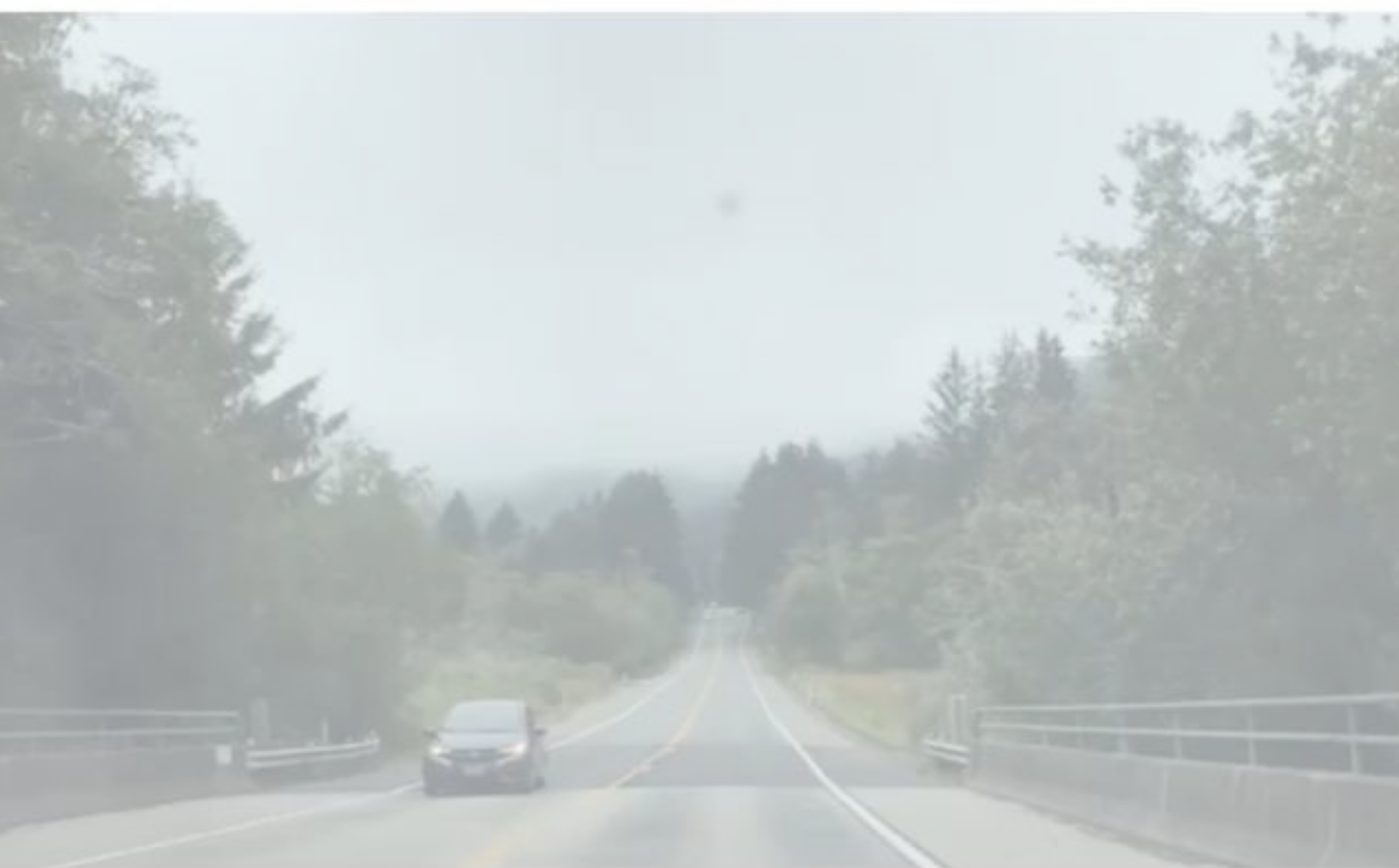
Tucson is their home.

This is my home.

I want to paint a self portrait of myself in these saguaros. I am basking in the fading afternoon, letting the inky sky wash over me, letting myself be lost in this desert wind, and I think I might see it.

This is our home.







*On the Road Again, Pt II:  
A Fictional Looking Ahead Towards a Worst-Case-Scenario World*

It's getting harder to remember what it used to be like. On the harder days, you try a little more than usual, squeezing your eyes shut with unnecessary and overly-dramatized importance that can only point obviously to desperation. The silence is good for this, it helps jog your memory. Or, at least, you think it helps to block out the white noise of the hyperbolically loud din omnipresent in the air. These days, the world has gotten so much louder. So, sometimes when it gets to be too much, too much work, too much noise, too much stress and fear and worry of what will come the next day and the next, you try to remember a time where life wasn't so scary. Sometimes, you can conjure up a little of the nostalgia nipping at the edges of your subconscious.

Empty roads and empty skies. Where once this same drive was peaceful and quiet and brimming with the ethereal feeling of you and your car and the rising sun. Now, the highway overfills with you and your car and everyone else's car pumping gray into the dusty blue sky. The green grass has gone yellow, the cows crowd the plains and their *moos* sound like cries for memories. The trees are falling, corpses lying in the living forest and the dust settles like an abandoned battlefield.

It is not quiet.

Crowded houses line the cliffs, burned forests make way for a new type of home.

You can barely breathe.

You remember what a road trip used to mean. It used to be the thrill of laughing at the clouds crossing the sky in obscure shapes, crying when the sun set and your eyes stung with the light of the campfire and the world fell silent. Your eyes never stop watering now. The planes are never silent, the engines scream across a deserted forest.

Yosemite Valley is on fire.

Redwood Forest is a graveyard.

Saguaro Park is a wasteland.

La Jolla Cove is a landfill.

It all is infested, the world, the protected lands you once held so dear, have given way to the overwhelming crowds of killers. You bury your memories in the churchyard of this desolation. It's too hot out anyway.

You can't breathe between the people standing here.

You can't breathe at all.

Neither can the earth.

## *The Backyard Park and a Note On the End of the World*

How do you write about darkness  
when it is not dark  
or emptiness  
when it is not empty?  
How do you begin to understand  
history when you are in it, inside it  
like a mouse safe in its burrow  
it does not venture to think beyond this moment  
it does not think beyond building.

How do you write about the world,  
when it is eclipsed by an omnipresent ceiling  
and one-way windows?  
I remember what it is like to go outside  
and pump the air full of  
black smoke from my smiles.  
I remember what it is like to care little  
for today, to live for tomorrow.

To write about the sky,  
it is important to look up.  
It is more cloudless, more blue,  
than I believe I have ever seen  
to write about the birds,  
it is important to listen to the quiet.  
To write about history,  
it is important to live in it.

There is a word for the feeling  
of campfires and homecooked laughter  
and staying up late looking up  
towards a sea of constellations  
blanketed in living trees  
there is a word for the feeling  
of a sunset hush, a crowd of held breath  
and lungs filled with something pink and yellow  
smelling like daisies in the spring but the  
cold air breezing through unkempt hair disagrees.  
There is a word for those little moments  
in days which feel like the end of the world.

That mouse in its burrow is content,  
and look at the beauty it has in its grasp,  
in this moment,

in the backyard.

There is a word for a brighter sky,  
For louder birds  
For quieter roads  
For simpler joys  
For thriving lives,  
Meaning  
*Now.*

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Thank you to the National Park Service for protecting these areas.  
Now, we are seeing rates of environmental restoration and reverence that were unimaginable not so long ago. Bluer skies, clearer days, and a keen sense of how fortunate we really are to be on this planet.  
I hope, and I believe, this change will endure.  
If only we try.