

Saguaro

by: Stevie Billow

With flashbulb clarity, you appear; standing against the whirling motes that obscure my memory. You're laughing. I don't remember the sound of your laugh exactly, but it's bright and bursting like sour cherries. This particular image of you, dark hair warmed by sunlight, is tethered to the tarp tent we pitched, religiously, in the early summers of our childhood. Behind you, the tent hunches, its shadow stretching far beyond the reach of your small body.

We sold waterlilies from a fuchsia Barbie bucket on the side of the road. We plucked them from lake shallows, toes stretched into silt, wading up to our waists through gelatinous algae. We exchanged the lilies for fifty cents a head. With our earnings, you told me, we'd buy ourselves a desert.

We sucked down sugar-clouded cereal milk, spoons rattling in our mouths. You never had a cavity. Mom collected each of your perfect, pearlescent baby teeth and stored them in an Altoids tin hidden between the brushes and creams on her bureau. I've never seen them, yet, I know they are still there; rotting, burgundy bullets eager and waiting in their cartridge case.

We painted our bedroom walls the gradient ochre of dusk, outlining a lone silhouette; a cowboy, you imagined yourself, pulled into focus with the flare of a sunbeam, blurred by the whorls of biting sand. You taught me to summon the blossoming cacti with each breath, to conjure the grit of dry earth and bleached bone between my fingertips. And even now I smell the blooms more readily, feel the grind of desert dust more vividly than I can remember your face.



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