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Doldrums

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Doldrums

Ruth A. Aul

The desert is dead space.

You can feel the heat shimmering across your skin, hear the quiet drowsy hums and crackles of the dry air, its deafening silence making time move like molasses. The sky fades from indigo around the edges to harsh cerulean at the top dotted with little faraway cotton ball clouds and streaked through with a jet trail. The sun is a celestial yellow eye, and the golden tears leaking out run and seep into all the gaps between buildings and over all of the sizzling fields full of dry dirt and cactuses and little clusters of yellow flowers. They run in through the slightly grimy window of the creaky old wooden house on the corner and fill in all the cracks, bathing everything in a golden glow somewhere between the color of sunflowers and honey. Behind doors with chipped white paint and in the spaces just to the left of windows where the light doesn't reach, dusty brown fades into oily black. Some stray rays of the light sneak their way into the darkness, and tiny hints catch the dust drifting through the shadows, making it glitter and float like little fairies. In the old leather and black coffee murkiness, tiny shapes play in your mind's eye just beyond your reach, like dark mirages in the cool, dusty corners. In half-honeyed light and shoe polish shadows, a parched, empty room looks like a funeral parlor.

Outside the dead-space rooms, puddles appear on cracked pavement and parched, baked sand, shimmering away and disappearing when you look straight at them. A couple of little brown birds peck at the street, and fly up to perch on humming telephone wires when an old red sedan with peeling paint and duct-taped windows rattles past on the rough, faded blacktop. The tiny birds twitter and flap their wings in disapproval, a dog barks, a kid yells somewhere far away, and mariachi music drifts out of someone's window; but the bone-dry air sucks up the sound and muffles it so you hear the world like a kid pressing a drinking glass against the kitchen door.

The plug-in fan sputters, then continues to buzz. A car whooshes by. A cat yowls somewhere, a woman yells something unintelligible in the distance, and the honey and sunflowers of the afternoon wilt and

darken until the sun becomes a pomegranate, the juice staining the once-gold spaces a peachy pink. You're viewing the world through a pair of dusty, rose-tinted glasses. The mountains go from hazy, tawny grey to deep purple, the little birds on the humming wires wiggle into their cactus nests, a baby cries in its crib a few decrepit doors down, its mother smacks on her gum and chatters on the phone. The crickets and coyotes begin their chirping and yapping, the noises drifting in on the suddenly cool breeze. The tawny rocks still sizzle with the heat of the day, and the waves of heat rising from them etch psychedelic patterns onto the rose gold sky.

As the colors fade from pink to deep red, the bleeding heart sun dips behind the velvety black mountains. For a brief moment, there is absolute silence—no dogs, no crickets or buzzing insects, not even a breath of the evening breeze to rattle the leaves of the Joshua trees and blow a discarded hamburger wrapper off the side of the road— just the bleeding sun slipping away and the paper lantern moon peeking out from the soft sky. Ears ring in the deafening silence, and the last touches of golden ichor seep out of the sky. In the reverent quiet, the sky is pricked with pinpoint stars one by one, and cacti are alien silhouettes in the dying light. A cricket chirps, a coyote yaps, and sound returns. A chill settles over the hot, heavy dryness like a blanket. Fans sputter to a halt, and the shadows in the little spots to the left of windows previously filled with black coffee murkiness hide inkblot almost-shapes from the moon. Moonlight drips down, down, down from the velvety dark sky and pools on door frames and windowsills, eventually running off to form silvery-white puddles on the floor. The buzzing, crackling heat is gone now, replaced by the cold-coffee dryness of the night. Moths flutter and splash in the watery moonlight, the cold air whispers around the walls outside, and the desert is alive for the night.