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Quarterly West

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Q U A R T E R L Y W E S T

IN THEORY

A creosote bush is born into aridity, welcomed into the desert by winds and lack and thirst. But the creosote is also a blessed creature, plain and foul-tasting; the desert animals leave it to its own devices.

Sprouting from a central trunk, the creosote's supple branches are dark from the moment they emerge, black beneath the skin, charred in the womb of the plant. Leaves the size of fingernails unfurl. The creosote eschews the luxury of exposure.

The creosote grows a little each year, but with a hollowness at the center. An empty space: its trunks grow up from the sand in a small ring. For the second decade, the third even, the branches may overlap, obscuring the empty center, but after a very few years more, two people could stand comfortably inside the ring, two people who might be only acquaintances. Or lovers so deeply wed they did not need to touch with their bodies. Strangers could stand there with some awkwardness, perhaps.

A creosote bush grows in increasing concentric circles, a circle widening year by year in the infallible memory of itself. One ring after another dies, loosening and opening: more space. More light dazzles the empty sand within.

Theoretically, a small party could transpire within a creosote bush of a certain age. Several people could lean against sofas, holding mixed drinks. Music could play, and a host and hostess could link arms in the kitchen. A woman could drink too much cognac and begin to talk to her best friend's husband. She could lean towards him, inclining like a tautened bow. Her hand could laugh across his cheek, grazing away crumbs which were not there. Her eyes could suddenly hold the promise of all he wept for as a child. His wife could be talking in the kitchen, not noticing the grazing fingers, the figures bending toward one another so that he begins to smell the woman, his wife's best friend, so that he begins to smell her perfume and the skin beneath the perfume and the promise in the skin. The hour could grow late, the guests could begin to leave. The headiness of the cognac could start to fade, the man could think of his children. A creosote bush is large enough to contain these things.

There is nothing naïve about a creosote bush. Some may, in fact, be the oldest living creatures on Earth. They have seen the hippopotamus, the tapir, two kinds of camel, three species of *Eohippus*, and the ancestor of the modern bison dwell and disappear in North America. They have watched the climate change with the lessening rainfall. They have thirsted as their lush companions departed. There is

little that a creosote bush has not seen.

In theory, a girl could lie on the ground next to a hotel bed within such a bush. Her brother could lie at the foot of the bed. The woman in the bed could reach down to take her daughter's hand, and the man in the bed could begin to mutter, the woman to reply. The fingers of the woman could begin to tighten around the fingers of her daughter. The little boy could sleep on. The girl could hear the woman, her mother, replying to the man in the bed. *No, not again*, the mother's voice could seem to say, *not with the children here*—A thudding sound could occur, which the girl would hear not with her ears but in her hand and wrist and directly, thuddingly, in the center of her chest. The woman could choke off a sob. The bed could begin to rock, to shake, as the muffled sobs of the woman swept down to the girl like a lullaby, the soft carving of her mother's fingernails into her wrist. The girl could begin to silently come apart upon the floor, drifting limb by limb through the roof of the hotel room. The boy could sleep on, not knowing he would be wakened by a kick that would send him weeping to the corner of the room, clutching the sheet to his head. He could sleep on at the foot of the bed, and the girl could lie awake feeling the soft carving of her mother's nails in her wrist, lulled by the croon of the woman's strangled sobbing not into sleep but into a wakefulness more deep and absent than slumber. The bed could continue to shudder and the man to grunt, the woman to sob, the boy to sleep within the circumference of only a creosote bush. A creosote bush is large enough for these things, even if they should continue for years.

It is unusual to find a creosote bush growing in solitude. In most areas, they cluster over the acres like family. But whether a creosote lives alone or in the company of its kin, it is not impossible for a single specimen to contain a small throng of women, forming unannounced before daybreak. Many weeping women could begin to circle, around and around without pausing, careless of the absence of landmarks by which to count their passage. Their headscarves could slowly drench with perspiration and their eyes could begin to glaze with thirst. Thirst for their sons. Somewhere nearby, their sons could be slit from nipple to nipple not once but many times and soaked with alcohol. Each nipple could be gouged away, could be doused again with alcohol not once but many times. Filaments fine as thread and carrying volts of pain undreamed could be placed at their scrotums, at the delicate spider-egg sacs webbed with blue that the women sponged each day for years, dreaming of smooth-faced young brides and the soft cries of grandchildren.

The women could stumble shoulder to shoulder, describing arc after arc, weeping or stone-eyed at the mindsight of the guards smoking in the corridor, each waiting his turn at the girls inside, at the daughters of the women. Thirteen, seventeen years old. Girls. Finished, the guards could slide their muzzles there, could unload six quick rounds into the furrow, stopping afterwards in the yard to rinse the blood and sperm. First a girl, her younger sister watching, and then the younger sister. The mothers circle and circle. They cannot contain this. For each it

happens at a different time: each body breaks open, each soul slides silky wet up the white Sonora sky. One by one they shatter, *Give me madness, Jesus, show me your sweet face*, gliding up invincible now while below their frames still stagger circling like broken birds. All this could, theoretically, occur within a space no larger than a single creosote bush, the roots of which would not shrink from the soil.

These things are true: the grace of the willow on the streambank.
The blue spruce splendoring behind the cabin.
Mountainfuls of maple forest after frost.
Neither you nor I would be the one to deny these things.

Yet observe for a moment the grace of the creosote bush, hollowing as it grows, stretching and bending under an empty sky. Wind, scorch, thirst—years of these things. Centuries. How it endures. And then—a swelling secretly open, a burgeoning lack, a pregnancy of sorrow, until at long last you fall to your knees before the weeping child...the spread trembling fingers of the derelict...the deathbed shudder of the beloved stranger...and you cry *Here it is!* speaking of your self as of a jar or a bowl, offering and offering your last fiber, your last salt breath, each terrified pulse of you as a sacrament to you know not what.