Mohave: the desert

Arthur Johnson*
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THE MEXICAN called him "The Devil's Garden," but I really couldn't believe what that Mex'd said. The Mex was afraid of him. It seems like most people are afraid of him, though. I don't mean that they're really terrified of him, but they're always happy enough to leave him alone. I guess that he really doesn't mind that, though. Maybe he knows that he's better off that way.

I think that the last time I saw him was in April. Yes, that's right. I remember because of the flowers. They'd popped out right after that little rain we had. I'll be damned if I can figure out where they all come from. It seems like one day things are all brown and drab and then we get a little spring dew and the next thing you know he's on fire. There's that squaw cabbage and that dark blue one, lupine, and acres of those gold-colored gilia! And asters and sun-rays, too. For a couple of weeks there he looks like a hot-house.

He's a funny one, though. Tough as nails! Like a kid that's known nothing but knockin' around and general bad treatment. The mountains steal his water and the wind does nothin' but blow! And that sun!

It seems like he's sort of got his back up now, though. Like he's ready to take anything that they can dish out. Everywhere, he looks hard and sharp. Rocks, plants, animals, everything! Colors, too. Reds and oranges and yells. Everything's hard and hot! Maybe that's why the Mex' doesn't like him.

I don't mean to say that he can't be gentle, though. I don't know of anything quite like those sunsets. Sometimes when a day was over I'd just sit and take it all in. Soon as the sun started to hang low in the sky, why the wind would go down and things would start to cool off. Then the sky
would turn pink and then red, and pretty soon the color slopped over onto everything and it looked like the end of the world. Some say that it's the dust in the air that does it, but I don't think so. The dust around here is mostly yellow, not red.

Most of all, I think I like the kids. There's times when I think he's running a combination orphanage and reform school. He adopts every plant and animal that can't make it anywhere else. Mesquite, the Joshuas, that little yellow pectis, jack-rabbits, ravens and bighorns. And the road-runner—craziest damn bird. Anything that has an air of "rascal" about it. Snakes and lizards, cicadas and cactus. All they've got to do is work for their keep.

Then there's the nights, too. I think that when he was looking for a place to settle down, he took the spot with the most stars above it. At night the air gets crisp, and the moon comes up red as the sandstone and big as a Joshua tree. The shadows crawl with the moon, and you can hear a fox barking. A fire seems pretty good company.

He's hard, and then again he's soft. One thing though, he's awfully contented. It's really too bad that he's about through. Oh, yes, he's about done. Another century or two and we people are going to evict him just like all of the others. Maybe he'll end up in cotton fields or parking lots, or something like that. Or maybe men'll keep drilling irrigation wells until there's not enough water for a mesquite bush, and he'll end up in just plain dust and the kids along with him.

But then I guess that's progress, and they tell me that there's nothing like progress.