#LifeIsForLiving

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May / Saguaro National Part West

The bright sun washes a cloud of ironwood flowers crowded in bushels on gray limbs, from rich lilac into white—especially in my cell phone photograph. I am amazed by how inadequate what I try to digitally capture is compared to my memory of brilliant desert sun, crawling over dirt roads as quail scamper under nopal cactus and how each saguaro is crowned with pear-shaped buds unfolding into thick white flowers, yellow stamen. When I finally find a wheelchair-accessible concrete table to stop at, the wind lifts my sunglasses into the air. Ravens and turkey vultures ride high against blue sky. I tie back my hair with a bandanna that wind also teases. But the sandy dirt, laced with stretches of rock covered in desert varnish, stays put. Claimed by desert roots and sun, the solid—dry—soil knows it is home. A black speckled bee hangs out by my feet, one of a 1,000 different types, buzzing and fluttering over spilled something sweet. My head swings left to the thud, thud, peck echoes from inside the saguaro that stands 40 feet tall. Gila woodpeckers trade shifts all afternoon landing on vertical thorn laced skin before popping a head, then body, inside the hole. And the other poking its head out to check before launching into flight. And I know. The desert. It is especially dry from only a few rains in eight months but I cannot help being in awe—how magic happens in the surprise of the same. I am not the only one as I overhear an elder, scrambling out of their minivan,

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exclaim, “This is STUNNING!” So many compounds, minerals, cells create desert life. I think about how U.S. Republicans want to block any state regulation on artificial intelligence for 10 years. An eternity these days in machine learning and all that is built to keep those circuits cycling. Observing how a triangle-leaf bursage shades a pincushion cactus, I wonder, what are we seeking relief from? The uncertainty of boredom, tedious tasks, writing essays? I know for some Crip friends, artificial intelligence will open doors, help with everyday tasks, with social navigation. Yet also, to digitize is to surveil. My new doctor’s face scrunches up in frustration when I advocate, “I have to consider where my data goes downstream,” and that I am not comfortable with the app on his phone recording and synthesizing my medical appointment notes. His disgust shifts to judgment. Eye-roll, shut down. He assumes I am noncompliant, a dangerous label for a disabled person—rife with consequences. I too played with photo filters, liked, friended, unaware that datasets were being mined from my generation’s attempts at connection, sharing art, capturing a moment, making a case for change. Now we try to re-create birds and flowers in zeros and ones. And what are we collectively contributing to be washed downstream? A drowning of mystery, curiosity, and engagement by personality models to initiate a flood of persuasion? A desert ground squirrel darts out from under a stand of nopal that is turning light green, husky dry, and I think—*this is important.* Even in the uncomfortable heat, there is more wonder in an afternoon, than in days and days of social media, ChatGPT, and generated content. Received by paying attention. Making choices to not know all but just some. When did our faith twist from—knowing through relationship, the slip-slide of slow, patient observation—to faith in prophesized collapse? That we must be so nimble to know nothing well and resign ourselves to trust that artificial intelligence can honor diversity, not just sweep us in, or out, of the picture? The earth tilts in such a way that sunlight permeates my shade, warms my spirit, sheds my skin, before gliding behind mountain range. Reminder of limits. Endings. Beginnings.

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A thick gray desert ironwood tree trunk curves toward the sky. The tree's limbs are covered with many small blooms. In the picture, the brightness of the sun makes the flowers look white instead of purple. Behind the tree grows saguaros and nopales. The sky is a brilliant blue.

Part of the main stem of a saguaro, with one of its arms growing out from the main stem up toward the sky. On the top of the arm is a loose circle of big cone-shaped white flowers and buds. The bright blue sky is streaked with white clouds.

A tall saguaro, one thick trunk-like stem lined with rows of thorns, with two thorn-laced arms, all crowned with flowers grows amongst cholla and a palo verde tree. Many saguaros, other cacti, desert trees and bushes grow in light colored sandy soil. A mountain and blue skies with thin clouds are in the background.

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