

A Desert Pea

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She sets up the camera trap on the ashy trunk of the mulga tree. The camera faces the log in question. It may or may not be the home of an echidna. There's no hurry to find out.

Dry Australian winter wind sweeps away the days, hums in the tin roof of the ranger's shed at nights. Here, in the desert, time is slow and viscid. A rare camper van wanders through the red dirt, seeking out the seclusion of the outback. The ranger greets them with the routine warnings for the open fire, snakes, and spiders. They ask for the nearest water hole and invite her to share a scarce beer.

The camera shows that an echidna does reside in the log. The ranger names the echidna Amy. Some years ago, Amy's relatives helped an ecologist find out that echidnas hibernate, lowering their body temperature to match the shaded soil. The ultimate goal of life is to survive. Echidnas hibernate, numbats evolve long tongues to catch desert termites, pig-footed bandicoots have long legs to dig burrows and hide.

The ranger thinks that her mind hibernates too, in a way. She tunes in with the stillness of melting dusk, with the fiery bursts of high noon. She's red as the vast plains; she's blue as the sky. She sees no water, but water is all around: in every thorny shrub, in each thin, withered blade of grass. The soil—which looks so dead, covered with a patchwork of cracks, crumbling, ancient—has everything, and so does she. When the time comes, the desert blooms in purple and red, unfolds the fields, and unleashes the rivers.

She worries about change. Only the most specialized systems of adaptations can stand the harsh conditions of life here. All variables have to come together to comprise the equation of life. If a single thing is altered, and evolution doesn't hurry to catch up, the whole mechanism fails.

Some days, kangaroo hunters stop by the ranger's station. The thick-legged bodies hang from the dusty utes, and the guys complain that it's getting harder to sell the exotic meat. The ranger knows that kangaroo has been long declared a pest species, but she looks away, keeps quiet, and wanders off away from fire and talking and beers. She goes into the bush, guided by her imagination and the light of the purple Milky Way. In the transparent darkness of young night, she sees the first stars of white flowers peeking from the low shrubs. The air smells of honey and carrion. Silver leaves of the brigalow tree tremble in the wind, and her world is at peace once again.

She is never alone here; she never feels stranded. The desert fills the void. Millennia of iron firmament guards her. Soft, whispering songs of the centuries embrace her, accept her. She is one with the ephemeral rivers that flowed here once, invisible now but still flowing within her.