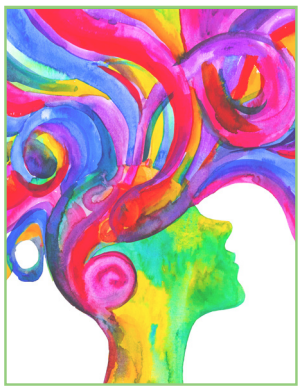


ARIZONA ATTORNEY MAGAZINE

2023 Creative Arts Contest

FICTION

Audrey C. Miller

Rebutia Minuscula

BY AUDREY C. MILLER

Rebutia minuscula. Red crown cactus. It sits in its plastic pot on my shelf, a squat green hedgehog of a plant, adorned with a florid crimson flower; graceless. The spines are yellow-white, translucent …

… Alluring.

"What are you looking at?"

I pull my finger away from needle-sharp injury and turn at the sound, uneasy. I hadn't heard her come up behind me.

"Nothing," I say. "Just the cactus. It might need water."

"Probably not," Lizette scowls. "Come in here and help me."

I follow Lizette from the living room to the office, but I'm still thinking about succulents. She snaps at me when I write "desert" instead of "dessert" in the homework assignment I'm editing for her and tells me if I'm going to make that kind of mistake she may as well just write it herself. I finish her assignment and finish the dishes and make dinner and eat dinner and watch TV and go to bed and dream of cactus.

Lizette never could find the words to tell me how much she appreciates what I do but I know she does.

I am alone in a grocery store. I don't know anyone in this town besides Lizette, and she hates shopping. I walk past columns of cans, regiments of brightly-colored soups and broths and chilis, with banners fluttering, flags advertising which are on sale, a few cents off here, there, this brand, that brand. It's even less expensive to buy dry beans though, selecting something new from among the neat piles of bagged legumes. Healthier, too. Less sodium, though I'm liberal with my box of store-brand salt when concocting chili or soup or stew.

Meat isn't on sale. Skip that this time, then.

Onions are cheap, always. Spinach is on sale. So are artichokes, for once; those will make a nice treat. And - amazing find - morels are available. They're *not* cheap, pound for pound, but they're also not heavy, so I grab a very, very few of them. A dollar or so's worth.

A display of small succulents catches my eye, bits of heat and sunlight captured in pots, out of place here. *Sedum morganianum. Echeveria pulvinata. Aloe barbadensis.* My cactus swims in my thoughts unbidden, its yellow-white thorns and green-yellow flesh everything, everything. A thorn pricks, and I look down at a spot of blood welling on my fingertip.

My laptop is heavy and prone to overheating, but it's what I have. It's fine as long as I keep it plugged in. The power cable is draped across my chest as I recline on the couch, computer propped on a narrow three-ring binder, then a throw pillow, then my knees. I am absorbed in the problem of explaining to a group of ecologically-minded English majors that *Carnigaia giganta*, the giant saguaro, is in fact a parasite. Young saguaros grow in the shade of nitrogen-fixing legumes such as mesquites, which shelter them and provide the nutrients they so desperately need. As the young leviathans grow over decades, over centuries, they gradually leach all the nitrogen out of the soil and the legume cannot survive. It has nursed the saguaro to greatness, seeking nothing in return, and fades into the desert.

Then I wrestle with the problem of whether this is something that needs to be explained; whether it's even relevant to my essay or if it's a needless digression muddying the waters, because of course in nature the designation of "parasite" is not a value judgment but simply a fact. I don't want my audience to think I have anything against saguaros or that they're not worth preserving.

Lizette bangs through the front door. "You didn't pick me up," she says by way of greeting.

I start, feeling guilty, worried. "You didn't ask me to. Your bus pass is still good, isn't it?"

"It's raining," she explains. "I had to walk from the bus stop in a downpour. My backpack is soaked." She drops the offending object to the floor with a thump.

I disentangle myself from the laptop, power cable, pillow, and binder and find a towel for her in the hall closet. She dries her face and hair, irritated.

"I'm sorry," I say. "There's soup in the

AUDREY C. MILLER has been writing since before she could hold a pen, so naturally she chose a career that allowed her to just sit and write. By day, she writes District Court appeals in Social Security Disability cases for Hallinan & Killpack Law Firm in Tucson. In her free time, she writes fiction and sonnets; does astrophotography; paints; cooks; and spends way too much time lounging in the hammock with a book. She and her husband Jason Perry, a planetary scientist at the University of Arizona, care for a very spoiled menagerie of tarantulas, snakes, lizards, cats, and a dog.

© PHOTO BY JOHN HALL, JOHN HALL PHOTOGRPAHY

crock pot."

"Again?"

"I also made bread."

"It's just that soup isn't very filling."

"It's got rice in it. That should help. And there's the bread."

"Fine," she says. "I have to write that paper tonight. It's due tomorrow. Six pages. Can you edit it for me later?"

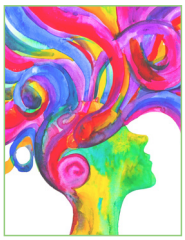
I glance toward my laptop, still thinking of my half-finished article. "Sure," I say.

Midmorning sunlight streams through the windows and catches the spines of my red crown cactus. I had been aiming for the couch and my laptop to work on that article, but instead I find myself in front of the shelf, just staring, staring, exploring the gradient of green between the peaks and valleys of the cactus' ribs and tubercles, deep dark blue-green around the bumps under the white spines fading to glowing yellow-green in the grooves. If I look closer, closer, the waxy skin is almost speckled in a dense screen of pale green dots.

It seems to breathe.

The sun sets. I pull myself away from the cactus and half-heartedly put together something for dinner.

When I cook, I was once transported. My article faded; Lizette and her demands faded; all that was necessary was flavor and smell and the colors of produce, the sound of the knife slicing through vegetables and the pot bubbling and the rushing flame of the burner. I could taste a broth and know



FICTION

HONORABLE MENTION

Audrey C. Miller

instantly that it needed another shake or two of chili powder or celery seed; or whether it would be perfect after another fifteen minutes of simmering.

Lately, though, my senses are dulled. I am an automaton, going through the motions of cooking without seeing, without smelling, without hearing. My soups are dull, lifeless things; my bread fails to rise.

I have trouble caring.

When I do think, I do not think of the produce in front of me, but rather of a different plant. My cactus swims before my eyes and I find myself ruminating on the sharpness of its spines. I wish to touch them, though I know that would be a bad idea. But at least I would feel something.

I burn a batch of rolls because I am too busy staring at *R. minuscula* in the other room to hear the timer go off.

"I'm worried about you," Lizette says.

I look up from my laptop. I haven't written anything since I sat down. That was... maybe an hour ago? Maybe more? *R. minuscula* sits on the shelf, squat and green, pulsing with slow plant energy. My eye drifts toward it.

"Look at me," Lizette snaps. I obey.

"What?" I say.

"Your deadline is when?"

"Um. Yesterday."

She glares at me, frown deepening. The groove between her brows reminds me of the grooves between the ribs of the cactus, only hers is cast in shadow.

"I can get an extension!" I protest.

"Are you sure?" she says.

I'm not, but I don't say that. Instead, I look back over to my cactus. My friend.

"What is with you lately?" Lizette demands.

I shake my head. "Nothing," I say. Nothing. There is nothing with me. I probe inside. I feel...nothing.

Lizette shops. She brings home a miscellaneous selection of cans, pasta, snack foods, and meat and drops the bags unceremoniously on the counter.

"What's this?" I ask.

"Food," she says. "We were out of things."

I pick up a bag of barbecue potato chips. "What am I supposed to do with this?"

"Eat them!" she says. "I don't know! Make something! You weren't shopping so I did! You'd think you'd be grateful!"

"I am!" I say. "Thank you. I'm sorry."

She harrumphs and storms to her office at the back of the apartment and slams the door behind her. Some part of me registers the fact that the selection of items she has

I finish Lizette's assignment and finish the dishes and make dinner and eat dinner and watch TV and go to bed and dream of cactus.

given me contains neither pasta sauce nor any produce or milk with which to make pasta sauce, but mostly I can't be bothered. I put the groceries away and go back to staring at the cactus.

A week. The grooves between *R. minuscula*'s tubercles deepen and I pour a tiny bit of water around the base of the cactus.

Lizette yells. I have missed her graduation.

I look up at that. "I'm sorry," I say. "I lost track of the time."

"The *time*?" she screeches. "You lost track of *time*? You've lost track of everything! You're losing track of yourself! You're losing track of *me!* Don't you care about me at all?"

She stands there in her graduation gown, red-faced, mascara running. "No," I say. "I don't."

I turn back to the cactus.

Lizette is gone.

A week. It occurs to me I am hungry. It occurs to me that I have not thought of anything at all in a very, very long time. I regard the cactus. The thoughts disappear.

The mail. Something in pink, something in red. Something about "eviction, five-day notice." The lights turn off.

I am rooted, thorned. Perhaps I will be transplanted.

The sun rises. The sun sets. I sit. I have been sitting. I exist. So does the cactus. We exist together, linked in silent plant time, waiting for waiting for waitingwaiting waiting wait AZ AT