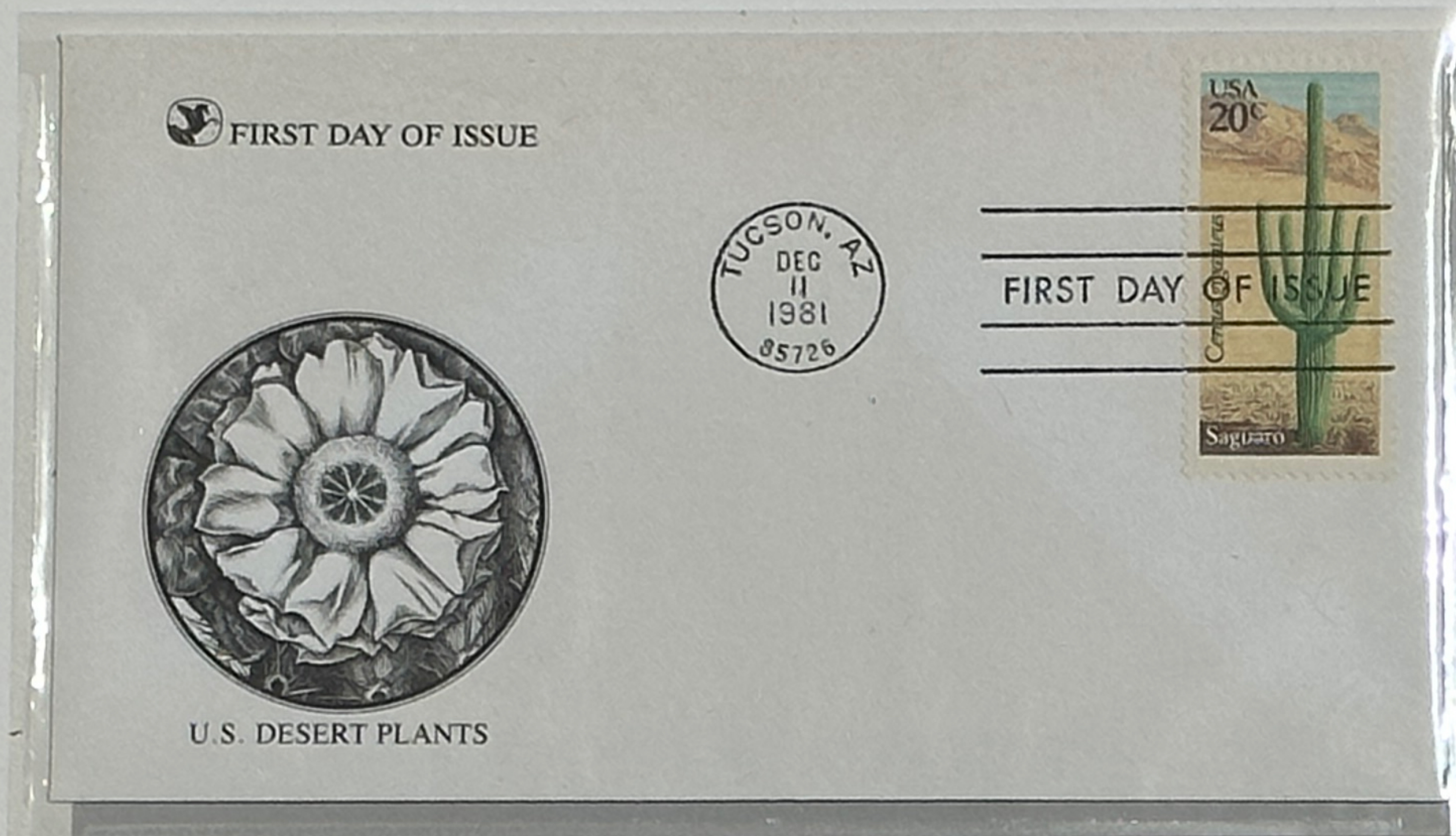


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*Cactiet:* Called sentinels of the desert, the stately slow-growing saguaros (some plants are estimated to be 150–200 years old) produce night-blooming white flowers in spring. Although as many as 300 buds can be crowded into a circle just below the branch tips, only about one-third of them develop fully.



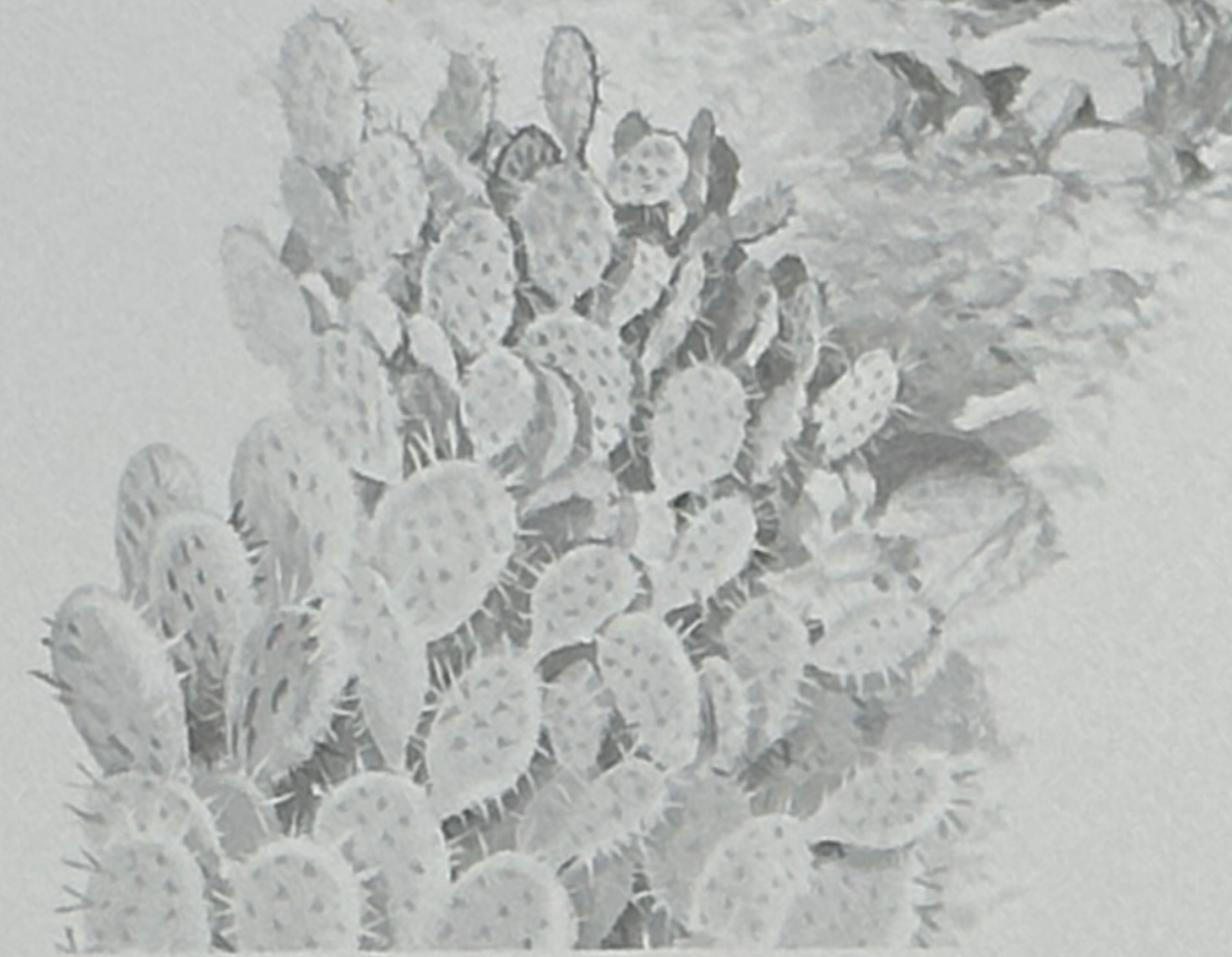
## At Home in Arizona's Desert

*In a career that spanned three fields of interest, Joseph Wood Krutch was a journalist, an educator, and a naturalist. As a journalist, he served as a drama critic and later as an associate editor for The Nation magazine. As an educator, he taught for many years at Columbia University in New York. And in 1952, moving from the Northeast to a part of the country he had visited many times before, he wrote about his life and the life around him in the Sonoran Desert in Arizona. One of his best-known books was The Desert Year, in which he contemplated his new surroundings. An adaptation of his description begins below.*

**B**Y FORTUNATE ACCIDENT I have found the ideal spot — a house not 10 miles from a medium-sized town but plumb in the middle of hundreds of acres of desert, untouched except for an occasional artificial oasis where someone

has put a home. To the north, only a mile or so away, rises a bold range of mountains, bare except for the scattered green dots that represent some clump of unconquerable shrubbery. In every other direction, the vista is closed only at the horizon's edge, to which the nearly level desert stretches away.

The tall, branching, and twisted columns of the giant saguaro cactus are all about me, and through binoculars I can see them striding halfway up the nearest mountainside. They are the most obviously strange, the most plainly theatrical feature of the landscape. Understandably, they have been popularized as curiosities, yet despite this popularization they will probably be the last familiar sight to be really accepted as familiar, to be believed in and taken for granted as natural and normal rather than as part of some stage setting. Before I arrived, their white blossoms had faded. At this moment their



*Author Joseph Wood Krutch (1893–1970) at his home in the Tucson area.*

prickly-pearlike fruits, stuck improbably at the ends of the improbable columns, are showing their bright red hue against the sky as the ripe ends burst open and the birds arrive, eager to pluck out the seeds.

If I step through the gate in my patio wall, I am in a moment in a kind of sparse wilderness that shows no sign of man's intrusion, that belongs still to the creatures who have always lived here. Besides the animals there are many green, growing things of many kinds. There are cacti, of course, and among them the great barrels, which would be specimens in any botanical garden and which, at first, surprise me as much as, in Africa, I should no doubt be surprised to see lions and elephants not attached to any zoo or circus. There are also the flat green pads of the more familiar prickly pear grown to unfamiliar size; there are the coppery-purple pads of the somewhat less common Santa Rita prickly pear and also, omnipresent, one or another variety of the cholla — that fierce touch-me-not of the desert, which often assumes the form of a low tree with bark on its trunk and branches of savagely armed cylindrical pads. The spines are not the minute spicules we first think of when we think of cacti but much like darning needles in length, in strength, and in sharpness.

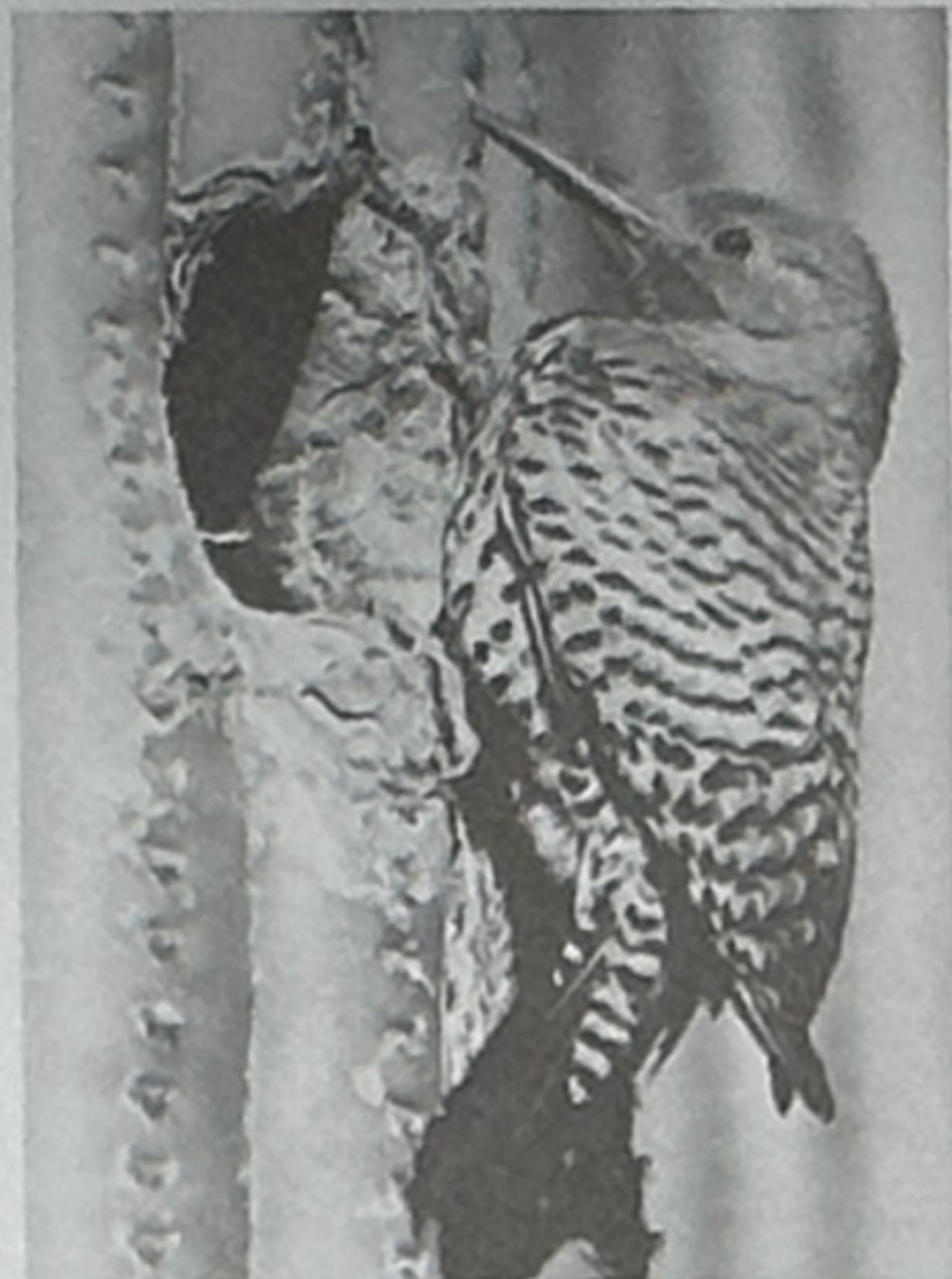
At first sight, the other large growing things — the mesquite, the paloverde, and creosote bush — seem less abnormal. From a distance this stretch of desert floor looks green enough and almost like the thickets one finds in many cooler, damper lands. But there is much that distinguishes it. For one thing, the green is a grayer green. For another, one realizes as soon as one steps into it that it is not really a thicket at all but a floor on which everything must have — and everything has managed to get — its standing room.

There is no continuous carpet of grass or herbage, no crowding together of exuberantly growing plant life. One does not push one's way through undergrowth; instead, one strolls almost as in a garden. Where water is scarce, roots spread far and shallowly. Hence the area to which a mesquite, for example, has successfully established claim will support little else. For a while it is hard for me to believe that this untouched country has not been thinned by some human gardener. Because of a spacing that nature has attended to, it has a rather curious air of being a park rather than a wilderness.

### The Desert's Wildlife

From my window I see a family of Gambel's quail strolling about like barnyard fowl — the babies much like baby chicks, the mother with the one coquettish plume curled out from the top of her head and bobbing before her eyes. The other day a roadrunner leaped to the patio wall to stroll cockily along its rim for a few minutes before deciding that the enclosure offered little promise of either snakes or lizards, and I cannot yet take the horned toad who looks at me with beady eyes from under a mesquite bush in the same matter-of-fact way that I take a wood frog in the East.

The birds too, of course, are different, and so far I have learned to recognize only the most obvious — the cactus wren



They can call the cactus home. A Harris hawk (far left) nests in a saguaro, which can also be a home for the tiny four-inch elf owl (above left) or the gilded flicker (above). The intrepid cactus wren (left), the state bird of Arizona, manages to find a nesting place amidst the many spines of the cholla.

who builds his messy, sparrowlike nest among the murderous spines of the cholla a few yards from the front door; the hooded oriole who wears the obligatory orange-and-black livery of his family; the Arizona cardinal, more brilliant than his southeastern cousin; and the woodpeckers who have excavated two or three holes in every saguaro.

The first sound that even the unobservant stranger is likely to notice, later in the morning or even in the middle of a hot afternoon, is a mysterious, almost threatening *coo-uh-cuck-oo* breaking the torrid stillness when everything else is quite silent. Obviously, I said to myself when I heard it, an owl of some sort. But it turned out to be, of all unlikely things, a dove. White-winged dove is its popular name; it is extremely prevalent, and it loves nothing better than to sit on the very tip-top of a saguaro. But why a dove, the most banal symbol of the inoffensive and the sentimental, should choose to imitate what is possibly the fiercest, and certainly the most irascible, of birds I do not know.

For the desert birds and the desert animals this is not an unfavorable environment. They have had to make their adaptations to the heat and dryness of their land, just as the animals of other climates made other adaptations to theirs. For the jackrabbit and the ground squirrel, as well as for the dove and cactus wren, this is obviously a paradise and there is no paradox in the smile that the face of the desert wears. Only to those who come from somewhere else is there anything abnormal

about the conditions that prevail. Only a kind of provincialism will take it for granted that 40 inches of rain is "normal," eight or nine inches "abnormal." If the paloverde drops its tiny leaves in the dry season, all the deciduous trees in wetter, colder countries drop theirs in the cold season, and we do not pity them for it. Moreover, the paloverde, ingeniously using the green of its trunk and branches, continues its vital processes during the drought — which the oak and the elm cannot do during the cold. Its estivation is partial, not, like the hibernation of northern trees, complete. The little gray chipmunks who scamper over the ground seem quite as gay as their chestnut-brown cousins of the East. If I call this world grim, I am obviously indulging in a pathetic fallacy.

Let us not say that this animal or even this plant has "become adapted" to desert conditions. Let us say rather that they all have shown courage and ingenuity in making the best of the world as they found it. And let us remember that if to use such terms in connection with them is a fallacy, then it can be only somewhat less a fallacy to use the same terms in connection with ourselves. Of the desert flora and fauna, let us also add that the best they have made is a very good best; so good a one, indeed, that we may be sure a desert plant or animal would not want to be any other kind and would languish in what others would call "a more favorable environment." Though there are more ways to kill a cat than by stuffing him with cream, that is, nevertheless, one way.