Why Dogs Stopped Flying

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What I Learned from the Joshua Forest

"We gravitate toward spaces that are metaphors for our inner lives."

Martha Beck, Expecting Adam

Where the fingers of the Mojave Desert touch the eastern rim of the Great Basin, I walked every Sunday morning January to May, in the mountains’ shadow, among Joshua Trees, a forest growing west to the horizon and the empty bottom of the Basin.

Joshua leaves clump together like Napoleon’s bayonets braced against a hostile world. Joshua keep a distance, each an unwelcome neighbor, an angry relative—water rights at the root of it all.

But they have their friends. Yucca moths spread pollen tree to tree, anther to ovary, and leave their eggs. Red-shafted flickers nest in Joshuas, lizards live in the dead branches and woodrats chew off the leaves for beds. Some friends get lost—the giant sloth.

Mormon pioneers named the trees, but I do not believe that Joshuas pray or point to the Promised Land. I believe they surrender to the sun, to the arid earth, to the hot wind, to flickers, to the offspring of moths. They throw up their limbs to live.