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## Celebrating Cactus

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# Celebrating Cactus

by Fredrick Zydek

For reasons only the planet understands,  
these plants live mostly in the Americas.  
They are leafless things covered with spines  
and bristles sharp and plentiful enough  
to ward away even the hungriest grazers.  
Needles have been their salvation from  
Jurassic herbivores to the buffalo and long-  
horned cattle that have wandered their way.

These are creatures that know more about  
preserving water than any other living thing.  
The barrel cactus contains enough sticky  
juice to save a man from dying of thirst.  
They come in all shapes and sizes. Some  
are like vines with roots exposed to the air,  
others round, some grow tall as trees and live  
in forests of their own kind. They all have roots

close to the surface that stretch out like long  
arms in all directions. The Organ-pipe cactus  
and Saguaro provide dried woody ribs  
the Indians once used for fuel or as frames  
to build their houses. The fruit of these cacti  
can be eaten fresh or boiled down into jams  
and preserves. The joints of the flat-leafed  
opuntia are still eaten boiled or fried, their

flowers used to make colorful gourmet salads.  
The Night-blooming Cereus and the Bishop's-  
Hat Cactus have the most beautiful blossoms  
but it is the Old Man Cactus I love best. They  
are covered with a dense mass of grayish hair  
which shields them from the sun and whose strands  
are so sharp not even insects dare climb them.  
They look like miniature Yeti preparing for a hunt.

