

Animals of the Mojave Desert

Katherine Allum

Desert Iguana

Dipsosaurus dorsalis

The first time I met Daniel, he put a lizard into my hands.

A desert iguana, he clarified.

The iguana's sharp eyes peered at me. I felt the flicker of its heartbeat against my thumb.

Gila Monster

Heloderma suspectum

My family had moved into the rental down the street, and Angela became my new bestie. Past experience with big brothers taught me they were moody and disinterested. Not Daniel.

No visit was complete without a Steve Irwin-esque animal presentation. I was a captive audience—the Nevada desert was a foreign, prickly landscape, after living in the Pacific Northwest among pines and soft cushions of moss.

Here there be monsters.

California King Snake

Lampropeltis getula californiae

He asked if I'd like to hold a snake and, without waiting, offloaded it—pristine white and black stripes—into my hands.

Just don't squeeze him.

Daniel held up his hand, showing a recent bloody wound on the pad of his palm.

Pale Kangaroo Mouse

Microdipodops pallidus

Once, he gave Angela and me a ride to get lunch. I lingered in the car and haltingly asked him to Reverse, our high school's Sadie Hawkins Dance.

Daniel smiled at me, gently. He was going with someone else, but he said thanks for asking.

Mortified, I tried to delete this memory.

Gambel's Quail

Callipepla gambelii

Daniel stood in the living room holding a plump quail. Its topknot, an inky apostrophe, wavered as it looked around.

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He'd hit it with the quad when riding in the desert—fortunately, it was only stunned. He kept it overnight and was off to reunite it with its family.

You can touch him, he said. The topknot goes *boing*.

With my index finger, I lightly stroked the quail's head. The topknot did indeed boing.

Mojave Rattlesnake

Crotalus scutulatus

Someday, girls stop playing with dolls and orchestrating iguana weddings. Families leave rental houses and move into their real houses. Besties go to high school, where they have different classes and activities.

Then I heard Daniel had cancer. The bad kind.

What do you do when you're sixteen, and the first boy you asked to a dance gets that sick?

Western Banded Gecko

Coleonyx variegatus

A few years before, it was Independence Day and our neighbour Tony had a stash of fireworks from the Indian Reservation.

At dusk, the oppressive heat of the day lingered. Kids ran on the street with sparklers. Daniel showed up and

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we sat on the tailgate of his truck, waiting for Tony to light 'em up.

I remember my father charging toward us, his bald head emerging from the dark.

Hey Brother Allum! Daniel waved.

Later, my dad told my mom he was about to let loose on the creep with the pick-up, but then realised it was Daniel.

Moapa Dace

Moapa coriacea

We sat side-by-side on a pool lounge while people shouted Marco and Polo. He was thin but his hair was growing back.

Hey Katie. He grinned his blue-sky smile. My cancer's gone.

Did I remember when I asked him to Reverse? He'd wanted to go with me, but he'd already been asked. Plus, I wasn't sixteen—a Mormon rule. But we would've had a great time, huh?

Greater Roadrunner

Geococcyx californianus

That was the last time I saw him—the cancer came back.

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I was sick with recurring strep and couldn't visit him in hospital. Did I send a card? I feel like I did. I should've done more. Bought a hazmat suit.

I should have been there for Angela.

Red-Tailed Hawk

Buteo jamaicensis

At his funeral, people stood in the doorway and sat on the floor.

Home is an hour outside of Las Vegas—you round the corner on the highway and the Valley expands in front of you.

Think of the shy wildlife.

The tiny hearts fluttering in the sand.

Animals of the Mojave Desert. *Ourselves: 100 micro memoirs*

Katherine Allum is a writer of literary fiction. Her debut novel *The Skeleton House* (2024, Fremantle Press) won the 2023 Fogarty Literary Award. American born, she ran away to London after uni, met an Aussie and married him, and now lives in Perth.