

University of Nevada, Reno

Thirst: Searching for Water in the Great Basin

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
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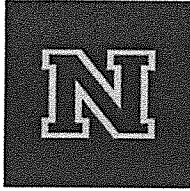
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Abstract

This collection of essays focuses on the theme of water in the deserts of Northern Nevada. The creative nonfiction narratives in this work depict first encounters with dry landscapes, as the author moves from Florida, the wettest state in the nation, to Nevada, the driest state in the nation. These pieces attempt to make a call for the importance of connecting to and learning more about places that are foreign to us, not just those that we are familiar with.

For Ellie A. Levy and Robert F. Stone

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Prologue

The desert and the ocean are realms of desolation on the surface...

Both worlds are deceptive, dangerous. Both seething with hidden life. The only veil that stands between perception of what is underneath the desolate surface is your courage. Dare to breach the surface and sink.

— Vera Nazarian

I have always been a girl who loves water. I was surrounded by it all the time growing up on Florida's Gulf Coast. Rain, clouds, rivers, saltwater waves, dew on petals, moisture in air. My favorite color was the shade of leaves just after rain, and I imagined angels playing in the light that reflected and moved on the surface of lakes. I felt the water in my veins and on my skin. I saw it blanket the sky and cover the land. I heard it in my dreams.

Being born and raised in the wettest state in the nation made this easy. No one there expects you to love anything more than water. Most months of the year the beach takes center stage. While I was never a fan of swimming out in open waters, I had been on my grandparents' boat so often that I still can't remember my first time riding out and away from the shore. Sitting on the bow of the boat, watching its hull cut the water, letting the salty wind tangle my hair, feeling the bumps from beneath as we hit each wave was an experience I had always known. Even on the beach itself, I was endlessly drawn to the shoreline, where the blue waves turned to white foam and the sand was both drying in the heat of the sun and being washed as the water curved its way up the beach.

When I wasn't near the shore, water still made its presence known. I listened to the thunder booming in the distance and the constant beating of raindrops on rooftops: a

lullaby I fell asleep to long after my adolescent years had passed. About ten years ago, when a series of hurricanes made their way across Florida in a matter of just a few months, two huge branches from our oak tree broke off in the middle of the night, thumping onto the roof before rolling down into the front yard. My bedroom was at the front of the house—closest to the tree and beneath where the branches fell. I didn't wake once. My mother was shocked that I could have slept through a storm like that. I shrugged it off; the sounds that tended to wake up others were the same ones that helped me dream.

A few years later, when my mom remarried, I started borrowing my stepdad's kayak. I'd bring it with me to Seminole Lake, where I'd find alligators floating among the reeds and cormorants spreading their wings out to dry after diving for fish. Other times I'd paddle out on the orange kayak through inter-coastal waters, weaving in and out of red mangrove islands teeming with pelicans, herons, and ibises. Eventually my parents bought a house on a canal off of Tampa Bay, which allowed me to drop into the water from their backyard and head for Weedon Island Nature Preserve—an island with kayak trails that let me sneak into a hidden world where canopies of mangrove hovered above and small crabs crawled on roots that wove in and out of the saltwater. Being out on the water alone, letting my fingertips grace the surface, and propelling myself further out into wet wildernesses quickly became one of my favorite pastimes.

My admiration for water only heightened as I visited my grandparents in the Appalachian Mountains a few times each year. Once I was old enough to drive on my own, I made seasonal trips from Florida to North Carolina, a ten-hour drive my mother hated me taking alone, but one I enjoyed most as a solitary experience. On my visits, my

grandmother and I would often take Highway 64 from Franklin over to Highlands, where the road weaves along a curvy stretch of mountains, sidelined with a series of waterfalls both grand and small.

Once, we stopped the car near a stretch of open field that was no more than a few hundred feet in diameter, and walked out to get closer views of the vibrant autumn colors. After several moments of silence, my grandmother turned to me and said, “Right here, in these mountains...this is my church.” The maple and beech trees across from us stood like tall pillars of a chapel—scarlet, burnt sienna, and amber leaves between dark branches took the shapes of stained glass windows. The sound of rushing water over boulders drowned the silence.

A few years back, I took a weekend trip to North Carolina for my birthday. On the day I turned twenty-two, I took a solo hike on a small section of the Bartram Trail. Despite the rainy weather forecast for that day, I set out from my grandparents’ cabin in the morning, bringing nothing but a bag full of snacks and camera equipment—no umbrella. I pulled over on the side of the two-lane highway in the middle of the Nantahala Forest where an opening in the trees showed a dirt path. Halfway up a switchback on the side of an unnamed mountain, it began to drizzle. I paused to take pictures of things being transformed by the falling water: leaves, wildflowers, spiderwebs, mushrooms. I had hiked almost up to the clearing on one of the lower ridges when it began to pour, thunder rolling in from somewhere beyond the mist. The damp soil beneath my feet turned to slick mud as the water fell harder from above, so I turned to head down the mountain and quickened my pace. When I got back to the car, my clothes had stuck to my body, dripping wet. I leaned over the steering wheel, listening to

the loud pattered drums of raindrops on metal.

These moments shaped me gradually, the way water smooths rock over centuries. Looking back, I never had specific instances open my eyes with drastic epiphanies. Over time, I was slowly moved by wet places in subtle, yet important ways. My body yearned for the creek water that slid over rocks and bare feet, for the shoreline that left and came back again twice each day, for the rainstorms that poured every summer afternoon like clockwork. For most of my life my awareness of this desire remained dormant, subconscious. As my senior year of college approached, I looked back on my poetry and my passions, discovering what the underlying part of me had always known. Water flowed like streams from one piece of writing to the next, endlessly spilling over the edge in ways that continued to inspire me to write.

With the advice of a former professor, I included University of Nevada, Reno on my very short list of graduate programs to apply to. I was hesitant; I knew nothing about Nevada as a landscape. Although I had also been accepted to a university in North Carolina, I felt something pulling me westward. Declining the opportunity to live in the only state other than Florida that I had spent a significant amount of time visiting wasn't easy; surprisingly, choosing the desert was.

However, when I moved from Florida, the wettest state in the nation, to Nevada, the driest state in the nation, I suddenly felt worried about feeling dehydrated, parched, void of what was central to my life. This was in part why I chose to come here in the first place: I wanted adventure and imagined I was most likely to find it in a place that was drastically different from what I was accustomed to. I wanted to challenge myself to live in and write about an entirely new environment. Yet I couldn't help but feel a tension at

first, caught between the excitement of being so near to mountains and the anxiety of moving to a desert landscape I didn't understand. I unintentionally began building up a wall, a front, limiting my ability to appreciate this place and learn what it wanted to teach me. Part of me considered accepting that I would never come to love the desert, that living in Nevada was simply something I would have to do while earning a graduate degree. But a greater part of me was curious, confused, and regretful. I began to wonder how people could live in such a dry, harsh environment. Why do people *choose* to live in places like these? What was I missing? What didn't I understand? Had I made a mistake in coming here?

I concluded that if I could find a way to open myself up, reach into this open space, and discover what it takes to love the desert, then I might be able to use this practice with all types of landscapes. As my world shifted from one of water to one of air, sand, and rock, I felt torn about the concepts of wet and dry. Struggling to find balance, I had one foot in the desert, the other still stuck in the swamp.

On one of my flights back home to visit Florida, I observed the expanse of Nevada's basin and range landscape. Peaks were covered in snow on one side, while brown dust lay visible on the other. We passed over basins of alkali and silt, and I could see nothing but earth's shifting surface for miles out my window. Some areas showed traditional paths of water and traces of ancient ephemeral streams that come in seasons, running like veins on the body of the earth. Then we flew over a small, flat piece of land encircled by mountains, and at the heart of this place the sand came up in small waves. The early morning sun barely touched the height of each small bridge of sand, making the scene appear like water—light reflecting through shallow beach waters in moving curves.

Yet this sand was still, fixed instead of fluid.

I began to see a new way of looking at my old home and my new one: no longer entirely separate or individual, they were two pieces of a whole. Both places were unique, and had drastically different flora and fauna. However, they both also showed me repeated patterns, gave me similar feelings, and shaped me with and without water. For months, I couldn't see one place without thinking of the other. They coexisted inside of me, one side half-soaked and the other half-shriveled. In the middle were all the ways these two places connected: the flatness of open spaces; water showing up when I least expected it; layers of past and present overlapping one another. If you draw your finger across the latitudes that run across Florida, you will come across both the Everglades (with receives 30 to 100 inches of rain annually) and some of the driest places in the world (such as the Sahara, Gobi, and Mojave deserts).

I used to think I couldn't live without the green moistness of my wetland-filled home state. Now I feel that I need both landscapes. I need the wet places to overwhelm my senses, to drown me in rain, to bless me with glimpses of alligators, roseate spoonbills, and zebra longwing butterflies. Yet I also need the dry places to remind me to be thankful for water when it's there, to be a better listener and student of nature, to appreciate even the most rare animal and insect sightings. I want to live in this tension, this contrast, this ephemerality. This collection of essays is about my attempt to find that harmony.

The chapters in this project are encounter essays, narratives about my initial engagements and discoveries as I ventured into the high desert of Northern Nevada, and so they may still carry the scent of sage or the taste of dust. Going out into dry lands for

the first time, I thought I knew what I would see and how it would feel, but no two visits were the same. When I sought dry land, I found water; when I sought water, I found dry land. The desert also determines the rate of temperature rise or drop, a lack of moisture creating drastic variations of hot and cold—changing quickly with the shift between light and dark. The desert surprises you, turning flat lands of salt into lakes or welcoming those who adapt well enough to call this place home. The desert is no place to make bets.

I have come to believe that all nature writers should walk the shifting lines between distinct places, or the *ecotones*—areas where two environments meet or overlap. In a time when even the most definitive areas across the globe are transforming in profound ways, it is more important than ever to begin looking beyond boundaries—natural and constructed—to ask questions, expand knowledge, and understand connections. Like many others before me, I misunderstood the desert prior to moving to this landscape. Through my encounters with this new place, I have discovered the value of correcting my misperceptions. While it is important to learn about and revere the environments we grew up in, it is just as vital to begin to do the same for those that are foreign to us.

Playa: Water and Salt

*We look around us and cannot but fail to understand
how large the space is.*

— William L. Fox

I

There are many things I have left to learn about visiting dry places, but this I know now. Before making a solo trip to the Black Rock Desert, I expected to find nothing but dry land. I envisioned cracks spreading out all over the desert floor, too many to avoid stepping onto, like small, dark spiderwebs blanketing the sand from one end of the alkali flats to the other. But the desert likes to play games.

When I walked out onto the playa for the very first time yesterday, I felt like I was walking on the earth's largest slab of potter's clay. As I took each step, I could feel the mud shift under the pressure. Some places looked dry but felt wet—a tricky landscape. Other areas were covered in shallow puddles, reflecting the large cumulus clouds overhead. I wanted to play with the earth, run my fingers over the surface in its smooth muckiness and squeeze the mixture in my palm. I imagined what I could make with the clay. Flower pots, mud castles, slabs of imprinted sagebrush. I thought I could transform pieces of this land into something more tangible, but my assumptions were wrong. I bent down and squeezed a handful of the sediment, hearing it squish as the water, air, and soil merged in my fist and watched as the mud seeped between my fingers—far too wet to make anything other than dirt mounds.

I stood at the southwestern edge of the playa, admiring the open landscape, and thought of all the things I'd do if the land was in its dry state and not the sticky lake bed it was. I had heard that people sometimes make the mistake of driving on the lakebed too soon after rain had come though and get stuck for days on the desert playa, so I left my car at the edge of the gravel road and began to trek out on foot. I walked past the Bureau of Land Management's 12 mile entrance sign to the lakebed, which warned *Impassable when wet*, and looked out onto one of the flattest landscapes on earth. I had never seen a place so barren before: no plants, no animals, no hills. Nothing stood between me and the mountains several miles in the distance. I could see why car companies come here to film commercials or break speed records; the ground was more flat and even than most roads and stretched out for miles in every direction.

I envisioned myself sitting out in the middle of the playa in silence, waiting to see how long it would take for some flying scavenger to come by and investigate the still creature on the desert ground. As a native Floridian living in Nevada, I wanted to familiarize myself with this hard and rough land. I left the Gulf Coast in hopes of gaining independence and also distance from the humidity I had always known. I sought out the greatest change of scenery, and I had suddenly found it, A part of me came alive at the edge of the desert—a part that came from a newfound strength gained from standing alone in a foreign place.

I paused my walk, standing about thirty feet past the end of the gravel, where the water began to form puddles on the desert floor. I stood so long in one place my feet became stuck in the muck, forcing me to pry both feet out of the clay before it swallowed me whole. The playa held onto me, as if to say, *I am coming with you*, the same way that

salt and sand from the beach stick to wet skin, or the way grains of mud cover shins on rainy hikes through the forest. As I walked, my footprints left their mark on the surface. I remembered how the beaches of Tampa Bay look during summer, footprints on top of footprints, all along the shoreline, until every space is filled with signs of human life. Now here I was, out West during winter, with no one's tracks on the ground but my own.

It was then that I began to fall in love with the desert, staring out across the sheer openness, the vast space, which I had all to myself. . . knowing that I was alone with miles of flat earth out in front of me. The closest town—Gerlach, NV, population 173 and declining—was a dozen miles south of the entrance to the playa. When I stood atop Wayah Bald in North Carolina, I felt the impulse to yell in hopes of hearing my voice echo. But here I had no desire to make noise. Instead, I felt forced to listen, the weight of the desert pressing upon me, in my ears, on my skin. The only sound was a soft wind—so quiet I could have heard a car coming from around the mountains, but not a single car passed in either direction all day. I felt alone in a way I had never experienced before. It had nothing to do with loneliness and everything to do with solitude. I could stay here for as long as I pleased, no one rushing me to the next point of interest along the highway or counting the minutes I've spent looking out onto the open landscape. It looked as though it were covered in wet canvas, stretching out from under my feet until it became more liquid than fabric off in the distance: a mirage.

As I stared across the playa, I wondered how much smaller I'd feel if the mountains weren't there. They were the one thing that helped me put myself, my body, in perspective. If the ranges disappeared and all that was left was mile upon mile of open space, would I feel even smaller? Or would I feel larger? Is this what I should be

reminded of more often, my own fragility in the grander landscape of the earth? My own incapability to survive in a harsh environment? My inability to grasp how little I know about time, about space, about myself?

I had so many questions to ask the desert, with not a single reply. Edward Abbey was right, the desert is more riddle than answer.

After introducing myself to the southern tip of the Black Rock Desert, I continued farther up County Road 34, which runs the length of the flood plain on the western side. A few miles past the entrance to the playa, I pulled over on the side of the empty two-lane highway, walked out to a few large boulders nearby, and sat down. There was a slight chill in the air and large clouds hid the sun, while snow lay on the summits to my left and the playa on my right remained wet from the last few days of rain. I looked around at the space between the cliffs and the flats, moving my gaze down the slope.

The sagebrush was grayed out from the cold; no more lemon yellow lighting up the tips of branches. Now it was soft and faded, blending like camouflage into the landscape. I chose a strange time to visit. Rain and snow in the desert was not what I had anticipated when planning a solo adventure away from Reno, especially during a drought year. Mist overhung the cliffs of the Santa Rosa mountains, drifting slowly, coming up in puffs from each mountainside like steam from a hot spring. I was reminded of the Smoky Mountains of North Carolina, and thought of all the days I spent watching the fog glide between ridges, as if it were a living thing.

I pulled back onto the road, drove over a few hills, and headed toward the base of the range. A rainbow appeared in front of me, its full arch a boom of color against the

grey clouded background. I drove more slowly, inching as close as I could without losing sight of it. Of all the things I felt and saw that day, I had never been as surprised as I was to see how bright the rainbow looked as it bent over the nearly monochromatic landscape before me. I parked the car again, and sat on the hood to watch the clouds shift and the colors of the rainbow vanish.

As the residual heat of the engine under the hood warmed my body, I began to realize that this landscape holds more surprises than we think. Those of us unfamiliar with the desert expect less of it than we do of other places. We expect to see nothing the first time we visit. Because of this we are more surprised than anywhere else when we find water, color, or signs of animals. Out in this landscape I discovered rain, puddles, golden light on fresh clay, baby blue behind reddened ridges, deer tracks in mud, and white feathers in sagebrush. I loved feeling shaken of my prejudices, but I also wanted to become someone with an expectation to find more, not nothing. If anything, the desert has more to teach all of us, not less, than other places. We are challenged to look harder, to pay more attention, to ask questions.

The more time I've spent in the high desert, the more my sensitivity to color has heightened. My trips back home to Florida have overwhelmed me with green blanketing every inch of the landscape, so vibrant it was as if I was seeing the color for the first time. At first, this way of looking at my home state was strange, even uncomfortable. Now I prefer it this way. The sub-tropical place I had always taken for granted after years of looking at the same scenery had renewed itself, fresh and gleaming with perspective.

The desert sky may be best this time of year, alleviating my cravings for color. I hunger for it most in winter when the white of snow and the empty spaces between tree

branches become too much to bear—the artist in me sees the blank canvas, and yet I struggle with the temptation to splatter paint everywhere, because the writer in me wants to learn to let the whiteness speak for itself. I am beginning to see how the absence of color on land brings out the sky's paintings of clouds and light at dawn and dusk, when everything above me turns from blue to hues of violet, fuchsia, amber, and tangerine.

There have been times when living in the high desert has made me miss being back in Florida—so green and lush that the palms and leaves sound like endless rain and the sky is always ready for a thunderstorm. Every so often I felt myself drying up: my lips chapped and the skin on my hands and feet toughened. I've tried lotion or chap-stick, even bath salts.

When I returned home from the Black Rock Desert last night, I made myself a bath. At first, I let the water ripple over me in tiny waves as I lay in the steaming tub, let it fill up my belly button like a small pond, surrounding my shoulders and breasts like the Pacific around volcanic islands. I waded my hands through the water, creating small currents and imagining the breaking of waves on cream-colored beaches.

But then I began to think of the desert *playa*, not the Spanish *playa*, or beach, I miss from home. In the tub I looked at the water barely covering the expanse of my stomach, a mostly flat terrain with a thin layer of water, like the Great Basin, stretching out between ranges of my knees and the steep, rocky cliff up the front of my skull: neck, chin, lips, nose, forehead. Cupping pools with my hands, I moved water up to my stomach and washed it over my body. Then I waited as it slowly seeped back to the edges and down into the tub, leaving my skin to dry. I thought back to the way wind moves

water across the flood plains of the desert, blowing it away inches at a time, airing the surface out until the cracks form again in the mud.

Then I envisioned myself soaking it all up, filling myself with all the water until I become a heavy sponge, and soon my hands and feet began to shrivel like dried fruit or flowers. This is a feeling my skin is familiar with from afternoons in the Gulf, or during summer trips wading through mountain creeks in Appalachia. Even before my earliest memories, my senses seemed to be tuned to water in various ways.

When I was young, maybe three years old, I woke up from a nap in the small mountainside cabin my grandparents owned in Ellijay, North Carolina. The house was a tiny, simple wooden building with a kitchen, dining area, and a living space that lay just beyond the door from a wide, wooden deck out front. A creek tumbled down boulders just below the deck and under the footbridge, and when the stream wasn't too strong, we would wade up and down it, feet sliding over slick mud and moss. My grandmother tells me that one afternoon, after a morning of creek walking, I sat up from my sleeping bag on the living room floor half-awake, and said with a puzzled look on my face, "That's not rain, that's the waterfalls." I must have first assumed the sound was rain before waking to remember where I was. I think something had happened to me that day, something stirred in my dreams or imagination, tricking me into thinking I need to be surrounded by the sound of moving water: rain, streams, oceans.

Now I go days without hearing moving water. Only on occasional late nights when it's quiet enough downtown, can I hear the Truckee River roll through riffles a block from my apartment. I find myself surprised on wet days, nearly always waking up expecting to see an abundance of desert sunshine and a cloudless sky. I have spent so

much of my life learning what water can teach me: to live in cycles, to fall down without fear like rain drops or creeks down steep cliffs, to know it's okay to cry as long as I take breaks and welcome the sun when it comes my way. I'm starting to understand that there are important lessons to be learned from sand, mud, rock: to be still, to know that change takes time and that some scars and cracks soften or erode only over long periods of time, that rain is precious and should not be taken for granted, that thirst is an important feeling.

Last night I dreamt of that open space, meditating in my sleep. The playa, millions of years ago, being born as the old waters of ancient lakes dried up and rain clouds fizzled out before making it over the ever-growing cliffs to the west. Once part of an immense lake, and now something new, but still not finished. Spreading out, millimeter by millimeter over a span of time I may never fully comprehend, yet somehow sensed in my dream, a landscape changing, adapting to the forces beneath the surface, stretching with each exhale, accepting these changes as they come along, welcoming the water that will someday fill the void between the ranges. I opened myself up, spread out my arms as if they were the edges of the playa, felt the wind blow across my skin, and waited for the water to come back again.

II

Two months after my first Black Rock trip I still couldn't wipe the image of the playa from my mind. I kept imagining myself painting the milky pools of water that scattered

the soft surface, but I hesitated every time I brought out my blank canvasses. I knew I had only seen part of the ephemeral lakebed's process, and so I went out to the desert again, hoping to see the same alkali salts hardened from weeks without rain.

As I drove up County Road 34, just a few miles from the entrance to the playa, I spotted a couple of birds fly up and away from the road as I neared. Their bodies were mostly black, but their bellies and wings wore large splotches of white, their long tails flowing behind as they lifted up before hiding out of sight in the nearby fields of sagebrush (black-billed magpies, I later learned). I was startled to see them here, since I hadn't seen any birds at all on my first visit. I searched the horizon to see what other birds might be nearby. Finding none out in the open, I wondered what might be hidden away from the road in the vastness of this desert.

As I neared the gravel entrance to the playa, I spotted two wild horses feeding on the left side of the road. I pulled over across from them. Their manes and tails were frayed and stringy, and their coats wore splotches of brown and white—one horse a dark mud color, the other a faded tan. I rolled down the window and turned the engine off. They stared at me with great intensity, bodies still, mouths chewing. I watched them bend down to nip a few more blades from the small patches of grass, bringing their heads back up to meet my gaze once again. Then they took a few steps away from the road and through the bushes, until all I could see were their tails swaying side-to-side across their back ends.

I started the car and turned right, driving on the rocky entrance to the playa that ran between bushes in the direction of flatter land. A sand-colored dragonfly hung midair outside the car to the left for a moment before disappearing, gone as soon as it had come.

I second-guessed my own eyes—was I imagining things? Maybe these were all just signs of spring coming to the desert, a process I hardly knew in a place like this, but it was hard to adjust to the idea that spring and summer might be the best—or only—seasons for certain animals, especially insects like dragonflies. In Florida, dragonflies can be seen year-round in all sizes and colors, whole groups of them dancing among reeds along the edges of freshwater lakes. And there I was, about to drive out onto a waterless lake, spotting one.

I paused at the edge of the gravel as I had on my first visit, and stared out onto the same flat surface in its dry state, remembering how much darker the salt had been before. I bit my lips and leaned forward, hands gripping the wheel. The ground in front of me looked blotchy: some spots a soft brown, others beige, yellow-gold, snow-white. Nature's own version of a tiled floor. I thought of how deceitful the ground had been last time when I walked out, thinking some places were dry and ending up with shoes covered in a thick, sticky mud. I crept out slowly, barely pressing on the gas pedal. I knew it hadn't rained here in at least two weeks, but as I began driving out, slowly speeding up to twenty, twenty-five, thirty miles an hour, I felt timid and worried. I reached forty and took my foot off the pedal, letting the car slow down on its own, and repeated this a few times to get used to the feeling of driving out in the middle of the playa. I began to realize the freedom I had, knowing there was nothing around me to crash into for miles, no other cars to watch out for, no paved roads guiding me between white and yellow painted lines. Not even sticks, rocks, or plants sat between me and the horizon.

I picked up speed, now going fifty, sixty, sixty-five miles per hour with the windows down and my hair flying around my head like flames lifting into air. I couldn't

help but grin, feeling the slight grind of tire to hardened salt beneath me, and looking out at the mountains surrounding the lakebed. I let my foot off the pedal again and this time I took my hands off the wheel, allowing the car to coast out into the desert playa while I leaned over to the open window, placing my chin on my folded arms on the car's windowsill. The car soon began to slow down, but for a few moments it felt like the desert was driving me, like the land had taken the reins and was showing me where to go. Dust flew behind my car like thick smoke and I watched it settle back to the ground as the car rolled to a stop.

I parked and stepped out. Suddenly I couldn't hold the tension in any longer and let out a high-pitched laugh. Why had I been so afraid? It was as if I had been scared of some force or being that I couldn't see, like a monster in the dark, and then realized I was in the land of light and space—nothing there to jump out at me for miles around. I threw my open hands up into the air, closed my eyes, and faced the sky.

Out in the middle of the playa, the ground is so dry that cracks cover every inch of land beneath your feet. On days like today, even the wind is so still and quiet that your ears ring from the silence, and you feel caught between wanting to be as motionless as the landscape around you and wanting to move so as to create some sound that might relieve the pressure on your eardrums. The sky was covered in a thin layer of cirrus clouds—sheer and misty—which draped over the basin, barely moving. I heard the faintest hint of a plane somewhere above, but saw no sign of it, and soon the soft sound disappeared into nothing and the ringing in my ears took over once again.

I tried practicing stillness—held my tongue against the roof of my mouth and

breathed as slowly as possible, imitating the desert. I wanted to re-tune my senses and learn how to feel less alien in a place so foreign to me. I envisioned my home landscape, remembering how condensed the flora, fauna, and city life were, each one right up against the next. I tried thinking about a time when everything stood motionless. My hometown, St. Petersburg, couldn't have been more different from the playa. On a peninsula surrounded by the Gulf of Mexico and Tampa Bay, a constant breeze creates waves on both salt and fresh waters. The wilderness of Florida is also a place so thick with green you cannot walk through it. Between the sharpness of the sawgrass and palmetto leaves, or the Spanish moss draped over every branch of oak and palm, it's far too easy to become tangled or lost in a matter of minutes. Though the state is largely void of hills or mountains, its flatness is not like that of the desert playa. The only open spaces that come close are bodies of water. The land itself is full of dense plant life and urbanization; the only large spaces of land to be seen are the Floridian playas, the beaches, which are disappearing to urbanization and erosion more and more each year.

The mountain ridges to the north and south in the Black Rock Desert, which were farthest from my view, seemed to be mirrored on the ground, as if water was floating on the horizon, as if the lake were there but just out of reach. I moved my eyes from the mirage down the surface of salt in front of me, watching as the cracks sharpened, and the distinct shattered shapes spread out beneath my feet like broken glass. I tried jumping on it, stubbing the toes of my shoes into the ground, knocking my fist on the rock to test its hardness. No sign I had ever stood there remained visible to me. Solid rock. I placed my palm on the surface, expecting it to be warm, but instead it felt cool to the touch, as if the sun's rays had no effect on the playa's temperature.

I retrieved my canteen from the back seat and opened it, letting a small stream of water pour out onto the dusty rock bed. I watched the liquid creep down into the cracks and transform the beige alkali into a muddy clay color. I reached down and dug the tips of my fingers into the wet fissure between two polygon shaped tiles, lifting the upper layer of one from underneath and held the flat rock in my palm, leaving an open gap in the patterned floor. I pushed my thumb into the center and it broke with hardly any pressure, though it had been unbreakable just moments ago. I felt as if I had taken a clay pot and transformed it back into something manageable, something I could spin once more on a potter's wheel and watch it become solid, then wet, and then dry, repeatedly until the same ball of clay had taken a thousand different shapes in its lifetime. I thought of how the strength of this land is tied to the ephemerality of water, to its own cyclical process. I wondered if I am hardened and softened in similar ways. If water transforms me in one way, and the lack of it transforms me in another, then should I dwell in that ephemerality? Should I latch onto this process and learn to live in the shift between wet and dry? I started to see how my physical existence was made possible because of water, but that my mental and spiritual growth has been heightened most in places it lives in least.

Soon the arid climate dried out what little water I had added to the alkali salts, and the mixture stuck to my skin so that when I tried shaking my hand out, none of it let go of me. I poured a little more from my canteen and slid my thumb over my other fingers in the clear stream, watching the water turn cloudy and full of silt before splattering on the ground. Even after I had washed the biggest clumps of clay from my hand, remnants clung between nail and skin, hidden just underneath the tips, making the white borders of my nails a deep shade of brown.

I drove on, leaving behind the only puddle on the playa. I started to feel more relaxed as the wheels took me farther into the middle of this place, as though I were sailing on open water and the nearest land was miles away. The mountain ranges, running parallel to my northern path, seemed to remain fixed, making it impossible to tell how far I was driving without looking at the odometer. I was trying to move toward the mountains like a swimmer hoping to make it back to shore, but instead of a tide holding me at bay, my skewed perception of distance kept me endlessly guessing at how much farther I had left to go. The two oceans—one of saltwater, the other of salt flats—converged in this experience, distorting my sense of scale and space. When I looked out onto the open land, I spotted a small dark shape on the ground ahead of me. Curiosity had me pushing harder on the gas pedal and soon I was parked near a black rock, no more than four or five inches in length, with long, sharply pointed edges. Lying on the desert floor, it looked like the arrow of a compass, pointing north. It was strange, seeing it from a distance and thinking it had been larger than it turned out to be. I thought it was an animal at first, and was surprised to see how small it was upon picking it up. I flipped it over, finding dust caked to the bottom on odd shapes. I looked around and found no others anywhere in sight, so I brought it back inside the car with me.

As I zig-zagged my way up the length of the lakebed, I started to see more signs of past visitors, each one making itself visible only once I was within a few hundred feet. I found a few places where someone had been doing spins with their car—likely just after the last wet phase—circles of tire marks spread across a place full of horizontal lines. I started to make a list of other things I found: more black rocks of all shapes and sizes, a monkey balloon (from Valentine’s Day?) covered in dust with the words “I Love You”

printed on both sides and a white string trailing behind, held at the end by a crack in the ground; four pieces of rusted metal from boats or cars, spread out at least thirty feet apart; broken shards of glass, all a faded teal color; sand-covered branches and wooden boards. I was far from civilization, but each discovery brought me back to the world beyond this desert. Unlike other wild places, such as forests or oceans, evidence of former visitors was laid out in front of me, uncovered, jarring my vision and crossing the boundary between city and desert—urban skeletons in a closet of wilderness.

When I eventually made my way back to the entrance of the playa, I hoped to see the wild horses once more. Though I reasoned they likely wouldn't be near the road anymore, I drove slowly, peering into the distance to see where they might have gone. I spotted them a few hundred yards from the road and pulled over one last time. I walked out to get a better look, carefully avoiding the piles of horse dung covering the empty spaces between sagebrush. I walked slowly, watching the horses watch me. The two were side by side, hardly moving. I walked at an angle, heading forty-five degrees to my left while they stood directly in front of me. I noticed a small group of rocks about thirty feet away from where the horses were. I stepped over to the boulders and sat down, hoping the horses would understand I was there to visit, not to intrude on a place that was clearly theirs. After a moment of staring in my direction, they went back to grazing, lifting their heads to check on me between bites.

Growing up, I adored horses so much that nearly every year I'd get gifts from my family members that strengthened my love for them. I had a series of toy horse figurines lined up on my shelves, drawings and posters of horse portraits on my walls, and t-shirts

of them kicking their front hooves in the air or of a herd galloping across green fields. But the horses I had always loved as a child were mere images, and the few I had the opportunity to ride as a teenager were tamed, domesticated. Matching their gaze in a desert wilderness challenged my memories, pushing me to see them as wholly independent beings I didn't understand as well as I thought I had.

At some point I learned that I had been born in the year of the horse, according to the Chinese zodiac calendar. Sitting near two wild horses on the outskirts of the Black Rock playa reminded me of this, and I thought back to the zodiac's symbolism of energy, independence, and improvement of ethos. I also recalled that the "lucky" directions for those born in the years of the horse were East and West. My understanding of time and purpose began to merge, and I started to feel assured that I was meant to be there, in that place and moment, having travelled westward in search of myself.

And yet, I knew then that I could not stay. I knew that some places are never meant to be home to human life, never meant to hold us. This was one of those places. I could visit, drive a few hours into Northern Nevada, and stay for awhile. But I was merely a guest, a tourist from out of town, a woman from the wettest state discovering meaning in the driest of places. Someone stopping by for a moment to meet whatever the desert was willing to welcome her with.

I sat there, with my back to the playa and my gaze toward the horses, intent on being as still and silent as possible. A few minutes passed when I heard some movement in the rocks between me and the horses. I didn't move, waiting to see if the animal would show itself—themselves. Two antelope ground squirrels climbed up and over one of the larger boulders, one chasing the other. The white stripes on their sides reminded me of

chipmunks, but they had no black stripes and their bushy black tails draped over their backs instead of trailing behind. One of them spotted me and paused before crawling to a rock nearby on all fours, sniffing the air in my direction. What did they think of me, these desert animals? Did they see me as alien as I felt I was? I leaned closer, breaking the barrier between us, and off they scurried into the bushes, where I could no longer see them, but could still hear their rustle among dried sagebrush.

As I considered my first two experiences in the Black Rock Desert, I realized how this place undercut my preconceived notions about dry landscapes. Water had always been the element I associated with life, and I had assumed that any place without it would be void of life. Yet, I had seen these animals only when I visited on a dry day. Maybe it was just chance. Or maybe I was beginning to look beyond the filter I had brought from the shores of Florida. Maybe I was finally learning to tune myself to the rhythm of the desert and the harmony of life in the land of little rain.

The Memory of Water

Encounters with animals are a gold mine of interest

because the more you learn about an animal...

you realize suddenly that there is

more than one way...to live a life.

— Kathleen Dean Moore

I

I used to think of time in seasons: four stages in the span of a year on repeat. But I don't want to think solely in seasons any longer. They move too quickly for me, no longer giving me enough time to shift from one perspective to another. I have realized in my grieving the loss of a close friend that a change in seasons will not change my sadness in missing her. Seasons will not show how deeply she impacted my life. But a desert can. Out here, the layers of sand and stone tell stories of an ancient, prehistoric past. This is the kind of memory I want to have of her.

While I often believed that without the source of life—water—a place would become lifeless, empty, or barren, now I know this isn't true. What remains is the memory of water, etched into the surface of rock, stone, and sand in waves and curves: a smoothness that may never disappear. The landscape has been shaped by the water that used to be there, and it will show these impacts for millions of years to come.

The desert is not what it seems. It is not a wasteland. It is a place where the toughest survive in the harshest of conditions. Where life lives beyond water and where

pure darkness allows us to see the light of stars. Although I feel like a desert who has just lost one of her rivers, I know that signs of Ellie are still everywhere. The walls of my canyons and the sides of my mountains are still teeming with remnants of the wetness once there.

In search of healing, I sought out places in my new desert home that would remind me of life. I thought that if I could find animals that adapt to difficult situations, maybe then I could reach acceptance. Maybe then I could rinse out my anger, or hang it out in the drying heat until it evaporated completely.

When I arrived at Stillwater National Wildlife Refuge, near Fallon, Nevada, about sixty miles from Reno, the refuge at first appeared to be flooded with water. Ripples and waves seemed to lay at the end of the dirt entrance road, but the puddles were unreachable, untouchable, unreal. The reflection of light on sand was sometimes the only way I could tell if the ground on either side of the road was truly covered in water or not. Lighter in tone or matte in finish: dry. Dark or glossy: wet.

At the southern end of the refuge, I walked along the Tule Trail. Beside my path were reflections of sagebrush in puddles on the dirt. They looked like miniature trees scattered across an open panoramic landscape. Farther away, the hills of sagebrush appeared smooth and soft, but the clumps of bushes up close made the area around me seem bumpy. The ditch on my right, mostly void of water during this drought year, showed signs of water that had once been there along its edges. Marsh grasses lay near flat against the ground lining each ditch, as if a flood of water had recently rushed through here. As a native Floridian relocated to Nevada, I was surprised to hear that

wetlands existed in a desert landscape. I had mistakenly imagined the marshes of Florida filling the expanse of a Nevada lakebed. I thought of the possibility of seeing a lush, green area but was reminded of my prejudices when I rolled into a dry, golden field. The land looked parched, so I sent out a wish for rain.

Some birds flew by and I suddenly wished I knew their names. The only ones I could see looked like finches, but many others were hidden—I could hear, but couldn't see, them. One made four or five different noises in a row each time it called. A pause would come, then the same sounds, again. Again. Another made mini soft squeaks; a third said *whoa-oh-oh*. Several of them darted in and out of the tall grasses as I walked by.

The wind rubbed on dry leaves and reeds. Some blades of grass looked as soft as a blanket of feathers, and I reached out to feel them, accidentally breaking off the tips as I did. I turned to face the wind directly and could hear each gust of air against my face, my hair waving in the air like the high marsh grasses around me, but unlike the landscape—dry rubbing on dry material like a soft scratching—my moving hair made no sound. The air was cool and crisp but the sun felt warm to the skin. I could sense the beginning of spring on the edge of winter. The clouds looked like soft wisps of paint, cotton balls being stretched and pulled apart in midair. They moved slowly, almost as motionless as the water here. All I could see and hear was a land that was waiting for water in rain and snow, sending out prayers for it in the songs of birds. I sat on a bench, trying to sense what it felt like to wait as the land did. To see what it saw.

At first, the whole field of cattails in front of me appeared unmoving, dead in late winter, but the wind was just strong enough that, when looked at closely, each tip of each blade swayed, just barely, maybe no more than a few centimeters in either direction. Back

and forth. Back again. In small open areas, the wind moved water in small ripples and patterns of light across the surface. In other places, the water was still, green algae and dirt atop its surface like suds of brown soap: a living motionless photograph. The mountains in the distance were shades of blue, violet, grayish brown. The basin was covered in honey, the color of dusk washing over it all. The wetlands in Florida were so different from those in Nevada. Back on the Gulf Coast, everything is mostly cool-colored, greens and blues dominating year-round. At Stillwater, the colors had turned warm after months of cold weather, full of sunlight and open space. Very little was hidden here, the tallest bushes reaching only up to my waist and the only trees empty of leaves, their branches bare.

Still sitting on the bench, I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, not realizing how much pressure I had been holding inside. I let the quietness consume me. As I let the breath out, the tension building up in my chest came out in tears, which slid down my cheeks and hung there to dry in the late afternoon sun. I watched the wings flutter in front of my eyes and thought of Ellie. Only two months had passed since she died, and I realized then how much I needed this place. I needed to find refuge, just as Terry Tempest Williams had during her times of loss. I needed to feel the hope that comes with wings and feathers. I needed to feel closer to home and to Ellie, wishing I had been there when she passed away. I had longed to see her one last time before they buried her, but I had been here in the West while the funeral was being held in Miami.

When I visited her grave a month after the funeral, the thick bushes that lined the cemetery were spotted with white ibises. The ground near the small temporary plaque that showed her name was still freshly adjusted, patches of new grass distinctly creating a

bold rectangle in an area of smooth, untouched earth. Tiny flowers of yellow and white were already making their way up to the sky among the bright green blades of St. Augustine grass. I couldn't stay long; the grave made it real. As my partner Vaughn drove us back along Alligator Alley—the stretch of highway that crosses the Everglades from Miami to Naples—I stared out the passenger window and watched the gulls, herons, and ospreys fly over the passing greenery. I imagined coming back to visit her again someday, lying next to her on the earth, looking up at wings and open air.

Remembering that day as I sat on the bench at Stillwater, I wondered if I needed *not* to be there when she was buried. Maybe this way I could always remember her in birds, with wings. She may have been there watching as her body was entering the earth, but I knew she wasn't anymore. She was there at Stillwater. She was everywhere. I imagined her flying in every sky and across every body of water, with wings of every size and color. I knew then that she would never be grounded, always moving from one set of feathers to the next, singing a thousand songs I might never hear.

Nearly a month after my first Stillwater visit, Lindsay flew out from Florida to visit me. The three of us—Lindsay, Ellie, and I—had formed a trio more than five years ago as freshmen in college back in southwest Florida. Lindsay came along with me on a second trip to the refuge, and I wanted to see what she thought about the arid landscapes of Northern Nevada—these places that I had been getting accustomed to.

The snow along the ridges of the mountains east of Stillwater made them look like powdered donuts: soft, round, and tasty. As we explored the areas north of the Tule Trail, we found hardly any water at all. Most of the lakes listed on our map were completely

dry. What little water that flowed into the valley was also being managed to flow somewhere other than this watershed.

We stopped near another trail, which had no name, and walked around. Birds of all kinds fluttered from tree to tree on both sides of us. Some were small, brown and tan in color. Finches, I guessed. A yellow-chested warbler stood atop the edge of a branch, singing alone. In some places there were so many birds on tree branches that they looked like dark leaves sprouting, imitating springtime. American white pelicans drifted in waves between us and the mountains, gliding just over the curve of the mountain wave itself, surfing on air. We were surprised to see them here, having only ever seen brown pelicans along the coast of Florida. I had been so used to watching them waddle over to fishermen on the pier, waiting for an easy meal; I hadn't anticipated any would live so far from saltwater.

Some of the areas next to the path were softer to walk on than the trail itself. Lindsay and I walked through some marsh grass and stood on a shifting pile of light, airy sand.

"It's like walking on cookie dough," she joked. We jumped up and down, getting a feel for how squishy the earth felt beneath our boots. She looked around, fascinated with tumbleweeds caught in larger bushes nearby. "I feel like I'm in a real Western movie."

At the end of the small trail, we came to a metal gate that read *Stewart Landing* and warned people not to trespass on private property. I could hear birds calling and splashing in water beyond the bend just behind the gate. Lindsay and I looked at each other, grinning.

"We should just hop over," she said. "Come on, hold my camera."

I laughed uneasily. I'm not the kind of person to trespass, but at least if we were caught, we'd be caught together. I passed her camera back through the rusted metal bars, and she returned the favor as I stepped up and over, landing in dust on the other side. We walked, passing a few shotgun shells on the ground. *A hunting area*, I thought. We followed a path that led to an open grassy field next to a small lake surrounded by marsh grass and cattails. Most of the birds were hidden out of sight, but a few mallards floated by an opening every few moments. I could hear at least five other bird calls, but the only one I recognized was the Canada geese—a honking blunt and loud compared to all the others. I thought of Ellie again. I envisioned her lungs no longer flooded with fluids, but filled with air forever more, always in flight.

Driving farther north through the heart of the refuge, we read signs naming the empty lakes on both sides of the dirt road. The *Tule Lake* sign barely stood above ground, leaning almost completely sideways, just inches above the dust. Rain and hail were the only forms of water we saw all day, coming from above in stormy patches, not floating on the ground as we had imagined. I couldn't help but think of the irony behind the current state of the water near the refuge. While I knew about the management systems used to irrigate this region over the last couple decades, I thought it was strange that the only large amounts of water we found were located beyond the gate, on the gun club's private property, right next to acres of land that were dedicated to protecting wildlife.

Later I learned that the wet marshes here had changed drastically over the last hundred years. The area that Stillwater resides used to be home to both migratory birds and Paiute Indians. Anthropologists date human life being sustained by Stillwater as far back as 6,000 years ago. While the Paiute had used this area for many generations,

agriculture brought by settlers of the late-19th and early-20th centuries became the largest cause of water being diverted from the wetlands. These wetlands fluctuated in natural boom and bust cycles in times of heavy precipitation and drought, but the latter is one that has been more prevalent in recent decades. Initiatives have been proposed and enacted, but have failed to increase water flow to the wetlands because water is first used for agriculture. Whatever's left is sent to Stillwater, an amount that's been next to nothing with the recent drought in the West. The wetland and its birds are the last priority.

After that day at Stillwater, I felt like there was so much being lost, and not just the water. Lost connections, values, time. I couldn't seem to grasp each minute as it went by, and suddenly it felt like years had passed since I last heard Ellie's voice or saw her face. Lindsay said she had been dreaming of Ellie recently. In some of the dreams, Ellie was brought back to life, as if the doctors had found the problem, as if she no longer had trouble breathing, as if her cystic fibrosis had been cured. But then Ellie would tell Lindsay that she couldn't stay long, that this was temporary. She had somewhere else to be.

I thought back to how Ellie had accepted death as wholeheartedly as she accepted life. Lindsay said Ellie had almost asked her to enforce her medical power of attorney, worried her parents would keep her on life support too long when the time came to let go. I wondered if there was something to be learned in that acceptance, in her willingness to die when the time came, in her courage to move on. Though she fought for her life with more strength than most people could ever have, she knew when to let go.

After seeing the dry “oasis of Nevada” near Fallon, I went out in search of another wetland I knew of in Northern Nevada: Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge. Nearly five hours east of Reno and more than an hour south from the nearest towns of Wells and Elko, the refuge sat around 6,000 feet in elevation in a valley just beyond the Ruby Mountains (a range with some peaks as tall as 11,000 feet). Although I knew the same drought that had been affecting most of the state was likely also affecting Ruby Lake, I had hopes of seeing more water and more wildlife than I had during my visits to Stillwater.

As I drove out I-80 East away from Reno, it felt strange to be driving around the bend of a mountain or over a hill one moment, and through a flat expanse of sand and sagebrush that extends for miles the next moment. Driving through Nevada, I tried to wrap my mind around the fact that a place could have both the largest number of mountain ranges in the U.S. and some of the flattest landforms in the world, one right up against the other.

Between Fernley and Lovelock, the landscape south of the interstate resembled the dry lake Winnemucca and the Black Rock playa: wide, flat, bleach-white with very few puddles of water showing themselves in the glare of sunlight. Scattered piles of small, black rocks spread out over the dust, but soon I began to see the rocks in shapes and names: a smiley face, a peace sign, a heart, *Sarah, Mike, RIP Larry*. I scanned the sides of the road, wondering how many times these same rocks had been moved around by the hands of people driving through on their way to some other destination. Had anyone let the desert make its own impression on them, rather than simply making their

own impressions onto the surface of the desert? Did any of them consider the desert more than a place to simply pass *through*? Were they merely hoping to be remembered in some way, something we all hope for when we leave this earth?

Travis Tritt's voice came through the radio as I passed more symbols, more names, a flowered cross.

And it's a great day to be alive

I know the sun's still shinin' when I close my eyes

There's some hard times in the neighborhood

But why can't every day be just this good?

And I just sang along.

The next morning, I left my motel in Elko before sunrise. If I could get to the refuge soon after the sun came up, I might catch sight of more birds than in the middle of the day. I hopped back onto I-80 East and switched onto NV 229, which was the only paved road that ran from Lamoille Valley, near Elko, around the northern tip of the Ruby Mountains and into Ruby Valley. I paused outside of a ranch at the base of the mountains to watch the light shift from dark blue to a pale yellow, while the sounds of birds and cows welcoming the day carried themselves in the wind.

By the time I pulled back onto the road, it was bright enough to turn off the headlights and pick up speed. But just as I came around a bend, I had to swerve around the body of a female deer, forcing me into the lane designated for oncoming traffic before being able to pull over on the right side of the road. I stepped out of the car without thinking, and quickly realized that I didn't want to look. Her face was tilted up, directed at

me, and a raven perched close by, waiting for me to leave. I wanted to grab her front hooves and move her to the side of the road so as to keep other cars from hitting her, but I felt frozen, one hand over my mouth, the other on my stomach. I looked around, listening to a warbler sing its morning song and watched as a black-and-white magpie flew from a nearby wooden post to a distant cottonwood tree. The moment felt surreal, life and death close to one another in time and space in a way I had never sensed before. I felt my insides churn and twist as I got back in the car. I couldn't do it. I couldn't move her.

Another car came rushing by in the opposite direction as I closed my door. They hardly even slowed as they spun around the bend and were out of sight as quickly as they had come. Did they think I was strange for stopping? Even I didn't fully understand why I had. It's not as if I hadn't ever seen roadkill before, but this was the first time I had been able to recognize the animal and had the power to pull over without anyone else in the car to stop me. Maybe I was also shaken more in that moment than usual because of the ideas I had about where I was headed. I didn't realize I'd be seeing dead animals on my way to a wildlife refuge.

As I looked back one last time in my rearview mirror and drove on, the thought stuck, and for the next thirty miles I spotted rabbits, ground squirrels, and mice—some balls of fur totally unrecognizable—lying on or near the pavement and dirt roads that lead to Ruby Lake. Between each roadkill, though, were old and new animal sightings for me: a herd of deer (at least fifteen), finches, a pronghorn antelope (which ran off into the field to meet the rest, maybe ten total), a jackrabbit, two yellow-bellied marmots, ravens, and a red-tailed hawk.

As I passed ranch after ranch, I noticed how blended the wild and farm animal

lives were, living in the same spaces and feeding on the same land. Wild birds flew from one side of the road to the other, again and again, while the cows and horses fed just beyond the barbed wire fences, swaying their tails like brooms above the dusty ground. Antelope ground squirrels covered the dirt road in some areas, as if this was the place they meet every morning to talk about their plans for the day ahead. A few times I slowed to a stop to watch them disappear into their burrows and timed how long it took for them to return. Some of their heads popped up from openings in nearby holes, while others rejoined in groups along the edges of the road. Another continued to dig, kicking bits of dirt into the air on a dry open field.

Once I entered the refuge grounds, I pulled into the Visitor's Center parking lot and grabbed a map from the wooden flap outside the door, since the center was closed due to limited staffing. As I began to drive out of the lot, a desert cottontail watched me from the nearby bushes, perfectly still except for its nose, sniffing away. I could sense that this valley was one I didn't belong in. People were strangers here; the animals still owned the place.

Before exploring the refuge's wetlands, I noticed the sign for the *Cave Creek Trail* to the south side of the Visitor's Center. I pulled over, eager to see what kind of cave this trail was named after. Although I had stood under boulders where streams and waterfalls flowed from deep in the Appalachian mountains, I hadn't ever experienced walking *into* the mouth of a cave.

The path weaved through patches of aspen trees, their white branches still bare from winter. A cold, clear stream ran alongside the path, creating sounds of memories

from years stumbling through creeks. Moss grew on rocks along the edges of the water, bright green glistening wet in the clear sunny skies. Along the path a few butterflies fluttered in and out of grasses and bushes. Some were spotted with browns and oranges. Another was small and white, like a torn piece of paper caught in the wind and blown here from somewhere else. The trail led up the base of the mountain, and soon I bent under branches and stepped over rocks before reaching the small cave opening where the stream began.

Some of the rocks overhead jugged out from the mountainside, as if pushed in with a giant's hand millions of years ago. Others looked as if they had fallen from above, hardly wedged between two other rocks, just enough to keep them still. The cool grays and blues of the boulders were spotted with green and red lichen, while flowers and small shrubs grew from ledges poking out from the cliffside. I stepped closer, easing myself down a slight dip in the ground to get under the rock formations. From here I stared at the water pouring out from somewhere deep inside the mountain: the birth of the creek.

I wanted to close my eyes and just listen to the *shhhhhh* I had missed so long, but I couldn't stop investigating the source of the water. I knelt down and felt it—cold as ice. I waved a flashlight over some of the darker pools, finding nothing but darker holes beyond the reach of my light. I stood up and moved my eyes down the flow of the stream, watching as it fell from the small cliff, down to the flatter stream before disappearing into the patches of aspen trees. Somehow, somewhere, this water flowed into the valley, fresh from melted snow.

After finishing the trail to the cave and having a quick lunch by the stream, I drove back

onto the dirt road and took the next left. My first stop on the auto trail route listed on the map overlooked a couple of small ponds and a few long dredges filled with water so clear I could see the rocks and plants on the bottom, a few feet below the surface. Just beyond one of the canals was a field covered in marsh grass. Several hundred feet away, I noticed another mammal, and immediately assumed it was another deer or pronghorn. But as I zoomed in on the image playback on my camera's screen, staring in my direction appeared to be a coyote, grayish brown and firm in stance. By the time I recognized it and looked again, it had disappeared, hidden somewhere in the marsh.

I continued down the gravel road, out into the heart of the valley and down through the center of the refuge. As I moved past, the birds flew away from the waters alongside the road, never waiting for me to leave first, acting on natural instinct. Mallards were always the first to go, quacking in loud repeated bursts as they went, making their feelings apparent. Canada geese usually followed, their distinct honk resounding in the valley. I soon realized it was going to take a lot of patience to see any of these birds up close, so when I came near a more open area of water, I parked the car and waited inside. Nearly twenty minutes passed before they gradually made their way back into my view, allowing me to spot ones I couldn't name.

I pulled out my new field guide to birds of Western North America and began teaching myself their names and habitats: American white pelican, sandhill crane, bufflehead, tundra swan, American coot, common merganser. Farther away from the water and off in the marsh I noticed a bird I knew well from Florida: the great blue heron. Slow to move and graceful in its steps, I had often seen this bird wading through swamps and mangrove islands back home, most often when kayaking through canals and lakes on

warm afternoons.

Before turning to its page in my book and learning about the vastness of its habitat range, I hadn't imagined a bird would be a year-round resident of both my native state and my new home. I watched it stand tall, creating a striking contrast between itself and the other birds moving around on the surface of the water or flying from one pond to another. I was excited to learn the names of new species, but also comforted to find some that I was already familiar with.

On the map of the refuge I noticed there should have been a photo blind just around the bend of the road. I had seen blinds back home in Florida, but had never found much use for them. Most of the time the trees and sawgrass were too overgrown to see much of anything that you couldn't already see out in the open. I always had luck just walking around on my own, but then again, the birds in Florida seemed to be more used to people than the ones here on Ruby Lake. I decided to test out the photo blind, walking through the knee-high marsh grasses a few hundred feet from the road. The wooden structure was painted a mahogany color and was topped with a metal roof. The latch to the door kept sticking, as if it hadn't been used in years. The wood creaked as I opened the door and bent down to step inside. Spiderwebs hung in the corners. The wind outside was softened to a light hum. I lifted up one of the wooden flaps next to a child-sized stool and peeked outside.

The birds kept their distance. I thought I heard some kind of gull, recognizing a familiar high-pitched *aw-aw*, but couldn't place where it was coming from before the sounds of honking Canada geese took over. Sitting inside looking out felt like being in a dark room looking at a single lighted picture on the wall, blues and yellows more vibrant

as they stood out against the black wall framing the image. But the picture was like a film, moving along as the world does, with me watching as if I was being taken out of time momentarily. I wondered if this was what it's like when we die, if there are windows that look out onto the physical realm. Then I hoped that it was true, that these windows were actually the eyes of those still living in the natural world, and wished to someday see through the eyes of a heron.

Further south through the refuge, dust flew up behind my car as I veered left onto a small entryway to Gravel Pit Pond. There, I stepped out and followed the long tail of a black magpie around a line of tamarisk trees to the shore. I slid down the ledge to the water, about a foot down, and trudged through thick mud, sinking in and yanking out my feet with each step, mud caking onto my boots thicker each time. The ground smelled rotten or moldy, as if new life was taking over something that had died here.

I spotted a trail of paw prints. Coyotes? Dogs? I couldn't tell. All along the edge of the pond were shells, tiny and bleached-white from the sun, sticking out of the mud. Each one was about the size of a fingertip. Some were flat on the sides and spiraled inward, while others spiraled out from a point—likely the shells of freshwater snails or mollusks. They reminded me of smaller versions of the fist-sized apple snail shells I'd often found on the shores of Lake Maggiore in St. Petersburg. Their golden-brown balls of color popped out among the light sand or green grasses where birds had left them, now empty of the life they were built to protect. While I helped my mother and grandmother build their collections by bringing back handfuls of conch, scallop, and tellin shells, I began my own collection of freshwater snail shells.

Between the thick smell and the sticky mud, I decided to cut this stop short and move to the next pond: County Line. There I spotted two more herons across the small expanse of water. As I reached the water's edge, the couple flew away, with great, slow flapping of their wings. Almost as if they knew it was suddenly safe, fish began jumping out of the water, landing in belly flops against the surface. They were about eight to ten inches long, mostly green and yellow, but hard to catch sight of in air, since they were jumping to a rhythm I couldn't predict.

I plopped my feet down into the water, feeling the ground squish under my boots and watching small bubbles ringed in white pop up to the surface. I took another step into the pond. Milky white silt spread out from my foot like a slow, creeping smoke over the green plants on the floor of the pond like mist over a forest, swirls spinning as if they had a life of their own. When the smoke settled I reached in to touch the greenery, expecting it to feel slippery with slime like seaweed, and instead felt rough edges.

Then I cupped some water with my hands, letting it slip slowly between my fingers. I couldn't imagine this place without this resource, and yet, I could see from where I stood how the eastern marsh areas were drying up, exposed like bones to the desert sun. How many of the birds would never come back? How many would lose a temporary or permanent home?

I also wondered if there might be some comfort in thinking about what places like these would *become* after losing water. Although there would likely be greater devastation if this natural element continued to disappear—a loss for birds, fish, and other mammals that depend on the waters there—it might have to be accepted as part of the drying desert landscape. While I thought it admirable and achievable to sometimes

restore environments that have been greatly affected by irrigation, I also considered our inability to process natural time. The deep and wide lakes that once existed across Northern Nevada had long since disappeared, remaining only in the memory of playas and marshes. If the water is lost, what might this landscape gain in return?

I thought back to Terry Tempest Williams: *Dying doesn't cause suffering. Resistance to dying does.* My new understanding of the desert challenged me to let go of my suffering. To let go of my pain. To let go of my anger. Being angry at the loss of Ellie wouldn't bring her back. Being angry at the farmers and ranchers wouldn't bring the water back. The desert knows about loss. The desert knows about death. The desert knows about acceptance.

I remembered Ellie in her hospital bed at Duke Medical Center, waiting on a new pair of lungs last spring. I had taken three flights over the span of twelve hours to get there, afraid I wouldn't make it in time to say goodbye. I held her right hand, while Lindsay held her left, Ellie laid out before us, hooked up to various machines to pump her blood and provide her oxygen. It was the first time I had nearly fainted, quickly being guided into a chair by a nurse, and swore at myself for not having the strength to stand by Ellie's side when she was fighting to save her life. We spent the next twenty-four hours praying, and received a miracle set of lungs.

The weekend following my emergency visit to see Ellie, I traveled to Oregon for my first solo journey. A few days prior, Ellie had made it through surgery and was now in recovery. Her persistence and drive to live had renewed my faith in the possibility of overcoming the inevitable. When I began to explore the Pacific Northwest, I felt overwhelmed by the abundance of green lining mountainside waterfalls, and sea life

growing along the coast. Orange starfish bigger than my hands and sea-foam green anemones brought spaces between dark rocks to life in the moving tides. That spring Ellie had overcome all odds, and so I craved the power of water, and the life it brings. I had needed it then, just as I needed the desert now that she was gone.

On my drive back from Elko to Reno the day after my Ruby Lake visit, I stopped near the Fallon lakebed where others had formed their images and words out of rocks on the sand. Cars and trucks sped by on I-80, while I walked out between mile markers 53 and 54, collecting dark rocks as big as my palm. Slowly, one at a time, I formed a wave, remembering the water that once was there. As I pulled back out onto the road, speeding through the desert, I tried to imagine what the lapping of ancient lakes on desert rock sounded like.

Blurred Reflections

*See how nature—trees, flowers, grass—grows in silence;
see the stars, the moon and the sun, how they move in silence...*

We need silence to be able to touch souls.

— Mother Teresa

I

It was just before dusk when we arrived at Frog Pond, located just east of the Black Rock playa at the base of Old Razorback Mountain. Also called Frog Farm or Garrett Ranch Springs, the pond of 100-degree spring water sat beneath the arms of cottonwood and tamarisk trees. Still late in winter, the empty branches provided little shade over the pool with the sun coming in from the west side of the playa, brightening the turquoise water.

When we first rode through the bumpy, dirt path that led from the playa's edge to Frog Pond, it was easy to spot where we were headed. The trees were the only ones in sight near this small area of the desert—you could tell there was going to be water here before you found it. It was a true oasis in a rugged desert terrain; a gem born on the lower slope of the mountain.

Before stepping into my very first hot spring with my friends Amanda and Rudi, I looked back out onto the salt flats we drove across to get there. Our trails of dust lingered in the air over the desert floor and the hills of sagebrush, appearing as an amber mist in the fading sunlight. The Santa Rosa Range across from us was slowly turning from lavender to a deep violet. Ivory sky lined the summits, baby blue blanketed above. The

playa looked like a traditional lake covered with a thin layer of water, though we had sped atop its dry, cracked surface just minutes before. It seemed as though the evening light brought back a glimpse of the ancient waters of Lake Lahontan that floated there twelve or thirteen thousand years ago.

I walked back to the edge of the pond, where a small wooden platform and step-down ladder had been built. The wood above the water was coated thick with a fine dust, but beneath the surface of the water it was covered in a green algae. I dipped the tips of my fingers in the water to test the temperature before plunging in. Instead, it felt like warm bath water, clear to the bottom in most areas and free of chlorine. Already, I could see the mosquitofish swimming around in schools nearby. Amanda stepped in first. As she moved into the center of the pond and I turned to step down the ladder, she warned me that the last couple steps were slick, so I held on with a firm grip and moved my feet carefully.

The boards felt slimy, like walking on seaweed or the skin of a fish. Schools of mosquitofish darted away into the deeper parts of the teal-colored water. The silt on the floor of the pool was a softer, airy version of the same slithery texture, kicking up in little puffs of sandy smoke around my feet. The pond was shallow, no more than four or five feet. I lowered the rest of my body into the water, letting it rise up to my jaw line. I let out a deep sigh, sensing the warmth of the water taking over the coolness of the early spring air. Amanda and I exchanged grins.

“So, what do you think?” she asked.

“Amazing...” I replied as I stretched out my arms under the clear water and watched the mosquitofish swim around, pausing here and there to gently nibble at my

skin. “Oh, that tickles!”

“They like the dead skin,” she laughed.

Our hot spring was about eight or ten feet wide, and a small stream ran off from its southern edge, flowing into a series of smaller pools further below. Near the center of the spring were a few large rocks and an algae-covered pipe. The cylindrical metal frame stood upright, spewing water from the open end just below the water’s surface. Ripples spread outward in all directions from the pipe like petals from a stem.

The water here, as in most geothermal springs across the West, was likely hundreds to thousands of years old, originating from rain and snow that fell around these mountains in the Black Rock Desert. As the water percolates through the surface of the earth, it becomes heated when coming in contact with hot rocks near the earth’s mantle, then travels through aquifers, cracks and fissures before emerging from the ground. It was hard for me to imagine the water I was bathing in as ancient. In Florida, spring water is young in comparison. While Nevada has the greatest number of hot springs in the U.S. (around 300), Florida has more springs than any other state, around 900. There, the water largely stays in shallow limestone formations, averaging 68 to 70 degrees year-round. Before coming to Nevada, I knew little about the vast geothermal activity here, nor would I have guessed I’d be brought back to memories of my home state. Despite the differences in average temperature and depth, the shades of teal, turquoise, and jade displayed in the hot springs mirrored those of the cold springs in Florida—helping me to see how these two places connected. It was like a sweet surprise, just like the idea itself of water springing up in a desert landscape.

I took my time moving from one spot of the pond to another, hoping the

mosquitofish would make their way back to me each time. On the east end of the pond, I leaned over some large rocks to get a better look at a frog that had just landed on the shore, right in front of the grassy boundary. With my body submerged, I inched closer, only the upper portion of my head in the air, the water line just below my nose. I could smell the calcium-filled mineral water rising in the steam: a fresh, earthy scent I had never experienced before. The minerals were rich, but the steam made it too thick to breathe in heavily. I leaned on my forearms, legs floating in the deeper waters behind me, and observed the frog. His body was also half-submerged, as if we were mimicking each other; both of us staring into a transformative mirror.

The moment brought me back in time to last summer's trip to Florida. I had spent weeks out in Florida's parks—rain or shine—just praying to see a frog at least once during the three months I was there. I hadn't found a single frog, until one found me. I had just come home from helping Boyd Hill Nature Preserve pull invasive plant species—mostly air potatoes and Caesar's weed—out of the woodland areas and was desperate for a shower. I stood under the hot water for a few moments, washing the dirt off my shins and out from under my fingernails while steam rose and filled the bathroom. When I reached for my shampoo, I felt something on the back of the bottle, touching the tips of my fingers before a scream was let out and a tree frog appeared on the white tiled wall in front of me. Shampoo bottle in hand and water hitting my back, I leaned over to get a better look. A set of black eyes lined with gold stared back at me, and the yellow-green body shifted slightly, as if ready to jump again. I rushed to turn the shower off, wrapped a towel around my body without patting myself dry, and desperately searched in the kitchen for something large enough to safely capture him with. After successfully

getting him inside a tupperware container and bringing him out to the ferns in the front yard, I returned to my shower, laughing.

The frog in front of me in the hot spring was a deep, forest green, with slight squiggle lines of white and black under his chin, and dark reddish-brown eyes. I watched as his neck pulsed in and out just slightly, and his ever-opened eyes stared back.

“I can't believe he's letting you get so close,” said Amanda from behind me.

“Me neither,” I responded softly, my lips barely above the water. I carefully turned in my spot to face her without scaring the frog away. Amanda and Rudi, arms wrapped around one another, turned to face the sunset over the Santa Rosa Range. I watched as she leaned back into him, steam lifting up around their shoulders as the colors turned vibrant behind their darkening silhouettes. The moment felt surreal, dreamlike, and I thought of Vaughn, still living back in Florida—far away in a distant time and place. I suddenly missed him in a way that was different from the usual uneasiness of space between us; this time I missed him in the way we share moments, experiences, and places that remind us of our shared willingness to be open to one another and to the earth. I knew then that I would have to bring him here, to the desert, in hopes that he could feel what I feel when I'm here.

I turned back to the frog and inched even closer. We stared, our faces now no more than a foot apart, half-in, half-out of the same water. “Amanda, look.” I whispered.

“He's still there?”

“Mhm...” I hummed, grinning with wet lips. After another few moments of sitting still, I decided to test how close I could get before scaring him off and reached my hand forward along the surface of the pond. I was half-sure he'd hop off into the green grass

behind him, but also half-hoped he'd let me touch (or, even better, hold) him. I wanted to feel his skin against mine and imagined what it was like to live the life of a frog in a high-desert landscape. The whole existence of the frogs and fish here seemed anomalous to me—wet animals in a dry place. Later I learned that they had been brought in from elsewhere around the 1940s for frog farming, along with the mosquitofish, but the fact that they were all still thriving decades later astonished me.

He jumped off the edge and into the water, just inches from my right shoulder. I yelped and pulled back, laughing as the tension released from the inside in a split-second. I moved into the center of the pond and watched as he slid up out of the water onto the shore again and paused before leaping into the grass, disappearing altogether.

As the last light of day shimmered on the horizon, Rudi stepped out of the pond to build a fire. Amanda and I stayed in to keep warm while the air temperature dropped closer to the predicted high 20s for that night. We sat quietly, listening to the frogs honking away, almost donkey-like. A few bats flew over the hot spring, like large butterfly silhouettes dancing in the neon twilight. Stars slowly showed themselves as the sky turned to night, their lights reflecting on the jet black waters—once so clear you could see the bottom, now so dark you couldn't see anything but the surface: silver and oil-colored waves. The stars peeked between shadow reflections from the tamarisk trees beside the pond, as if they were lights strung along the tips of branches like fluorescent leaves. Closer to the fire the tall cottonwoods played a soft vibrated song in the wind, sounds carrying across the desert like a small portable fan.

Having soaked in the water for over an hour, I could feel thick ridges and wrinkles forming on my hands and feet. We knew it was nearly time to get out and eat the

sandwiches Rudi had cooked for us, but the thought of stepping out of the warm water and into the cold air kept us in as long as we could. Each time I lifted my body up, allowing the surface to fall below my shoulders, I shuddered and sank back in. I felt like I had as a young girl, swimming in Crystal River, wishing I could transform myself into a mermaid and live with the manatees in the crisp, clear waters that flowed from the cold springs of Florida. I felt that childlike sensation again here, hoping to become another frog in the hidden Frog Pond oasis of the Black Rock Desert. And now the temperatures of water and air were reversed in this new experience: I no longer wished to stay cooled during the hottest and most humid months of the year; instead, I was holding onto what little heat I was feeling to keep me out of the chilly spring winds.

We decided to make a run for it. Jumping up out of the water, turning our backs to the steam and bolting for our dry layers of clothing inside the truck. We shrieked, hopping up and down as we threw off our wet bathing suits, raced to dry off with our towels and fumbled our way into long pants, boots, and jackets. Moments later, we stood by the fire eating warm portobello mushroom sandwiches and drinking red wine while the frogs croaked softly and the fire crackled between the three of us.

Though we used headlamps during dinner, I turned mine off afterward and looked at the sky over Old Razorback Mountain. Within a few minutes my sight adjusted, and the scene turned from pitch black to shades of navy and dark purple. Each time I blinked my eyes more stars appeared. I could see the Milky Way for the first time without the help of a camera or telescope. I walked to the edge of the hot spring in the dark, and turned on my headlamp to see if I could catch a glimpse of any more frogs. Scanning the rim of the pool, I found none. The light shone through the water and bounced off the

steam rising from it. In the glow of the lamp, the place seemed more ghostly and less enchanted. It was as if the shadows cast in the light came with a feeling that some creature was lurking in the dark, as if there was something the light was supposed to protect you from or prepare you for. Once I turned the headlamp back off and the glimmer of stars reappeared, I felt there was nothing to fear—I could see what the light couldn't make visible.

Just before putting out the fire, we watched as the glow of the moon brightened the ridge of Old Razorback Mountain (also sometimes called the Sleeping Elephant). We waited for a few moments in the dark, standing in the cold as the white disc crept up over the black summits—a true moonrise. We put out the fire and climbed back into the truck, heading for Trego Hot Springs, just a couple miles north on the dirt service road we came in on. The moon disappeared as we drove along the base of Razorback, appearing again as we drove out farther toward the playa again. Amanda said this spring would be better late at night since it's hotter than Frog Pond. While the pond is often a little over 100, Trego can get up to 190 in some places. The air temperature had dropped significantly since we had arrived a few hours earlier, and I was already craving as much heat as the next hot spring was willing to give me.

When we pulled into the campsite, two other cars and a small trailer were parked nearby. A young, rowdy group hollered to the music of classic country songs I didn't recognize. A couple of the men greeted us with beers in their hands as we stepped out of the truck. Amanda and I exchanged cautious glances, while Rudi was friendly enough to respond to their greeting. Our suits, not only wet, but now cold, didn't seem at all

appealing. We'd skinny-dip instead. Luckily, however, the men walked back to their party, several hundred feet away from the base of Trego where we'd be getting in.

I felt like I was sixteen again, taking my clothes off in preparation for a late-night swim. I hadn't skinny-dipped in years—thinking back to a high school boyfriend who loved to have us sneak into the beach motel pools together late at night—and felt slightly nervous about being with another couple and about being so close to a group of weekend partiers getting loud in the desert. But after Amanda and Rudi were in, I left my worries in the pile of clothes on the dust and slipped into the dark and steamy waters of Trego Hot Springs.

The bottom of this spring felt muddier than Frog Pond, thicker under my feet and grittier in my hands. We were in the pond nearest to the playa and the railroad tracks that separated the two landscapes. A dredge ran into this area from further east and up the small hill. This was where the water was safest—not hot enough to be seriously injured with burns, but just warm enough to feel the heat and moisture streaming into our bodies. Amanda warned me not to go near the dredge. Rudi mentioned that he'd nearly burned his foot stepping too near a pocket of hot spring water bubbling up from beneath the soil last time he was here. The moon had risen over the eastern mountains, now reflecting down the center of the channel and turning our bodies to a teal color in the late-evening light. Amanda reminded me of a mermaid or river goddess, with dark hair falling out of her loose bun and her skin now a faded blue. We joked about making mud masks out of the spring's dirt floor, and soon we were slabbing on thick globs onto our cheeks and thumbing some across our foreheads. Almost immediately we both realized how horrible the mud smelled, like something musty or rotten, and began washing away the wet grains

from our faces.

For the longest time I had believed that the best moments out in nature were those I spent alone. But I was beginning to see, that day visiting my first two hot springs, how pleasurable it can be to have friends with you. Though I still felt that I couldn't visit just any place with just anyone, letting those close to you show you new experiences and sharing moments like these with those you care about can remind you of how good it feels to share.

The three of us watched the steam drift like ghostly puffs straight into our faces while a train rolled by, honking as it vanished into the dark desert.

II

The mountains were ultramarine, with soft hints of rose appearing as the hazy, silver clouds played with the afternoon light. Vaughn and I were driving around the southern tip of Pyramid Lake on our way to the Black Rock Desert in our rental truck. The air was so still that the lake's water lay flat and glossy, as if it were made of brushed metal. Our playlist blared Dashboard Confessional's "Stolen" through the speakers, and soon I was thinking of more than just the two of us—desert mountains and dry lakes bordering our two-lane road, Vaughn's hand on my own.

We watch the season pull up its own stakes

And catch the last weekend of the last week

Before the gold and the glimmer have been replaced

Another sun soaked season fades away

You have stolen my heart

You have stolen my heart

I moved my glance from Vaughn to the rolling hills outside my passenger window and realized how much love can grow in a short amount of time. I thought of all the years I had gone through before meeting Vaughn and before moving to Nevada, of the chance I took in coming here and leaving him in Florida, of the strength we gained together and the respect I learned to have for a place so vastly different from the only one I had ever really known. Until that moment, I had never fully grasped how places, not just people, can steal your heart if you let them. Often, this can take time and effort, requiring patience and willingness to engage in the process of building connections. I had allowed myself to open up to a new landscape, and now that it had me hooked, I was hoping to get Vaughn to open himself to the desert, even if only for a day.

Mile upon mile disappeared into our rearview mirror. We hardly said a word about anything other than directions, a comfortable silence we have often fallen into while traveling over the last few years. When we approached the entrance to the playa, I stepped out of the truck to test the ground. The overcast weather had darkened the salt flats and I was worried the playa would be too wet to drive on, but soon Vaughn drove out to meet me and we rolled out onto the lakebed. We were now silent, the radio off. He looked at me and smiled, then revved up the engine, speeding out onto the desert floor for the first time. He pressed harder on the gas and lifted his hands up from the steering wheel and laced them behind his head for a moment, laughing. I was seeing myself in him, replaying my first drive on the playa in my head, with the desert bringing out a thrilling freedom from a side of us we didn't know was there.

He swerved, sped up, and swerved again, trying to do donuts. The truck was too heavy to drift like he wanted it to. He let it roll to a stop and turned to me.

“Where do you wanna go?”

“Anywhere. Take me anywhere.” I smiled, placing one hand on his arm and holding the other outside the open window, fingers outstretched. He drove on, and I made waves that moved from my fingers to my elbow, feeling the wind over my arm, then under and over again. I looked out across the flat and hardened sand, watching countless lines of tire tracks turn off from our own path in hundreds of directions. Out on an empty plane, there are thousands, millions of possible courses to take.

“It’s like driving a boat out here. You can just go anywhere,” Vaughn said, mirroring my thoughts as he turned the truck farther north up the heart of the playa. I was once again reminded of how wildly different places can leave us with similar feelings, with similar experiences. Open water, open land—not so different after all. Then he added, “I understand what people mean now when they talk about seeing a mirage, when they think they see water.”

We stared out far ahead of us, watching the thin lake in the distance stay forever on the horizon, never coming closer. I thought of how worried I had been about bringing him out here, afraid he wouldn’t be able to feel how I felt about the desert—a fear I hadn’t been completely aware of until we were here. Although there are experiences each of us have in moments of solitude that could never fully be explained even to those we love, I sometimes forget the bridges natural places can build between people. They allow us to see and touch the same world, sense the same feelings, imagine the same ideas, reach the same conclusions. I remembered how exciting it felt to bring Vaughn out to the

kayak trails in the mangroves of Riviera Bay. How we held hands while strolling along a dirt path in the Appalachian mountains, smiling in silence while our small chihuahua-Boston mix, Bruiser, climbed in and out of bushes, endlessly chasing squirrel after squirrel. Or how we stood barefoot in St. Augustine grass in our black-and-white evening attire after an award ceremony for his career successes, the same night he said *I love you* to me for the first time.

But when I came out to Nevada and Vaughn stayed behind in the only state either of us had ever lived in, I felt a gap spreading between the shared experiences we had in Florida, and the new ones I was creating alone in the desert. I saw the desert as another door that could open up a flood of memories, thoughts, and connections for us to share, as a bridge that could cross this gap and allow him to see a new place of dry land.

Vaughn parked the truck and we stepped out onto the bare lakebed. The clouds ran horizontally in lines across the sky, creating perpendicular crosses with the vertical positions of standing mountains. We took two different directions, Vaughn walking south while I strolled north. I sat down and put my hand back on the hard ground as I had weeks before, then rubbed my fingertips along the top, feeling the thin grains of the alkali salts. I thought of the beaches we had walked along back on the Gulf Coast of Florida, how thick the sand was there, and how both playas softened with the touch of water. It's strange how new places can bring you back in time to old ones, transporting you to memories of getting to know someone, memories of falling in love. I remembered moments a few years ago when I felt the need to keep the conversation going and to ask questions, hardly leaving a moment of silence between us. And yet here we were, almost three years later, quietly exploring the desert together.

He followed my path and bent down beside me. I told him to feel how hard the earth was, to knock on the ground, to kick it with his feet. As he tested it, I added, “And just imagine: it all turns to mush and the cracks disappear when it rains.”

With both hands he tried digging his fingers in the cracked sides of a polygon, attempting to bring the whole tile up from underneath. The muscles in his arms, twice as thick as my own, strained as his fingers failed to grip enough of the dried earth to lift it up. Small flakes broke off on the corners, but the tile didn't budge.

Since we had already stopped, we decided to eat lunch in the bed of the truck. We rolled out my sleeping bag, covered it in a black and green wool blanket I brought, and sat down, backs to the rear window, feasting on meat and cheese sandwiches. Although the wind had been whooshing by moments before, the body of the truck kept it at bay, making the scene even quieter. Soon we began to see little winged insects. Some looked like flies, but another looked like a yellow jacket, forcing me up and out of my seat more than once. Where were they coming from? Could they smell our food from miles away? Maybe the warming weather was welcoming them back to a home I would never picture they might have.

Vaughn and I finished eating and decided it was time to head to the hot springs. When we arrived at Frog Pond, there were others already there. Though no one was bathing, a man was in the process of filling a large white plastic tank on the rear of his truck with the water from the spring. A grey ribbed and flimsy tube ran from the bottom of the tank to the floor of the pool, making a loud mechanical hum as it sucked the water in. I walked over, hoping the man would greet me and explain what he was doing—or at the very least, how soon he'd be leaving. But he hardly smiled in his one quick glance at

me and didn't say a word. I watched for a few minutes, seeing the depth of the pool fall one inch at a time, until the top of the pole where the spring water pools up from stood dry, now a few inches above the surface.

He shouldn't be doing this, I kept thinking. This isn't his to take.

Vaughn approached me from behind, lightly rubbing my back. "We should just go on to the next one. Where did you say it was?"

I shook my head. "I like it here. I don't think he'll be long."

"But there are still a couple campers on the other side of the trees. We can just swim at the next spring." I looked around, spotting a couple of small RVs to the south end of Frog Pond. A moment later three young men sped by on dirt bikes, heading out toward the playa. I led Vaughn down the stream to the second pond and pointed out the frogs to him. I wanted him to feel as driven to stay in this place as I was. I tried to hide my disappointment in leaving Frog Pond, but failed. My face told all. "I know you're bummed," he added, bending down to test the temp of the water. "It's not that warm anyway. Let's just go."

I was more than bummed; I was angry and frustrated. I had pictured us repeating the experience I had on my first natural hot springs trip. I had hoped to re-create the scene I saw the week before, with the two of us together, as Amanda and Rudi had been. I wanted him to feel the lips of mosquitofish on his skin and hear the frog music after dark.

I was also worried. As we rode back down the dirt road to the next hot spring, I remembered the type of crowd that had been there last time. If there were people at Frog Pond, there were likely people at Trego. I directed Vaughn down a couple turns, and when we came to the clearing I was happily surprised. Empty.

We were still a couple hours away from seeing the sunset on the playa, but both of us were eager to get in. We piled up our clothes and towels near the ledge of the spring and slid into the steaming water, letting out deep sighs. For a few minutes we moved around separately, feeling out the thick sediment under our feet and stretching our arms across the surface. I passed Amanda's advice on to Vaughn, warning him not to go too far up the ditch.

"It gets hotter closer to the spring's source," I said. "People have burned themselves in some places where the water comes up through the ground."

"You'd think they'd put warning signs or fences up."

"We're out in the desert. Most people don't even know these places exist," I explained.

"Still," he debated, "if the water's too hot, someone should put up a sign."

"I guess so. There are some others I've heard about where they've blocked the entire springs off. In one, a dog jumped in and his owner jumped in trying to save him. Both the dog and the woman died."

"Exactly why they need to let people know," he said, shaking his head and swatting a mosquito away.

I considered this with mixed feelings. He had a point, but what if posting signs and spreading awareness meant both more safety and more people? Wouldn't that bring bigger crowds to these secluded places? How might it look if all wild places were filled with signs that listed possible dangers, if each one warned *enter at your own risk*?

The wilderness, especially in desert areas with hot springs, is filled with many possibilities, uses, or outcomes. For thousands of years, people have used these natural

pools of mineral-filled water for medicinal or therapeutic purposes, and have often been seen as a method for healing. People also now visit the springs both in times of celebration with friends and in times of relaxation alone or in pairs. But there are many springs that are too hot to even step into, ones that burn people alive. Risk is intrinsically tied to experiences in the wild; it is part of what challenges or teaches us about living on earth. The sensations, inspirations, and ideas that stem from experiences in the desert appear to be as vast as the landscape itself—connections I make with this arid environment forever merging, splitting, crossing one another just like the tracks of tires on the hardened alkali floor. Benefits and consequences blur together like a mirage in the desert.

Not long after being in the spring, I decided to take off my bathing suit, piling it up on the wooden ledge. I smiled at Vaughn, wanting to suggest he do the same, but he seemed more comfortable keeping his on. We noticed how hot the surface water was compared to the water surrounding our legs and feet. We held our arms out half-in, half-out and felt the heat drift around the skin underneath while the top rested in the steam being exhaled from the spring. Vaughn gently came up behind me, wrapping his arms around me. Soon I was sitting in his lap with my back against his chest, his broad shoulders blocking the wind from blowing on my neck. We sat there together, staring out across the playa as the sun began to play with the colors of clouds just beyond the Santa Rosa Range. This was what I had wanted: to share my love for this place with the person I loved most, looking out in the same direction from a pool of water in the desert.

But Trego was quickly becoming madly consumed with mosquitos as the sunlight faded farther into the distance. We tried swatting them away and smacking each other's

shoulders or backs when they appeared. We even tried sinking deeper into the hot water, but found they came after our necks and faces. They seemed to be getting worse each minute. I kept thinking: *We should have stayed at Frog Pond*. The mosquitofish probably help combat the bugs over there. I felt like we were being brought back to one of the peskiest problems in Florida's swamps, and I wanted out...fast.

We jumped out of the pool, rushing to grab our clothes while wrapping the towels around our wet bodies in hopes of protecting our skin from the insects. I was first back inside the truck, my body shaking slightly as I tried to dry myself and get dressed. Vaughn hastily changed from his suit into fresh clothes outside his door. I bit my lips anxiously and prayed none would sneak their way in as he hopped back inside. When the windows were rolled up and the doors closed, I chuckled and shook my head. The thought of mosquitos living in such an arid climate seemed ironic to me; so did pools of natural spring water. *Life will always find a way*, I concluded, *even in the desert*.

I also wondered if being there after dark would have made a difference, since we didn't have any issues with them on my first visit with Amanda and Rudi. I had been trying so hard to re-create the same experience and pass it on to Vaughn. I wanted him to watch the moon rise over Old Razorback Mountain, to see the steam turn to a silver haze in the late evening light under stars he had never seen before, to feel the remarkable disparity of the cool dry air and the warm wet spring. I kept thinking of all the things we could have done differently to achieve this vision, stirring them together in my mind as Vaughn lifted up the middle console between us, turning the front seat into a bench. I slid to the middle, leaning my head on his shoulder as he drove the truck through the sagebrush and back onto the playa, heading west.

The setting sun had placed the entire playa in shadow of the mountains and had begun to create a colorful spectrum of light and dark across the open sky. We stopped once more in the middle of the dry lakebed and stepped out. I bent low to the ground, trying to capture a few images with my camera that showed both the round edges of bright clouds and the jagged lines of darkened desert. Vaughn bent down beside me, trying to see what I saw. The day hadn't been perfect, but I started to feel that this wasn't what mattered most. I had to accept that I couldn't replay all of my past experiences for Vaughn, washing them over him until he knew all I had seen, felt, or discovered. It was his willingness to follow me on a desert adventure and his attempt to understand my love for this place that I appreciated. This was what was important: to strive for sharing experiences, whether or not they turn out the way we hoped they would.

Everyone comes to a place with a unique outlook; no two people will feel exactly alike having explored the same landscape. But it is in these shared moments, these acts of going to these places together that has brought us closer to one another. Sometimes it's not about having the same perspective, but instead simply looking in the same direction. As the dust trail fell back to the floor behind us and the colors in front of us began to disappear, we were happy just to have been there together—two foreigners in an alien landscape.