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The Lowest Point

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The Lowest Point

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The Lowest Point

ARCHER CASTLE

My heart slammed against my chest desperately, producing a deep, throbbing ache. My muscles burned with horrible heat, pushed to their limits by a walk not meant for the human body. My hands were crusted over with brown-white salts and throbbing with the feeble blood coursing through them. My feet, entombed in crunching, waterlogged sneakers, burned with water that gave no nourishment and warmth that punished. It was over one hundred and twenty degrees.

In times long past, a lake occupied this sweltering hellscape, but it died thousands of years before the first human was born. As the water that was once there was whisked away on blasted wind, evaporating almost entirely in the face of its surroundings, it left only the barest hints of puddles and its salt behind, coating the basin in sterile white where the lake once was.

After that, the basin was vacant for many years: locked in salty sleep. It woke only with the arrival of the Timbisha Shoshone, an indigenous group that lived nearby for countless centuries. They were entranced by the salt flats' alien surface, coated in crumbling hexagons, and with water that bitterly laughed at the idea of giving life. Only God could be found there, in that silence.

Before arriving at these flats proper, Mom and I had driven to the lookout point above the basin and surveyed the valley in its entirety to get a sense of the scale of the whole thing. We were tourists, after all. Why not take in the view? Beyond the salt flats were wide, sparse fields of brown sand, and eventually the rising of mountains, stretching past the mind's capacity to process distance, forever and ever until only the imagination was left to measure the miles. Instead of going to the designated observation balcony with provided ramps, Mom and I went the other way, clambering up a hill of loose rocks, dust, and stinging nettles.

I scrabbled to the top, my fifteen-year-old legs pushing ahead, almost running away from my mother behind me who pushed labored breaths into the crisp, lonely air. Alone at the top for a brief second, I looked down at The Lowest Point in North America, watching the cars pass

on this road, and felt so impossibly small, as though I didn't exist at all. It was a religious sense of awe, brought about through the total absence in this small piece of the world.

Silence fell over me for the moment afterwards, filled by the miles and miles of barren vista, until my mother made it to the top as well. "This is why we go off-road, eh? Get to the real good stuff."

"I think this is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen." The words came almost unbidden to my lips, found their way into the world and wrapped themselves around my heart, still pulsing in reverie. At fifteen years old, I had seen many things, but this was beyond. We both took pictures for a while, enjoying the scene in our own selfish ways. An appropriate time after, when we were done with our stop, she looked over beneath sunglasses, baseball cap, hoodie-as-sunshield, and we began our trek down. I followed her, carefully lowering ourselves down the way that we came.

Back in the car, I put my feet up on the dash, held by the seat's cushion and a comforting breeze on the back of my legs that told me that I was safe. We filled the cool air of the rented sedan with wisping conversation of no consequence, the '115°' on the dashboard display reduced to an abstract number. We were passing time, volleying meaningless words as we watched the miles to our destination tick down, down, down. And then we were there. The Lowest Point in North America. Badwater Basin.

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The National Park Service designates the hike that we went on as "easy to difficult depending on length... Do not attempt when it's hot!" When to attempt it then? In the dark, it still only gets as cool as 85 to 95 degrees when we were visiting. No, better to go at the peak of the heat, to brave the crucible, then to not go at all. And so, we left our silver sanctuary and stepped off of the pavement to experience the basin.

We were not alone there, to my surprise. I remember it being almost crowded. People of all sorts were around us, returning from their hike to nowhere or overtaking us to get to the center of it all. I kept looking at their faces for some sort of indication of what it was like out there, at the end of their journey. There was no indication I could glean. It was something that we would have to find out for ourselves, out on the salt flats.

Suddenly, after a half a mile of mostly quiet hiking, the other tourists seemed to vanish around us. In the distance, we could see moving dots impossibly far away—people in it for the long haul. Casting my gaze out into the wilderness, I felt a brief stab of envy for those hikers, voyagers borne by tireless legs across foreign seas of white salt and near-acidic puddles of stagnant water. I wondered what it would be like, alone out there.

What it would be like, to be surrounded by nothing and nowhere.

But our near-silent journey was over. We took photos yet again, fitting the world into hand-sized boxes, and I tasted the salt that thickly coated the ground. Though it felt like table salt, crumbling in my mouth, I knew it was something earthier, wilder. It was not safe to eat, and I was warned, but I could not resist. How could you go to a land where no life could be pulled from the ground and not suffer a little? Mom spoke up then, turning back to the parking lot that promised blessed respite, and sighed slightly.

"I think we oughta head back. The heat's getting to me." It was getting to me too, though I hadn't said it out loud for fear of breaking the spell that hung over the Lowest Point in America. There was no release from its tyrannical grip, its assault on the eyes, the skin, the head, the heart, the spine. It was campfire heat, that flash of intensity that scares the intrepid away from backyard bonfires, but it was never ending. The world had warned us to pull away as we descended into the basin fifty miles distant, but we had not listened. Now, as we walked back to our car and its conditioned air, a peculiar feeling began to take hold.

The distance to the car seemed to telescope. Our limbs were heavy. I've told you of this feeling before, in the heart and hand, in the feet and muscles. As we trudged back to that lot, a mere 2,500 feet between us and salvation, I was uncertain. Despite the small distance, despite the other travelers going forward and back with us that could carry our unconscious bodies, I was not sure I would make it back to that parking lot. There was an urge that began to build in me, a calmness, a numbness. Soothing weight, a desire to sit, to lay down, to rest. I knew that I could not. Something rang in my heaving, hollowed-out chest then, from a place that I had not known existed before the hike. A deep, animal truth: to sit down in that place was to die.

It was like nothing I had ever felt, and nothing I *have* ever felt, this truth. It shocked through my limbs and into my thought-starved brain. It filled me, swelling from a place behind my heart into my entire being. The feeling was foreign, but I retroactively knew it was there all along, hidden behind layers of excess fat and comfort. Apotheosis. Revelation.

While before, there was intermittent chatter between me and my mother, now it was silent. Our bodies manned the walls of a bloody siege against the heat, a valiant, but lost cause. Despite losses, we were winning. The parking lot grew and grew. The road went from a thin horizon line to a feat of engineering and perseverance. The hikers were distant at our backs now, less real, somehow. Finally, to both of our silent relief, the car.

Silver flashing in the punishing heat, civilization-in-a-box. Frantically, we clambered in, and before we drove away, admitting to each other our fears of death, we made whooping sounds of relief, relinquishing our primal joy and releasing it back to the land which had been its genesis.

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We drove away in heat even more extreme. The temperature on the dash climbed to 125, 130 degrees. It was almost beyond fathoming. Would our sneakers melt to the rock? Would our clothes catch flame, there in the sun? We knew that our skin would redden, blister, and peel, but how quickly? What could we risk? We decided not to check, and continued to drive, leaving the world of Badwater Basin far behind us. We were becoming ourselves again, feeling the air conditioning flow over our bodies, stopping for lunch and staving off our thirst with hearty salads and imported water.

We were talking and laughing, following the satellite triangulation of our phones to our next destination (the Manzanar National Historic Site) when my mother slammed suddenly on the brakes. As we skidded to a stop, I looked up to see what exactly was the matter. Our surroundings had changed since we had left the Basin, if not the heat; waist-high shrubs dotted the landscape, dark brown boulders interrupted the sandy ground, and unlucky insects yet again shattered themselves against our bumper. While mountains still ringed us, signaling that we had not yet left Death Valley, not yet, it was a kinder world that we had journeyed to. In this world, we had stopped in the middle of the road to witness a low shape lope across the road.

It was a coyote, of that we were sure. Small, but a coyote nonetheless. Padding across the road, it was almost comically thin, ribs showing beneath a windblown coat, twig-thin neck holding a head that seemed to weigh down the rest of its body. For a moment, it looked almost unaware of our presence, our two-ton intrusion. Suddenly, it stopped, and tilted its bobblehead up at us.

I took my feet off of the dash, and leaned in. It looked at our car with what seemed to be fierce disdain, eyes judgemental. Deep brown, with small dark pools in the center that dropped into infinity. In retrospect, it was probably looking at our car's headlights or the grill, but at the time, it felt like the coyote was looking at me.

It turned away from us after its brief pause, and lowered its head from our gaze. Moving towards the brush away from where it came, it moved off of the road, faster now, bounding into the wild landscape. With seemingly impossible vigor in its limbs, it ran into the brush, kicking up small piles of sand behind it. And it was gone.

In that moment, I felt almost as if I understood it. I saw its trail stretching back into the burning desert valley, and where it would go afterwards beyond all human sight. I saw it struggle to find food in this world of nothing-at-all, coughing up dust, searching desperately for shade, for water, for anything other than relentless heat. I saw it moving, never lying down, as it shambled onwards in search of something to devour. I felt its heart seize, like mine had on that basin, feel that urge to slip into quiet acceptance, and shake off its feeble mortality, shrugging off its bones, its muscle, its needs. I felt it disappear into the air itself, a heat shimmer untouchable and untouched, a dot disappearing beyond a forbidden horizon. I had come close to that coyote, separated by a hundred or more miles, dying there in the desert at the Lowest Point in America. For a brief moment.

And then the car started again. We were driving, and I was jolted back to myself.

“Wasn’t that cool, huh! You definitely don’t see stuff like that back home.” My mother was accelerating us back to our journey, twenty, thirty, fifty miles now, screaming along gray asphalt to leave Death Valley behind forever. I nodded my agreement, issued a breathless affirmative. I put my legs back up on the dashboard, and closed my eyes.

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Now it is a comfortable 75° outside, and I am walking through the breeze and the sky, slightly overcast. Clouds promise rain, and keep their promise later, but not now. Now, they hang, smothering and pendulous, providing cover from the bleak, autumn sun. Grass grows in abundance, deciduous trees sail upwards in a riot of colors, and all around me, life sings with abandon.

Suddenly, I am flung away from myself to somewhere beyond a flat horizon. I am far away from my body, tasting something awful without a tongue and feeling tingling pain without limbs. Then, just as suddenly as I was taken, I am again in my body not even having broken stride. When I return, for a few sepia-tinted seconds, in that place past my ribs beneath hurt and comfort, I run next to that poor animal, starving away in that unforgiving landscape, perpetually moments from death. I am blanketed by the comforting weight of the inferno without and the numbness within, surrounded forever by nothing but faraway mountains and the pitiless blue sky. In that moment, I can hear it far below: the ecstasy of terrible, final truth.