

Joshua Tree

At last on the open roads leading to Joshua Tree National Park, refreshing after LA freeways, I started to take pictures of wind turbines against the fog of deep blue-gray mountains. A pickup truck full of oranges, flattened boxes sticking up on each side to hold the fruit in. A water tower that read, "Desert Hot Springs" in red letters, and reminded me of the *Cars* ride in Disneyland we rode the other day. Junky campers on the road in front of us. And funky trees that seemed part cactus and part palm tree, and signaled our arrival in the Mojave Desert, where the park is, far away from our home in Western Pennsylvania.

"Can someone help me find the house?" Dad broke the silence. I kept my camera up and framed every scene, specifically the one announcing our arrival in Joshua Tree: POP 8,272 ELEV 2,750. A 25-foot Joshua tree, the funky cactus and palm combination, sat properly behind the welcome sign; its branches extending upward like arms, excited to see us. The house was in the town of Twentynine Palms, so we were close but not there yet.

"Don't you have the address in the GPS?" Mom said.

"Well, yeah, but I don't know where I'm going." My dad doesn't have a good sense of direction, and expects all attention to be on him when driving.

He had been more excited than usual about our family going to Joshua Tree National Park, staying in a house in Twentynine Palms, and spending two days discovering the desert. The last week we had followed my younger brother around Southern California to support his marching in the Tournament of Roses Parade. We picked up the rental car after the parade festivities concluded, spent a day in Disneyland, one in Universal, and retreated to the desert.

My dad was finally in control of the vehicle instead of being a passenger on a coach bus, which he was happy about, but I don't remember having to help the bus driver with directions.

The moldings of the land, the mountains and valleys, strangely reminded me of driving through Pennsylvania, on the way back home from Boston. The last five hours of that trip showcase the rolling hills, and the valleys where people have settled. Vaguely similar, with just a coloring change. Either the early January chill or desert-ness left this place tan and dusty, the hills spotted with barely green shrubs. The rolling hills of Pennsylvania take on the same brown color scheme at this time of year, but instead of the dusty tan, a darker brown from the bare maple trees and rich green from the pines. Here the mountains were edgier, more indents and creases, the way bed sheets look after a good night's sleep. Here the sky was bluer.

Dad turned at a red light onto a promising road, in the general direction of inhabited space. Then, I remembered how "Incredible Views" was in the name of the house, with photos of the view in the profile. I suddenly felt less confident with this new direction, since I saw no houses on the hills.

"Yeah I don't think this is right," I said as we turned onto an unpaved road, hinting that we should turn around, but not adding to his frenzy.

"Just keep going, maybe it's up there." My older brother pointed to the general direction of forward, not really knowing what he was talking about, but still insistent. He has the habit of typing in the address of the destination but not pressing go, then relying on his own ability to decide on a route. That may have worked in the densely inhabited Northeast, but here I sensed a real possibility of us getting lost and having to sleep in the car stuck in the sand.

A few houses lined the first unpaved road. They sat far apart, hidden behind faded fences, brush and short trees, the mailboxes, the only signs of life. I imagined the locals of the street sitting by their windows laughing at lost drivers. A second unpaved road, rougher than the first, was definitely not right. Dad hunched over the steering wheel like he was driving in snow. He had stopped listening to us and focused on his bad instincts. It took two blocks of wood stuck in the sand, signaling a trail, to convince him to turn around, and that this was, at best, traveled down with an off road vehicle.

Somehow we ended up finding the house in Twentynine Palms. It sat at the end of a road, just one off of the main one. A long palm lined driveway led up the hill. I think they tried to fit all 29 palms along the driveway. The trees were an odd piece of vibrant green against a rather rocky and drab backdrop. The house sat in the side of the hill; its stone exterior blending into the mounds of rocks and faded greens. The American flag in the front of the house looked stuck in the Martian surface. The interior of the house clashed; it felt more luxurious with pink tile, a tall black mirrored fireplace, a much too extravagant chandelier, and uncomfortable chairs. Other houses my mom and I had looked at were earthier with small rooms, interesting textiles. Here, the wood paneled ceiling sloped down past the wall of windows and out onto the patio overlooking the desert. It made me uneasy, like there was nothing to protect from the unknown of the desert, but the opposite wall, all mirrors, made me even more uneasy. It was a choice between facing the desert elements and facing myself and produced a cold and inescapable openness. The house fell into the shade of the hill as the sun began to set and the shadows came before I got a chance to get to know my surroundings.

The next day, we followed Dad's plan for what to do in the park, letting him to redeem himself after getting lost the day before. We had given him a travel book about Joshua Tree for Christmas, a few days before our trip, to hint that he should plan our activities. He mulled over its pages for days, in the free time at the airport and sitting on the hotel bed in Long Beach. He determined the must-see sites for the day, found local spots for dinners, including Crossroads Cafe and Pappy and Harriet's, and where we should chase the sunset. He filled us in on Joshua trees, their centrality to this ecosystem, their biblical name, and the way they define the park.

We stopped at places in the park where boulders stacked up high and the paths in between led to a pool of water at Barker Dam. My brothers climbed to the top of boulders, challenging each other to climb higher. I caught their outlines against the sky and, then, them jumping down from the rocks with my camera. Their hoods up in the sun of the desert. My older brother with a GoPro strapped to his chest. When they didn't respond to our calls and disappeared past boulders and into shrubbery, I worried the desert might have consumed them. I caught my mom walking in front of me and my dad looking out with his hand on his hip, and travel guide in his hand. Photos I took reveal a rich dark blue at the top of the image, and a perfect gradient down until it meets the tan sand of the earth.

In the dust of the desert, things didn't reflect. No water to reflect the observer or store windows to catch a glimpse of myself in. Here the dust blurred vision and the camera I hid behind put me into the place of strictly the observer and not the observed. It gave me an excuse not to be the subject of any photos, and would allow me to look back on the trip through what I saw, how I felt seeing, rather than how I looked and felt in my body. I took pictures to put a purpose to my wandering, the wandering and exploring I knew we would do on this trip,

something that had heightened my nerves on similar trips. I held the camera to ease the pain of feeling lost, not knowing what to do while my brothers hopped between boulders, out of vocal range. The camera steadied me in the moments, focused on the gradients of the blue in the sky and the range of grounded neutrals, on the silhouettes of my family, and their exploration of the landscape. In these moments, moments of seeing and capturing my family, of feeling very present in this place, and of realizing that here I can escape myself, the menace faded. The unknown and shadowy elements outside of the house the day before were now manageable and captivating for all of us.

We drove through the campgrounds in the park and dreamed about buying a brand new Airstream and taking a road trip out West, to camp in the park, next to the boulders and under clear skies and disconnect. We were already imagining coming back to stay longer and immerse ourselves further into the experience of the desert, do something more intense than just stay in a house with a glass wall. Maybe we'd visit the two other national parks in the Mojave Desert. I'm not sure how realistic we were, but in the moments driving down a Joshua tree lined road in the national park, and embracing the darkness to fit in one last trail around a particularly large isolated boulder, it felt necessary to return.

I still have one picture on the lock screen of my phone and desktop of my laptop, almost a year after the trip. It's something I look at daily, this moment of the sun setting in Joshua Tree. The time and date on my phone sit up in the blue of the sky after the fade of yellow, purple and blue back to the horizon and the green spotted mountains. A winding road with one car driving away runs down the middle, and breaks up the shrubs and Joshua trees spotted across the ground. The trees have arms that lift upward, outstretched and confident.

It is a sight from Keys View, the spot my dad found in his travel book to watch the sunset. It isn't an image of the sun moving down into the distance, just beyond Coachella Valley. It's in the other direction when you start walking back to your car after you have seen enough. It's a view of the effect of sun's evening movement on the rest of the sky, the gradient of purples and blues right above the edges of the distant mountains.

At Keys View, the light of the sun glowed in the haze, and made a perfect backdrop to silhouettes, mostly of the backs of heads, but sometimes a profile if I was lucky enough for them not to notice. The silhouettes of the Joshua trees showed off their spikes and branches against the yellowing streaks of clouds. Bunches of prickly evergreen leaves are condensed to the end of each branch, revealing why they are famously Suessical. It seems like they should be colored purple in a children's book, the bunches of leaves as fluffy purple tufts at the ends of a handful of crooked branches connected to a purple and white striped trunk.

The view created a refreshing solitude, a return to the natural after the man made, the guided tours of Hollywood, big clumsy tour buses passing by the streets of Beverly Hills. It felt so disconnected from the rest of the world, that nothing else mattered, finally nothing else mattered.

I never thought I could love traveling anywhere except a place by the ocean. I used to think that the only places that could be entirely captivating were on the east coast and where the sun rose over the water. But, here, there is interest in texture, something breathtaking of being grounded in a landscape and seeing the sun over the mountains and overlooking the valleys. The valleys aren't settled into; they're open. The minimalism of the land shows off its wrinkles. There has always been something unsettling to me about flat areas, like trying to go to sleep

without any covers. The ups and downs of the terrain settle me like a heavy afghan, the ones my grandma made that sit inside the blanket chest at home.

It's hard for me to imagine living in a place that doesn't have the criss-crossed streets named Eighth and Orchard, blocks of closely situated homes, across the street from cemeteries, and next to baseball fields. But this place feels more like my home than anything on the coast looking out onto open water. The mountains and valleys mirror the ones by the cemetery near my home. I can see the barn in the distance sitting on top of a hill, and the pinks of the sky on the opposite side of the sunset.

My mom managed to get one picture of me in Joshua Tree, despite my insistence on not being photographed. I'm standing on a boulder, cold with her scarf wrapped tight around my neck. My camera is hanging in front of my body, blending into the long black coat, tight black pants and black tennis shoes. My brothers and dad climb boulders in the background. In this moment, my eyes are closed, the new bangs shield some of my face and I've already started to fall away. I've started to imagine fading into this landscape, and finding a place in one of the valleys. A place where I could find my own window to sit in and watch others get lost and never leave.