Empty Places:

at the Fringes of the Mojave Desert

Text and Photos by Kyle Cassidy

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This is Part II of Mojave: a Travel Diary in Words and Images. For the complete document, please see www.kylecassidy.com/pix/travel/2008

I long ago stopped giving people post cards when I went somewhere. It seems impersonal and a waste of the experience. So you get this instead. Here is an account of my trip through the Mojave and Colorado deserts in March of 2008 while I was in California for a conference. This PDF is meant to be viewed as a book, with left and right pages, some of the photos bleed from one page to the other. Think of it as a book, but free. It was formatted legal size, meaning if you print it out, (or better yet, take it to a printers and have them make you a nice copy on photo paper) you should be viewing it at 8.5 x 14. If you're looking at it squashed down to 8.5 x 11 you're missing some of the large size goodness.

I should thank Paul Kennedy, my editor at Krause Books for believing in me, and Beth Gissinger, Aaron Katzmarek, and the other people at F+W for sending me to the desert in the first place and giving me the opportunity to photograph it twice. To Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Rich Cardona for making it possible for me to go back, and to Trillian Stars for everything else, including loaning me the use of her estates in Nevada and California while I was working on this.

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Thanks so much,

Kyle Cassidy
Philadelphia — February, 2008

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Empty Places:
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a travel diary in words and images

Coming Down The Mountain

Standing on the southern edge of the Mojave desert you can look down across California and into Mexico. Nowhere is it more evident than here what "high desert" and "low desert" mean. The Mojave looms some 3,500 feet over top of the land below, a subset of the Sonoran called the Colorado Desert, which encompasses the land west of the Colorado River. To get from here to there, you have to go down the mountain.

Palm Springs, the small desert resort town that both Sonny Bono and Bob Hope were at one time mayor of, lies at the feet of the Little San Bernadino mountains, which hover to the north like the enfolding arms of guardian angels. The town itself, buoyed by water from lake Meade via the Colorado River seems to be made of golf courses. In fact, the town's own tourist literature suggests there are in the area of 125 — which is pretty impressive for a town of only 43,000 people. That's, according to my high school math, one golf course for every 350 residents.

The Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians have lived in Palm Springs for the past four hundred years or so — while there were never very many of them, there are now only about 350 left. In the 1800's the Federal Government parceled out the land in a checkerboard fashion,

giving every other square to the Southern Pacific Railroad in an effort to get them to build a transcontinental line. The strange saga of this was borne out in my junior year American Pastoralism class, were I read with interest (and some amusement at the outlandish accents) Frank Norris' *The Octopus* — the first in his "Trilogy of Wheat." The truth is not far, it seems, from the fiction. Water and land usage rights are still at the forefront of local conversation. As lake Mead and the Colorado river start to dry up, people are already fighting over their future. Las Vegas, which gets about a tenth of the water allocated to California farmers from the river, has an expanding population. As recently as 1934 guns were drawn over water when the Governor of Arizona dispatched the National Guard to the banks of the Colorado to stop the building of a dam by the city of Los Angeles.

All the golf courses here seem a conspicuous display of living in the moment.

The Cahuilla control a lot of the local land still in a morass of legal rulings and paperwork which must keep lawyers in the thick of things. Much of this land is leased out to people who build houses on it. A typical lease is $2,000 - $4,000 a year.

From Palm Springs it's about an hour's drive to one of the strangest places around — the Salton Sea.

I'm sitting under the shade of a palm tree, drinking a peach flavored diet iced tea. The temperature in the Colorado Desert is typically about ten degrees hotter at any given time than it is in the Mojave. The slim shadow of the tree has caught up several other people like crabs clinging to a piece of sargassum in the vast open ocean.

Alfredo, a somber looking fellow about my age, perks up when I mention that I'm headed to the Salton Sea.

"I used to go there when I was a kid," he says enthusiastically. "That place used to be so beautiful. We'd go there to go fishing. It's not so beautiful anymore, but when I was a kid, it was a wonderful place."

Alfredo also mentions that when he was a kid, he lived in Mexico and, having no papers, couldn't just hop on a bus and go.

"We'd walk," he says, "my family and I."

"From Mexico?!" I exclaim.

"It takes about five days."

"Five days?" I repeat like a stunned parrot. I can't imagine walking five days through fields of poppies and baby bunnies so that Bob Barker

could present me with the Hope diamond, let alone five days through the desert just to go fishing, "Where do you get water? Where do you *sleep?*"

"You bring your own water, you sleep on the ground. My uncle, he was about seventy years old, he'd only take a bottle of tequila and stuff his pockets with jerky. He'd always outwalk all of the rest of us. You could never keep up with him. The fishing was great though."

The Salton has been a sea and a basin half a dozen times in recent geologic history but this is beyond the scope of human memory. For all any Americans know, it had only been a basin until 1905 when an irrigation ditch along the Colorado River broke and sent water pouring into it. It took the Army Corps of Engineers a year and a half to plug the hole, but by the time they had, a lake had formed, twenty miles long and five miles across.

Well, things attract things and in the desert, water attracts nearly everything. People came to the Salton Sea in droves. In the 1950's hopes flew high that it would become a resort — fish released into it flourished, bringing people and boats, hotels sprung up, celebrities flocked to "Palm Springs by the Sea", a marina was built, and luxury hotels — but in the late 1960's catastrophe struck slowly. For years irrigation runoff had been sweeping salt from the flats into the lake, water levels rose, and one by one the posh hotels sank beneath the water while the

salinity rose to levels 20% higher than that of the Pacific Ocean. Algae blooms started appearing, fish and birds began dying in vast quantities.

"The Salton Sea is the only engineering disaster you can see *from space,"* someone else under the tree offers (you may imagine us like tourists caught in a rain storm huddled under the only awning for a quarter of a mile. By this time we had taken up a sort of festive camaraderie). And indeed you can. It's easily visible on satellite photos in the southwest corner of America. (You can also see Lake Meade, the reservoir caused by the Hoover Dam, but nobody labels that a disaster unless you're from Saint Thomas, Nevada and the building of the dam put your house under 500 feet of water.) Though to call it an engineering disaster is somewhat disingenuous — left to its own devices, without people to muck things up, the Salton Basin would certainly have been the Salton Sea again at some point, and then probably the Salton Basin again, and round about like that. Which leads me to wonder:

If a disaster happens in the forest before there are humans on Earth, is it still a disaster?

Is "disaster" something entirely human? Sure, there are natural disasters, but I guess what I'm wondering is ... *does nature write her own laws?* And more importantly, *is nature fallible?* So the Colorado River pours into the Salton Basin, so the sun evaporates it a hundred years later — fish die, birds die, wolves eat baby rabbits ... it it wrong? Is it bad? Is it a disaster? Or is it just the way things are?


MOTEL
DERBY
BLUES
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Or perhaps, more succinctly: *Is disaster a selfish concept?*

I often wonder — the extent of our anthropomorphization, the things we expect — the things that we alone understand, good vs. bad, right vs. wrong — these are the very things that make us human. Do dogs know right from wrong? Or do they just know what will get them yelled at?

The ocean certainly doesn't know where it should or shouldn't go, only where it must go.

The north shore of the Salton Sea is in a town called *Mecca,* I don't know if that was wishful thinking in the 40's or if the town had been around long before then. The north shore is where the resort appeared and faded. Along the east cost of the river is the Salton Recreational Area — mostly places to park RV's — in fact, it's like an RV city along there. People come, and park, and ... I don't know what after that.

North beach isn't as deserted as I'd expected. There are a bunch of people hanging out in front of the liquor store and along the shore a group of kids are throwing rocks into the water. You'd think with this many people the abandoned properties would have been pretty much torn apart, but they're not. Maybe people here have better things to do than

to rip toilets out of long dead motels and smash them in the street. Their largely untouched nature is eerie, it's as if they'd died at an accelerated rate — withered overnight.

About twenty miles down the shore is a place called Bombay Beach, at a sweltering 225 feet blow sea level, which has attracted some attention over the past few years as having some beautifully unspoilt decay — if there is such a thing. Campers and vehicles left along the shore years ago have been slowly, and gorgeously, dismantled by nature — seemingly ignored by vandals. The town of Bombay Beach itself is about seven blocks square, mostly trailer homes, about half of them vacant, but enough to support at least two bars and a general store. Census figures put the population at about 350.

People creep through the town in slow moving cars, looking out their windows at me. I'm not sure if they're tourists or wary locals. The town has attracted a steady stream of photographers and I've half joked for a while now that I don't want to be the last photographer on earth to take a photograph of the blue chair.

In *Travels With Samantha* Philip Greenspun reveals that nearly every photograph you've ever seen of a brown bear catching a fish was taken at exactly the same place — the falls at Katmai National Park. All the nature photographers stay at the same hotel, in the morning they all walk over to the same man-made platform and line up next to one another photo-

graphing the same bears. The bears aren't tame, but they're famous and any nature photographer who's photographed brown bears can spot the falls at Katmai a mile away.

Bombay beach is something like that. Photographers trickle through all day — photographing the same things over and over. It's almost a theme park of decay. It can't be long before someone figures out you could charge admission....

Crossing the berm out onto the beach is going somewhere far away, even from somewhere as far away as I already am. The sea is silent, there are no waves. The smell of dead fish hangs in the air like a school bus. They are washed up along the shore in various stages of dessication. At one point thousands of their bones crunch beneath my feet like a carpet of broken light bulbs.

The cars and houses that used to exist here now remain solely as skeletons. The sea breathes in, it breathes out, people come, the sea swallows, then recedes, then returns.

On the way out of town I stop at the Bombay Market for some water. A guy with about nine thousand dollars worth of Hasselblad equipment pauses on his way to take the same photos I just did.

"Enjoy it while you can," he says, "they're trying to gentrify this place."

Looking around I can't imagine what he could possible mean. Are they planning to pave the roads? Or start weekly trash pickup?

The Salton Sea has a lot of beach front, but it's an hour from anywhere and then the water smells like dead fish (though a park ranger at the RV camp tells me that it's safe to swim in.) To actually gentrify this place would likely involve a billion dollar cleanup to lower the water's salinity and stop the algae blooms. One of the biggest proponents of cleaning it up was former congressman and Palm Springs Mayor, Sonny Bono. Without his high profile support, the fate of the Salton Sea seems uncertain. Though Palm Springs managed to get gentrified, and it's in the middle of the desert too....

I get dreadfully emotional about the oddest things — and this time, predictably, it's about the fact that I'll probably never again come back to this spot. After buying my water, I tell the man behind the counter to "have a fantastic day" — he replies cheerfully "Oh, I'm planning on it!!" in a way that makes me want to stay, spend a week here, a month, meet the people, find out what on Earth they're doing in this crazy spot. I want it to seem reasonable, I want to understand it. But I can't.

Joshua Tree

The sun comes up in Palm Springs, making the mountains glow red in a ring around me. I meet Juan half way across an immaculately coiffed aroya. He's headed to his taxi about to start the day, I'm loading up on water and Trail Mix at the convenience store. We fall into an easy conversation but he becomes immediately concerned when he hears that I have plans to walk across some vast expanse of Joshua Tree.

"Do you have boots?" He asks.

"I actually do!" I exclaim gleefully, pulling up a pant leg to show that I am wearing a pair of 8 eyelet Doctor Martens in an effort to stay hip in my old age.

"Good," he says, "you'll need them."

"Why?"

"Snakes."

"Snakes?"

"Everywhere. My three year old grandson picked up a one foot rattle-

snake just the other day. I said 'Don't move!' and I wrapped its head in a towel and shook him around to make him dizzy before I threw him away. I didn't want him coming back at us."

This was a little disconcerting in some ways, but in others, I was really looking forward to the possibility. Somehow I always find myself attracted to doing the sorts of things that have a higher percentage chance of leaving me dead in the sand somewhere.

"How often do you see snakes?"

"Every day. They come out on the rocks to keep warm. My best friend, three years ago, we saw a rattlesnake outside of his house and he took a machete and cut it's head off. The chopped-off head flew up and bit him on the hand. We took him right away to the doctor but his hand withered. It's still withered. I offered to take him to a healer but he didn't want to. I said *That's because you want to stay on welfare.* Not me. I work 12 or 14 hours a day. I want to make $100 a day for my boss and $100 a day for me. That's my goal. Yesterday I made $120 — $60 for each of us — but it all evens out, the day before I made $400."

Juan, who, incidentally, taught himself English by reading comics in the newspaper, is a big bear of a guy with a thick mustache and huge hands. I figured he can handle a rattlesnake, especially now that he knows to avoid the dangerous end even after it's been separated from the purely

cosmetic end.

Not a whole lot is known about the Mojave rattlesnake. They're likely nocturnal or possibly crepuscular and a shade of green that people find both surprising and alluring. A bulletin put out by the Edwards Air Force base suggests that as well as being the most aggressive of rattlesnakes, the venom of the Mojave rattlesnake is the most deadly of all, but goes on to note that the the large majority of people who have been killed by them were "intentionally interacting" with them (the Edwards memo includes "trying to kill the snake" in "intentionally interacting" — which makes sense. They recommend leaving the snake alone and calling a professional).

While rattlesnakes are rarely seen, lizards are ubiquitous. Fat chuckwallas and lightning fast side-splotched lizards hang on rocks everywhere. I also see cuddly looking antelope squirrel's in abundance, darting from burrow to burrow. I guess the rattlesnakes have to be eating something. Indeed, there are a lot more Big Things living here than I'd expected — apart from coyotes (dead ones litter the road like gum wrappers) there are badgers, porcupines, bobcats, and foxes — the big horn sheep, kangaroo rats, and jackrabbits I'd already seen plenty of. One of the first misconceptions about the desert is that ... well, it's *deserted* and since there's nothing there, it's probably a great place to dump stuff that you don't want. Compared to, say, the Delaware Water Gap, maybe there isn't actually a lot in the desert — but it's not nothing — and by na-

ture of its diminution, it's more fragile. I'm conscious of how many struggling wild flowers end up in my carefully placed footprints, how a bunch of visitors could cut a dead path through here — how reliant everything is on everything else.

When people move into the desert the first thing that changes is the water. Rattlesnakes may be content to get their moisture from kangaroo rats, and kangaroo rats may be content to get it from seeds and insects, but people in Palm Springs want to wash their cars as much as people in Boston, and take the same luxurious baths, and swim in sparkling pools. So places like the Mara Oasis, which was actually bubbling water as late as 1942, now watch the water table retreat. If you want water in the oasis now, you have to dig at least ten feet into the sand.

The first person to actively crusade for the preservation of the Mojave was Minerva Hamilton Hoyt — the proverbial little old lady from Pasadena with a penchant for fox stoles and big hats. Ms. Hoyt watched the desert being uprooted to provide cacti for suburban homes and, the even more bizarre practice of motorists lighting joshua trees on fire so that other people could follow the trail of flaming trees through the wilderness like street lights. She petitioned president Roosevelt and, with much diligence on her part, succeeded in getting several national parks created — among them Joshua Tree and Death Valley where plucking so much as a wild flower can get you tossed in jail.

BUT I STILL HAVEN'T FOUND WHAT I'M LOOKING FOR...

Through Palm Springs and around the Little San Bernardino mountains the road winds and rises slowly. I see my first joshua tree, oddly enough, in the town of Joshua Tree. Desert legend tells that the trees were named by Mormon settlers who noted that their branches all pointed in one direction (one reason that I'm suspicious of this is that their branches *don't* all point in one direction) like Joshua, pointing to heaven. Mexican explorers had previously called them "cabbage palms" — which isn't any more inspired.

"What's the one question you wish people would stop asking you?" I ask a park ranger who looks surprisingly like Donny Osmond at age 25. I expect that he's going to respond "Is there a bathroom nearby?" or one of the other things that's on the top of my head, but instead he pulls back his lips to reveal twice as many teeth as a person ought to have and answers: "*Where's the tree from the U2 album cover?*"

I was in college when U2 came out with their blockbuster album, *The Joshua Tree.* The ubiquity of that recording was complete. You couldn't go anywhere and avoid it: it blanketed the radio and MTV, and the tape decks of all of my friends. On the front and back of the album, iconic photography by Anton Corbijn showed the band standing in the vast landscape of the California desert — and in front of a lone Josh-

ua Tree. U2 had discovered America and America was very happy about that.

Concerned that the tree would end up in some fans living room after surviving god knows how long, (the life span of a Joshua tree is probably in the neighborhood of 200 years, though some claim they can live to be 700 or more — this is made difficult by the fact that joshua trees aren't really trees and don't have growth rings; they're actually either yucca plants or maybe lilies — people argue about this still), Corbijn and the band were quiet about the location of the photo shoot. A lot of people knew that it was somewhere in the Mojave — which is the expanse of where Joshua trees actually grow — and most of those people assumed it was in Joshua Tree National Park, something Bono and crew were happy to have people think. They mentioned in interviews that they had stayed at the Harmony Motel in Twentynine Palms. Tourists descended on the park but would never find it there. The photo was actually taken 300 miles away, in Death Valley. Ironically, the tree, after living maybe a hundred or more years, died of natural causes very shortly after the photograph was taken — probably in 1999. It fell, in the desert, and very likely, nobody heard it.

That Corbijn chose the Mojave as a synecdoche for America is not surprising. While virtually uninhabited the geography of the country has, I think, a great deal to say about how we think and who we are. Some places are formed by their geology and geography, and people grow to

love even the extreme environments of the places they call home. Ask a Bostonian shoveling his driveway from under two feet of snow if there's somewhere he'd rather live.... Here the heat balanced by the prospect of mineral wealth and the promise of not having to see too many other human beings or listen to them prattle on about their 401k's draws a certain breed of people. Provincial at times, highly individualistic, and resourceful.

It drew prospectors here in the 1800's, the same thing drew the Mormons here, and everyone that followed — they knew that hard work, isolation and opportunity lay before them. And without waxing on, it seems that much of that still permeates — that the geography still casts its shadow over the people who live on it — especially the farther you get from population centers. One thing every civilization needs, I've come to realize, is a place for the uncivilized — where one can live alone and apart.

Mexicans have come here since — well, since it was Mexico, and then after it no longer was. They still come — for the same reasons that the Europeans came — somewhere in the sand, hidden beneath it, hidden above it, hidden in and on it, was, and remains, a fortune — but it can only be discovered by the toughest, most resilient. The desert has always been a proving ground — at first, to be victorious at first you had to prove that the land couldn't beat you — now you must prove that you can beat the land. Put a golf course in a place that gets three inches


BARBER JUDI
MARINE HAIR CUT
9 am to 9 pm
CIVILIAN HAIR CUT
SPA & NAIL CARE
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of rain a year and keep it green — it's a new challenge today.

I park the car and get out and start walking.

A land of extremes, the desert itself here exists at extremes. A large percentage of it is preserved as national or state parks while an equally large portion is owned by the military who drives tanks over it and drops bombs on it.

Again, the silence here is shocking. If you can stand perfectly still you can hear the absence of sound, it wraps around you, feeling gigantic, and when there is, the rock walls drive it back across you and the slightest thing seems like an earthquake.

Once the road is out of sight and you realize it's miles till the next one it's like what I imagine drifting through space must be like. Everything is so much bigger than you and when you look down at a plant or a stone — you might be the only person on Earth to have ever seen them. It's like living a secret, shared with no one. This patch of earth can be

yours alone, your secret place, this tiny flower, the size of a grain of rice, could have grown for you alone no one's seen it before, and no one else will ever see it. You have some idea what the thoughts of a sailor must be after he has fallen overboard and seen his ship recede over the horizon.

Caught up in the quiescence I am suddenly aware of a huge sound, like someone swinging a heavy rope through the air. I flick my gaze and am shocked to realize that I am hearing the sound of a raven's wings moving through the air about a hundred feet away, coming in from the south over my shoulder — woosh! woosh! He circles overhead, rising and falling. I can hear every beat of his wings. Another raven joins it, and then a third. The silence is unnerving carrying through it the rhythmic beat of those wings — as though they are the only sound on earth right now. Who has ever heard the sound of a bird's wings? Coming from the city where there's always some noise this is freakishly unreal it seems wrong. But I watch the ravens play and listen to the sound of their feathers through the air. Any movement I make drowns them out and I stand motionless — the fabric of my jacket rubbing against itself, or my shoe moving in the dirt — even those are like explosions in a void.

The ravens are ravaging the population of endangered desert tortoise. Already beleaguered by humans moving through their environment and a strange respiratory disease, tortoises are hounded by the grow-

ing numbers of ravens, feeding off of human garbage (they are the ever present guards of trash cans and picnic sites in any of the desert parks) and drinking from irrigation runoff, they see the tortoises from above as sumptuous meals. The tortoises, which can live as long as 100 years, have relatively soft shells for the first five of those years, and their speed is no match for the birds. It can be a savage place here, but also a place of survival. In the late 1970's, pilots flying over southern California noticed strange circles in the desert. Upon closer inspection, these turned out to be creosote bushes which grow outward in concentric circles from a single seed, like the ripples in a pond. Frank Vasek Ph.D., a professor from the University of California at Riverside, started to investigate these large creosote rings and found one measuring more than 45 feet across that he determined to be between 9,000 and 12,000 years old — possibly the oldest living thing on earth, something that was alive before the pyramids were built, before Moses crossed the Sinai — right there, on the side of the road between Barstow and Vegas.

After a few miles I come to a small mountain, or a big hill. Rather than go around, I opt for over, thinking that from the top my cell phone might start working again. Alone, all we can think about, it seems, is being connected. The whole mountain is strewn with wild flowers, blooming life into this place; most of them smaller than a dime.

From the top I can see for miles. The town of Twentynine Palms is a tiny pale grid far off in the distance. I can see the road, like a pencil line, and two lone joshua trees in a huge dry wash miles away. The wind blows prodigiously up here and I stand on the largest boulder, higher than everything else, the world beneath me vanishing off to the horizons.

While at the summit I try impaling myself with a jumping cholla to see if the spines are as unnaturally sharp as people have told me (they're not) though my attempt at discovering the texture of a beavertail cactus leaves two dozen nearly microscopic spines stuck in my fingers. They come out easily enough, but I can't imagine a mouth full of them.

The world is so remarkable from this vantage point I don't want to move.

We Live on What's Left

If the cities of the east are monuments to humanity, the power of communal living, of developed brains, of engineering — surely the deserts of the west are a counter balance. We can move through them, we can live in them, we can even change them, momentarily — we can make them radioactive, or change basins to seas, but ultimately, we are such small creatures. Looking out across that great expanse at the tiny flickering of light that is our own, we see it enveloped in great arms that endure our meddling but are ready to take it all back.

The San Andreas fault begins at the Salton Sea and runs north to the San Bernardio Mountains, past Palm Springs and up the coast of California. It is the inevitable truth of nature drawn on the sand. Everything to the west of this line is moving northwest while everything to the east is moving in the opposite direction. Eventually, Los Angeles will slide past San Francisco and off to have an adventure somewhere. While this happens Palm Springs will get ripped apart and lots of underground sprinkler systems will have to be replaced. Until then, we'll continue to build monuments to ourselves and try and live the best we can.

The desert reminds us how insignificant we can be, how fleeting. It's not exactly a comforting thought, but I suppose it's inevitable. We'll come and go, but somewhere, near the place that used to be Barstow, as it drifts towards Mexico, there will be a creosote bush, growing in an ever-widening circle; oblivious to all the arrow heads and golf clubs buried around it just beneath the surface.


SOLARA

About the Photographer

Kyle Cassidy is an award winning writer, photographer, and graphic designer living in Philadelphia. He is the author of six books, most recently *Armed America: Portraits of Gun Owners in Their Homes* which was named one of the 100 best books of 2007 by Amazon.com. His Photo-a-Week blog was one of the first photography blogs on the Internet and is viewed by some crazy thousands of people every day.

By day he's a network engineer at the University of Pennsylvania and crime-fighting superhero by night.

Kyle realized he'd turned an important corner when he was no longer writing his own publicity blurbs, but still enjoys the idea of writing about himself in the third person. You can find him at www.kylecassidy.com.

The photographs were taken with a Leica d300 and a Hasselblad 500cm.

The text is set in Centaur, the captions and end notes are in Century Gothic and the title font is Trajen Pro.