

THE SILURIAN PROXY

FROM THE START, IT WAS SCIENCE FICTION. The Silurian followed a mass extinction about 440 million years ago. The seas trickled back to life. Watery organisms flourished. Eventually, terrestrial creatures—walking things, things with jaws—emerged from a bog's wet silt or the shallow pools of a nascent lake. That first step on land was, to say the least, astonishing.

As its name implies, Broadwell Dry Lake was exactly the opposite of the Silurian: dry, and yet astonishing. In the present, well into the Holocene, the water had completely evaporated, leaving a four-mile-long stretch of flat, bleached earth in an uninhabited area north of Ludlow, CA. From our camp, positioned near the lake's center, Paige stared into the distant hills. The shadow of a cloud spilled over the landscape like a diluted Sumi-e stain. She commented, "It doesn't look real. It looks like a Western movie." It was easier to conjure such similes. The desert is primed for film. If not gritty American realism or a Western, set in the true southwest or in the arid parts of Spain or Italy, then science fiction, where the desert could be a scenic substitute for another planet or the site of an alien soft invasion.

Or a noirish thriller. The patrons at Ludlow's only restaurant (besides the Dairy Queen) said a girl who had recently gone missing would probably turn up at Broadwell. We shuddered to think of it. But out there it did not seem difficult to disappear. Too, the more likely outcome of the missing is a corpse. But where would you hide a body? The ground was soft with clay, but its surface was one uninterrupted pattern, cracked and fissured like old china. I quietly marveled how perfectly each piece of the dry lake bottom fit together, as if each one had been cut to fit, while Adriana saw it simply as it was: a whole broken into parts. The landscape is blank, open, and ready to be projected upon, but it was not hard to suggest or imagine what might lie under the surface.

And yet the realness of the desert was palpable. It set in slowly, and then suddenly: the effects of an day's worth of light and wind on skin and lips; the sober reckoning of just how many gallons of water a person could consume in a day (hint: always more than you think). Or the night: as daylight began to fade, the dark bled up the sky's bleached inner walls, and when it was firmly established, cloaked the dirt with another layer of quiet. That night, in my tent, we were roused from sleep by a low rumbling sound, too quiet to be thunder and too long to be a mine blast, but none of us were brave enough to investigate its source.

On this shifting backdrop Daniel and Emma assembled their constructed oasis. The palm trees were seemingly cut from the sky and Photoshopped into the landscape. The truck with its mercury finish gleamed between them. Around and among them their supplies lay strewn about: tripods, lights loaded with colored gels, a humming generator. Serpentine tracks cut through the soft earth, evidence of a sustained joyride over the lake's empty bottom. They worked through the day, and into the

night, watching and recording the effects under changing lighting conditions: violet, orange, the moon's cool white stare. We observed the observers, snapping our own photographs too.

This was the part we played. We were all trained in active description, and how to collect evidence. Earlier that day we walked across the lake to its eastern edge. The terrain around the lake was littered with black, pockmarked chunks of rock, likely fallout debris from the Amboy cinder cone about thirty-five miles away. In the late afternoon light, all the rocks seemed to stand at attention; their long shadows made each one a discrete object on the dirt. Sarah knelt down to snap pictures of wildflowers, which were no more than tiny, persistent plants growing out of the gravel. We plucked dried sage and rubbed the leaves between our fingers. We found rusted bullets and pocketed them. I collected bits of bleached wood for kindling, and scanned the landscape for the dead girl. She was there, I thought. The desert had coughed up her traces and sent them towards our camp on a northern wind: a fabric-covered hair elastic bounding over the dirt like a wagon wheel; a napkin blotted with dark pink lipstick. Ludlow was a survivor too, or as one homegrown website put it, "refuses to die." In its blind persistence, the community had moved twice, following the traffic from the railroad to Route 66 to the interstate, and abandoning buildings in its wake. Over a century's worth of development is represented among those ghosted empty shells.

And yet, coming back to it now, that empirical evidence seems so inadequate: too anecdotal, or not specific enough. My photographs are also equal failures: records yes, but fuzzy and blurred. Observed time is compressed into such thick stitches out there, and easily, perhaps unintentionally, reordered here, asynchronously. I returned to my home in Los Angeles and

watched bits of Werner Herzog's 1969 film *Fata Morgana* absentmindedly on YouTube, hardly fazed by his long tracking shots of the Saharan taken from a moving vehicle. From the start, *Fata Morgana* was science fiction. Herzog developed it instead into a meditation on the landscape and the pressures of Western development (a different sort of alien invasion). On the distant horizon, his camera caught objects moving and shifting across his frame of view: a convoy of trucks, or oil rigs, or even some sort of odd, mobile settlement. But neither Herzog, his camera, or I can be sure. The titular superior mirage, named after the Arthurian sorceress Morgan Le Fay, the apparition of a woman where no woman should be.

At Broadwell, it seemed all things had real and unreal qualities, but I couldn't be sure. In the distance, things shimmered, their forms broken up into lateral pieces in the heat. Daniel raced the mirrored truck down to the end of the lake, out of earshot, and back again, where it roared into view. From my point of view at camp, I thought I saw the shimmer of water in the distance, but Daniel assured me it wasn't so. There was no water. But to quench our thirst for facts: the long hum that woke us in the middle of the night was a freight train on a distant track, six miles away.