

The Poetics of Spaces: Inyo National Forest & Outward

written by Janice Lee | August 19, 2014



Here is the perspective here: nothing else matters.

An encounter at such a high altitude: more than breath, breathing.

A different kind of breath. Looser. Tighter.

Here to witness the breath-taking mountains, the heart-breaking half-empty lake, the pressure on your lungs, the feeling of breathing, the natural processes of erosion, deterioration, death.

The physical weathering that causes rocks and boulders to split apart.

The cold and then heat. Tree trunks fallen over.

Questions of what is or isn't relevant in your life.

Questions of what does or doesn't matter.

Really.



Here is the thing. In a place like this, your perspective changes, widens. Remember single frames of your life back *there* and realize what it means out *here*. Recall gestures of comfort, words spoken, feelings. Here: presence. Here: it all.

Here is the thing. Happiness is difficult. Not just to obtain it, but to be consumed by it. For seconds, moments, hours at a time. It is a privileged part of life to be able to be joyous, even for just a few seconds, to be in love, to be content, to at least once breathe a sigh of relief. But it is also necessary to mourn, to lament, to be disappointed, to be angry, to regret.

It is crucial that we fail. And it is crucial that we succeed.

When you see the half-empty lake, imagine what it would look, you replace the word *would* with *should*, replace *should* with *would* again, see snapshots of lives that intertwine and scenes that seem to belong on postcards, exist *in* nature, away from *that other stuff*. You think about the weather. You are ambushed by a group of deer, fleeting, hopping. You think about life as privilege. As burden. You think about the scale of things. Large. Small. Full of holes. Weather-worn. A breeze that rises up behind your back and cools the sweat on your back.

All people are not created equal.

But the sky above, is a gift.

We live under the same fucking sky.

This is how the world ends: you are sitting on the edge of your bed, head in your hands, crying.

This is how the world ends: a cat meows in the alleyway.

This is how the world ends: your arms wrapped around me, the clouds above us pouring down rain.

Gone nothing.

Gone everything.

Here is the thing. People should not call other people evil. Evil doesn't exist, unless the devil does. He might. The gesture of calling another human being evil is the gesture of *I hate you and you are the opposite of me. I am good and you are evil. I am right and you are wrong.*

Polarized categories means that there is no chance of a middle ground, of understanding, of empathy. Only one side can be right. Only one side can be wrong.

To not be on the *right* side, the *correct* one, fully and completely, without question, is an act of betrayal.

The gesture is an unwillingness to understand another's point of view. To skip empathy and to move on to moral judgment.

Out here, we have a conversation about which hike to go on. This is petty and necessary.

We are cooking dinner and the coals are too low and the grill is too high.

What should we do?

I don't know.

This conversation is also petty and necessary.

And human.

Humanness is not about bravery and compassion, the noble or brave points. Yes, these too, but animals are also capable of compassion, of bravery, of selfless acts of bravery, of love. What makes us different though, is our ability for vileness and judgment. With our "higher intelligence" we create things, the wonders of technology, yes, but we also create more ways to hurt each other, to critique each other, to judge each other. Intention is not always malicious. But it gets muddled with morality and ethics. Intention is not an ethical choice. It is a subjective one, selfish, sympathetic.

We are all capable of good and great things. We are also all capable of cruel acts, of making mistakes, of acting selfishly, of vileness.

What we need is empathy. Not empathy for those we care about and those we already understand (that, of course, is just sympathy again), but empathy for those we villainize most.

We villainize because we don't understand.

Remember the depths of silt, of water whirling around your ankles. Remember joy and sadness. Remember rolling down a hill. Remember pain.

Here is the thing. Villainization is also objectivization. Somehow, the standardization of affect has permeated categorization has turned it all into polarization. There are only victims or perpetrators. No longer human beings. Victims, too, are not human beings, but objects, symbols.

The divide is arbitrary and destructive.

Here is the thing. In the end, we are all human beings. This is important. This matters.

Here is the thing. Empathy is crucial.

Yet the burden of empathy is on those capable of it.



Start by empathizing with a tree. Its tenacity and persistence to survive. Think of those trees that grow on the sides of mountains, in crevices, in places no one else wants to go. Trees with initials carved into them. Trees that don't complain and persist, that fall over from wind and storm, that endure after fire.

Think of the empty lake. Trust in nature.

Empathize next with fire. It destroys everything it touches. When it is put out, it fades away, smoke that lingers for a moment to let you know it was there, that it is time to leave. When it is called upon, it puts forth its best effort to destroy, blazing trails and leaving behind ash where there once was life.

Then, empathize with the weather. The slow deterioration of everything under it. Indeed, all narratives are about deterioration but we make them stories about conquest and growth and vitality. Growth exists but temporary and fleeting. We live in an empire of mud and weather.

Losing sight of *that other stuff*.

Losing sight of *others*.

Tears streaming down your cheeks when your heart is broken.

Tears when you are happy.

In love, effortlessly.

In love, the most difficult thing you have ever done.

Here is the thing. There is a responsibility to being enlightened. Being enlightened doesn't mean that you are more intelligent or knowledgeable or passionate or moral or correct. It means you are more capable of empathy. Ethics isn't about rightness. It is about humanity. It is about failure.

Again, here is the thing. The burden of empathy is on the one who is *capable* of it.

Here is another thing. Just go out there. *There*. Away from *here*. Witness the night sky, away from the city lights, with all of its glittering and endless wonder.

See with your eyes the echoes of the universe. All of that magnified and so far away, up there in the darkness.

Hold my hand and be with me. *Exist* with me.

Human beings.

Our pasts and futures up there in the stars, our present here, as humans, in the mud, glorious and good, vile and filthy.

Feel like this is the last time.

Imagine that this is the last time.

It is the last time.

What do you remember?

What do you remember now?