

## Ben Trefry Essay:

When I get ready to ride my bike down to Mono Lake, I've just finished another day of online school, seeing my friends and teachers in tiny frames on my screen. Every day of it is the same, really. With three of us working or going to school over Zoom, my house these days is a cacophony of unnecessarily loud conversations. (Perhaps we instinctively talk louder over Zoom, hoping someone will just *hear* us the way they would in person.) But down here by the lake, the only sounds are, in order of loudness:

1. The gentle but insistent washing of the waves
2. The wind, a soft whistling in the grass
3. The cries of birds, usually far, sometimes near as they glide over my head to survey me from the safety of their kingdom the sky. This is a sound from my childhood-- those seagulls were always with us for recess on the school playground as the spring gave way to summer.
4. The buzzing of the alkali flies, thousands in harmony.

The view, of course, is spectacular: a wide open basin from the sparkling snowy mountaintops, down the drab brown slopes, to the dark pumice sand where I sit by the lakeshore. To think that under every tree on those faraway mountains is another spot to sit and contemplate as I do now! But my immediate surroundings are no less fascinating: a curious garden of round, low tufa poking through the dry grass like ancient ruins. Finally, I pause to study a small pumice stone in the palm of my hand. All the tiny pits and jagged ridges are not unlike those mountains I see--it is simply a difference of scale.

Even though one might expect that social distancing would result in a craving for personal contact, it's actually refreshing to be the only human for miles around. The rising heat waves blur the land in the distance, and I can almost pretend I'm living in my own private sphere of oily glass. Nobody is waiting for me to leave; alone with my thoughts in this alien landscape of infinite detail, I spend almost two hours by the lakeshore as the lake grows greener, the wind and waves louder.

Eventually, it is time to leave. I've been sitting just a few inches above the lakeshore; hopefully the lake will rise enough this year to wash away my footprints. In case it doesn't, I brush them away myself. As I walk back to my bike, the faint smell of salt fades, replaced by the smell of green spring bitterbrush in the sun. Soon I'll be back on the (dirt) road, then I'll be back home... but now and forever, this moment is mine. Perhaps someone in the future will come and sit on the same low tufa rock I sat on, reflect on their own life, perhaps even write their own essay. But they will never see the same colors, hear the same sounds, or think the same thoughts.