

2020 Mono Lake Committee Scholarship

essay by Keely Podosin



Once I turned off the 395, I saw nobody. We were the only car in sight, the only people out and about. I turned on to Navy Beach. Nobody. There was just the lake, with its tides lapping and the sun shining down on it. I saw some seagulls flying overhead, and wondered if they noticed a difference in the world. If they noticed how nobody was out exploring, taking advantage of their beautiful backyard. Did they like it? Without so many humans to scare them away, to ruin their homes and ecosystems, did they enjoy our absence? The sun was beating down on my neck; my bottom was sore from a combination of the tufa I was sitting on and the leg workout I had done previously. But I couldn't help but wonder, were we really necessary? The natural life at Mono Lake goes on, even when humans are put to a halt. The sun was out, the day was gorgeous, and everything felt normal. Sitting at Mono Lake's edge, a sense of normality crept over my body. I was out, enjoying nature, as I love doing and had done so often before. I wasn't worried about my proximity to other people; I didn't feel sad about the outcome of my last year of high school, or potentially my first year of college. Sitting at Mono Lake's edge, I felt content. Nature allows us to lose ourselves, to forget our thoughts and worries and focus on the beauty we are fortunate enough to enjoy. Places like Mono Lake allow us to put our lives in perspective and humble us. Places like Mono Lake do not need people to succeed as productive ecosystems, but rather, they can thrive in our absence. I focus on the sound of the water again, bringing me back to where I am. There's a smell I can't recognize, and I feel what seems like an ant crawling up my leg. There was no ant. I look up at the mountains surrounding the lake, and then the snow-capped ones behind me. I think of all the great memories I've had on mountains like these, hiking, skiing, laughing with friends. Again, the sound of the water brings me back. I stand up and head back to my car. As the water fades into the distance, I notice again how deserted the road feels. I cross an empty highway, and start driving back home. I am once again brought into my thoughts, and a part of me couldn't shake how everything was feeling wrong. I wanted to see my friends, I wanted to finish off my high school career. But Mono Lake was able to give me a break from these feelings. Mono Lake, and places like it, showed me how even in the worst times, nature can make me feel content.

2020 Mono Lake Committee Scholarship

essay by Ben Trefry

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.