

## The Drive In

I left Mesquite in the morning halfway through a movie where Christopher Walken is hospitalized after being soundly outsmarted by a mouse. Fifty miles outside of Vegas I veered off the road and slithered in between a barbed wire fence to study a Joshua tree. These life forms look like creatures Dr. Seuss would have created. Perhaps he would have named them the Zybutrix tree. These Yucca cousins are perfectly in tune with their harsh environment. Their long pointed leaves are hard as steel and endowed with sharp teeth on both sides. Nothing gets at them without at least a scratch. Clusters of serrated green bayonets clump in bunches and cast polka-dot shadows upon the gritty yellow floor. The base of the trunk is sheathed in bark, but a fibrous beard grows a few feet above the tree. Splinters of these short daggers grow downward and are spiked at the tip. They curl slightly upward like loose shavings on a plank of wood. Any thirsty robber comes away licking its wounds after a scaling this barbed fortress. The specimen I observed was quite healthy and seemed to have an ample supply of water and strong roots. It stood fiercely like a young warrior underneath a bright blue canopy. But many of its relatives in this strange arid forest full of spikes and barbs showed the ravages of time. Clumps of punk-rock hair were missing spikes and sagging under their own weight. They seemed to be disintegrating, dissipating in the wind before my eyes. Had I imagined this entire landscape? Was this all a mirage? My car sparkled underneath the midday sun. It rippled like a lake trout. I got back in and sped away from the buffets and casinos and scantily clad single mothers reveling in the ephemeral euphoria of ogling trucker eyes upon their shriveling bodies and stretch marks.

I-15 filled up with iron near the California border and I decided to stop in Baker for lunch. The self-proclaimed world famous Mad Greek claimed to serve up the best gyro in America. I found it to be something of a let down-extremely crowded, expensive and devoid of the attention that goes into food from a restaurant that hasn't exploded into a tourist attraction. I think it was something about the excess of dill weed present in the cucumber sauce. Nevertheless, it was better than bowel-irritating burger fodder and it still had to be the best gyro in Baker. I decided not to buy a shirt or mug or plate or bumper sticker or fisherman's hat commemorating my experience there. I peeled a smuggled orange in the parking lot, snapped a picture for posterity and left.

It was odd to drive through the Mojave Desert in a traffic jam. In such desolate country you expect to be alone. I thought about all of the bizarre life that thrives in such a hostile and unforgiving land. It was all invisible to me. What were the snakes and lizards and shrikes doing right now? Where were they hiding? Were they watching this endless concrete conveyor belt transport shiny chunks of metal at astronomical speeds? Some brave creatures tried to cross the freeway; only the lucky few survived and they knew to cross late in the night. Back in Utah I had swerved to avoid a flayed mule deer carcass in the middle of the road.

Pop. Pop. I struck them one at a time. They glanced off the windshield insignificantly, leaving bright yellow streaks. On the road they were much too dazed to even feel anything. Their wings flapped uselessly one last time before a spinning rubber paw finished the job. At first there were just a few of these doomed beauties. Why were they crossing so low? Didn't they see their mates going down by the dozens? You fool, I

thought. Butterflies don't have a brain. They can't feel emotion. But what if these beautifully symmetric patterns sheath a cold heartless monster with the vilest intentions. Satan trapped in a seraph's body. Perhaps inside the thorax of delicate swallowtails and lycaenids the odious ghosts of Stalin, Hitler and Dahmer are gnashing their teeth. The ultimate punishment for a truly evil soul. Unable to perpetrate their sadistic deeds, these masked fiends flutter about on the breeze from flower to flower dipping their proboscises into sweet honey pots. An ironic judgment from a capricious deity. A pair of monster's devil wings reduced to benign airfoils.

They were powerless against me. I was a horseman upon an iron steed. As I burrowed further into the desert heart more of these angelic demons appeared. I struck them mercilessly with increasing frequency. Why weren't they flying higher? Why were they hurling themselves directly into my car? Again, reason told me I was being foolish. These creatures can't think. But their numbers increased and soon I was passing through clouds of them. Millions of the winged imps obstructed my vision and I turned on the wipers to clear their bilious innards from the glass. Then it occurred to me what was happening. All of the heinous souls trapped in these innocent bodies were committing suicide. They couldn't take it any more. This mass exodus was actually an act of desperation by serial killers, sadists and other addicts of enormities. They had been given a new vessel to inhabit, but their essence was immutable. They were incapable of existing as anything else but their own dark and horrible forms. And now, emaciated and lusting for something they could never taste again they chose obliteration as their solace. I bore into them with my teeth clenched.

In Barstow I got on highway 58 and soon I was dipping into soft mint-green hills streaked orange with petals of California Poppy and peppered with tiny black flecks of grazing bovine. I passed fields of giant silver windmills spinning their arms in the face of the wind and I screamed at them out of my car.

“Work harder, you lazy bastards! Your state is bankrupt!”

In the dust bowl agglomeration of carwashes and truck dealerships that is Bakersfield I hopped on I-99 and gulped down hefty lungfuls of carbon monoxide, sulfur fumes and manure for 30 miles. I violently swung the car off the road past a peeling eucalyptus and seamlessly merged onto Highway 46. Soon I was nose deep in the sun's piercing corona and squinting like a mole. I briefly stopped to take in a surreal landscape: Innumerable derricks fed from the ground like oxidized roadrunners pecking at crickets. I passed Wasco and entered a redolent country of orange groves and roadside fruit stands. But by this time the stark beauty of the land had lost its luster. I had become glued to the road. A muscle twitched above my eye and I felt a slight burn in my cervical vertebrae. By the time I hit the 101 my knuckles were white and the radio was up to a deafening roar. When I came to the top of the Cuesta Grade there was just enough light left to see the ocean. I stuck my head out the window and screamed at the top of my lungs. I tasted the brine in the air as I inhaled. It was six-thirty and the sun was a glint over the valley when I pulled into the farm.