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The Salton Sea: An Unfished and Quickly Loved Foray

Emily Christina Vizzo

“Death was striking constantly, but it was no man’s duty to remove the resulting debris, which piled up faster than time could reduce it to powder and make room for new growth. New growth, however, was constantly forcing its way through the debris.”

—Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1835¹

Stomp keeps texting me from Mexico—Tulum. Of course, I almost went to Tulum, too. But then I didn’t.

“I am texting you from an airplane,” Stomp writes. “I am watching Mad Max on an airplane and all I can think about is the Salton Sea.”

When we returned from the Salton Sea two weeks ago, we arrived in separate cars and two hours apart. Stomp’s buddy Calvin, slated for a destination wedding in Tulum, picked fat limes from a full, curving tree in the January cold in his Orange County, California backyard wrapped in potted white geraniums and an L-shaped swimming pool.

Stomp muddled the limes with a big butcher knife, delicately gripping the blade and using the knife’s blunt wood handle to grind the limes into pulp before mixing in cane sugar and white rum. I drank that for breakfast with a piece of cold sausage pizza on a china plate, sausage set aside in little gray balls.

In September 2015, *National Geographic* described the Salton Sea as a “vast saltwater lake in remote southeastern California,” some 234 feet below sea level and formed in 1905 after Colorado River floodwaters went massively rogue, pooling in a ghosted desert lakebed².

¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, J. P. Mayer, and George Lawrence, *Democracy in America*. (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006), 27.

² Michael Cohen, “New Hope for the Salton Sea—National Geographic Blog,” *National Geographic Blog*, September 3, 2015, <https://blog.nationalgeographic.org/2015/09/03/new-hope-for-the-salton-sea/>.

Irrigation runoff from Imperial, Coachella, and Mexicali farms still feeds the Salton Sea. And as insistent drought shrinks the Salton Sea footprint, the toxic goulash gets saltier and more contaminated.

Nat Geo describes the sea as 50 percent saltier than the ocean, attracting more than 420 different species, including migratory birds such as pelicans, herons, ibis, and snowy plovers.³

When I saw it, the sea was glassy and copper-coloured, dreamlike, lunar; the melted-penny shoreline carpeted with piles of dead fish—tilapia of all sizes, dried and perfectly formed like palm tree husks after a storm, or like poorly wrapped, moon-coloured tamales.

In 2003, complicated water deals allowed San Diego to siphon much-needed water from the Salton Sea. This water suck was offset with infusions purchased from the Imperial Irrigation District in what *Nat Geo* calls “the nation’s largest farm-to-urban water transfer.”⁴ Next year, in 2017, those infusion faucets switch off. And the Salton Sea could dry up.

“You can’t let a lake go dry,” Stomp tells me. “The wind comes up and blows up the stuff from the bottom, and everybody gets sick.”

Calvin’s two buddies were tall and clean-shaven. One of the guys, with tattoos twining up both of his biceps like animated morning glory vines, built custom cars in Las Vegas for a living. I wasn’t sure what the other guy, Nick, did for work—although he mentioned that he spent New Year’s at the Salton Sea.

He showed me videos on his cell phone: drone footage hovering over a hodgepodge circle of motorhomes, dune buggies, and motorcycles. He had bought a used motorhome, someone’s inheritance from their grandpa, for around \$2,000. In the vehicle he and a buddy had found a bunch of No Doze from the 1970s and ate it all. It kept them up for several days, Nick said, days which they spent drinking.

Calvin was drinking vodka on ice, refilling his tumbler with Tito’s throughout the Sunday football game. He pulled out a shoebox and showed me the new shoes he planned to wear to his wedding.

“You coming to Tulum?” Calvin asked. I tell him the shoes are beautiful, and they are. They look like gleaming ponies, like twin pianos, like satin cigars.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

San Diego is bone dry. I live there. Though America's eighth-largest city and California's second largest, we mainly poach water from other places. The San Diego County Water Authority reports that rainfall alone hasn't been enough to meet the region's water needs since 1947⁵.

San Diego drains about half its water supply from the Colorado River and about 30 percent from what's called the Bay-Delta, a watery mishmash dripping down the Sierra Nevada and pumped through the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers, according to the SDCWA. The remaining 20 percent is a precarious portfolio of scavenged H₂O—groundwater, recycled water, conservation.⁶

I'm lying on the floor in my friend Penny's living room, playing with her daughter Cate. We've made from-scratch turkey chilli and cornbread on this rainy Thursday. San Diego roads and waterways are ill equipped to deal with rain. I'd been sent home from work when my office flooded. Large, blue industrial fans blasted the soaked carpets. Because one mature eucalyptus tree fell, labour crews will return weeks later and buzz down the whole hillside stand.

Cate and I bang plastic toys together on the floor.

"I'm going to the Salton Sea," I tell baby Cate. "Won't you come along with me?"

We're in a rental car: a white Nissan Sentra so new the windows are still gummed with peeled-off dealership stickers. Stomp preloaded a playlist of NPR segments all focused on the Salton Sea and we get both Bluetooth and Google Maps booted up. Our backpacks are in the back seat. I brought notebooks, felt tip pens, and a copy of de Toqueville's *Democracy in America*. In the net pouch where a water bottle would go, Stomp has stuffed a bottle of wine.

We're navigating out of East County's spanking new strip malls and terraced condominium communities, out into the landscaped gardens and horsey wealth of Olivenhein and Rancho Santa Fe, into bedraggled foothills pocked with service stations and for rent signs.

The Salton Sea community, we learn, leads the state in childhood asthma.

A museum dedicated to its history reports that 4.4 million years ago, the Salton Sea swam inside the Gulf of California—part of the ancient Lake Cahuilla—until it was choked off by

⁵ "San Diego County Water Supplies Sufficient to Meet Demands in 2017 and Beyond," San Diego County Water Authority, September 30, 2016. <https://www.sdcwa.org/san-diego-county-water-supplies-sufficient-meet-demands-2017-and-beyond>.

⁶ "Water Supply and Groundwater," San Diego County Draft Final Environmental Impact Report, February 2017, [https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/dam/sdc/pds/PC/170210-Supporting-Documents/Agriculture Promotion Ordinance/Chap2-2.8-WS-tracked.pdf](https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/dam/sdc/pds/PC/170210-Supporting-Documents/Agriculture%20Promotion%20Ordinance/Chap2-2.8-WS-tracked.pdf).

Colorado River silt. In the 1920s, the region became an improbable hot spot twinkling with resorts, speed boat races, regattas, and yacht clubs. Jerry Lewis and Frank Sinatra partied at the Salton Sea.

“It’s sweet, too sweet,” Stomp said about our coffees, which we had bought from a crowded Pipes Café in Cardiff by the Sea, with a deep blue Pacific Ocean scrolling toward the reef.

In 2010, I’d spent New Year’s in the U.S. Virgin Islands, where I was living with my sweetheart. On December 31st, I’d hiked into town and then taken the passenger ferry from St. John to St. Thomas, eventually climbing into one of the open air \$1 dollar buses fashioned from a semi truck and emblazoned with reggae lyrics in glittering, hyper-stylized cursive like a carnival rollercoaster cart.

I cashed my paycheck—I was earning \$10 an hour—and then bought toilet paper, apple shampoo, and a \$5 bottle of champagne from Kmart before traveling back to St. John.

I’d made us potatoes, beans, and avocado for dinner, I think. I had hitchhiked from the center of Cruz Bay to the steeply pitched trailhead to our house hauling two plastic gallons of drinking water.

Our water came from a backyard cistern—stowed rainwater, essentially, which was fine for the shower and washing dishes, but not potable. Locals didn’t eat the fish caught in the reef waters directly hugging the island, due to ciguatera toxin.

Though the sea was a fantastic, crackling aquamarine blue, my neighbours warned of the raw sewage seeping like a squeezed sponge from crude septic systems in the island interior into the reefs where tourists swam and dove with their rubber fins and snorkel masks.

Continuing east to the Salton Sea, the rented Sentra swept past gnarled fruit trees and trailered ski boats sprouting from cracked driveways and front yards. Brownd Christmas trees tilted against gutter curbs and blue recycle bins.

Along El Norte Parkway, we passed handmade signs advertising buffalo jerky, alfalfa, pecans, cherimoyas, and Christmas wreaths. Stomp pointed out wholesale orchid enterprises, date palms, and twisty white fences surrounding horse runs.

Passing into the desert, we drove through a handful of reservations and brief, sad casinos stiff with white stucco and perfectly spaced palm trees.

Our car swept uphill, winding past turnouts and hillside crevasses planted tightly with oranges, grapefruit, avocado, and grapes. We passed hand-lettered signs for bees, nuts, and firewood.

Turning right onto the 76, we motored past lemon groves, grapefruits, and crates of houseplants.

We drove through the Palomar Mountains, 21 miles outside of Santa Ysabel. Stomp took my picture standing by a pretty lake near Warner Springs, rimmed in snow-capped mountains reflecting onto the still water. Black and white cows lazed throughout a shaved winter field.

When we ran out of Salton Sea-related public radio segments, we started listening to Queens of the Stone Age.

“Desert music,” Stomp said. “We’ll listen to it until we can’t take it anymore.”

In the *New Yorker*, Dana Goodyear describes the Salton Sea as “fifteen times bigger than the island of Manhattan and no deeper in most places than a swimming pool” and surrounded by “small volcanoes, bubbling mud pots, and ragged, blank mountains used for bombing practice by the Navy and the Marines.”⁷

As we drove, foothills sputtered into cow pastures and then raw, creamy desert backed up into a bluebird sky scratched with high cirrus.

The rocks looked cartoony, with sheer surfaces. No cell service. We passed a huge transformer, stirring up a flock of fast-moving starlings. And we got stuck behind an Amerigas truck loaded with two canisters of gas, each marked highly flammable.

“He doesn’t have to pull over until there’s five cars behind us,” Stomp says. Right now, it’s just us.

Highway signage warns us of strong winds for the next 17 miles. We turn left on Montezuma Road and see our first sign mentioning the Salton Sea. It’s 48 miles away.

Somewhere after Esperanza Ranch, we pass Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, where the desert lulls into dunes hived with ATVS and dune buggies.

We drive past trees with Christmas bulbs hanging from their bare branches and a very steep grade, semi trucks furiously jake braking, with the Indio desert unrolling away from us. We pass three sheriff SUVs parked in a sand spit with their lights flashing, a high wall of pink rock cantilevering above them. We pass a crinkled mountain ridge, spare as a spine.

The sun climbs. It isn’t morning anymore.

⁷ Dana Goodyear, “California Runs Dry,” *The New Yorker*, June 19, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/05/04/the-dying-sea>.

Writing for *The Atlantic*, Chris Iovenko describes the Salton Sea's "intense rotten-egg stench," a result from the hydrogen sulphide emitted from "decaying organic matter trapped beneath the water." On a bad day, Iovenko reports, the stench can be detected 150 miles away in Los Angeles⁸.

My dad is a plumber. One Saturday morning in January, I'm lying on his couch in a cornflower blue sleeping bag rereading Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*.

While I read, he changes from a long-sleeved gray shirt printed with a thrashing yellowtail into his plumbing uniform. He's trying to beat an impending El Niño rainstorm to an elementary school parking lot with a cordless Sawzall in order to cut away a temporary wood form he'd used to bolster a day-old concrete pour. Earlier rainstorms had flooded the parking lot and nearby classrooms; the school's original 4-inch drain pipe had swilled uselessly against the bloated overflow.

During the last rainstorm, someone snapped a photo of a man kayaking down Channel Drive, a street bordering my dad's neighbourhood—his home, his plumbing shop—to the west. In fact, one of my dad's plumbing vans made it into the photo, which went viral. Though it looks like the plumber and kayaker are waving to each other, the photo has been edited. They're flipping each other off.

My dad visited the Salton Sea when he was 10, he tells me. He floated easily in the briny water with his big brother.

We're listening to the hundreds of crows in the heavily fruited ficus trees outside when his buddy Abernathy stops by in a fleece-lined jacket and cap.

Abernathy is a professional fisherman, hauling prawns from the rich Channel Island waters hemming Ventura County. This week, the Ventura Harbour was stoppered with sand, Abernathy said, completely storm clogged.

"I used to hunt ducks out on the Salton Sea," Abernathy tells me. "But I wouldn't eat anything out of the Salton Sea, so I switched to hunting pheasant a little further out at the U.S.—Mexico border."

Abernathy and I are bickering about fish in the Salton Sea; he swears it's filled with orangemouth corvina and I'm insisting on tilapia. Then the room erupts in a chorus of cell phone alerts: flash flood warnings.

⁸ Chris Iovenko, "Toxic Dust From a Dying California Lake," *The Atlantic*, November 09, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2015/11/the-airborne-toxic-lake-event/414888/>.

“Tilapia is a freshwater fish,” Abernathy snaps.

We hear a loud pop. Storm winds have blown a power transformer three doors down and the kitchen lights, switched bright to lighten the gloomy morning, sputter into dark. A fire truck will plow past, slowly crushing through the dropped ficus fruits. Abernathy and my father head outside with their instant coffees.

In Borrego Springs, a pocket-sized town pushes up. We pass a sign warning of \$1,000 littering fines, a smattering of hotels, and an enormous solar farm. Sand spills onto the highway borders. We spot scant, industrial gray trailers parked behind the sand dunes. A crew of sharply outfitted bicyclists takes a highway curve, and a loaded, gleaming motorhome barrels past us headed west.

The telephone poles look like cemetery crosses; indeed, we’ve passed numerous roadside grave markers adorned with carnations, plastic toys, and handwritten signs naming the dead.

The road isn’t levelled correctly; we dip and skid, crunching through the sand-blown asphalt. Signage posted among the gravel and roadside shrubs continuously warns of flash floods. Abbreviated canyons jut from the remaining foothills. Most of the palm trees are missing their tops.

“Things could look a little more desolate,” I tell Stomp.

“You sound disappointed,” he says. For every sketchy trailer, he makes a *Breaking Bad* joke.

We funnelled into the Salton Sea at a T-shaped intersection framed by a giant gas station and billboards hawking cheap, local real estate—lots for \$6,980. Residential lanes wore fanciful names evoking the sea; we passed pink- and peach-coloured track housing, a rent-a-kayak venture, and cinder block buildings. A public health clinic, a sign for a slot tournament, a Jack in the Box, a library. A clutch of mobile homes. Satellite dishes. Semis everywhere. The ditches had names: Amarosa Ditch, Verde Ditch, Anza Ditch.

“Everyone qualifies,” Stomp reads from a real estate sign. “Everybody qualifies here at the Salton Sea.”

There’s a sign that says, “American Dreams.” There’s a sign that says, “Save our Sea.”

There is a playground with no children in sight, and a statue of Mary of Guadalupe. She looks sad, the way she normally does.

At Johnson's Landing, on the shores of the Salton Sea, the tri-tip steak plate special costs \$18.99; homemade brownies are \$3. Plastic swordfish hung in nets swagged the café walls. Diners sat in brown vinyl booths watching the football game.

Through the bar windows and over a red-painted deck fence, I could see the Salton Sea, a glimmering gray wedge of dead, poisoned water lined with desert foothills and crusted with resting birds in big, white-headed hordes. Twinkly lights draped from the roof, and petite birds twittered in the patio trees.

We sprinkled our fried fish with malt vinegar, swiping plastic ramekins of thick, yellow tartar sauce with dark, greasy fries. After we paid, we walked along a rough jetty and deserted boat launch out to the shoreline. The sand, we'd learned from our podcasts, was not actually sand but ground-up fishbones.

As we crunched through the dead tilapia, Stomp told me about fighting in Iraq right after college.

I can tell he's having trouble breathing the air near the shoreline; there is something banded and gaseous that presses against my temples like a spoon edge. We push toward white cycles of birds that pin and repin themselves to the sky in curved wheels before settling back into the fishbone sand.

Overhead two gas-fuelled kite sails heave through a blurred blue sky; the rainbow-coloured sails razz against the shrill weed-whacker engines powering seat-belted humans over the oily, plaintive-smelling sea.

I ask Stomp to take a picture of me standing by the Salton Sea. Later even I can see how sad I look in my puffy black vest and wilted red flannel, standing among more dead fish than I can count. Their dried-up eyes are still open. My eyes are streaming in the cold chemical dust.

"Did you get me?" I ask Stomp. He walks toward me, crushing heavily through ground-down bones, and hands me my phone.

"Yeah," he says, staring hatefully at the roiling kite-buzzards. "But you're not going to like it."

The PowerBall lottery is at an historic high—it will reach \$900 million that day—and Stomp insists that we buy tickets at the Salton Sea. The gas station is packed with people buying fuel for their ATVS, 12-packs and 24-packs of canned beer, and plenty of others buying lottery tickets. Stomp sets down two \$1 bills on the counter and promises to return and buy the cashier a car if he wins.

As we head out the door, a man with wild hair turns toward Stomp and yells above the gas station noise, "If you win, you got to come back and buy me an eye."

He points to his right eye, where there is none.

Leaving the Salton Sea, the sky is getting moodier. We're listening to the number one desert band, a chaotic and dissonant bass cluster named Truck Fighters. A powder blue semi truck loaded with hay bales blazes past us heading east, toward the Salton Sea. We're headed west now, vaguely toward El Centro and Calexico, and toward home.

There's an industrial plume rising from the south shore of the Salton Sea; later I will learn that it's a demonstration plant hoping to prove the viability of extracting lithium to make lithium-ion batteries—for cell phones, tablets, and electric cars—from geothermal brine. For now, it's just heartbreakingly ugly.

A Border Patrol SUV steams past our car, super fast. There are wind-worn plastic bags caught in the barbed wire fence and another roadside grave.

We miss our turn and loop backward; we'll need to pass through a Border Patrol checkpoint. A blinking yellow arrow urges us toward the right-hand side of the road. Within the Juan Batista Park, we pass over the sandy-walled San Felipe creek.

There's an American flag flying, and two white trailers made of corrugated metal parked within the highway divide. I wonder whether the trailers hold guns or people; Stomp speculates that it holds a big computer linked to the cascade of security cameras scanning each car. We don't wonder very hard though, and the border agent waves us through with a vacant and emotionless face.

The road out of Salton Sea, through Ocotillo Wells, isn't flooded any longer, but it's still muddy and wet. The sand is pale, the shrubs evenly spaced. Rented quads and dune buggies cross the highway like red ants. We pass the Ocotillo Wells airport and a man walking alone in the near dark, wearing a woollen beanie and sunglasses. He doesn't look at us.

Driving home, we pass yellow U.S. Department of Transportation signs that say, "Flooded." These are propped up alongside the road. Then we're the only car in sight.

My dad's friend Abernathy has been mulling on the Salton Sea when I get back from a bar in my hometown. Stomp returned from Tulum last night and we'd compared notes over tacos and eight different kinds of bottled hot sauce.

The rain had soaked the wood cord lying in my dad's backyard; old orange he'd gotten at a discount from a guy in Santa Paula. My dad preferred avocado, I knew, because it crackles better. The oils in both the citrus and avocado make it burn hotter. As a kid, carrying the wood dump from our front yard to the side of the house, I'd always tried for the avocado branches because they were smooth and thin. Eucalyptus wedges looked pretty, like sunsets, but they splintered.

It angers Abernathy that the Salton Sea is so polluted. Sitting on my father's couch, he's been fuming about the New River. He wants me to write letters to the U.S. Congress. Abernathy knows ranchers who farm the Imperial Valley; he offers to put me in touch with them.

Earlier that day, he'd been invited to a pig roast hosted by local chefs who wanted to befriend a reliable prawn guy. But the hog had been slowly and artfully roasted at the wrong temperature for 16 hours, Abernathy said, and the chefs concluded regretfully that it was too dangerous to eat.

"Put down those pillows and come tell me what you'd like to ask the ranchers," Abernathy said as I scooped up my sleeping bag.

"Just ask the ranchers, 'What do you think of the Salton Sea?'" I said. "Keep it simple."

I'm thinking of my friend Dane, who told me that if you pee into the Salton Sea at night, it glows.

I'm thinking of people who warned me to be careful out at the Salton Sea because of meth labs.

I'm thinking of my college sweetheart's roommate, who zigzagged disastrously between Christian zealotry and meth misadventures, and who would blast French rock and a garden hose at the bedroom window if the morning turned into afternoon before we rambled out into the San Diego sunshine.

"Did you, yourself, ever pee into the Salton Sea at night?" I had asked my friend Dane.

"I did," he told me. "And it glowed, I swear."

I didn't see meth labs or fluorescent urine at the Salton Sea. But I remember that when Stomp and I ordered fish and chips at Johnson's Landing, a local guy leaned over at the bar and said, "Good choice."

"They get that fish fresh from the lake," he'd said, nodding through the window at the dime-faced Salton Sea. "Delicious."

Then he laughed. And because I hadn't known whether that could possibly be true, I'd laughed too.

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