

I HEARD NOTHING ONCE *by Gina Williams*

LIFE IS SIMPLER OUT HERE, but that doesn't make it any less complicated. I haven't seen another human being for several days. Not a car, a plane, or a machine of any kind, except for my own vehicle. It's so quiet here in the middle of the Alvord Desert near the Oregon-Nevada border that I can hear the soft thud of my own heart. There are no bird calls, no insect noises. Coyotes howl and warble at dawn and then go silent, leaving only paw prints in the wake of their chatter. This morning, there is no wind. Airplanes don't even fly over this stretch of southeastern Oregon desert unless they are landing here on the ancient lakebed where I have pitched a tent. The loudest noise right now is the sound of my bare feet on the cool, cracked earth. How many people are left on the planet who can say, "I heard nothing once?"

I return from a sunrise walk deep into the rolling sagebrush knolls and eat a breakfast of wild rice and dried fruit. I toss a pinch of cooked rice onto an ant hill and sit on my haunches for a long time, watching the insects. One renegade ant from another mound moves in, steals a fat grain of rice. It's nearly twice his size. He grips it with his strong jaws and pulls it around, fending off guards as he zigzags across the pebbled mound. So fascinating, their constant movement, their ever purposeful existence. In the late summer months, I like to watch them haul tiny needles from desert plants atop their mounds for winter insulation, their lives timed more perfectly than any human-made device.

As the sun rises, I tidy up camp and prepare to head out, exploring on jeep roads. I've seen bobcats and wild horses in the hills, chased lizards scurrying along rock ledges with my camera. My husband has witnessed mountain lions stalking herds of bighorn sheep on the flanks of Steens Mountain to the west. But today, we load up the truck with extra water and snacks. Dust devils are spinning around in the distance. The desert playa is empty, otherwise. I'm looking forward to new discoveries and slide the key into the ignition. Now, the silence isn't as welcome as it was just moments ago. The battery is dead.

There is nothing to do but set out for help on foot across the playa. The road leading to the Fields Station, the nearest town, population 15, is five miles away on the other side of the lakebed. Looking across the desert with binoculars, the blue-gray horizon undulating on the other side of heat waves, we can see what could be a car or two, the way the sun appears to be glinting off of metal.



I try to conserve water and energy as we hoof it steadily towards the shining specks. Distance out here is warped by terrain and light, by the flatness of the desert, the whiteness of the cracked playa, the enormity of Steens Mountain, jutting into the sky in the distance. Objects seem to appear and disappear. Something that appears huge from afar can turn out to be a tiny shrub. Streaks of light and brilliant flashing in the distance could be nothing but a discarded beer can.

After what seems like hours of walking as the sun grows hotter by the minute, comes the first real noise I've heard all day. The sound of a machine. A fast machine. The cloud of dust and noise gets closer and closer until I can see a man on a dirt bike is roaring our way. "Hey, there!" he yells, pulling up next to me and idling. "We're shooting a documentary and I need to keep you out of the shoot zone."

"We have a dead battery about four miles away on the other side," I say. "And we're nearly out of water. Do you think we could get a jump?"

"If you're willing to wait until we finish this section of the shoot, sure, no problem. We're filming a guy named Ron Heagy. He's about ready to try to make his goal of driving a hundred miles an hour. Ron is a paraplegic," he continues. "He's driving a computerized muscle car with his mouth. He hasn't driven since his accident thirty years ago."

In the distance, I can just make out the car, silver and shimmering. I imagine Ron Heagy inside, sweating, strapped in, his mouth gripping the control mechanism. I try to picture his face, middle-aged like mine, hair thinning, youth lost too soon on a California beach in a surfing accident when he was 18. I imagine the stillness of his limbs, the excitement flashing in his eyes like a boy, the fluttering in his stomach as he prepares to hit the gas. A low rumble from the car ripples through the air, splitting the thick silence. The man escorts me to the film trucks where crew members give me water and offer granola bars. I sit in the shade of a vehicle and wait. In just a few minutes, Ron will or won't reach his goal. A short distance from the film trucks, Ron's wheelchair sits empty as the car revs in the distance. The souped-up hot rod is a 1968 Pontiac Firebird. The car looks like the best kind of wicked, polished and rumbling beneath the hot September sun. The camera crew is ready. Ron blows hard, and the car screams across the desert. The crew yells out speeds as he gets closer to his goal. Sixty. Seventy-eight. Eighty-five. Ninety-two. Ninety-nine. One hundred. One hundred and one.

Tears streak my dusty face as Ron slows and drives back across the desert, triumphant, a plume of dust rising behind the silver bullet.

We don't get a chance to meet Ron—he's swiftly taken from the car back to his motorhome parked

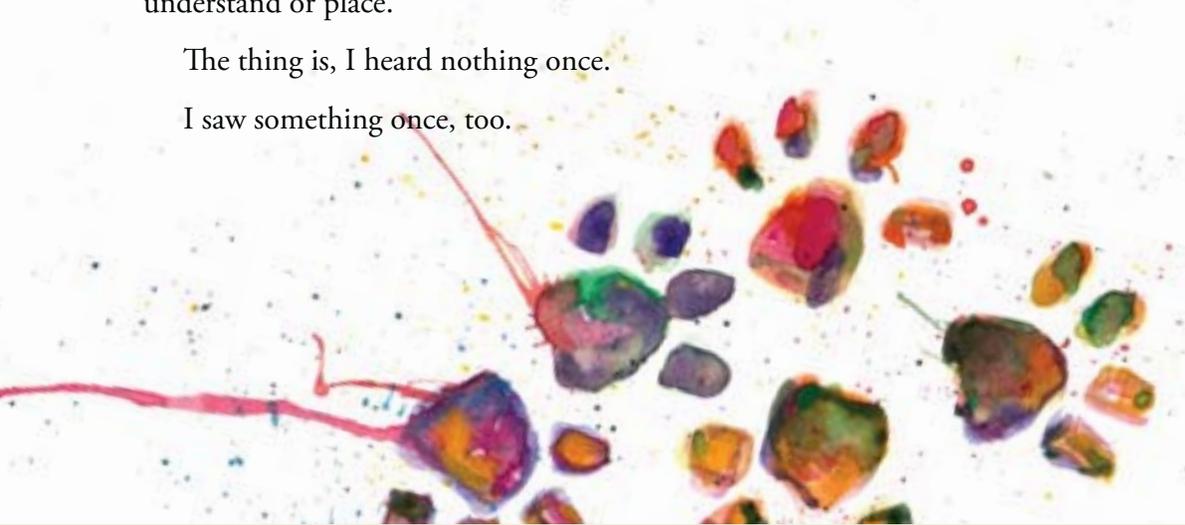
nearby. A crew member gives us a lift in the wheelchair van back to our car. He gives it a jump, says he's from the Midwest and can't wait to get out of this godforsaken place. The vast emptiness here makes him anxious, he says, like the ground could swallow him at any moment. We let the battery recharge, turn the engine off, settle back into the peace. I pull a beer from the cooler and go back to the ant hill, contemplating the day.

The rice is gone from the mound. The ants are retreating underground. The sun begins to fade, turning the sky purple and indigo, flushing the fat clouds banked up against the mountains a streaky bright orange and blood red.

I close my eyes for a moment and see the empty wheelchair, so stark against the bone white earth and the big, empty sky, can see the silver car racing away from crushed dreams toward something I will never be able to understand or place.

The thing is, I heard nothing once.

I saw something once, too.



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Learn more about her and her work at GinaMarieWilliams.com.

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