

“Water Rights”
by Tim J. Lord

Tim J. Lord
37-04 21 Ave., Fl. 2
Astoria, NY 11105
917-628-3176
timjlord @ yahoo.com

A vast body of water.

The body of water extends from a white, pebbly beach.

Near the white pebbly beach but rising from the water is a tree. The tree is dead. But the tree is full of birds.

Near the tree is a jetty. on the jetty there is a lone figure standing, looking out at the water.

The RANGER stands on the shore, looking out at the vast body of water.

The WATER AUTHORITY REP stands nearby. He alternates between holding a handkerchief to his nose and smoking.

THE WATER AUTHORITY REP:
The smell.

THE RANGER:
Yes.

THE WATER AUTHORITY REP:
It's bad.

THE RANGER:
It happens.

THE WATER AUTHORITY REP:
What is it?

THE RANGER:
There are massive algae blooms from time to time. When the algae dies it's fed upon—

THE WATER AUTHORITY REP:
The birds?

THE RANGER:
Not really. Mostly by microorganisms. they digest the algae

and they...

THE WATER AUTHORITY REP:
What do they do?

THE RANGER:
You know...

THE WATER AUTHORITY REP:
No. I don't. what do they do?

THE RANGER:
The same thing you or would I do?

THE WATER AUTHORITY REP:
God in Heaven! What do they do?

THE RANGER:
...They fart.

THE WATER AUTHORITY REP:
They fart?

THE RANGER:
Well, it's not exactly the same. But yes.
They eat, they digest, they emit this gas. Smells like sulfur.

THE WATER AUTHORITY REP:
Disgusting.

THE RANGER:
No.

THE WATER AUTHORITY REP:
Yes.

THE RANGER:
Not really.
The Salton Sea is a living body of water. You go to the ocean?

THE WATER AUTHORITY REP:
Of course.

THE RANGER:

The ocean is a living body of water.
Living bodies of water smell bad sometimes.
The ocean smells like this sometimes.

THE WATER AUTHORITY REP:

Not really. Not like...

(He inhales deeply.)

Jesus!

How do you stand it?

THE RANGER:

It doesn't last long.

THE WATER AUTHORITY REP:

Still... A sea in the middle of the desert.

There's a lot of it.

THE RANGER:

Yes.

THE WATER AUTHORITY REP:

How much?

THE RANGER:

Thirty-five miles long, fifteen miles across at its widest, for a total of three hundred seventy-six square miles of surface area. At its deepest, it's fifty-one feet.

And there are dummy versions of the original Hiroshima atom bomb down there—

THE WATER AUTHORITY REP:

(shakes his head. lights another cigarette)

How much?

THE RANGER:

The Sea waters every last acre—every square foot—of agriculture in the valley south of us—

THE WATER AUTHORITY REP:

But how much?

THE RANGER:

Ninety percent of all birds using the Pacific flyway stop on the Sea's shores during their migrations—

THE WATER AUTHORITY REP:

I don't care about birds.

THE RANGER:

People will you there's no fish, that it's too salty even for saltwater fish, and it's salinity is very high_ twenty-five percent greater than the ocean—so freshwater fish that find their way in, they don't last too long, but saltwater fish thrive here—

THE WATER AUTHORITY REP:

Wasn't there a huge die-off a few years back?

THE RANGER:

Yes. Ten years ago we lost 7.6 million tilapia and croakers—the algal blooms do that by consuming all the oxygen in the water—but scientific studies show that the Sea may have the most productive fishery in the world.

THE WATER AUTHORITY REP:

If you can keep salinity down.

THE RANGER:

Yes.

THE WATER AUTHORITY REP:

But my question—

THE RANGER:

What question?

THE WATER AUTHORITY REP:

how much?

THE RANGER:

...No. I answered that question.

THE WATER AUTHORITY REP:

Not completely.

THE RANGER:

Did I tell you the beach you're standing on isn't sand or even pebbles. It's the ground up bones of the fish and birds that have died here.

THE WATER AUTHORITY REP:

...You're not a very good salesman, you know that.

THE RANGER:
What? It's the truth.

THE WATER AUTHORITY REP:
Answer my question.

THE RANGER:
Did I tell you about the birds?

THE WATER AUTHORITY REP:
Yes.

THE RANGER:
Governor Sonny Bono worked actively to create the bird sanctuary we have today.
His death was a huge blow.

THE WATER AUTHORITY REP:
Yes. My condolences.

THE RANGER:
We named the wildlife refuge for him.

THE WATER AUTHORITY REP:
How much?

THE RANGER:
Three hundred seventy-six square miles—

THE WATER AUTHORITY REP:
Volume.

THE RANGER:
...I can't—

THE WATER AUTHORITY REP:
Yes, you can. You have to.

THE RANGER:
...7.5 million acre-feet at present.

THE WATER AUTHORITY REP:
At present.

THE RANGER:

At present.

But it used to be much higher. Currently, the surface of the sea is at two hundred twenty-eight feet below sea level, but in 1935 it was two hundred forty-eight feet below sea level, and in 1500, or thereabouts, there was a massive inflow from the Gulf of California, filling much of the basin and creating a body of water twenty-six times the size of the sea before you now. We call that ancestral body of water Lake Cahuilla, which seems a bit ridiculous, you know, to call something so much larger a “lake” while we call this a “sea”—but, oh, look there. That line on the mountains, stretches all the way down. That was the water line. We find the remains of mollusks and stuff like that up there all the time.

(silence)

THE WATER AUTHORITY REP:

You know, 1.3 million acre-feet of water flow into this Sea every year.

THE RANGER:

That sounds correct.

THE WATER AUTHORITY REP:

That water is worth a great deal to us.

THE RANGER:

Yes, I understand the value of water.

THE WATER AUTHORITY REP:

It's a waste to allow all that water to flow into barren desert.

THE RANGER:

—

THE WATER AUTHORITY REP:

We want it. We're going to get it.

And there's nothing you can do to stop us.

The WATER AUTHORITY REP exits.

The RANGER looks back to the sea. The RANGER looks to the tree.

The birds are gone.

The RANGER looks to the jetty.

The lone figure is there.

The RANGER waves.

But we blink.

And the lone figure is gone.

End of scene.