

## PRELUDE

**Desert Drag Strip**

***Date:** Wednesday, 15 Jan 1997 07:34:52*

The world reels by, unfurling at 90 miles an hour. At this speed, travel gains the sense of dance even on a relatively straight, flat interstate such as this section of I-395 heading for Death Valley. I am aware of the countryside, the gentle undulations of the valley floor contrasting the angular gyrations of slowly eroding hillsides; I am aware of the thinning stands of Joshua Tree and can pick out a few individual shapes for their magnificence or their decrepitude; I notice the snowline band so evenly frosting the hill tops. I notice that I am climbing toward that line, that I am now above it and that the snow along the roadside proceeds from spare dollops, to broad patches and then a thin crust with mesquite poking through.

If I slowed down—if I left the interstate and slowed down—if I were off the interstate riding a motorcycle, or better yet a bicycle—if I were walking along some nearly forgotten footpath, the world would appear different. Some have written the difference is qualitative, that we see the world from an inherently better perspective when we slow down, when we stop to smell the roses. I have been one of those writers. But it occurs to me now that I am painting the broad strokes of the desert in my mind, like the underlying wash that begins a watercolour landscape.

I have hiked through the high desert and driven through it on interstates, state roads, back roads and dirt tracks. I have flown over it dozens of times. At 36,000 feet patterns emerge that are impossible to imagine from the ground, no matter the rate of speed. Seated by the window on one flight, the desert sliding by below, I recalled from a hiking trip the sparsely vegetated, rock strewn sand stretching mile upon mile, where it washed out from ragged stone walls in a broad fan. Given time, the merest trickle of water eats the earth. I understood then how the drainage sparse desert rainfall could carve such a fantastic geometry from rock.

Northbound on I-395 I am suddenly overtaken by an F-15. Passing on the right just one hundred feet above sage and sand, the fighter jet hugs the valley floor, banks dramatically once and disappears over the next rise.

I am crawling northbound on I-395, nearly stopped at 90 miles an hour. I look again at the pointillistic patches of snow, at the pipe-cleaner arms of the Joshua Trees. It is so much easier to appreciate the fine details of the desert when one takes their time.

The speedometer shows numbers all the way up to 120 which sets me to wondering if a Plymouth Neon with a four cylinder engine can really go that fast.

It can.