



Photos by Gabe Thorburn

Inspiration Desert

By Rebecca Tavernini '11 MA

*...maybe
you are gazing out of windowless frames
at an extreme view of the world, one
of desert whorls surrounded by
mountains in their ageless presence;
a lake bed where sloths once came to bathe.*

—Russell Thorburn

These lines from “Somewhere in California, Three Hours from L.A. at a Prehistoric Lake” reflect the experience of the father-son team of **Russ Thorburn '85 BA** and **Gabe Thorburn '09 BA**, who served as Artists-in-Residence at Mojave National Preserve in California last spring. It is one of about 40 Artist-in-Residence programs in the national parks.

Their home base in the desert was the classic 1940s Zzyzx Mineral Springs and Health Spa, once a prehistoric quarry site and now a Desert Studies Center operated by California State University. The “Somewhere” poem is one of 70 that Russ, an NMU English instructor and author of four poetry books and a forthcoming novel, wrote as part of his stay.

Gabe, who has a degree in digital cinema, concentrated on photographing the desert environment with his 30-year-old film camera. He recently landed a job as online editor with Warner Bros. Animation in the post-production department, working on Looney Tunes, DC Comics and Hanna Barbera titles.

Their residency culminated with an exhibit of their poems and photos at the preserve’s Desert Light Gallery this winter, and a limited-edition coffee table book, *Many*

Names Have Never Been Spoken Here. The pair was also invited to do a reading in Palm Springs, sponsored by *Poets & Writers*.

“I happened to come across a special presentation about the Mojave National Preserve’s Artist-in-Residence program at a camera store in Hollywood across the street from where I was working at the time,” says Gabe. “It sounded so appealing to me because it combines two of the things in life I’m most interested in—nature and creativity. When thinking of ideas on how to approach the proposal for the application, I thought that poetry and photography would make a very interesting exhibit, given the depth of experience my dad has writing poetry.”

The presenter at the camera shop event turned out to be prominent photographer Bob Killen, who served as the first artist-in-residence at Mojave, who coincidentally also works closely with his own son, Kyle Killen, producer of such television series as “Awake” and “Mind Games.” Bob Killen opened up his studio to Gabe and became his mentor for the Mojave residency, helping him prepare photographs for the gallery exhibit.

“When you are in the Mojave Desert, and especially when you are driving by, it doesn’t look like there is a lot out there. However, once you get out there and start looking around, there are so many interesting things both up close and in the landscapes,” says Gabe.

“We’d usually get a late start in the day, when it was already 105 degrees,” says Russ. “So we would often go out at night and watch the gorgeous sun setting over the mountains. In the distance you could see the lights from a long line of cars on the Vegas to L.A. corridor.”

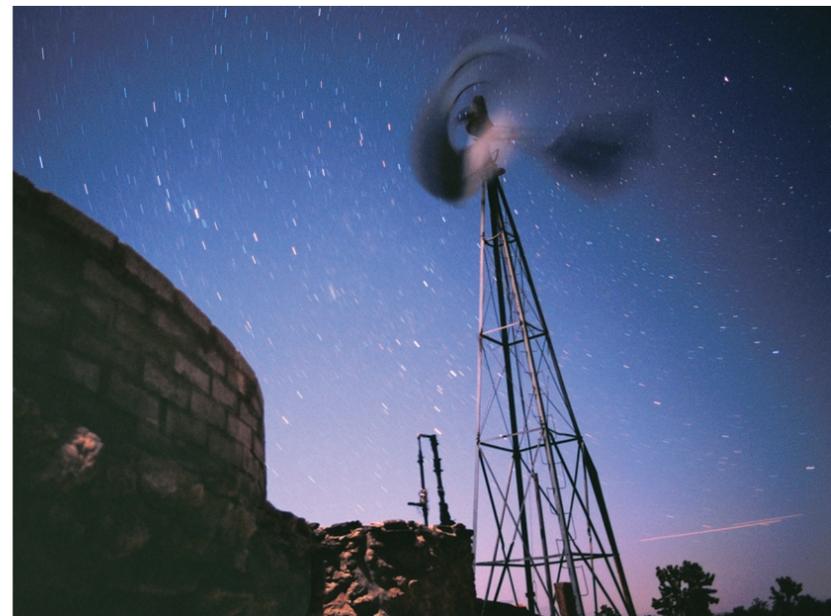
A traveling theme began to emerge. “A lot of poems focused on the Mojave Road, which has been used since the 16th century. I had the idea of travelers passing through, such as a southern belle, a slave, Walt Whitman... The mountains, scrubgrass, volcanic cones, a prehistoric lake bed—this all inspired these characters in my head—during the Civil War and World War I era.”

While the two tried to match poems and photos, and vice versa, they didn’t have the ability to look at photos while they were there because Gabe was shooting on film. Yet they saw many of the same things, and in the end, there was surprising unity, both artistic and familial.

“Being in a totally different environment than what we are both used to being in together was an experience in itself,” says Gabe. “Also it was a great experience to be both working on something that we love doing.”

Russ echoes the sentiment: “Working with my son has been fulfilling because we share the same blood and instincts. And out there in the Mojave Desert, we were experiencing the same sweat.”

This wasn’t the first time they teamed up on a project. Russ recalls being drafted, along with his wife and other two sons, to appear in many movies that Gabe made while at NMU. And Gabe has a long history of attending writer’s conferences with his dad, as young as three years old. Russ’s most recent book shows his own love of film and photography as well. *Misfit Hearts* chronicles the making of the movie *The Misfits* through filming-location photographs. And his new novel, *Things Long Lost*, where an L.A. detective goes to the Sonoran desert in search of his missing daughter, has a lingering desert feel. ■



The Windmill’s Never Still in the Desert

Up in the Shadow Valley
where ranches once
clung to the soil, the windmill still
keeps going round

as it pumps for water in a joyless
dirt,
and the cattle pen remains empty
where the ranchers

broke open hay bales to feed
their stock.
There’s a trough under the windmill

where the cattle drank sloppily;
it’s easy to know their thirst in a
place like this.

Dust we eat, drink, and remember—
even dream
with the soul of an animal.

In the propeller blades of the
wind-catcher,
an easy cadence, maybe too easy
in contrast to the desert.

A photo my son took caught
the windmill in mid-whirl;
you can almost hear the noise
of all that rattling.

The voices of the ranchers rough
from cigarettes
talk about pulling out after years
of heartache,

rain that never fell into their pockets;
of a truck filled with possessions:
the pinet slid

into a corner, the bench face up
with legs in the air,
stacked kitchen chairs, the whole
kitchen too,

with pots and pans clattering; box
springs wedged
between the table and television,
all ready to move.

We have been searching for the
right words and pictures,
for the voices that will tell us, father
and son,

everything about unloosened scrub,
the bones
of a road in the desert.

Out here a windmill’s a marker
for somebody’s
failed life, the ranch abandoned,

leaving only fence posts with barb
wire, but you can almost see
the ranchers during their spring
round-up

in the hills of scrub and Joshua
trees, where politics
doesn’t matter as much as a
good horse.

The windmill, like us on our journey,
is never still in the desert, even now
it digs for water,

and any drink from a metal tub
will soothe the hoarse throats
of ghosts.

—Russell Thorburn