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An Undiscovered Wilderness--Place and Self: a Digital Curation of Text and Images

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Place and Self: a Digital Curation of Text and Images

By

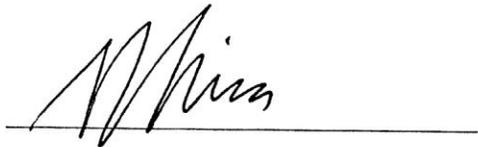
Alana J. Jajko

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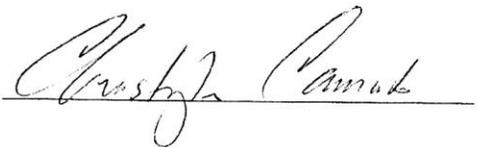
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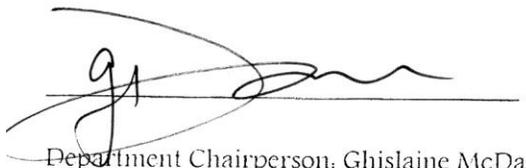
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Place and Self: a Digital Curation of Text and Images

An Undiscovered Wilderness

By Alana Jajko

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Introduction

When we travel, what do we take away from the places we see? Souvenirs? Memories? Do those places take something from us in exchange? Do they change us? Places and people are two ever-changing entities that interact constantly with each other, shaping each to the other's whim. Of course it is obvious how mankind has shaped the earth, mapped it out, built cities and set aside places to preserve the nature that was there first. But I seek to explore how the earth shapes us, how each landscape we visit becomes a part of us in some way, and how we connect places with certain feelings and emotions. Why does the environment leave such an impression? And this divide established between humans and nature? Why is that so ingrained? Are we not natural creatures ourselves? Perhaps that is why we are so drawn to nature.

I spent a summer traveling around the United States—camping my way through, stopping at some of the most moving natural environments in the country. The northern lands of Canada and the Great Lakes region, Yellowstone National Park, the cool refuge of the Redwood Forests, The Grand Canyon, and the dry abyss that is Death Valley were just a few of the many places I experienced. I began to think about how each of the places I found myself in affected me personally, and how nature has a strong pull on the individual in general. There is something in nature that inherently is already a part of us as human beings. We are automatically drawn to the beauty of a sunset or a forest or ocean, and repelled by the destruction of a forest fire or drought. There is a stark connection here between humans and nature, and these instilled reactions make me wonder how strong that influence of place is on the self.

The Great Plains

In nature, there is life and death. This is something true to us as human beings as well as everything else that exists naturally in the landscapes we visit. Some of the greatest feelings of life are stirred in the most unexpected of places. When you do not anticipate falling upon something so striking, it enlivens you that much more when you do. The Great Plains states—like South Dakota and Wyoming—I had always pictured to be wide open flat states with nothing really to see, just fields. But as we drove over and through this landscape, I began losing myself, drawn to the life outside in the endless plains, gold and green beneath the sun.

August 5th 2014

Upon entering South Dakota, there is a noticeable difference in landscape. Since Michigan we have driven through Wisconsin and Minnesota, passing farms and towns and occasional cities—but South Dakota is a place of flatlands and rolling plains. Hay bales dot the fields as numerous as if they were herds of buffalo grazing in the sun. On those fields that stretch unplowed, a wind from the west weaves through the uncut grasses, moving the thin blades in rippling waves. Wheat berries fan out with the wind in soft feathers towards the east. They shine, sleek like silk, like the coat of a mustang moving over muscle as it canters against the roaring wind and over the plains. There is something entrancing in watching this movement. It is a sight you can feel, just by seeing—a field you long to lie in, you long to move with, to run through in great strides, wheat rustling against your jeans and wind lifting your spirits to the skies as open and rolling as the plains below.

--en route to the Black Hills, South Dakota, SD-795

The essence of life that was so astonishing here was just the sheer beauty of the open landscape. But watching the golden fields roll by was only the beginning.

We began making our way through the Great Plains, home of Mount Rushmore and the Black Hills, and what we discovered was not exactly what we expected. There really was a surprise around every bend. We saw Mount Rushmore, of course, and around the first bend here we ran into a line of about 50 bikers passing in the opposite direction. We happened to be visiting during Sturgis Rally Weekend, where bikers from all over the country gather to do one big ride together—400,000-500,000 bikers overrunning the entire Southwest corner of South Dakota.

When we arrived, the famous carved mountain was hidden in fog. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Abraham Lincoln—great men of our country, chosen because of their roles in preserving the nation and expanding its territory; yet seeing them shrouded in fog brought to mind the great controversies surrounding their creation. The mountain was once known as Six Grandfathers to the Lakota tribe, but when the Black Hills area was seized from them, a treaty was broken. They had been promised this land forever, and it was taken. Nearly 50 years later, construction of the four presidents had begun, the “white man” leaving his mark on the territory. Much later, in the early 70s, there was an occupation of Mount Rushmore by members of the American Indian Movement. A holy man brought a prayer staff to the top of the mountain, claiming it to leave a symbolic shroud over the faces of the monument until the treaties of the Black Hills were honored. Looking back on that foggy day, I wondered if that staff still lay there, calling the ancient spirits of the Lakota to cover the white men in a blanket of fog.

As the day began to clear up, we drove over to see the construction of the Crazy Horse Monument on Thunderhead Mountain. It had been planned to be larger than Mount Rushmore, overshadowing its dominance, and representing a great leader and hero of the Sioux tribe.

Federal and State funding was refused for its construction, and from what we saw, the monument is still far from completion. The man who began this project suggested that Crazy Horse be sculpted along with the presidents of Mount Rushmore, but he received no reply. In being separate, however, there was a sense of freedom about this sculpture that Rushmore did not have. Crazy Horse looked out over the land as its equal, not something to be owned, his arm outstretched and pointing the way for his people. When I looked at Rushmore, I saw dominance—heads held high, looking out but not really seeing. Yet both structures took possession of the land, carved out of natural landforms into something manmade.

These two mountains stood in conflict—the four white men who mapped out the country, and the angry Indian who called the land home. That night we camped at the base of the Iron Mountain across from Rushmore, along with a few groups of bikers at a place called Wolf Camp. The owners of the camp were also the proud owners of two wolves—Akia and Wakan Tanka. We could hear the wolves howling in the night and again in the early morning. It was eerie, but beautiful—a sad, longing sound that resonated with something deep inside, instilled fear but awe as well. I wondered again, whether the Lakota spirits still haunted this earth, channeling their anguish through its creatures, wild beings caged by men. Sometimes we forget that we too are wild beings, creatures born from nature.

Writer and philosopher, Roger Scruton, talks of oikophilia, a concept that revolves around the “love of beauty and respect for the sacred” (253). He points out that many great thinkers considered the beautiful and sacred to be connected, something to be rescued from the “human urge to exploit and destroy” (253). In this place there was a correlation between a love of beauty and respect for the sacred. For many of us, we love nature because it is beautiful. We admire it, feel drawn to it, acknowledge its splendor. The people who carved into the mountains

recognized this greatness and used nature's beauty to immortalize a few men. For the Lakota, the land of the Black Hills was home. It held a beauty that they did not exploit because it was sacred. They used the land to live, and nothing beyond that until it was taken from them. They embodied a sense of piety for the earth. But in the seizing of the land this piety was lost, mountains blemished by the faces of men—white and Native American alike.

Regardless, this landscape spoke for itself—a territory of clashing ideals. And then there were the bikers, who seemed to embody another entity altogether. There was this greater sense of camaraderie amongst them, a unity of spirit—like a tribe riding free over the land on metal beasts in lieu of horses. Their presence was almost an invasion. We were outnumbered—even the population of South Dakota was approaching outnumbered—by your iconic American rebels. Only they weren't. Generally they were good-natured, regular people coming together to be a part of something big. They were all different, but they shared a purpose. To have this unity at a site of such controversy was a curious juxtaposition. The landscape spoke so loudly, yet so did this mass of people—a coming together in a place of historical dispute.

After spending the day in Keystone—seeing Mount Rushmore, Crazy Horse, and absorbing the sheer phenomenon of being outnumbered by bikers—we spent an evening in Deadwood, South Dakota (your iconic wild west town—bikers and motorcycles replacing cowboys and horses), and then made it out to the famous Devils Tower by midnight. Devils Tower, in the Northeast corner of Wyoming, was the United States' first established National Monument, and was made famous by the movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Of course, coming in at night, all we could see was a black mass against a horizon of stars. The camp we found was right at its base, and its shadow loomed above—dark, not a U.F.O. in sight—but still ominous. We slept, for a few hours, and then woke at sunrise to see the line of first light touch

the top of the tower and illuminate its strange vertical ridges in a red glow as morning approached. It was so strange seeing this stark rock formation in the middle of flat land and open sky, and it is no wonder it inspired the makings for a movie about extra-terrestrials. It was so alien, yet I was drawn to it. I remembered reading a Native American myth as a child, a legend of the Kiowa tribe about the mountain. In this story there were seven sisters being chased by a great bear. They jumped upon a stump that suddenly grew to the size of the mountain. The bear could not reach them, only leaving claw marks around the sides of the stump, and the seven sisters were borne into the sky, becoming the stars that make up the Big Dipper constellation. Different tribes have different variations of the story, but they all consider this mountain to be sacred, just like those in the Black Hills. This mountain was a natural entity, yet the people of the surrounding areas felt compelled to use their own cultures to explain the origins of its creation. I watched Devils Tower grow smaller as we packed up the car and drove further into Wyoming. It did look like a stump from afar, and I wished I had been more awake the night before to see if the seven sisters—the Big Dipper—really did hover above its great mass. But soon it was gone, over the horizon of fields, and we continued on to other places. Much of the drive consisted of the rolling plains, like in South Dakota, golden and green and beautiful. But then the landscape turned over the earth and rose suddenly as we drove through...

August 7th 2014

Canyons in Bighorn National Forest are an unexpected wonder to behold in passing through the countryside of Wyoming. A creek cuts deep, the road winding beside it, into vertical rock—red and yellow and brown, yet still dotted with the dark green pine of the forest. Each layer is another color, and around another bend we see Pyramid Rock. We are cutting deeper and deeper into the gorge with the creek, winding along the rock face. We had entered the

mountains from the east, from Wyoming's wide open frontier land. We now emerge into the west, into a completely different landscape. The canyons are softer here, from this other side. The fields of yellow grass stretch wide and sloping, like sand against the backdrop of sharper rock formations. The contours of the mountain lie stark against the sky, but the shadows of billowing clouds above knead its surface like red and gold dough baking beneath a Midwestern sun. Queen Anne's lace grows scattered on the roadside beneath an old weathered fence, and a sunflower reaching out of the red dirt fights to stand upright against the wind that exits the gorge between the canyons, banded like red agate.

--Bighorn National Forest, Highway 14, en route Yellowstone/Cody, WY

These mountains were some of the most awe-inspiring landscapes that I have ever seen. I don't know if it was because they were so unexpected, but turning that first bend to see the greatness of the layered rock surrounding us was one of those moments that awakened the wilderness within. It was a place where I felt so drawn to the nature around me that we had to stop the car a few times just to get out and bask in it. The mountains were jarring against the endless fields through which we had driven, like a sea of calm turned to storm. They stood still, but dynamic, the earth crashing in great waves before us. In one surreal moment, I felt like I knew what it was like to walk amongst a stormy sea frozen in time. Yet behind me, the waters lay tranquil—an even line of gold and green fields below, a great open blue sky above. The tops of these vast waves of rock felt like the top of the world, like I could see it all laid out right in front of me, the greatness of the earth we live in.

Yellowstone

After driving through fields and canyons and the Bighorn Basin, we approached Yellowstone. Thinking back on it, I began to wonder if National Parks were truly natural places. Even though they are meant to preserve and protect wildlife, they are a creation of man—marked off and fenced in with paved roads, restaurants, tourist centers and lodgings. Upon driving through Yellowstone, I was immediately turned off by the vast amount of tourists populating the place. The traffic was horrendous, and despite the warnings that people have been “gored” in the past by getting too close to wild elk and buffalo, I saw so many getting out of their cars and walking up a little too close to the wildlife to snap pictures. Yet the animals remained calm. I kept my distance and watched them from the road...

August 10th 2014

The low guttural groan of the bison rumbles softly over the plain as I approach. The herd is grazing along a road, heading north through the park from fishing bridge. This is my first sighting of wild buffalo going about their daily routine. A few calves hang close to their mothers while two bulls butt heads further out. Another two follow the fight like spectators while the rest graze about the field peacefully. The low grunts carry through the air and echo in my bones, deep and almost prehistoric like ancient beasts.

--wildlife of Yellowstone

I admired these creatures, but I found it strange how comfortable they were with the cars and people so close. Yellowstone was the very first national park established, on March 1, 1872, under the presidency of Ulysses S. Grant. But at this time, the Northern Buffalo were nearly extinct. While their population in North America was near sixty million in the early 1800s, in the late 1800s there was a mass slaughter for their meat and furs in an attempt to wipe out a

prime resource for the Plains Indians. Nearly destroyed, less than a thousand buffalo were left in North America by 1890. They were, of course, reintroduced to places like Yellowstone, but their existence is not the same as it once was. Like Mount Rushmore, a piece of nature was cut into because of the conflicts of man. The herd that I saw held maybe thirty buffalo. To think that they once roamed by the thousands is a wonder we might never see again. Though these creatures are “wild,” I wondered if we were unintentionally domesticating them by designating the place as a National Park. Man had asserted so much control over the species that it is hard to say if they are truly wild. Were they any less wild because they remained so calm around people, or were they only responding to the link of wildness that resides within us all? We, as human beings, are natural creatures, but can the things we create, the things we control, be considered just as natural? Yellowstone just seemed to be a wild place contained.

But then, I did also consider how large these parks actually are. Of course there are trails throughout much of Yellowstone, but they are more like small footpaths; and the main road just makes one big loop around the caldera—it was strange to think that the entire park is actually a volcano. The first night we decided to try some backwoods camping. It is a free, close-to-nature kind of experience where a park ranger assigns you a spot to pitch camp for the night and you hike into that spot. We camped for the night in an area of high bear warning, about two and a half miles from the road, right on Cascade Lake. By the time we had made it to the trailhead, night had fallen and we hiked to the site by moonlight. It was here where I felt that we were truly in a place close to nature, where the wildlife is free and holds reign over its home. As we approached the site, an eerie fog hung over the lake and the temperature began dropping. Though it was a frigid night, with temperatures falling down to the 30s, it is something that I would not have missed. When we woke, the fog was still there but instead of being lit by the

moon, the glow of the sun rising illuminated the morning, casting light through the trees and causing the frost in the fields to glisten. Though the fog kept the lake beyond our gaze, this place held a kind of beauty of pure wildness that made me question the control of man over nature that we experienced in other areas of the park.

Yellowstone was the first established National Park. Naturalists, like Emerson, Thoreau, and Muir were determined to awaken a sense of piety for the earth to counteract the abuse of our God-given wilderness back in the mid-late 1800s. In this awakening, the intrinsic value of beauty especially in the natural world was acknowledged, and we began sectioning off areas of wilderness for preservation. Though being at the center of Yellowstone gave the illusion of pure wilderness, the thought of this “fence” around the whole thing nagged constantly at the back of my mind. It was frustrating to me that in order to protect this beautiful place from the exploits of man, borders had to be placed. And though the park was created in the spirit of piety for the earth, I felt like this drive had been forgotten. It had just become an attraction, \$25 per vehicle to see the wonders of the earth. But these wonders did entrance me, and I found myself appreciating their beauty, regardless of how they were regulated. The control of man over nature could not trump its inherent magnificence.

The next day we made our way around the park to the famous geysers of Yellowstone. It was slow going. Along with the mass of tourists, some of the roads had melted from activity beneath the surface a few weeks before—another confrontation of the manmade in nature. Reconstruction was still underway, and so we faced delays up to two hours. We did see Old Faithful though, looking just like I had seen it on National Geographic, spewing boiling water from the earth. And we made our way around to some of the vibrant basins as well, notably the Grand Prismatic Spring. It was so bizarre, seeing such radioactive colors seething naturally in a

pool on the surface—oranges and yellows like bright marigolds, greens and teal blues fading to deeper hues like gemstone waters. From above, it surely looked like something alien. It was hard to believe that such colors existed naturally. But there they were, glowing like great sapphires embedded in the earth.

The landscape here, seeming so unnatural, got me thinking back to the Great Plains—all of those rolling fields and, of course, Devils Tower. It made me want to see the earth from the outside looking in, and so I did. Pulling up some satellite images, I could see the technicolor spots of Yellowstone’s basins—eyes of color, bright against a landscape of greens and browns. And then there were the fields of Wyoming. I was shocked to look down on those wide open prairielands and see circle crops—perfect circles. It felt so alien, just like the landscape of Yellowstone, only these fields that had so entranced me were not naturally laid out, not as open and rolling as I thought they were. How could it be that something so organic and beautiful was actually perfectly geometric, planned out by the tools of man? It was almost unsettling to look at, to realize the control that human beings could assert over the land on that scale. From where I stood, on that mountain in Bighorn Forest, the fields seemed to go on forever, but looking from a satellite, I discovered that this view from the top of the world was very limited in reality. And those circles, it baffled me that they could be so vast yet so perfect. Man held a power in shaping that land—but then, looking beyond those clusters of circles, I saw that Wyoming was really nothing but rock. It made those circles that I thought were so expansive seem very small. What had felt like freedom on earth, I realized, was actually very minor and contained on the larger scale of things. It was strange. It threw my perception of things into an array of uncertainties, but it was also fascinating to look down on these places from above and witness how a change in perspective could also alter my reality of these places to such a degree. It was here when I

realized that the experience of a place could be so changeable. When we are living life we are never seeing the bigger picture. We are experiencing places under the scope of a magnifying glass, detail by detail—mountain to forest to desert to lake—and not even those in their entirety. Everywhere we go, every place we experience, is just a brushstroke in knowing the greater painting of the universe. When we stop to think about where we are, in any place, the trails that follow those thoughts are endless.

The Redwoods

The Redwood Forest became another environment where a pull from my surroundings took over and submerged me into an entirely different state of being. The trees were just so big, the aura of the woods so enchanting. I felt like a child again, running from tree to tree, gazing up and up and wanting so badly to find a secret place, a quiet space that I could call my own in the heavy damp of the ancient wood...

August 15th 2014

There is another world in the Redwood Forest. It is a world of giants, ancient and wise. Their years are marked by roots, twisted and thick, as well as armors of bark weathered by centuries passed. This is my place. I break into a run and maneuver the tangle of roots at the base of a tree fallen at its middle. When I reach its trunk I stop and survey the roughened shell. It runs wide and tall but with nicks and crevices perfect for climbing. I get a strong foothold and begin making my way up to its split, steady and rising, longing for the quiet haven at the tree's center. I reach the lip of bark, pull myself over, and drop inside with a soft thud of foot on dirt. Inside the tree, there are layers of leaves and needles and rotted wood all packed tight. I sit upon this natural floor and run my hand along the cool inside of the trunk. Everything is muted,

even my own breath, at the heart of the tree. I look up and see the ridge, a ring of jagged bark, and beyond that, taller redwoods, running towards the sky.

--amongst the Redwoods

I closed my eyes and became one with the forest. I never wanted to leave. That was my place, exactly where I was supposed to exist in that space and time. Walking through those woods was like walking through a dream—content, happy, comforted. In the nest of the Redwoods I felt safe and at home, as if the trees stood as great guardians to a hidden sanctuary by the sea. I never realized how close to the ocean the Redwoods were. They thrive off of the moisture, and the limitations there are to building in that particular area. Their location is a blessing, untouchable and still. They stand over their carpets of needles and bark, thick and strong and quiet...yet there is a hum to the woods. The air is thick with moisture and muted by layers upon layers of packed dirt, leaves, and bark, but there is that hum, a purr of life in my pocket of woods.

This place was enchanting. The air was heavy and soothing and cast a spell over my sense of being. I was a child again. The trees were just so big and I wanted to climb them. I wanted to burrow in the twists of gnarled roots, and get lost in the nests of weathered bark. I ran from tree to tree, desperate to explore, to become a part of their ancient secret. The trees were alive and so was I. Something in this place changed me for the time I was there, awakened the wild side within me. It brought me back to the days when the landscape was my playground. When I would climb crooked branches, thick with knots and covered in sap, and I would climb into another world. I could sit amongst the highest limbs and peer through to see the ocean stretching as far as I could see, imagining what monsters or lost cities lay beneath. I would sit

there, clutching the branches, sea breeze stirring scents of pine and salt, and wonder what would happen if I took the plunge beneath the water, traveled to its depths, and explored these forgotten civilizations that I wanted so badly to exist.

Of course, those had been my imaginings from the coastal pines of Maine—these were the coastal Redwoods of California. From one coast to another, I wondered what I would be able to see if I climbed to the top of a Redwood. Could I see the ocean? I could feel it in the air, so heavy with the sea that I could almost taste the salt. It thickened my hair and tickled my skin. My fingers itched to grasp that first bit of bark that would take me to the top of the world. There is something different about climbing a tree than climbing a mountain. With a mountain, you feel the changes of the earth, know you are rising, can see it rolling down behind you as you strive upwards. On a mountain you are grounded—but with a tree in the depths of a quiet wood, you are surrounded by thick branches, nowhere to go but up or down, and only when you near the top do you know how far you have risen. From a tree, you are hovering—clinging to the earth's canopy from a place known only to the clouds. I longed to reach the top of a Redwood. From the ground, they forever rose like great totem poles to the heavens. They were wild and grand and I was drawn to them. I left the place of the Redwoods covered in dirt, with leaves and needles and twigs snagged in my hair. I let the wildness of this place take me and it was glorious.

Each place I visited became an experience in itself. Martin Heidegger speaks of a notion like this in his "Building Dwelling Thinking," through the "concept of 'fourfold' as a central aspect of dwelling" (the cultural studies). He argues that in the fourfold intersection of earth, sky, mortals, and divinities, a place really becomes an experience. The earth becomes the supporting ground, the physical place from which we are nurtured. The sky embodies our gaze

“beyond,” a sense of spirituality and aesthetic experience. Mortals refer to human beings, how we come to accept our nature, and the inevitability of life and death. And divinities are what exist beyond that and everywhere in anonymity—they hold a “concealed presence in everything that surrounds us” (the cultural studies). Through a unity of the fourfold, a metaphor for existence in any given “dwelling” or place occurs. A sense of self can be formed in this experience of place. When I entered the dwelling of the Redwoods I felt a part of my inner self awoken that been dormant for quite some time. I felt the call of the forest, and a piece inside of me had answered. There was a reciprocity amidst those trees—myself, a mortal, existing between the sky and the earth with a greater sense of the divine living within it all.

I soon came to realize that with every place I visited, a different feeling nudged its way into my being, provoking thoughts and ideas that I had never before considered. Even though the Redwoods were a National Park, the place felt truly wild. The paths that went through the woods were dirt, and there were very few paved roads that drove through the park itself. It was one of those places that seemed untouchable—weathered with age, but old and strong, and humming with life.

Yosemite

Our world consists of life and death—but there is also a meshing of the two, a conflict of life and death, in the world we live in. Forest fires, especially, embody this conflict. Out west, notably in California, the land had been plagued by draught, causing lakes and waterways to dry up significantly. While we became so used to showering freely at most campgrounds, when we reached California, water was expensive—costing two dollars for every minute you wanted to

shower; and as we traveled, we began to see more and more evidence—trees dried up and scorched by fire, water levels in rivers replaced by sunbaked dirt, and red smoke rising in the distance. We saw the smoke when we had reached Yosemite. Its trademark view of El Capitan lacked the sight of Bridalveil Falls, for it had dried up. The trees lacked vibrancy in the emerald green we expected, and turning a bend we saw the smoke. The smoke of wild fire is red, and the fire can go out of control so easily. As I followed the smoke from the car window, I wondered what it would feel like to get caught in the heat of wildfire at your heels...

August 16th 2014

Around a bend I see smoke rising from the thick of the woods. It is tinted with the red of wildfire. My mind leaves my body, the car, and I am born on the wind, drawn to the spell of the growing billows. They capture me with wispy arms and I swirl down to its depths, to the edge of the raging fire, swallowing tree after tree. Though a breeze caresses my face through the car window, I am caught in the suffocating heat of the fire. Its glow peers through the brush, sparks flying to the heavens, the deep rumble of flames overtaking the silence of the woods and wildlife long-fled. This is the edge. The leaping tongues hot on the heels of life, consuming, devouring, wherever the wind may take it. I feel its warmth upon my skin, growing hot, and the smell of burning wood filling my lungs.

--In Wildfire

Around another bend, and I saw the skeleton of a forest. My mind had returned—charred trunks standing, but barren, sloping along an empty scape, the smoke of distant fire visible through the remaining branches. Wildfire is deadly, yet its energy rages forth with life. There is even some life, some plants that need the fire in order to survive. Jack pines, for example, have

cones sealed with a resin that can only melt and release seeds by the heat of a forest fire. The giant Redwoods and the Sequoias of California also have serotinous cones like these. And then there are some plants that can only grow from the nutrients in the ashes left behind. Though they are most definitely destructive to healthy life as well, periodic fires do get rid of old and diseased plants to make room for younger trees and plants in their stead. These fires are just a meshing of life and death, a vehicle for the natural cycles of life. And though we try to control it, work with it, and fight it off, it is one of those greater forces of nature that man just cannot contest with.

A week later, after we had left Yosemite far behind, we heard on the news that forest fires had begun sweeping through areas of the park, destroying a few buildings and leading to the evacuation of thousands. Another week passed, and a fire had taken over a popular area of the park, growing to burn through 700 acres. About 100 visitors caught in the smoke had to be evacuated by helicopter. Fire crews had attempted to keep the fires under control, but the tools of man can only do so much against the forces of nature. We were lucky to have just missed this breakout of wildfire, but hearing these reports sparked something that I had been thinking about since the first National Park we visited, Yellowstone in particular. Are National Parks truly natural places? Have we, as human beings, in sectioning these places off, turning them into tourist attractions, disrupted the sanctity of wilderness?

Back in Yosemite, before the forest fires, we pulled off the winding roads to take a break from the car, and enjoy the world outside.

August 16th 2014

Tenaya Lake is a treasure trove. The waters glisten like molten gold in a pool of aquamarine and sapphire. I dip my toes into the chilled mountain liquid. A marvel of color—

reflections of the trees and skies and rocky landforms all melt into one body moving and changing, frigid and fresh and radiant. I let the energy of the earth flow into my center—through the waters at my feet and through the sun at my back. Amidst the flowing waters, sunlight glints in golden coins between and over the stones of the lake bed. I soak this up too, nature's mirage. I feel the light play upon my skin, reflecting the treasures of the earth.

--Yosemite, Tenaya Lake

It was moment of pure serenity—where everything slipped away into those crystal waters and I could feel myself drawn to the earth. Moments like these perhaps affected me the most in a way that is hard to relay. It was what one might call an aesthetic experience, a feeling of complete euphoria and closeness to the sublime, yet so calm and content. It was yet another experience of place. Environmental philosopher, Erazim Kohák, argues that it is the “intersection of eternity with time whose locus humans can be” (202). In that time and place, a moment by the lake—now a memory—had been created for eternity. Kohák says “it is the privilege and the task of humans to recognize and to act out the presence of eternity in time” (202). And so I did. I felt here my roots as a natural being, putting my mind out to the lakebed, the mountains, and the trees around me. I felt immediately connected to the surrounding life, and I established that moment in time as something eternal in my own mind. I felt like I had become one with nature—like amongst the Redwoods, and looking over the rolling fields of the Great Plains—but in another way. Each of these places left me with a distinct feeling, all different, but all awakening something deep within. I felt a kind of bond—like with each place visited I understood something new—whether it was a thought, a feeling, or some bit of inexplicable knowledge. The earth was speaking to something within me, and that something was responding to its call.

But of course, these moments would come and go and we swept ourselves back into the car, leaving the winding roads of Yosemite behind for the long flat tracks of western desert—the start of our journey back east.

Death Valley

For the most part, these close-to-nature places left me with a feeling of wonderment and made me feel small, but not in a bad way—they heightened the realization of my place in natural world. It was humbling to stand next to these massive wonders of the earth, to think they were here ages before we even existed, and that they have stood to watch the changes happening to the earth each day. Each of these places hummed with the glow of life at its center. And I felt myself become a small waypoint on this map of the world, connected to everything around me. Yet, I soon came to realize that there was something to say for those places seeming vacant of life as well. Death Valley, crossing from California into Nevada was one such place...

Life in Death

August 19th 2014

We've entered Death Valley just around sunset. The landscape is desert spread wide, spotted with bristled shrubs and barbed cacti. Dusk is fast approaching. The frontline of shadows creeps up the mountains, lining the valley as we sink further into its depths. At the basin's center the temperature has risen—113 degrees farenheight at 9PM. The red-orange glow of the departing sun fades over the horizon and the valley is enveloped in stifling darkness. The heat of the day has been trapped by night, and a warm wind picks up, leading us on our way back east. I glimpse out the window and see the stars blinking into existence. They dust the sky in an ethereal geography of their own—glinting in both clusters of galaxy and spread sparse

across the desert of black. Yet many more gather in the great band of river that stretches north to south in the summer evening landscape—the Milky Way. We've stopped to admire the tapestry of night sky. The silence in Death Valley is deafening. Only the wind, still warm, wanders in this wilderness. I look up at the stars, at the Milky Way, and feel its arm wrap around the earth. For, we too, are part of this celestial range.

--night in Death Valley, en route Dallas Texas, Rt. 380

I never saw the desert in the daylight, but in the darkness it seemed so devoid of life, nothing but black along an endless terrain of dry, flat land. Likely there were bobcats, coyotes, and mountain lions hunting in the night for rabbits, rodents, lizards, and birds—iguanas and rattlesnakes slithering about the ashen brush—and in the upper reaches of Death Valley's mountain range, I imagined the big-horn sheep finding perches in places unreachable by man. But it all was camouflaged by the drapery of night. I heard a rustle of the flora on the wind, smelled the dustiness of crumbling dirt, but that was all. The silence on earth forced us to look up and out to other worlds. We could see so clearly the trillions of other stars just beyond our reach, seeming so close, yet light years away. It laid spread across the sky like a great tapestry, and I began to wonder what stories it told—stories of creation, and of destruction to be sure, of life and of the passing of years. In looking at the sky, I was looking into the past. The years that it took for the light to travel that far had long passed on the stars I saw in the heavens above. And to think that the sky we see at night is only a fold in the great tapestry of the universe. We sit on another patch of endless stories, another waypoint, a speck of light in the dusting of stars that weaves the cloth of time and space.

That was Death Valley. It took us a good few hours to pass through with multiple stops to make sure the car did not overheat. This was the middle of nowhere. The one gas station we passed priced its gas at just over six dollars per gallon, and when we saw the headlights of a car in the distance it was a good half an hour before we actually crossed paths with it. This was a dangerous place for a human being, a place where survival was limited to the well-equipped species. The creatures of the desert had their genetic adaptations to subsist in this environment. We had a car. The experience of passing through this place was one of a kind—eerie. But when we stopped the car and got out to stretch, it wasn't so strange. We looked up at those stars and everything was alright. The air was warm; the scorching heat of the day had been swallowed by the earth and a pleasant warmth encircled us on the wind. It was quiet, all but for the empty rustle of a breeze through desert brush. I could see the horizon on all sides, a great ring, lighter in the west where the sun had set a few hours before, and darker in the east glimmering with night. This was the desert, thriving off what it was, dry and flat. But stopping to appreciate what we could, we found it to be beautiful in its own way. In a place feeling so barren of life, we found it looking up.

From Death Valley through Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas, the world was endlessly flat. Flat and dry. The red earth screamed for moisture, curling up to the skies—tumbleweed, the stuff from movies, actually crossing our path. In the rearview mirror, I saw the skies darken. It was approaching fast, and as we drove we could see another storm brewing up ahead.

August 18th 2014

Caught between two storms the desert is stirring. I can see the wind before I step out of the car. It carries dirt off of the cracked floor in dry wisps, taking flight before the rain to come.

I step out and each foot hits the parched earth with a crunch. It curls upwards, reaching in anticipation, longing to taste the drops of sky. The sky flashes in answer—a charged bolt from cloud to ground. The earth is ringing, red and spotted with brush. This too reaches for the sky, beginning to yellow for lack of rain. Wisps of sky begin to fall, its fingers brushing the earth, chasing the last bits of dust to air. It is coming, reaching down to embrace all that looks up. A jagged desert mountain stands on the horizon, indifferent. I turn to face the wind—to greet the first drops of a desert storm. They come running like children of the sky, hugging my skin in joyful embrace. I smile and the clouds open in welcome.

--roadside storm Rt. 160, near Kayenta, AZ

After miles upon miles of desert lands, the coming of this thunderstorm was something I did not realize I needed until it had come. I got out of the car amidst the rumbles of darkening skies, and watched the frontlines of the storm approach. The winds picked up, the clouds charged in and the rain was released to the ground. I closed my eyes and let it wash me clean. The red earth turned to mud and I walked upon it, climbing a slight hill on the roadside to see the outskirts of Monument Valley—a rock formation here and there, stark against the changing sky. A white flash, and a web of lightning reached out to the rock. I thought of Yosemite, where we had just been a few days before. Lightning is a top trigger of forest fires; it is the component that activates that cycle of life and death—the power source of nature. Its long spindly bolts brush the earth like fingertips, a touch of the gods. The stuff that falls from the skies is the stuff of life. It perpetuates all that lives on the earth. In a desert, like this one, it may take days, even weeks, for the rain to come, but it always does, showering the earth with a gift that it will cling to, soak up, and ration until the next storm relieves its thirst.

Being in the midst of this storm, I felt centered, felt my place in the universe. Like Heidegger's fourfold for place as an experience, the Cherokee have a concept of the seven sacred directions. In addition to the cardinal North, South, East, and West there is also Above, Below, and wherever we are at any given point, Within. That is the here, the now, the center of the self within, and wherever we are, these seven sacred directions are with us, carrying the energies of existence. East and West signal beginning and endings while North and South embody the natural environment and elements of weather. Above reaches skyward to the energies of the entire universe which are then carried through our centers down to Below—everything that lies at ground level, our physical realities on the earth that sustains us. There is a reciprocity that ties these directions together, creates a path for the flow of energies around us wherever we are. Standing amidst that storm, I felt the vibrations of existence come together into an experience of place at its greatest. I felt these energies flowing, the sky above colliding with the earth below, then spreading across the desert wilderness in all four directions around me.

New Orleans

On the outskirts of New Orleans, there lies a 140-acre Six Flags Amusement Park located on the lip of land between Lake Pontchartrain and the Gulf of Mexico. The happy chaos of excited voices and screams of delight, however, is long gone, silenced by the floods brought by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Submerged in about seven feet of water, the park was condemned to abandonment. Most of the buildings were gutted of their main equipment, but the larger rides remain still and barren in the absence of their occupants—dusty bumper cars with seats ripped and worn, log flume rusted and inhabited by alligators, roller coasters mere skeletons stripped of their old excitement, sky swings hanging sadly from their chains, and the faded ferris wheel standing alone in the distance.

This was on our list of places to visit, so we snuck across its boundaries by an old service road into the park. The pathways were long overgrown, weeds strangling washed out equipment, and trees reaching past cement boundaries. Tiny lizards lurked in vacant buildings, and a bat, disturbed by our presence, shot out of its daytime resting place. This place, left by man, had been taken over by its environment. It was now home to the creatures of the bayou, gators and lizards and wild plants. The air was thick and hot with humidity and the sun glared on the white cement, but we could hear a storm rumbling in the distance, see the dark clouds approaching.

Around one bend, Patrick and I heard voices and we looked at each other, alarm bells going off in our heads. Shane was photographing the roller coaster, so we tried to get his attention.

“Shane!” We shouted his name quietly, but he couldn’t hear us, and just as he finally turned we caught a glimpse of two people dressed in gray.

Patrick and I had already started running and Shane wasn’t far behind. We didn’t know if they were kids or guards or vandals, but in a place as vacant as this—human presence instilled fear and uncertainty. We hid in the remains of an old arcade, breathless and silent. If they were guards, we did not want to be caught. My heart hammered in my chest as we heard them coming closer. One of them laughed and started running. We let out the breaths we had been holding. It must have been a couple of kids in their school uniforms, but we still did not want to be seen.

We were trespassing. The park is currently owned by the city of New Orleans, but in its abandonment it was closed to the public. Though we didn’t see any signs, we knew we did not belong there anymore. It reminded me of one of the lesser known verses in Woody Guthrie’s song “This Land is your Land”...

*As I went walking I saw that sign there
And on that sign it said "No Trespassing."
But on the other side it didn't say nothing,
That side was made for you and me.*

We were acting on the freedom and desire to roam, just like the American ideal that this song is so iconic for. But the thing was, in a place like this, manmade boundaries hardly held meaning anymore. Human hands had created the place, but in leaving it to the wilds of nature, it had become something different—created a new kind of boundary. We were trespassing in a different sense, disturbing the quiet that had settled in the absence of people. The ghost of an old New Orleans was still there, echoing in the walls of abandonment, but to think of the delighted screams and joyful laughing in the place that it had become was eerie. Something else had taken over. The water rides had become swamps, swallowed by the bayou, and the rollercoasters strangled by jungle weeds. Vines roped themselves around queue lines and invaded operation booths, and the pathways lay baked by the sun, washed by rain. Those places in the shadows, old arcades and food courts, were now home to nocturnal critters. You could hear something move here and there when you entered a building—tiny feet over broken glass, a flutter of wings in the rafters. This place was now in the arms of nature. Nature is resilient. To think of the grass that snakes so stealthily through city sidewalks, or the dandelions that pop up the day after a lawn is mowed—this place had gone beyond the little rebellions.

August 21st 2014

The old service road into the place is something out of Jurassic Park. Wild plants stand waste-high, clinging to my legs as I pass, and I can barely see the fence, long run over beneath

strangling weeds and vines. I tread lightly over top, barely glancing for a “keep out” sign. I know it is long gone. The heat of the bayou is sopping with moisture. I feel it gather at the base of my neck, and trickle down my spine. By the time I enter the heart of the park I am soaked through. There is a foreboding with each step I take, a sense of estrangement. This place has been lost to man, we don’t belong. I step beneath the shade of a building...some kind of arcade? A food court? The glass of shattered windows snaps beneath my feet. I look around the room from where I stand and see graffiti, unidentifiable rubble, and ceiling fans sagging from their fixtures having once been drenched by floodwaters. There is an emptiness to it all. I turn to go and feel a ghost of the past brush my mind—“remember the old New Orleans” lay painted on the wall. Tiny lizard eyes watch from the shadows of the doorway, and I see a bat here and there resting in the rafters. The only thing that stirs is a storm echoing in the distance.

--a moment in a place long gone, Six Flags New Orleans

The threatening storm never came. We slipped quietly away, leaving behind the park that was no longer ours, the sign that still read “CL_SED FOR STORM”—the “o” carried off by the winds of Katrina long ago when the storm hit.

The change that this place had undergone in the nearly 10 years since its abandonment was most noticeable in its aura, the feeling of being there. Sure, the rides had been mostly gutted and the wildlife of the surrounding area had flourished, but the vacancy in a place that had once been home to so much vivacity was jarring. There was a new kind of life that had taken over—the subtle existence of nature, snaking its way back to places where it had surely been before the park was even built. The divide between man and nature was most visible here. Though, arguably it was the boundary between the manmade and nature that was truly at work. Again, I

came back to that question: We ourselves are natural beings, but can the things we create be considered natural as well? In a place so grounded in boundaries, this sense of divide was impossible not to think about it. The manmade borders had perished to the ghost of a time long gone, and with that new invisible boundaries, feelings of separation, clung to the sense of place. Warning hung in the air that was so thick with humidity. Just a constant sense of estrangement, that something was not as it should be. It was peculiar but beautiful all at once. I only wished I could melt into the landscape, become a pair of the invisible eyes that always seemed to be watching.

Conclusions

The Great Plains, Yellowstone, Redwoods, Yosemite, Death Valley, New Orleans

In the Great Plains I came to appreciate the beauty of a dynamic landscape rolling open and wide and rising to unexpected canyons—but also came to realize the power in symbolism that we attach to places—carving faces in mountains to immortalize man, using a natural monument to assert control over the land and each other. It was a place emanating with desire—desire to own the land, and desire to take it back—etched in the faces of four great Presidents and a determined Sioux leader upon mountains. In Yellowstone, I began to question our relationship with nature. Are we natural beings? Can the things we create be considered natural? What about National Parks? Can the wilderness that we fence off really be thought of as natural? Why is there this divide? Are we not natural beings ourselves? It was only in those deepest parts of Yellowstone, the backwoods, where I felt the wildness truly thrive, yet I did feel at peace with my surroundings, which made me question that divide even more. And then there

was alienness of it all—the circle fields of the Plains, and the technicolor basins of Yellowstone. It made me realize how changeable our experiences of place could be.

The Redwoods then altered my state of mind completely, took me back to when I was just a child, longing to explore and be lost to the enchanting trees. Climbing and feeling the earth packed beneath me, the air heavy with seaside moisture, and my spirit longing to be wild and free. And then there was Yosemite, whose forest fires provoked thought on the destruction and creation of life—how we try to fight it, control it, and work with it—while it is really a process meant to be left to its own, perpetuating the natural cycles of life. It brought back those same thoughts on Yellowstone—in sectioning off a National Park and controlling these natural fires are we disrupting the sanctity of nature?

And when the earth seemed devoid of life in desert lands like Death Valley, I recognized a calm quiet in the glimmering night, looking up and out to other worlds and feeling the greater pull of the universe in the life of distant stars. It was then that I realized nature extended even beyond the world we know on earth. Then finally, in the Deep South of New Orleans, there was the abandoned amusement park, a manmade attraction lost to the forces of nature nearly ten years ago with the coming of Katrina. Something created by the hands of men, destroyed by a hurricane and taken back into the arms of nature—a jungle of overgrown foliage and a home to the gators, lizards, and bats of the bayou. In its abandonment, this place became a refuge for those lesser beings of nature looking for a home.

But strangely, this last place tied everything together. It was vacant, but it was a different kind of emptiness than I had experienced in the desert night of Death Valley. It was the vacancy of something lost, perhaps the ghost of the childhood that was so awakened in the Redwood

Forest. There was a sense of nostalgia in the park so tied to childhood, to the old thrills of youth, like the desire to climb those great trees—yet it was alien, strange to encounter in a place so changed, so ravaged by the forces of nature. It was another kind of estrangement, like what I felt from the satellite images of Wyoming. That was a rift from a god’s point of view, a change in perspective. Here in this park, I was seeing things, feeling them, up close. The wilderness that had flourished from an event of such destruction, flooding the city and this park along with it—this tied right back with Yosemite’s forest fires, nature destroying old life to make room for the new. I stood at the center of this jungle, rollercoasters, sky swings, and ferris wheel all drained of the life they once held, and replaced with something new, an overgrown habitat with a life of its own. And then there were the boundaries of this place to be considered, manmade and natural, reawakening all those questions that had arisen in Yellowstone.

With each of these places new thoughts and ideas, powerful feelings, seeped into my mind and being, and I realized that each of these places were connected with what we deem the natural world in one way or another. There is an undiscovered wilderness within ourselves that awakens when we are close to nature. It is a part of us—a calling that we cannot ignore. We are drawn to the life from which we are created and it exists everywhere we go. From the ever-changing landscape of the Great Plains to the subterranean volcano that is Yellowstone, from the thick enchantment of the Redwood Forest to the spreading wildfires of Yosemite National Park, from the driest of deserts in Death Valley to places like New Orleans ravaged by the floods of a greater force of nature. They are all so different, yet each one speaks to the soul—moving landscapes in a natural world that resonates with a wilderness within.

Other Journals

The following entries, along with those incorporated in the main text, are segments taken from a sketchbook and journal that I kept as I traveled from one place to another. The creation of this text and its existence amongst the rest of these writings has a place in the ideas of Timo Maran's notion of a nature-text. A philosopher of semiotics, Maran studies how landscapes, as represented in a text, symbolize the experience of the intersection of environment, text, author, and reader or participant. Usually one would think on this idea in relation to a piece of literature, making the environment one of the imagination. But in a way the landscapes here, in each of these entries, did the writing for me. I felt the earth speaking to me in some ways or others, and wrote these musings upon the pages of my sketchbook as I traveled. These texts are reflections of the environments they discuss, and though I did write them, I wonder if the landscapes are actually playing the role of authorship. Looking back on them, I find myself acting as the reader, an outsider experiencing these places once again through the writings of a distant me, one engulfed in the existence of each place.

July 30th 2014

Today the clouds lay staggered like stepping stones to the sky—thicker at the bottom of the horizon, smaller bits break away from the smooth mass and rise to the sun—separated by a trickle of blue that permeates each stone of cloud. The sky is a deeper blue at the pole, straight up, then fades down to a paler blue at the edges of horizon. It is a stream and the clouds are pebbles, stones, boulders. A few lumber close to the tips of Canadian pine, heavy, so close to the

fingertips of earth yet forever floating in the sea of sky. In the west they billow, great and white and full, like the sails of a ship that billow with the wind. And yet, from the east they stretch, long and smooth, like waves of ocean upon the shore at low tide.

--Leaving from Sturgeon Bay

July 30th 2014

Heading north through Canada on highway 69, the forests gather thick and green on either side. Nature is dense here. The trunks of each tree stand close and strong as guardians to their sacred wood. Their sanctuary is broken only by scattered faces of rock, with guardians of their own. At the tops of some mounds, here and there, sits a cairn—small, but balanced and standing high upon its domain. The trees still stand behind, just pushed back by the sleeping rock of earth beneath. As these hills rise and fall, the trees do as well. The earth breathes as it sleeps. I see it in these swells, rising and falling, steady, even, still.

--en route Sault St. Marie

July 31st 2014

This morning Lake Michigan was absolutely stunning. The water lay peaceful reflecting the pale blue of the sky above, yet the two worlds became one with the settling of the morning fog in a soft peach mist. It was as if the gods has made their bed for the day, stretching the sheet wide and laying it down upon their bed of earth blanketing the realm just between the heavens and below in a soft, luminous mist on the horizon. In the lake, a needle of light shines blinding in answer to

the sun's glow in the morning sky. The beacon of the gods shines bright today, challenged only by the dark gray of storm clouds in the distance.

--upon leaving Castle Rock campground, early morning, Lake Michigan

August 2nd 2014

The air up north is fresh. I close my eyes and let the sun spread its warmth on my skin, but the air that is carried on the wind brushes my cheek with cool fingers. The touch is light, but crisp and vivid. I look out to Lake Superior. I feel the ice at its center carried on the wind though it is midsummer. The sand too is cooling as the sun sinks below the horizon. Its last light glimmers in a warm glow upon the lake. As it falls, I dig my toes into the sand, clinging to the last dregs of warmth. A sliver of rose, I realize I am holding my breath, and inhale sharply to a lungful of cold. The sun takes its final plunge, and I long to follow its radiant path to a world below the lake, an escape from the approaching cold that is night.

--sunset on Superior, near Blind Sucker #2

August 9th 2014

The sound of the water lapping against the rocks beneath the cove is healing to my being. It is constant and soft and lulls me into a state of balance with the earth. I take a clump of dirt in my fist and feel its warmth gifted by the sun. It is heavy yet comforting, and lifts to the wind and over the lake as I loosen my fingers and turn over my palm. The lapping of water over earth continues. It's as if this bowl of rock and dirt was an extravagant goblet—the water, a fine

nectar sloshing in the cup of a jovial god. I lift my face to the sun and let the lapping of the lake sing its praise—a drink of earth and toast to life!

--cove on Yellowstone Lake, afternoon watching sun-sparkled waters reach for the shore

August 23rd 2014

The dirt road scuffs beneath my feet, dried to a dust that rises in clouds in the distance. I stand at the edge of an oak grove. While the dirt in the road is dry, the air that hugs me is dense with moisture. It seeps into my skin and thickens my hair to the roots, hot and heavy and humid. The lines of trees tunnel over the road, each reaching for the other side, branches intertwined and draped with Spanish moss. The sky leaks through in places but the world beneath the oaks glows with a soft green aura. Beneath this haven is where life slows down—a quiet place in the coastal plains of Savannah, Georgia. Just beyond lie the salt marshes thick with tall yellow grasses. Here, the sun is hot, its rays beating down on the open earth with the pace of the emerging day. I stay beneath the shade of the oak trees, in this other world where time slows down, where the heat of the day has yet to set its gaze upon the lingering shadows of night. This is my place. I stand with the trees, gazing up at their winding canopy, longing to reach the place where branches cross and seal the portal. To reach their grasp and look down upon the realm of nightly shadows, speckled by day.

--oak grove, Wormsloe plantation, en route Virginia

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