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TALES FROM A PLACEHOLDER: A RELATIONAL JOURNEY WITH LAND, PLACE,
PEOPLE, AND SELF

By

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B.A. Anthropology, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, New York, 2018

Thesis

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For all the placeholders, land and human, who've held me in some way as I wished to hold them
here.

"A place becomes a home when it sustains you, when it feeds in body as well as spirit"

— Robin Wall Kimmerer

"Community keeps you alive; friendship keeps you warm"

— My sister, over text message

Chapter One:

Poisoned Roots

“When I’m home, I’m never there

Long enough to know.”

— Boygenius; “Ketchum, ID”

“I left, and then I lived.”

— Carmen Maria Machado

Prelude

In the same way that I knew nothing about the industrial agriculture's vicegrip on our food systems, the art of workshopping other writers' essays, and the Western-laced interpretations of traditional ecological knowledge, I knew nothing of ecological restoration prior to enrolling in a course focusing on the ethical issues surrounding the practice. Admittedly, the main motivation was it was my only chance as an Environmental Studies graduate student to take a course with the regionally-renowned Daniel T. Spencer before his retirement the following year.

In the first few days, Dan had each student give a several-minute introduction about our respective background, if we had any experience with restoration, and why we were enrolled in either the course or the graduate program. He was so generous about letting us talk about ourselves that it took three separate classes for twenty students to give their consolidated life spiel. As each student—mostly in between age 22 and 29, majority white with a few Indigenous backgrounds—gave their backstory, I noticed that many of them, despite us all being from different regions of the country and with varying environmental interests, seemed to have similar backstories of growing up in the outdoors or having parents that emphasized stewardship values that led them to become aspiring environmentalists.

Well...shit, I thought, embarrassed that my journey to share was not based on any of those sentiments. Believe it or not, not everyone gets Nature, Nurture, and non-philosophical nature as a three-for-one.

For context, I grew up relatively close to the ocean, in a house within walking distance of a beautiful botanical garden. My parents would take my siblings and me on multiple family vacations to places like Colorado, Wyoming, and Arizona throughout my childhood. Memories based

in Florida ecology are hazy, dating back to annual trips to the Everglades in elementary school, with images of unbothered alligators and long-necked waterfowl sticking out. Yet none of it struck a deep sense of anything that would prompt me to become an aspiring steward and-or writer in southwest Montana. It could have been my age that kept my depth perception confined to academic walls and video game screens and hardwood volleyball courts, or perhaps the short-term nature of the family tourism industry, that kept me from ever wanting to know a place beyond what I've already known.

If you want a more accurate, more creative portrayal of where I grew up, I suggest reading Lauren Groff's *Florida*, a collection of short stories that take place there. Yes, something fictional can be more accurate than a real-time account. She was able to access the magic of Florida, finding it in the expansive sand pine forests, the deceptive sharp-toothiness of saw palmettos, the swamps and marshes, the sticky summer humidity, the weeping, coil-like Spanish Moss, and the unabashedly imperfect humanity.

Confounding to think that she wrote about the same place I spent the critical years of childhood and adolescent development in. Once upon a time, maybe right before I moved away from home for the first time for college, I would have described Florida, and my hometown Miami, as the following: the place I was born and raised; the lopsided penis of the U.S.; a pain in the ass to drive through whenever my family took vacations to our beach house in the Panhandle; home of the college rivalry trio of the Miami Hurricanes, Florida Gators, and Florida State Seminoles; where Ultra Music Festival and U.S. Tennis Opens and Art Basel slow traffic along I-90 to a halt; where that bath salt-induced cannibalism incident took place; and where "Salt Life" is equal parts a brand, lifestyle, and a philosophy I never subscribed to.

And, how would I describe it after leaving to attend college in upstate New York?

A place that's horribly humid for too much of the year; the best source of Cuban food outside of Cuba, thanks to Castro's regime sending thousands to the Miami shoreline some fifty years ago; where peacocks and iguanas are our version of deer that parade people's yards; the source of my daddy issues that came not from my actual father, bless his heart, but my hot-headed Hispanic volleyball coaches that chipped away at my love for volleyball and self; where the 2018 midterm elections decided we were okay with building another freeway in a portion of the Everglades, and dedicating millions to a new soccer stadium in Miami; where Stand Your Ground laws covered George Zimmerman's ass after he gunned down Trayvon Martin's; where I can come home twice a year for free food, loving dogs, and my grandmother who I don't call enough; where, when my parents die, I will have no reason to return.

And now, how would I describe Florida after examining it through a place-based lens in the name of a Master's Degree?

A place that, in retrospect, I may have been too harsh on; where my mother and father, who each lost a parent at an early age, met and eventually created a family rooted in stability; a place that I've known longer than any of the places I've lived in since leaving for college; a place that, ultimately, I rejected.

It made more sense to me when I did a quick internet search of Ms. Groff, and discovered she was born not in Florida, but in Cooperstown, New York. So of course, she could access the magic of a place outside of her hometown. My entire thesis was intended to do the same.

Forgive me, Florida. I am not your champion.

Manicured Ecology

I

When my older sister and I migrate south to the house we grew up in for the holidays, two things are guaranteed: that she will get sick at some point during her visit, and I will step on the scale in my parents' bathroom.

We don't know why Keaton was cursed with a brittle immune system. As a teen, she first suffered with stomach issues. Then it became gluten intolerance in college. Now, she oscillates

between urinary tract infections and depressive episodes every few months. She is the thinnest of the three children, though being size 0 to 2 she is technically on par with the genetics of our mother and grandmother. To a stranger, she's as hot and healthy as they come.

My body doesn't betray me like Keaton's does to her; instead, I chose the reverse. For my entire formative age, I was subservient to an electronic slab of glass, letting the numbers, usually twenty digits higher than the women around me both at home and in school, judge the worth of my flesh. I cared that much about numbers, even when I wound up a humanities major in college.

And so, throughout my twenties I've made offerings to my body that I believed were for good for it, to keep it functioning and fit and, most importantly, contained: relatively healthy food, a lot of exercise, coffee, appetite-suppressing ADHD medication, sex that ranged from life-changing to soul-sucking, weed, cigarettes, late-night munchies from weed, and sometimes kombucha as a treat.

My efforts were rewarded one evening a few years ago, when I returned home from up North for Thanksgiving week. I was in my mother's bathroom while she was getting ready for a family dinner out. As my mother applied the last of her foundation while peering into the circular mirror on her counter, I checked myself out in the giant mirrors that face one another on opposite walls, perpetually reflecting both of our bodies into infinity.

"You look good, Kal," said my mom. I was wearing a crop top and high waisted pants, baring a few inches of my stomach I was comfortable with. To my knowledge, it was the first time she had complimented my body in our history of exchanges about the subject.

“Thanks, it’s from all the crying last week,” I responded in dry cheerfulness, since she knew about how a recent lover of mine from up north started seeing someone else.

“Well then, depression looks good on you!” she joked, and we both laughed. It took 24 years and being too sad to eat properly for a few days to get there, but at last, my southern tropical roots were finally proud that I was starting to resemble its low-lying geography.

II

I am from a part of the earth that is so flat, even the petite women in my family have more natural elevation than where we were raised.

Florida’s flatness isn’t what makes the state ugly to me—that’s on the government and a personal history of male encounters. There is plenty of beauty to be found a few feet above sea level, though I never went out of my way to find it until the past year. In the backyard of my childhood in the poorly-zoned suburbs of Miami, I was surrounded by countless vegetal bodies, each with a unique form that provides for both itself and the residential wildlife, that never once browns, falls, withers, and respawns in the nearly year-round humid climate. Some bodies are light, like the Areca palms and Wart ferns, who hiss wildly against coercive gusts of coastal wind. Some are sturdier against the breeze, like the thick-leaved, Swiss-cheese-holed *Monstera*, or the hardy, succulent-like Green Island Ficus shrubs. It’s an Eden of natural bodies around me, each species beautiful and functional in their own special right.

Still, because their beauty was noticed by human eyes, their bodies were bred, cultivated, planned and placed into my yard. Only the true relics of the acreage, the native oak trees — tallest, shadiest, and most supportive of them all — were respected enough by zoning ordinances not to be bulldozed down in the name of our house’s inception.

One could say that the backyard village is part of the family, on the grounds of longevity and rootedness in one place. But it would be unfair to saddle it with the baggage of atomic nuclear family dynamics, stacked within the man-made walls that the village has fortunately been excluded from. The academic preservationists may have a point—separation between man’s judgement and nature’s innocence is sometimes appropriate.

~

I am also from a place that, like all places, experiences little and huge change, the most tangible being the incremental sea level rise and never-ending commercial development. Once upon a time there was no such thing as eco-conscious landscaping or high-rise condos in South Florida. Before them, it was 75% wetlands, with mangroves, prairies, swamps and marshes—a combination of aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems, shared with the Seminole, Taino, and Tequesta peoples. Much of it is now lost to man-induced drainage, agriculture, and the age of cement. Today, the built environment sprawls for miles over an ecological graveyard in the form of wealthy and middle-class single-family homes and a city skyline that serve as the highest points of elevation in a slowly drowning metropolis. Fortunately, for the outdoor enthusiast, a small handful of nature reserves were salvaged in between golf courses and boating docks.

What has not yet been paved over in South Florida requires a vehicle to get to. This past winter, my sister, her boyfriend and I took a half-day drive through Big Cypress National Preserve, bordering the Everglades, some 30-40 mins west of Miami. Unsurprisingly, I found that the differences between the mother-curated ecosystem I grew up in, and the Mother-Earth-curated version that evaded my youth are stark: in suburbia, we share a fenced yard with squirrels, fidgety lizards, red-capped woodpeckers, an iguana dynasty, and cardinal couples that raise their

babies; beyond the pavement, alligators and anahingas sun themselves underneath and in between the Cypress village. While we have a vat of chlorine as a watershed we hardly use, out there it is a murky swamp rich with nutrients and predators and Cypress roots that hold the whole ecosystem up. Our property boundaries separate us from our human neighbors; across federally protected landscapes, Floridians and Florida's remaining ecology stare at each other from a distance.

And yet, both places reveal that a landscape, ecologically accurate or not, can still be a network of life that provides basic necessities to its inhabitants. But, whether it be in the form of a reptile's jaw strength or an uncalled-for parental comment, one is kept on edge—even where you're supposed to feel safe.

III

When surrounded by near-permanent flatness for 19 years, both outside and within the walls of my upbringing, it is not so much a wonder why I fell in love with mountains as hard as I did when I moved to Montana.

Imagine stepping outside your front door and being greeted by waves of asymmetrical geography that emerge organically from the earth, instead of meticulously placed vegetation and egotistical skyscrapers covered in windowpanes that reflect off one another. Unlike Miami, where man zoned the earth beyond recognition, the mountain valley town of Missoula seems to work within nature's more curvaceous boundaries. City planners have done their darndest to avoid urban sprawl in the name of protecting existing open space and critical wildlife habitats from further development. One can experience the mountains as bodies, contacting their flesh that hasn't yet been lost to the concrete epidemic. You can believe these bodies once existed—

for millions to billions of years—without being scrutinized and evaluated and trammled by human eyes.

As I adjusted to life in Missoula, Montana, so did my body when I didn't even realize. I walked and biked more, played hours of year-round recreational volleyball, learned to cook cheaply but healthily for myself, hiked several bodies west of the Continental Divide, and burned extra calories dwelling on the state of the world and my own academic imposter syndrome. Phases of heartache and boredom that once turned me to food in college instead redirected me towards a higher intake of cigarettes-per-day, shrinking my appetite in the name of cathartic outdoor brooding with the mountains as my silent companion. I noticed that whenever I'm grieving a lost human connection, which has been much more frequent the last few years, I look incredibly good naked in the mirror. Because of course, I still have a full-length mirror set up in my room.

By the time I stepped on the scale in my parents' bathroom once more after 2 years of living out West, I found that not only had I lost what I had gained in college, but returned to my weight as a teenager, recontextualized in the mold of a grown woman with greater muscle definition and greater struggles than a number on a tile. A human landscape, just as modified by hazardous external human inputs as the place she sometimes struggles to call "home."

Perhaps that is the Florida birthright.

~

“I don’t do leftovers, especially not seafood,” my dad grunted after I insisted he finish the takeout shrimp dumplings I was too full to finish. As I began launching into my hippie environmental liberal agenda about food waste and class privilege—again—he interjected: “Well then why did you order so much food?”

Because I was going to share the dumplings as an appetizer and if I eat the rest of it in front of either of you, one of you will make some comment about my eating habits that gave me all the fucked up perceptions of my body for 15 years that’ll leave me pissed off the rest of the night but too tired to fight back the way I used to; I wish I had said.

My mother added: “Well it’s no better to fill your own body with trash instead of filling the planet with it!”

You couldn't ask for a more poignant insight into how and what bodies were valued in the walls of my upbringing. How I ever made it to Montana and pursued a degree focused on earthly bodies that were not my own is a miracle in retrospect.

~

My love for Montana—and mountains in general—is nothing against Florida. For the most part. Some Floridian environmentalists really care about the remaining wetlands and the coral reefs at risk from increasing water temperatures and currents. And I know that beneath that flat, but ever moving surface that spans beyond what the human eye can see, there exists its own interrelated ecology that, like the Big Cypress Preserve, are much more accurate to Florida’s ecology than my manicured backyard.

But I can't marvel at any of it without a boat and a set of diving and snorkeling equipment, and I already committed to hiking and backpacking as my overpriced choice of exploration.

IV

One afternoon this past winter, somewhere in the middle of Christmas and New Year's, I sunbathed on the mulched yard where the oaks weren't shading (credit my mother for choosing a non-water-intensive landscaping material—it almost makes up for the amount of water spent maintaining the golf courses my brother and dad regularly congregate on!). Under the double-edged comfort of American holiday cuisine, my body had relinquished some of its Florida form, temporarily softened and leavened, resembling the rolling foothills of southwest Montana. The December sky was the bluest I have ever seen down south, stark as a backdrop to the chaotic latticework of native oak branches above me. Or, maybe it was always that blue, and it was only until now that I was able to notice. My dog Story trotted up and sat down next to me, squinting up towards the sun, almost glowing along the outline of his fur. As I stroked his chest, looking up at his uncomplicated face and the ecosystem that has sheltered me and my family from the world, I felt, for once, at ease. Serene, even.

Miami, Florida is where I crawl into an illusion of time standing still. Where, like the seasons, there's no reason to grow and change and die and be reborn again. But like all paved places, it holds a history. A history of wetlands and evolved reptiles and Latin American emigration and flat-ass beaches and mountainous flesh and erotic skyscrapers and violence to bodies of all kinds.

And, within my parents' private property, a history of subtle generational trauma that started with my maternal great-grandfather looking down at his daughter eating ice cream one afternoon in 1950's Tennessee and saying, "You know, you'll get fat if you eat like that every day."

But in those few minutes, with a domesticated animal, a series of branches from a tree that existed on this earth before my family transformed its surroundings, and a brutally blue void—none of which cared once for how my flesh presented itself—I was gracious to be where I was: in a fake-ish landscape in a fake-ish city that I once hated deeply, that lost so much of its old body so that I could lie comfortably on it. At the very least, I know now that looking up at what remained is more important than looking downward at a man-made number, on a man-made scale, on a man-made tile floor.

Forged Art in the Panhandle

You might have heard of the 1998 movie *The Truman Show*, starring Jim Carrey and directed by Peter Weir. The plot was fairly original for its time: a man's life was secretly filmed twenty-four hours, seven days a week, for thirty years, with everyone around him playing designated roles as friends, family, colleagues, and strangers. The protagonist, Truman Burbank (played by Carrey), starts noticing oddities in his environment, coupled with a desire to leave the place he spent his entire life in, and the movie unfolds as he grapples with both as everyone around him attempts to convince him nothing is wrong in order to keep him contained. In a way, the plot resembles a lovechild between the modern dystopic television anthology *Black Mirror*, and the 1940's feature film *Gaslight*.

This place he is longing to leave is a beautiful beach town called Sea Haven. Which is actually not a beach town, but a giant dome-like set design in California, constructed solely for the purpose of filming Truman's life for a global audience. They make the point of stating in the movie that it is the only structure apart from the Great Wall of China that can be seen from outer space.

In reality—nonfiction reality—the movie was filmed in Seaside, a small beach town community in the Florida Panhandle along the Emerald coast, nestled between protected dunes, sand pine forests, and coastal lakes. Full disclosure, it is not the size of the Great Wall; in fact, it would take someone under twenty minutes to walk from one end of the town's boundaries to the other. My parents bought a house there in 1994, and every summer for nearly two decades, our family would drive ten-plus hours and six-hundred-plus miles from our home base in Miami to this private getaway. There's even a scene in the movie—where Truman is driving around recklessly in a circle—where I can pinpoint our house, still intact save for a few paint jobs. Jim Carrey's character even inspired one of our dog's names.

Reality aside, Sea Haven and Seaside hold comparable atmospheres. One-tone houses brighten up the neighborhoods with varying colors—off-white, buttercream yellow, turquoise, sea foam green, robin's egg blue, pastel pink. Single family houses are tightly compacted along the streets, the limited yard space of each landscaped with pine needles, holly shrub, and oaks. Each house comes with a name painted in blue across a white picket fence with its name, along with the names of its owners, their kids, and sometimes even their pets. Neighbors, and customers and local vendors are on a first-name basis with one another, the culture of southern hospitality defined by the twang in the collective accents.

There is, however, a key distinction between the fake Sea Haven and real beach towns like Seaside (besides the southern twang). Sea Haven, by design, doesn't change at all in the thirty years of the Truman Show's runtime, which was intended to be the appeal of the environment. The whole mission of the characters aside from the protagonist is to keep Truman convinced that there is nowhere more worth visiting than the only place he's ever known. Of all the fictitious elements of this screenplay, the thematic temptation of stagnancy is what falls under the radar.

By contrast, Seaside, a victim of its own land planning success given its uniqueness at the time, had to make some adjustments in set design since its inception. Over time, the 80-acre haven was uncovered by the masses, and while Truman was determined to escape his environment, members of the rich white Southern demographic were desperate to stake their claim in privatized paradise.

~

Every time I return to the beach town of my childhood, something is always different. No longer can cars maneuver the brick-laden street in the downtown area, now oversaturated by increased foot traffic of visitors and residents. Shops and restaurants that were there for my first two decades, that I naively believed would stand the test of time, were replaced by ventures with pricier items of niche needs. The post office that stood on the center of County Road 30A was relocated and remodeled into the downtown area, for reasons I do not know.

Certain features remained intact, such as the demographic of white southern elites characterized by adult women's bleach blonde hair and unnecessarily expensive sundresses, men in seersuckers and aviators, and preteens kids and their chosen style of oversized t-shirts and gym

shorts, all sharing a Southern accent that range from soft to full-blown twang. Seemingly timeless businesses like Modica Market and Sundog Bookstore still stand, though the former's founder, Charles Modica, passed in the early 2010's, and his kids who still run it are now graying in their hair.

Once upon a time, entrances to the beach along the Emerald Coast were NOT juxtaposed with signs that say *This is a private beach*. The pavilion entrances on each street did NOT have gates with a keypad, the entry code only given to homeowners and randomized each week. An attendant would NOT stand at the pavilion during daytime hours and ask to see your wristband indicating you're either a homeowner or guest. My father COULD get us reservations in any of the higher-end restaurants we normally dined at in earlier years, without having to do so two weeks in advance.

Those, like my parents, who've had houses in Seaside for twenty-plus years, now complain of this incremental transformation of their no-longer hidden gem. So even the beneficiaries of gentrification, myself included, have their struggles too.

Within our own house on Tupelo Street, my mother completely redecorated the interior, swapping old television sets, drawers with chipped painting, and my worn collection of Garfield comics for wicker chairs, transparent linen drapes and fresh coats of white paint. Apparently, nostalgia of the original "shabby chic" design that was once in style was less appealing than a crisp, modern beach look that resembled an artist residency or museum exhibit. I love my mother and her eye for making a space beautiful out of anywhere, but did she really have take part in gentrifying my childhood too?

It's not just Seaside. Seaside is merely patient zero of an entire county road that has undergone and continues undergoing development. Drive through the two-lane road of 30A today and you will see sleek, modernized plazas that weren't there five years ago., Alongside them are cleared patches of former pine forests where John Deeres idle between hours of construction-slash-destruction. More plazas, medium-rise condos, and/or pseudo-Seaside villages await their inception.

If, one day, the entire Emerald coast is paved over entirely in the name of simple living, at least the Florida State Parks, save some fraction of ecologically accurate landscapes. For now, there is a surprising amount of pine forests across central and western Florida. While spending a week up in Seaside this past January, my mother and I visited Grayton Beach State Park, which hosts one of the rare dune lakes. A mile-long trail took us through mounds of sand, a small patch of forest with live sand oaks, saw palmettos and magnolias, and then briefly along the shore of the lake, murky from the color of leaves, and the exchange of nutrients between the Gulf and the freshwater watersheds. Bunches of sea oats dotted the sandscape, blowing prairie-like against the Gulf breeze. The dune mounds couldn't have been taller than ten feet at most, but if I were the size of a native tern, or a sand mouse, they would be equivalent of the mountain ranges I've been hell bent on being just a door swing away from for the rest of my life.

My mother and I, who've known this place for decades, were only then experiencing Florida beyond our original understanding. You could believe the landscape existed before the first developer cast his profit-seeking lens upon it, the first sand pine was cut down, the first boardwalk built. It makes the State Park's motto: "...the REAL Florida.", all the more haunting. Passing by a dune lake outlined by several lakefront properties along 30A, either by car or bike,

provokes the feelings of, including but not limited to: jealousy for those who can hop on a paddleboard or kayak and cruise the watershed, or sit on their private porch or dock and watch the sun descend over the horizon; horror and rage at the fact that people were allowed to construct homes on a rare ecosystem; guilt and hypocrisy at the realization that you and your family are no different from, if not worse than the lakefront communities, since your parents own a house on a landscape buried by brick and property taxes.

If they could talk, I could hypothesize how those sand pine forests that still stand, tall enough to look down at me with contempt as I ride by them, would respond to my newfound grief and anger: *We know. It sucks. So, what are you gonna do about it, rich kid? Do you even know how many of us were killed for your parents' beach house alone? How many were lost to the brick streets your mom walks your dogs on? Don't kid yourself into suddenly caring now. Either enjoy your bubble on our graves like you have for twenty years, or fuck off and never return.*

And I wouldn't have a proper response, because if I were to denounce all acts of zoning and development, it would make me a hypocrite as a decades-long beneficiary of said development. And though I have a newfound respect for Florida ecology, I don't have it in me to return to the state and try to preserve what remains of it. The Florida State Park motto: "...the REAL Florida" is as accurate as it is haunting.

~

If you have the wealth, or at least the connections to wealth, to be able to walk along the beach, you might notice the signs in between the pavilion stairwells and million-dollar beach-

front properties that indicate a dune restoration in progress. Only when it was too late did I recognize the contrivance of trying to protect an ecosystem while building upon it all the same. It's the dilemma amongst the (majority Caucasian) environmental philosophers and ethicists and circle-jerkers: Can ecological protection and expansion of the built environment even co-exist? Some scholars Mr. Eric Katz would say no, that we wouldn't be dealing with the ethics of restoring ecosystems if we didn't expand to begin with. Two years after Seaside was founded in 1980, another guy named Robert Eliot called out commercial developers who promise to repair the ecosystems at stake after they tear into them—specifically referring to dunes in his case study. He compared “restoration” in this form to “forged art,” in that yes, it *appears* natural and real and accurate to the landscape's history, but ultimately devalues the viewer's experience as false advertisement of a “pristine”, “untouched”, “wilderness”.

Meanwhile, in Truman Burbank's reality—another forged art—nothing about the place he's in changes, except for the people around him due to the natural occurrence of aging—one of the only aspects of the show that its producers could not control. Another major character, Christof, the in-film creator of the Truman Show, speaks a line that hits at one of the movie's overarching themes: “We accept the reality with which we're presented.” It's precisely this reality of stasis that Truman wishes to break free of, much to the threat of the structures built around him. Throughout the movie, every moment that he expresses interest in exploration and travel is immediately interrupted by weather events or lamentations by his “loved ones” that there's no place like Sea Haven, therefore no reason to leave.

I wonder if Christof, or maybe the movie's screenwriter Andrew Nichol, had his own version of a childhood summer home. Perhaps he, too, witnessed his childhood haven transform before his very eyes, to his dismay. It makes sense to want a place like Sea Haven to exist, where

no land development occurs, no populations rise, no ecological services are compromised, no beloved shops close down and get replaced by more modern enterprises. There is comfort in places that don't change, as if time doesn't affect every part of the globe. Maybe he doesn't have a place like Seaside; maybe he just hates the way things around him change, for better or worse.

(Of course, if you're of a non-white or non-upper-class background, or one of the millions of sand pine citizens of Florida, such a sentiment falls harder on itself than those dense forest stands.)

In the final confrontation and climax of the movie, Christof says to Truman, who has finally uncovered the false reality of his world—that the “real world” is ugly, and violent, and people are awful and murder each other and destroy the planet and are driven by greed and self-preservation. It is now twenty-plus years since the movie came out and the sentiment has yet to become obsolete. If his intentions were truly altruistic, and not based on keeping Truman as a means of his own success and profit, he'd probably be less of a villain than the movie portrays.

It's one thing to uncover the ugly reality behind your once-innocent haven, and another to realize that it still serves as such when put against the even uglier reality of the world outside of it.

~

Truman finds the exit door to the dome and steps through, an entirely new life, new world, new adventure awaiting him. The viewers cheer his decision, Christof bows his head in defeat, and a former love interest-slash-ex-cast member of the show runs out of her apartment to

go find the freed man. What I'm curious to know about is what would happen if there was a sequel to the film, and whether Truman, after experiencing years of this new life, would he ever wish to go back to Sea Haven when he sees the true nature of the world?

I can envision a scene in a hypothetical sequel where Truman, now informed of the world's true state, frantically searches for that dome in California, and once he finds it, begs security to let him back in, even attempts to fight his way through. He stumbles around dismayed, then finds Christof on the side of a curb, appearing homeless and out of luck, yet still wearing his trademark cap and turtleneck. Truman, stunned, as he immediately recognizes him from media outlets covering his post-*Truman Show* downfall, approaches and sits down next to him. He asks Christof what happened to him, what happened to Sea Haven, and declares he was wrong and the world is, in fact, horrible, and he wants to go back. And Christof would look up at him with the same contempt as those sand pine forests looking down towards me, dwindling ever so incrementally across the Emerald Coast, uttering the same sentiments:

You made your choice. You left. And now you want to come back to your forged art of a reality, to hide from what I warned you about? It's too late. Begone and start anew, and don't you dare be blind to your nostalgia again.

Part Two:

The Egoless Arctic

þetta reddast

—the unofficial Icelandic motto

(translates to: “It’ll all be okay”)

How Fjörds Made Climate Change Boring

All the scientists, scholars, activists, community organizers and educators, who've sacrificed their hearts and minds and bodies to address the climate crisis, deserve a collective apology for how little they're taken seriously. Even if the last decade suggests otherwise, I would hope they know how much they're valued by those who just don't have the power to demonstrate it, beyond marching in the streets and voting in a heavily flawed political system.

But I must confess that their hard work is not what inspired me to join the movement. Instead, all it took was dropping me into a tiny fishing town in the northwest fjörds of Iceland.

Call it unconventional, call it insulting, call it cliché that it occurred during a study abroad program. But when I read the title of the program, "Iceland and Greenland: Climate Change in the Arctic," the first three words sold me over the last five, as I was but a woefully apathetic anthropology major with Iceland on my travel bucket list after watching *Secret Life of Walter Mitty* some years ago.

In our first week of lectures—conveyed in the form of PowerPoint slides and multi-lingual educators of varying expertise, all taking place in a sleek University classroom—we learned that we're on an island saturated with glaciers, waterfalls, a volcanic center, scattered geothermal fields, and even a tropical lake fed by spring water; that unlike in other places settled by European descendants, the earth itself kills more people than people themselves; and, through the

evolution of risk management and land planning and snow surveying over the last fifty years, that Icelanders care enough about their fellow man to act.

And yet, fascinating as it all was in the moment for someone not used to the landscape nor the culture of adapt and mitigate, the bombardment of information failed to take hold of my frontal lobe and root itself in my memories for years to come. All my humanities background knew was to just write down three months' worth of presentation slides and hope it'll be useful for later.

What imprinted itself instead was the thirty-ish minute round trip walk to and from the University center in Ísafjörður, the capital of the Westfjörds. For three weeks, five days a week, I lived with a host family in one of many uniquely designed houses in an entire neighborhood situated cautiously along the lower slope of one of the flat-topped cliffs that surround the town, their bright-colored exteriors popping against the cliff's winter cloak and spring brownness. And for three weeks, five days a week, I'd, step outside my temporary residence and be immediately greeted by a council of towering, stoic, unavoidable walls of earth. As I penguin-walked down the slope and traversed the spit of land that held the downtown center, my view was made up of at least 60% elevated earth depending on if I was looking where I walk or not. It's a backdrop I've never experienced as someone who spent 19 years in the tropics, where the tallest anything in my line of sight was an overhead native oak or landscaped palm tree, or a downtown Miami skyscraper.

In retrospect, I find it counterintuitive to try and teach someone the impacts of climate change in a classroom setting while there's a mountain looming outside the window. Frankly, it's quite rude. When you have a herd of American students dropped in a Kentucky-sized country in the middle of the Atlantic, do you think refined graphs and numbers will slam a person's senses

harder than stepping out of a tiny plane and suddenly being surrounded by the flat-topped glaciated cliffs of the Westfjörds?

~

What compels me to listen to the earth's council of geologic elders over the decades of anthropocentric assessments of them is the fact that they do not say a word about it. They are merely there, silent as they are indefinitely omnipresent. The organically-raised castles of each continent could not care less about whether our species will survive the climate crisis. Why would they? They didn't make their own mess to clean up.

Still, unbothered by our presence as they might appear, these giant formations know when to show their annoyance with humanity. One snowy day in early March, a pod of us reckless trammellers trudged on all fours up the snow-covered side up one of these cliffs opposite the inlet of Atlantic water, stupidly determined to reach the top. But just as we were getting somewhat close, a giant crack in the snow extended horizontally in our direction, crackling as menacing a warning as any movie that features an incoming avalanche.

Nope. We swallowed our pride and turned back.

At the height we had reached, we could see the town and their neighborhoods down below scattered across the flatlands. From there, you could better understand the kind of power these giants wield, if provoked, and why avalanche walls were built right above the sloping neighborhoods of the Westfjörds. A lesson learned—not during the weekday in a University center, but outside on a Saturday, with our hands and feet on the sides of a millions-year-old body that could kill us if it wanted to.

The ominous indifference of these beings is both envy-inducing and inspiring. Which is not something I can say about the equally ancient, equally omnipresent, objectively uglier human beings whose indifference to their own power will be the death of their brethren.

~

The hours of indoor lectures were, thankfully, punctuated with group tours to the most noteworthy geologic features. There were a few stops at waterfalls — Goðafoss in the north, Gullfoss and Seljalandsfoss in the southwest — and the force in which gallons of water could plummet down could contradict my previous sentiment that Iceland's power is in its silence. While the mountains and cliffs are quiet and still, the hydrology of the country is explosive and, uncharacteristically for the culture of Iceland, always in a hurry. We made it to Vik, a black sand beach known for its relentless sneaker waves that will snag an unsuspecting human and drag them to an unknown fate. While we had a tour guide with us as we navigated through Thingvellir National Park, I could not tell you a single fact espoused about the place, because really, the murmurings of Iceland's features were more compelling than the words of their human translator.

~

Riddle me this, fellow environmentalists—which would incite a heavier dose of climate dread in your soul: reading published papers—filled with academic jargon tinged with elitism—about the increasing rate at which glaciers are shrinking and how humanity is screwed if global temperatures increase by I-honestly-forget-how-many degrees Celsius at the end of the century; OR spending an hour watching a glacier rhythmically drip its way to death as you spike and stab your way across its body? I was fortunate—maybe unfortunate—enough to experience both in the span of a few days, so I have my thoughts.

A day after my group received a lecture on shrinking glaciers and the inevitability of an environmentally-doomed future, we ventured out to Sólheimajökull in the southeast region. The day was overcast, giving an air of dreariness and exhaustion before we even got off the bus. Before us stood another great hunk of rock and ice, another elder of this island, involuntarily resigned to its fate as a tourist destination.

As we walked with spikes on our boots and poles in hand across, the light blue sheet revealed itself underneath the snow, curving every which way as we invaded its crevices. Water slowly dripped off tips of the sheet, birthing tiny tributaries of former glacier that coursed along its own body. I never imagined being horrified by the simple conversion of a solid to a liquid.

I witnessed climate change firsthand in the form of those drips, and instead of inciting a visceral rage at all the things that induced such a cruel, slow-burning death of this glacier, and the planet, it did exactly what every long-time environmental activist warns against as a deterrent for collective action: it bummed me out. How could anyone marvel in the moment when the drip-dripping existed as a reminder of its own inevitable doom? Should I consider myself lucky to have received lectures from both a human AND a glacier? At the very least, you have to appreciate their sustainable approach to death—creating their graveyard through their own blood.

After that, I found guided tours to be less enjoyable. Splitting focus between people and nature made for a lesser appreciation of what either had to say.

~

And don't even get me started on trying to instill climate statistics while living briefly in Greenland. Ten days was all we had in that gloriously obscure fever dream of a place on earth, and so forgive me if internalizing the threat of thinning sea ice on the livelihoods of indigenous

hunters takes less of a precedence than living the reality of being an American in *Greenland* of all places. And anyway, how is an American exchange student supposed to absorb and apply all the accumulated knowledge on climate impacts that far up in the Arctic when they eventually must return to their homeland of an incomparably different set of geographic features and social systems?

At the very least, ten days was enough to witness the Arctic in its most unyielding. In the backdrop of Greenlandic language classes and presentations on topics that I wouldn't recall unless I fetched the five-year-old notebook with three months of lectures I've all but forgotten, our roaming ecosystem of lower-latitude, nonnative species were nearly blown off our feet by April blizzards with negative-degree wind chill as we muscled our inexperienced limbs from the downtown center of Nuuk to our hostel alongside the coast.

In knowing there are 55,000 people on that mostly uninhabited continent, who made an entire built environment in a place both unbearable for equator-leaning visitors, yet vulnerable to the impacts of equator-leaning global industries, ten days in Greenland taught me what collective resiliency looks like, even though I would never experience it there.

~

Three months in the Arctic did what they needed to. After an unceremonious acquisition of my Bachelor's, I moved out west to pursue an environmental career in Montana. As it turns out, being keen on surrounding oneself in America's rockiest regions doesn't really qualify you for paid positions in stewardship, and so I rooted myself in the mountain valley town of Missoula and returned to academia as an Environmental Studies graduate student. The courses have climate change as a backdrop to each topic, sure, but instead of beating you over the head with how

we're all doomed and capitalism is to blame and yadda yadda yadda, they offer insights into what isn't yet doomed: the capacity for local community-building to mitigate region-specific climate impacts; the collaboration between public and private entities for large-scale ecological restoration; and how much hope there is in grassroots organizing over demanding federal policy shifts from a distance.

The elevated entities that surround the former glacial valley town are even bigger than the ones I first encountered in the Westfjörds, but neither flat-topped nor as tightly compacted, like the ones forever guarding—or threatening—Ísafjörður. Instead, they present themselves as softly rolling grassland foothills, or fierce and jagged mountains further in the distance. Even though I've lived here long enough to grow fondly apathetic to my surroundings, they still manage to transmit a small source of inspiration when I take a moment to acknowledge their presence. But admittedly, it's easier to listen to the Earth's dominating silence when you're an unemployed, un-inspired undergraduate, than when you're older, intentionally working to make use of your own existence to fight an existential threat, even when you know deep in your own core that you're not terribly passionate about it.

So, sue me for preferring the sensations of cold air pressing against my face on a sunny day, momentarily blinded by the reflection of snow draping surrounding ice cliffs of Ísafjörður, over the subtle strain of my back and neck as I interchange between looking up at a projector screen and absent-mindedly scribbling notes that I'd never use when I returned to the States. Sue me for acknowledging my cosmic insignificance when I stare up at these million-year-old citizens of Gaia, and not when I read article after article about how the planet's health won't be salvaged unless we collectively undo 200-plus years of global systematic exploitation. Sue me for choosing the numbness in my toes as I traverse between these cliffs in my first hike across five

feet of snow over the accumulated numbness from phone updates of increasingly severe wildfires, earthquakes, mass shootings and institutional damage control.

That sense of insignificance? That numbness? In the context of human-engineered numbers that project themselves on symmetrical screens in fluorescent-lit buildings, such feelings risk inaction and nihilism, and none of us need that this late in the graph-tracked road to the apocalypse. But outside, in face of chaotically, asymmetrically produced landscapes, that either loom over you in silent dominance, or mind to themselves in the distance, by God is it as soothing as it is empowering to the fragile human soul. My heart goes out to the scientists once more, for they've likely dedicated more of their lives indoors trying to work out the numbers to present to people who'd rather be frolicking outside.

~

One October weekend, a cold front slammed the mountain valley town with five inches of snow, followed by a twenty-degree drop in temperature the next day. I was smoking a cigarette on my front porch, staring out at the final product: the hills, peaks, and the evergreen forests within them were shrouded in white, while at my eye level, remnants of autumn still lingered. The setting sun cast a familiar shade of pink on the snow-covered hills and mountains—a shade I'd seen for the first time some years ago cast upon an equally white-capped chunk of earth. A feeling—also familiar—simmered up and spread outward from my chest. A feeling I never would have gotten reading a scientific article that took years of grant writing and research and peer reviewing to reach my eyes, wired and exhausted by the blue light of my laptop. A feeling that incites both a love for this earth, and a will to act in a way that honors that love.

I smiled, ashed my cigarette, and went back inside to do what I could.

Withdrawal in the Arctic

David James Duncan described “strategic withdrawal” as “any act you can devise...that embodies a willingness to wait for the world to disclose itself to you, than to disclose yourself, your altruism, [and] creativity...to this world.”

~

It started with the acne and dark pores on my face, which in my induced state, looked like mountains and craters of rugged flesh, scarred from trying to frack and drill them away with my fingers, only to carve further damage through my bacteria-filled, bitten-down fingernails. And then, as my then-unreliable depth perception zoomed me outward, the full picture in the mirror of my college apartment bathroom came into view, and suddenly I was looking at a dirty-blonde, asymmetrically faced, ADHD-riddled, sex-driven, chain-smoking, waste-of-my-parents'-tuition-money, chronically stoned pile of flesh in the form of a twenty-one-year-old with hormonal acne. I was disgusted, first by the physical landscape of my face, then by the entire landscape of my life at that point in time.

Years later, I wondered if my environmental career was unintentionally founded upon LSD and cystic pimples.

~

“You’re not there to change, you’re there to learn,” said a student panelist during a mandatory informational session in the semester before I studied abroad.

~

It was a bright, sunny day in the Westfjörðs of Iceland, with no clouds in the sky except for one singular low-lying gray puff. Three program mates and I decided to hike to Fossvatn Lake, across the fjörður and hidden behind two cliffs. In my poorly equipped, lace-less Doc Marten Chelsea boots, I struggled behind my hiking mates—who were already experienced in the outdoors—trying to muscle my legs through three feet of white-capped terrain, getting stuck with every other step that I took, navigating the joint sensations of sweating from the cardiovascular uphill and the frozen numbness of my toes. At the very least, the former was a decent enough

distraction from the latter while the sun was still overhead. “The Land of Fire and Ice”—as over-used a descriptor of Iceland as it is succinct.

We were the only humans out there, except for one woman who passed us on snowshoes, likely familiar with this trail, unperturbed by the sea of frost, as if it were no different from navigating waters of the Atlantic inlet below us at knee-length. Our footsteps made temporary marks on the snow, slightly wrinkling the smooth canvas of snow between the cliffs. The lake we were supposed to arrive at was nowhere in sight, though I wasn't that disappointed that the destination was likely hidden under a white blanket. Instead, I looked out at the landscape we just traversed, and it's remarkable how far we came to begin with. The flatland we started from was no longer in sight, hidden by the snowscape we crossed in between two flat-topped cliffs. Two colors—white and blue, fierce in their simplicity—filled my line of sight as purely snow and sky, broken up by shadows across the snowscape and a few hints of geologic gray peeking out.

Have you ever been caught by the simplicity of a winter landscape like that? No trees in sight, no bird or mammal, only the white noise of the air with an occasional breeze of the wind's global commute? I can't explain it. It's the physical sensation of seeing something so crisp and clearly without distraction. Your eyes strain a bit to adjust to the brightness, you feel the cold air on your flesh less as a burden and more as a complement to the winterscape. If you can normalize yourself to the sensations, you may even feel a part of the landscape, if only for a moment.

It felt that way any moment during the hike where I paused to catch my breath, or to turn back around and see how far we came. A pause never felt so sensational.

~

There was little background noise one early March evening—only the occasional car driving by below the lower slope of the cliff I walked along, or the distant crash of waves along the downtown shoreline within the fjord I was situated in. Sea-green ribbons of soft light undulated across the sky, slow and with grace, but neither structure nor intent. Like sea kelp swaying in a pitch-black ocean—a gravitational inversion of my coastal Floridian roots. I strained my eyes, trying to absorb every particle of its glory. I don't remember how long I was standing on that hill, staring upwards, but I figured I had to have felt my neck cramped up after thirty minutes.

The feeling could only be described as the purest, almost primal form of awe at the sight of something never seen before. I wonder if the sensation is what we as infants experienced as we spent our first few years absorbing our surroundings before we became woefully normalized to bedroom walls and human emotions. But never have I felt this sensation of captivation as a child, even when exposed to even larger natural features in America in the form of family vacations.

What was it about those airborne ribbons that held me so as I stood on a millions-year-old body in the Arctic? Was it the dichotomy of watching something momentary and soft float above the aged, rugged, ever-present earth that made it even more unusual? Two beautiful entities of opposing ways of being, and I was caught there as a body that would last longer than what was above me, yet shorter than what was below me. What a blessed, wretched purgatory to be human.

Finally, after several more minutes, before the cruel feeling of boredom began to stir, I mustered the will to look away for good and walk back to my host family's house. At twenty-one years old, I had been convinced I would never see something more beautiful in my lifetime. And

when you believe that the rest of your life will never match up to the moment of witnessing a phenomenon that requires a clear sky, a high enough latitude, and either a visa or a green card marriage—all while dead sober—how would you not need drugs to cope afterwards?

~

Another evening, this time in May, I walked along one of the avalanche barriers protecting Ísafjörður's neighborhoods that I'd gotten acclimated to after several commutes. This time I was marinating in a pleasant high, thanks to my program mates finding a cannabis supply back in Reykjavik. As I walked north, the ice cliff opposite the fishing town fjörður stood motionless in the distance. The sunset was beginning to cast its warmth across the horizon, casting the snow still hanging onto the cliffs in May in a soft orange hue. My pot-infused lens noticed that as I kept walking towards that cliff, it remained still, unresponsive to my roaming existence across the water. And I had the (personally) groundbreaking realization of how long those cliffs have been around, how unperturbed they are by both the foreigners and the settlers who move every single moment of every single day, even just to take in a deep breath. An unoriginal revelation when considered amongst the centuries of (maybe) soberly written literature on the earth; but for someone who had little interest in the physical environment until entering this program, it sparked the first acknowledgement of just how feeble my human existence was compared to the earth I was traversing.

If psychedelic drugs are what forced me to look so deeply inward, to examine my ego with all its bruises and scars, then the looming omnipresence of Iceland's mountains and cliffs were what yanked me outward, into the sober, egoless reality that is earth. I vaguely understood the essence of power to be something political, social, or physical—something only reserved for

the human condition. They didn't need validation from the Atlantic, or their volcanic neighbors down south, that their existence was enough.

~

Ever since leaving Iceland, I kept attempting withdrawal into the mountains, not once considering why beyond their aesthetic, inspirational appeal. And it wasn't just the mountains; I sought community, academia, companionship, basically anything that kept me from focusing on myself. And I thought it to be a good thing—a self-realized narcissist should work to exist less for themselves and more for others, whether it be humans or otherwise, no?

Perhaps I only learned half of the solution in Iceland, in Duncan's "strategic withdrawal"—I withdrew from the person I realized myself to be in that college bathroom mirror and let the earth present itself the form of a collection of natural wonders in a tiny island in the Atlantic. But perhaps the second half of the equation wasn't recognized until much later—to return to whatever I was escaping or withdrawing from. Confront it through the lens of five years past. Acknowledge it as a part of your evolving landscape; remember, the country of Iceland, one of the youngest bodies of Earth at 33 million years old, with its waterfalls and volcanoes and glaciers and freshwater spring lakes, did not just appear like that out of nowhere.

~

Strategic withdrawal is not synonymous with substance withdrawal. The weed and cigarettes continued after Iceland. What else could be expected when returning to the liberal arts college bubble that introduced me to them in the first place? Especially after spending three months

in a program where I learned more by being outside than I did taking notes or writing a (figuratively) half-baked research paper. The weed I never stopped smoking didn't address the issues I had within myself, only hazed them out of the peripheries of my own self-criticism temporarily.

~

I think of the Lights, and how liberating it must be to be able to float and dance without being marred by physical space and existential woes. To be uprooted, circumstantial, in-the-moment. I think of how I'd never felt so viscerally present than when I was watching them dance.

But then I think of the mountains and what it means to be resilient, unwavering, and grounded in one place. As I get older, becoming a mountain sounds more and more appealing. I've moved from Florida to upstate New York, to Vermont, to Montana, with human connections of varying intimacy coming and going throughout. While I'm grateful to have seen so much beauty in twenty-five years, the fear of floating around indefinitely continues to grow. I'm nowhere as graceful as the Lights.

It would be many years before it occurred to me that I could try to be myself instead.

~

You cannot escape yourself, I learned. Though I didn't learn that in Iceland. That lesson took five more years and a psychedelic mushroom adventure once I'd settled in Montana. Funny enough, that also involved a mirror. At first, in the mirror in my bedroom of my subsidized student residency, I saw myself very aged where the light hit my face, got scared by the objectivity of my mortality, and then looked even closer. I examined the areas around my eyes, where I'd seen the most signs of aging in the past few years. Some acne still remained on my cheeks and

jawline, but this time I was more focused on the lines and pores that didn't exist on this landscape five years ago. Unlike the last time I was staring at myself in the mirror on a drug trip as an undergraduate, I didn't observe with disgust, but fascination, and maybe a little wonder, at the way my features have changed oh so subtly.

And then, I had an epiphany—a drug-infused one, once again, but those can be most important of them all:

You're freaking out about signs of aging, when it's the SAME PROCESS THAT HAPPENS OVER MILLIONS AND MILLIONS OF YEARS TO MAKE ALL THE MOUNTAINOUS LANDSCAPES YOU LOVE STARING AT, YOU ENDEARINGLY DUMB FOOL.

And then—I started smiling. My chest opened up, and I laughed—laughed at myself, laughed at my mental breakdown the night before, laughed at my revelation, laughed at the fact that it all happened within what I thought was my worst enemy: the indoors, with the curtains drawn, the mountain valley of Missoula nowhere in sight.

~

In Iceland, it was easier to withdraw from myself and into the beauty of the world. But to withdraw from the tools that reconstituted your physical being for several years—that's something the features of the Arctic cannot give guidance on. They were always as they were, even when modified by the human species that sailed in from Scandinavia some centuries ago. If all the human inputs were cleared out suddenly, and the land of fire and ice was left to continue without interference, perhaps it would adapt just fine, in the same way it's adjusted to all the volcanic and glacial activity endured for millennia.

If only I were guaranteed the same.

Chapter Three

A Transplant's Search for Roots

We don't exist for your journey of self-actualization, silly human. You just chose to think that.

— What I imagine the mountains would have said to me if they could talk

Disillusion West of the Continental Divide

You know the cliché movie plot where the shallow, narcissistic, upper-class-born white protagonist either chooses or is forced out of their comfort zone to some obscure section of rural America? And she hates it at first and struggles to adjust, but then after hearing the raspy wisdom of the old-timer residents and the wonder-driven innocence of some local kids, she finds the beauty in the community and by the end, chooses to remain in rural America?

Okay, now imagine that, but in reverse. As in, the protagonist willingly ventures out to a place she's never been before, but is brimming with excitement for personal and professional growth in the environmental field, all within a mountainous setting.

So, Butte, Montana. Or, Butte, America, as the most passionate residents call it. Adjacent to the Homestake Pass along the Continental Divide, it's nearly a mile high in elevation. I was unaware at the time that a literal butte is not a crude name for the run-down mining town I was living in, but a geologic loner. Buttes, I learn too far after the fact, are not mountains, but former mesas, eroded and weathered by streams, save for the flat top.

A sign along a paved walking trail in the uptown district will tell you when you literally reach 5,280 feet above sea level.

Today, it could serve as a case study for why all middle-to-upper class, coastal-born white liberals should be required to live at least six months in a region of rural North America. Nuances of classism aside, if you or your parents could pay for you to go abroad for a semester to another country and have your mind blown by a non-American worldview, you can afford to do the same thing in any of the states you flyover to get to your tiny, overpriced hipster institution.

And what did my coastal liberal elite, recently-graduated-with-a-humanities-degree-I-felt-overwhelmingly-indifferent-about worldview think when I first arrived with my parents? Cute. Quaint. A historic vibe emanating from the weathered buildings. With beautiful sunrises in the morning and the occasional apocalyptic sunsets at night, trademark for Big Sky country. Exactly what you'd envision someone who has yet to be exposed to the inner workings, beautiful and ugly, of a place they've never been would think. And in January of 2019 when I first arrived, a soft white blanket draped the mining town with an air of shyness, not quite open to being its true self to its incoming resident. Which is understandable.

Butte, Montana, the so-called "Richest Hill on Earth" at one point as the largest source of copper that powered America's electrical needs in the early 20th century. Giant black mining shafts scattered across town serve as relics of that part of history, along with old mansions now deemed as historic heritage sites along the uptown neighborhoods.

One such mansion, known as the Hennessey, is where I would be renting a room for the next six months. A successful surgeon living in Utah bought the house and renovated portions of it, including the soft-blue-walled bedroom I moved into and its accompanying bathroom. Signs of the house's longevity appeared in the lavish ground floor study room filled with rows of books in glass cabinets and a standard globe that's fundamentally useless in 2019, the 3-floor wooden

staircase, the abysmal water pressure, and the need for a Brita filter to feel safe drinking the tap water. I found all of it charming and livable at first.

I wouldn't have immediately felt so at home in Butte had it not been for Mia. She, too, was from Florida, my west-side counterpart. She was also serving Americorps in the same organization, but in a different position, and we ended up as roommates in the Hennessey. When I hugged my parents goodbye and was officially severed from all I had ever known, I wrote her a note with my phone number and slipped it under her door in case she wanted to hang out.

Later that day, she and I chatted together for the first time on the second-floor balcony, which offered a sweeping 180-degree south-facing view of the mining town and its geologic boundaries. To the west was a relatively flat (by Montana standards) ridgeline of the Continental Divide, where the 90-foot-tall Lady of the Rockies statue stood watching over the town, easiest to spot when her white body lit up at night. It's like Montana has its own version of the Christ statue in Rio. To the east, the esteemed "Big Butte," a recreational hill with a giant white 'B' branded on its side, as is common in Montana college towns (here, it holds Montana Tech, with the aptly titled "Oildiggers" as a mascot). And in the center, the rest of Butte's urban makeup, its downtown slanting downward as commercial turns to residential in the lower flats. The farthest thing in the distance, yet the most captivating of the panorama, was the triangular peak of Table Mountain, whose north-facing feature would blush a bright pink when the sun rose or set on a cloudless day. While the elevation nearest to me had imprints of human interference, that peak was the reminder that you cannot build on everything.

On this balcony, Mia uttered the words that could very well have been a marriage proposal: "Do you smoke?"

It was as though the Lady of the Rockies blessed me upon arrival. I had mountains, a friend, and a coping mechanism when boredom crept in. To have found paradise 5,000 feet above sea level this soon after post-grad felt too good to be true.

Mia also had a Subaru—one of the few you’ll find in Montana with a Florida license plate—and together we’d explore the areas on our weekends. One weekend, we drove to a secret hot spring and bathed topless. Another, we tried driving to a trailhead, but her car got stuck in the snow, and we ended up hitchhiking to the nearest town to call for a tow. As we cruised at 80 miles-per-hour on I-90, all around us were foothills and giant mountain ranges, sometimes blanketed in national forests, sometimes barren. Butte was the headquarters for my body, the PC for my brain capacity, but Montana was the subject of exploration, its swells of earth seeming infinite, as though I could spend the next fifty years there and never know it all.

Adventures were had, and it made up for the agonizing 40 hours I spent sitting in an office in front of a PC throughout those six months. As for the Americorps experience, the reason I was even in Butte to begin with, well...perhaps I overestimated the categories of ‘environmentalism’ and ‘sustainability’ that would be involved in a position at the National Center for Appropriate Technology, or NCAT. It’s kind of ironic that the headquarters of an organization dedicated to local, regional and national energy efficiency and renewable energy development is in a mining town in Montana of all places, but a pleasant surprise nonetheless. Within NCAT I was a “researcher” for the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program Clearinghouse. The good news was I got an office for myself. The bad news was the office was where I stayed for most of the 900 hours my position required me to fulfill. Which I wouldn’t mind if I had any emotional connection to energy efficiency as an environmental focus and had no problem reading document after document of statutes and regulations for funding low-income solar energy projects

across state lines. Not to mention that my window view was a constant tease to my senses, offering a narrow view of that Continental ridgeline, coated with evergreen, inaccessible to me for days on end. When I smoked a cigarette on the building's balcony and peered up where the Lady stood, she looked like she was beckoning to me to hike up to her and find solace in her marbled embrace on the ridge. Or, maybe she was staring down with pity. Or, maybe she was posed in the way one poses after they shrug their shoulders in indifference, their arms extended forward, slightly bent, non-verbally communicating *Nothing I can do for you out here. You chose this. Look out yonder and take it or leave it.*

~

Mia became visibly and verbally discontented with her work around a month in and started applying for alternative positions. You could consider this taboo in Americorps culture, especially when you and your cohort of post-undergraduates take a verbal oath during orientation. For some reason, our supervisor emphasized that this was a service, not a job, as if it's more heinous to quit the former than the latter despite being paid below minimum wage for our "service". That didn't stop Mia from applying for a job in Yellowstone National Park and accepting it without hesitation. Given my own initial-enthusiasm-turned-apathy-turned-growing-disdain for my position, maybe I should have followed suit.

So, with Mia and her car gone, I was virtually on my own to exist in Butte. And in the same way that winter fog would lift from the streets into the atmosphere, so too did I realize my initial impression was a bit of a mirage. As the temperatures warmed, my outsider-looking-in view cooled down.

Paradise can be real, but also lost.

What did it mean to be a part of Butte, Montana? It meant having banter with the employees at the gas station across the street from the mansion whenever I purchased cigarettes. I learned to walk past the local meth head hangout spot where a Confederate Flag hangs on the third story without a wave of horror coursing through my body. It's the lady at the local bakery—where they only accept cash or check—knowing I will order the eighty-cent maple-glazed cake donut, after making it a weekly ritual. I still crave that simple donut sometimes. It meant planning an exit route for the hypothetical scenario that someone to break into the not-terrible secure mansion.

But holistically, I wasn't a part of Butte. I rarely went out to drink with co-workers—sorry, co-servants, or co-volunteers, or whatever—preferring the quiet comfort of just-okay cannabis in my bedroom after an arduous day of sitting silently in front of a screen. Even though there's a bus system that could take me to the NCAT building, I relied on another co-worker to carpool just so I could avoid public transportation, failing to look beyond my mistrust in Butte strangers. The Irish history, combined with the state's nationally ranked alcoholism, makes the town's reputation well known for its St. Patrick's Day celebration, but I only stayed for an hour at the downtown parade. I never really fell in love with the culturally significant “pasty,” aka a shepherd's pie in the form of a Caucasian-style empanada. And, I only occasionally mingled with the other residents of the house, which included: a 20-year-old pole dancer who got pregnant with her third child, and executed a “heist” to bring her second kid back to the mansion from Idaho from her baby daddy; a textbook redneck on disability checks from the government, whose friends were nice but obnoxious and loud while I was trying to sleep; an ex-meth-head who I get high and talk about life with (he was my favorite, truth be told); and a guy who killed himself after a weeklong alcoholic bender in the house. They all deserve to have their stories told

and written about, because they each reflect a way of life condemned by those of us who know nothing of rural American-specific hardships—but not by the girl who did double sessions of hot yoga and Pilates just to escape their presence after work.

~

Tourism-based websites will highlight the Berkeley Pit—a giant, mechanically-induced crater adjacent to Butte’s uptown district, now filled with fluorescent goo that can and has killed a flock of birds that dared to touch down on its surface—as the main “attraction”. Why a symbol of the degradation of the landscape is more notable than the Continental ridgeline to people, is beyond my understanding. The Berkeley Pit is just one of many lingering consequences of industrialization in Montana, while smaller, nearby towns like Opportunity bear the brunt of toxic waste removal as part of the efforts to undo said damage.

But I knew none of this when researching the place I would be working and living in for six months—only that it was surrounded by mountains, with a few nearby hiking trails, which was enough for someone more fueled by her geographic setting than her chosen position or the history of environmental disasters in the Treasure State.

~

Years later, I drove past Butte on my way back towards Missoula, where I chose to lay roots after my six-month service with NCAT was finished. Only after enrolling in graduate courses that had me read up on the extent of Montana’s industrial impacts did I really, *really* see the depth of the mining industry on that mile-high landscape. A portion of the slope that held Butte’s uptown district was stripped of its outer flesh, revealing inner shades of millions-year-

old-strata, bleeding burnt orange and mahogany. Craters were carved out of said flesh, the Berkeley Pit being the one worthy of commodifying for tourism's sake.

So even the mountains that I lauded for years for being so omnipresent, so wise, so resilient, were vulnerable. And when you consider that mining these unsuspecting features for their mineral resources is what made Butte, Butte, for both historians and residents, and what contributed to building a community for people to be a part of in a way that I couldn't...who was I to condemn them?

It was not the mile-high landscape that let me down, it was everything built within it that did. I moved to Butte, was immediately charmed, got to know it, became a part of it, and, after a few months, it didn't do it for me. What a wake-up call to realize that just being in the presence of mountains isn't enough, if every other non-geological facet of my life was lacking! Would I have wanted to stay if I found my not-job fulfilling, if I found my living space tolerable, if I found human connections here worthy of maintaining in the long-term?

If you can't develop a meaningful relationship to a landscape, OR the people, the built environment, and your work within said landscape...then what?

For half a year I was cozied up right next to a series of mountain ranges, which originated from a plate in the Pacific that finagled its way underneath the American continental shelf and made its way upward to become the Rocky Mountain series, which is part of a larger geologic feature in the Great Divide, that spans for thousands of miles from South America to Canada, that separates the flow of water between the Atlantic and the Pacific from the center of the continent.

And I still wasn't happy enough to settle there long-term.

I just became a human butte—an isolated chunk of eroded matter—of my own making.

But that's not the Continental Divide's fault.

Boardwalked Irony

When a guy I kissed at an Americorps conference invited me on a multi-National-Park road trip from Montana to Utah, I finally had something to look forward to. After three months of languishing in my office position, all I had to do was for seven days was tilt my head upward at the geologic bounty of the American West outside of my then-residence Butte, be reminded of all the beauty that exists beyond the mundane walls of underpaid adulthood, and reignite my passion for interacting with elements of Earth unrelated to human error.

Day One

Elias and I started at the Mammoth Hot Springs on the north side of Yellowstone. The geothermal terrain was vibrantly mosaic—vegetation and soil meshed together in earthly symbiosis, creating bacteria-like patterns of brown, orange, green, blue. Steam rose in waves from these sulfuric color palettes, giving brief moments of warmth on an otherwise chilly, overcast day. The mountains that dominated our view driving into the park were now veiled by fog and mist in the distance, emphasizing the earthy, warm-colored tones of the springs in front of us.

As we walked along one of the boardwalks in between the springs, we came across a wool ear warmer hanging from a branch. Impulsively, I snatched it and stored it in my backpack, mildly smug to have taught someone a lesson about leaving no trace. To be frank, it felt more impactful than anything I was doing for renewable energy development in Montana's low-income communities back in Butte.

The paint pots were the most unusual sites of the park. In small pools surrounded by brush and boardwalk, the earth bubbled with nonstop chatter—a pleasant change of pace between the silent, nonchalant steam of hot springs and the selective explosion of Old Faithful. They distracted from the chatter of nearby humans, and I wondered whose frequency reigns supreme out here.

Tour buses filled up parking lots and small lines formed at each port-o-potty as we visited more geothermal sites, the boardwalks busy as could be in the week leading up to Memorial Day. There, lying in the center of one sulfuric pool, out of any person with common sense's reach, was a cowboy-looking hat. Whatever satisfaction that lingered from my virtuous garment swipe evaporated faster than the sulfur-fueled water leaving the earth's flesh. One could reason that a strong gust of wind knocked it off its previous owner's unsuspecting head, and the dangers of

traversing a sulfuric pool, even for park staff, made it a permanent exhibit, the culprit anonymous. It could even be portrayed as an art installation—a micro-display of a man-made, built environment within the natural environment. *Ugh, tourists*, I thought as I took pictures before we continued along the boardwalk, back to the parking lot, back onto the driving road, to take us to the next natural feature, the irony of it all entirely lost on me.

Day Two

I slept horribly against Earth's rigidity, having forgotten the difference between a cushy full-sized bed and a sleeping pad that might have had a hole in it. We woke up to 30-something-degree weather with a light snow flurry across the campground, packed up and headed south towards the Grand Tetons. To my dismay, the titular peaks, like their Yellowstone neighbors, were also veiled by fog, and we're allowed only a peek of the base, where the snow trickles out and the bare rock begins. I accepted that the weather won't be in our favor this week.

Day Three

Idaho, to my surprise, is a hidden gem of mountains and valleys, overshadowed by the Pacific Northwest and National Park deities to the east. All around our Airbnb—a quaint farmhouse in southeast Idaho with solar panels on the roof—rural farmland stretches out for miles, with the mountains bordering Wyoming from which we came in the distance. Elias came up behind me and reached his arms around my half-naked body. I ran my hand through his hair as he kissed my neck. A lover and a view: a simple but infrequent formula for harmony. A comfortable bed is always a bonus.

The morning sun peeped in with ways of promise through threatening grey clouds.

We broke apart and got our things together. A humble continental breakfast was waiting for us, courtesy of our hosts. They told us of a nearby wildlife bird refuge, where we decided to visit before continuing our previously set course. As we departed, the wife told us if we ever come through again and wish to stay there, we could get a 10% discount.

The refuge was unusual for its geographic setting—marshland caught between the boundaries of mountains and farmland. Again, in Idaho of all places. Elias is more of a birdwatcher than I am, so he had the binoculars and field guide on deck. Swallows, kingfishers, red-shouldered blackbirds, and all kinds of waterfowl reside here. We're the only ones out here, and their calls echo across the range. A pair of trumpeter swans swoops into the waterway and start conversing—or bickering—with a pair of ducks whose species I don't know. Their honks sounded comically like elephants. I was beginning to itch for us to depart so that we wouldn't arrive too late at our evening destination, but held my tongue so as to not be a buzzkill.

Our next pit stop was the Fossil Butte National Monument, back in the southeast corner of Wyoming. Along another gloriously two-lane road, it stood as a flat-ridged hunk of rock in the middle of nowhere. After the mass human activity at Yellowstone and the Tetons, and the quiet but (personally) uninspiring marshlands in Idaho, I was giddy at the thought of a lesser-known-but-still-federally-recognized landscape that offered an uphill commute along its terrain. As we drove in, he points out a group of prong-horns—the first time I've seen them in person. We checked out the visitor's center first, where fossils excavated from the site are displayed behind glass cases. I think about how, if I had pursued an archaeological route in my anthropology studies in college, I could have spent years in an isolated chunk of earth like this, uncovering the secrets from millions of years ago. I wonder about the employees—if they lived on the site or

nearby, if they had Master's degrees or field school training, if they get lonely, if the isolation from friends and family is worth it if they're enjoying their chosen career.

After leaving the center, we headed to one of the trailheads that took us around the Monument in a loop. On a carved path within the rocky terrain, we hiked against dry sagebrush and animal droppings. At one point we came across a bench along the trail. We looked around and realized we, as two warm-blooded mammals with working limbs and a baseline attraction to one another, are as isolated from human judgement as the butte we stood upon.

An idea formed.

No more than five minutes later, the human lovers pulled their pants up respectively and kept walking along the landscape. More sage. More shit. I pretended that the faunal residents do it as an act of contempt towards visitors for tromping through their home. We hiked past a boundary fence that separated us from the archaeological digs on the butte. Elias stopped me suddenly and pointed out a single moose fifty feet from the trail in front of us. She seemed unperturbed by our presence. Maybe she saw our mating ritual from a distance, but thought nothing of it, because she doesn't hold humans to a higher standard of etiquette the way we do.

The rest of the day was spent driving all the way down to southern Utah. I took over driving duties after we left Fossil Butte, and within an hour we were hit with a torrential downpour. I sensed Elias' subtle tension inches away in the passenger's seat as I carefully maneuvered his low-to-the-ground Honda Civic—not the best model for a road trip, but it's carried him farther than this before we met. I don't remember the conversations we had, if any, or the content of the NPR and Science Versus podcasts he put on in place of silence. Either I was hyper-focused on

meeting his driving standards, or I was absorbing the southward shift in American geography as they whip past at 75 miles an hour.

The rain subsided as we crossed state lines, and I was afforded a break from gripping the wheel and looking steadfastly ahead. I knew Utah had desert-like geography, but as we continued south, I'm caught off guard by the scale of it. I had only been acclimated to snow-capped, triangular peaks of Continental Montana that gradually melted into green and brown variations of themselves. Orange rockiness that appeared to randomly generate across a dry desert region bred astonishment that could only be contained by maneuvering an automobile. It was an entirely new set of landscapes before my eyes, and it was zipping by me in a flash, refusing mental absorption and the chance to marvel.

Day Four

We headed out early to avoid traffic congestion at the Zion National Park entrance. I'm surprised by all the different vegetation along the Watchman's trail: small pine trees, sage brush, little cacti bunches here and there. We then walked along a concrete footpath smack in the middle of Zion canyon. It's the first time on the trip where we could leisurely stroll with these Southwest-specific giants hovering over us, protectively and threateningly. Much more intimate than on the road, much more visible than the veiled background of Yellowstone's and Teton's peaks.

We took a heavily packed shuttle to our next destination: Angel's Landing. Annoyingly, but understandably, the trail was flooded with foot traffic.

Damn tourists. Irony lost again.

We started along the edge of the Virgin River and entered a crevice between two rock walls. After a series of switchbacks and immediate elevation gain, we reached the top of the

ridge and took a break. As Elias and I sat and nibbled on trail mix, we observed the last half-mile of our destination: a terrifyingly steep cliff jutting out of the canyon wall, with only five-to-ten feet of walking surface. Even worse, the trail across was equally as jam-packed with other hikers as the it was on our way up. I asked Elias what he thought, and he seemed willing to finish it out. Not keen to disappoint him or look weak in the face of a challenge, I withheld my anxieties and agreed, hinging on the hope that observing the cliff from afar is worse than making initial contact with it. Before we get in line with the other hikers, we passed by a warning sign and read: “*Since 2010, ___ people have died falling off this trail.*” There was no number showing the death toll—5? 50? 500? Would knowing the answer change my mind?

In any case, I let him take the lead.

Chains were bolted into the rock along the trail for us to hold onto as we shuffled across the ten-foot-wide cliff surface. Five minutes in, my foot slipped ever so slightly against some eroded grain, but—as someone who used to have a handful of falling-to-her-death dreams in her youth—it’s enough to shake me to my core. Elias heard my slip and my sharp intake of breath and took my arm, gently reassuring me that he wouldn’t let me fall. I didn’t have time to sit in fear, as others were behind me. From there, I buckled down, gripped the chains even tighter, and focused on putting one foot in front of the other, only looking up to check that he was still in front. The surrounding canyons disappeared around me, as did the desire to absorb their grandeur—sorry to those features, but in the face of gravity, other human bodies in front and behind me, the body and my ability to navigate it were the name of the game. The only piece of nature that briefly distracted, instead of terrified, me was an emerald hummingbird zipping around a small bunch of brush and cacti.

Lucky bastard, unconfined by gravity's threat at that height. What the hell is it doing here, around all this narrow human traffic?

It could ask me the same thing, I suppose.

After a tense twenty minutes, we arrived at the true end point. In all honesty, the view of towering cliffs looks pretty similar to what we had seen on the ridge before jumping in line, just with a different panoramic viewing experience. It felt more like an accomplishment of conquest than it does a revelatory experience in nature. I wasn't disappointed by the view, but not in awe either. It just was.

After returning from the cliff, we walked past the warning sign and noticed a small sticker on the ground that answered a question I would have liked to know before grabbing those chains: 9. Or 6. Not as high a number of casualties as I expected, but the feeling from that foot slip still lingered.

We took a break halfway down the trail and sat down on the constructed wall along the edge of the cliff. When I saw there was a brief gap in human traffic, I turned his face towards me and kissed him quickly. He smiled slightly. Later, he told me he was also scared while traversing Angel's Landing. It was comforting knowing that he, too, was intimidated by the earth's scale.

Day Five

Even in an Airbnb bed, I didn't sleep well again. When Elias is already up and dressed, I'm groggy and huddled in the bed sheets. He said we need to go soon; I groaned and curled further into comfort.

This time, we headed to the Kolob Canyons, away from the main portion of Zion. It was pouring heavy rain again, and the employee at the center there warned us of flash flooding. We took the La Verkin trail that goes inside the canyon. There's little to no elevation gain; instead, we face the obstacle of high-water flow along the trail. About a mile in, I gave up trying to avoid getting my worn shoes soaked. The rain subsided, but clouds and fog veil the looming canyon walls above us. Now and again, they revealed their millions-year-old presence, as if to remind us that they were watching closely as we traversed through their sacred oasis. It was eerie, and it felt like we weren't supposed to be here, and I loved it.

After, we drove up to the overlook site at the top of Kolob. The pervading pillars of orange were much more visible from up here than down below. Halfway down, vegetation dressed the bottom half in climate-resilient greenery. Clouds moved through their tops, and we could see traces of snow where they pass through. We're so high up that you could see patches of light on the canyon wherever clouds didn't obstruct the sun.

Again, I didn't feel the primal sense of wonder I was anticipating. Disbelief makes more sense, as I was confounded by the scale that these features exist in the American Southwest. Were the images of flat deserts and smaller-scale geology really my only perceptions of this part of the country I lived in? How much of my own national homeland do I even know? Could I ever know all of it, even if I spent my entire life roaming through all its peaks and valleys?

At night, we watched Miyazaki's *Nausicaa: Valley of the Wind* on my laptop. Its themes of environmentalism and power dynamics were brutal, its characters unrelenting in their motivations. There was death and pain and grief and fear, but also resilience and courage and resolution. The protagonist is a headstrong, compassionate young woman respected in her community, like many characters in his other films. She seemed younger than my 23-year-old self, and I envy

her inherent selflessness. She was willing to protect her community and restore the relationships between humans and mythical creatures at all costs, while I laid in a stranger's bed with someone I met two months ago, hundreds of miles from the place I moved to, and thousands of miles away from the place I originally left.

Day Six

We headed out early and secured a campground in Bryce Canyon. In the valley that we hiked in and around in an 8-mile loop, thousands and thousands of hoodoo spires stood tall, like terra cotta soldiers of the former seabed. Only one phallic joke was cracked between the two of us. I asked Elias a question about politics as we walked along the rim looking down at the orange pit, but I don't even remember his response. I don't even remember if it was because I was too busy scanning the unique landscape, or that I wasn't all that interested in the topic. It's difficult to try connecting with a place you're in only for a day while connecting to a human you're starting to know beyond the honeymoon phase.

We drove through the different scenic vistas throughout the park, and each stop, much like Yellowstone, is its own ecosystem of non-native humans, that expand and shrink with each passing vehicle. The irony of witnessing such a phenomenon while also being a part of it, of course, nowhere to be found.

At night, I woke up close to 3 am, when I had my alarm set anyway. I unzipped the tent and peered up at the sky. I nudged Elias awake, only for him to groggily peer out of the tent, and then retreat back to sleep. I wrapped a blanket around myself and pulled out a joint I had stored for myself for a moment like this—where no one is actively around, the space is wide-open. Stars spread for miles above me, the most I've ever seen at once.

I didn't really mind having the moment to myself.

Day Seven

On our way back up north, we stopped in Salt Lake City. We stopped by a nearby park, where he calls his mom for her birthday, and then visited the local aviary at my request. I failed to recognize the contrivance of paying \$13 to observe rescued but caged birds amongst yelling kids, days after being at a vast, no-cost wildlife refuge where the birds out-populated the humans.

The Mormon Square was the strangest tourist spot I've been to in a while in a city. Compared to other faith-based places I've been to, everything looked as though it adopted organized religion on a budget: the architecture is amateur at best; the history and stories behind Mormonism and their accompanying exhibits sound like modified—even satirical—Biblical text. Most of the staff and guides were women. We enter the temple and eavesdrop on a guided tour, where the women explain that they dress modestly to honor Christ as they work. Part of me pitied them for being so young and to have committed themselves to a life grounded in something as painfully abstract as faith; but another part of me envied them to have found their commitment, their duty, their sense of place.

Elias and I didn't converse much.

I didn't take any photos today.

Day Eight

We were eating lunch in another Mexican joint somewhere in Idaho. I braced myself.

“And...how do you feel about us after this?”

Not looking up, he shrugged and replied: “I feel good about it. I’m not really sure about being in a relationship though.”

A sinking feeling spurned from my chest, but I nodded in concession.

When we arrived back in Butte, one of my housemates had a new set of unkempt strangers hanging out in the living room. Just like that, I was back in the reality I’ve had for months—living in a dusty old mansion in a dusty old town while serving a position I had gradually lost interest in. After spending days surrounded by thousands of strangers in outdoor spaces I wanted all for myself and the person I drove with, the invasion of my indoor space was the catalyst that put me in tears. In the bedroom that I have leased for one more month, Elias asked me what’s wrong. I couldn’t verbalize it, but it was then that I knew that the honeymoon was over. The escape into nature and human intimacy was short-lived, as it has always been and would be. I never truly absorbed the beautiful places we went to, never listened to the voices of the Earth from that region. Veiled mountains and Olympus-like pillars of orange were not my destination.

Neither is Elias, as much as I desperately wanted him to be. This was the most time we had spent with each other since meeting at a work conference, making it a preliminary test of longer-term companionship. On the road, in the silence, he worried about his workload, his meetings with multiple local organizations, his ability to make positive, collective change in his community; meanwhile I worry about taking in the places we’ve been, the speed at which they’ve come and gone, and my failure to be inspired by most of them.

We would never use that 10% discount in Idaho.

What was I expecting? How can anyone develop a connection to millions-year-old features when they speed past you on a highway, or when you're more focused on where you're walking and who's around you? Did I really think I could have in-depth moments in nature in board-walked National Parks at the beginning of tourist season? And still I had the nerve to condemn others for wanting what I want?

I'm no environmentalist, no Miyazaki protagonist with a moral code and adored by others. I'm a fucking tourist—within both the bounty of the West and my own life--taking physical and mental pictures of sweeping landscapes, and archiving small moments of human interactions, so I can reaffirm in my loneliest moments that the world is beautiful, and I wasn't always unwanted.

I confess—I want permanence. I want to be as stable and resilient as those orange canyons, those towering Tetons; to be as unbothered as that moose or that hummingbird when people come and go. No, wait. I *need* those things for myself. I *want* what I had briefly on this trip: a human companion and a landscape. The immediate, tangible security of a human willing to share life with, juxtaposed with scenery that consistently inspires and humbles.

Maybe it's all just a series of escapes, veiled by a reality that I can't yet accept. Will the fog that holds my future lift and reveal something as spectacular as the sweeping summits of the Rocky Mountain ranges?

Elias left, I called my sister as my tears run out, and then I smoked weed and ate Chinese food and browsed the internet on my laptop, in my temporary bedroom, in what is neither a home nor an escape. The mountains surrounding Butte, and the boardwalks and chains of the parks I made brief contact with, don't care what I do or don't do. They don't care that we've

built inside and around them for our survival, and then through National Park development, our pleasure. They've been around longer than any aspiring environmentalist has and probably know they'll outlive us all. They know we're all tourists, that we're all temporary, that our built environments won't last. They must be amused at our attempts to capture untainted moments in nature on our cameras, choosing images of pristine springs that don't feature hats and boardwalks.

As if we didn't build our way into these places for the sake of trying to admire and protect them. The irony forever buried by wanderlust and animal shit.

Seeking Narrative with a View

There's a giant mountain with an M branded into its side, owned by the University of Montana, similar to how a rancher would mark his cattle. It's supposedly a norm on this side of the Continental Divide to have letters on hills when living in some form of a valley.

1216 McDonald Avenue

For a low-income complex, the windows offer a surprisingly generous view of the mountain valley town. From the bedroom I can see the layers of ecosystems, from the built environment to the foothills of Waterworks Hill, to the ridgelines of the Rattlesnake in the way back. My roommate lives on the second floor of his building, on the south side of town by the YMCA. Rent is relatively cheap by Missoula, Montana standards, and extremely cheap by coastal liberal city standards. The walls are beige, the floors are carpeted, and the shower pressure is heavenly.

Despite the decision not to pursue each other more seriously, Elias still let me crash in the spare bedroom as I figured out my next move. Not the best motivation for an aspiring environmentalist seeking adult independence, but I've learned to roll with it. It's only a temporary living situation, so I only purchase an air mattress to sleep. It deflates overnight and there are many instances where I wake up at 4 am on an uneven surface, unable to go back to sleep. We have occasional casual sex. Outside, wildfire smoke wafted through the valley from all directions, but I thought little of it and what it meant to live in dry heat west of the Great Divide.

While Elias is still in his service term and I was unemployed, I'm left to my own devices. I have no means of transportation except for the bus route, but as an ex-suburbanite now without a car, I'm too nervous about relying on its schedule, and also just riding around with strangers in a public vessel in a town I know nothing about. Instead, I spend most of my time indoors either in my (temporary) bedroom or at the nearby coffee shop-slash-bookstore. Elias lends me his car occasionally to go hiking up the surrounding hillsides. A popular way to get an elevated view of the town is to hike up Mount Sentinel, right next to the University. From there, you can get an even better, more elevated view of the town situated in the former glacial valley, with local grassland hills and distant peaks of taller mountains serving as the boundaries of the county, and the Clark Fork River cutting westward through the downtown district.

~

I returned to Missoula after spending August and most of September with my family in Florida. It was transitioning into autumn, and learning that leaves turn colors in Montana during this time was the best surprise. As it turns out, non-native deciduous trees were planted all throughout the town as part of an urban forest plan. Imperfect human population aside, I was already sold on Montana as a geological dreamscape, and the simulation of the New England autumn that I fell in love with during my undergrad years was a signing bonus. If non-native species can be welcomed in and allowed to set up roots and bring aesthetic and ecological benefits to the human and non-human communities, then surely, I could too, right?

~

In between environmentally-focused jobs that I keep getting rejected from, I score a part-time position with a local Poke sushi restaurant in the downtown district. Here, I gain insight into the human demographics of Missoula: college students who have yet to lose the youth in their faces; young and old couples dressed in flannels and Patagonia gear; business professionals working in the buildings adjacent to the shop; a homeless man who came in just for the free water fountain. During evening shifts, I watch the reflection of the sun's descension against the sleek, modern windows of the building across the street.

The week of a cold front in October, I meet with the director of the Environmental Studies graduate program at the University of Montana. The program sounds beautifully interdisciplinary and offers a concentration in Environmental Writing. Convinced I will never move forward in the environmental field with just a Bachelor's in anthropology, I take the GRE, bomb it, apply to the program anyway, and get accepted a few months later. Go Griz.

~

Autumn has passed. The leaves are all on the ground by now—crumpled, yellow, dying like their grass counterparts. Days are cold and grey. Earth looks uninspired and unsympathetic. Fall is beautiful, and so is winter, but the transitional period from the former to the latter is a task to get through, no matter how many times I've done it.

Elias starts seeing someone else. He looks happier than I've ever seen him, even more so than when we were briefly seeing each other months before I moved in. For a week, I cry myself to sleep, wake up, remember, and start the day with a pit in my stomach. There were hour-long phone and video calls between my mom, my sister, my best friend. For the first time since moving to Montana, I feel the impact of their distance.

When I return to Missoula after spending Thanksgiving back home, I move into a new apartment. When I go back to Elias' place one last time to get the rest of my stuff, he asks if I want to fuck.

It had been two weeks since he first told me of the other girl.

I say yes.

In short, I hate November; it's ugly, it's inconsistent, and it feels like it will stay that way indefinitely.

1250 S 1st St. West

The ditch out front of the new complex holds barren deciduous trees for months, along with debris from homeless campers, and an occasional pod of deer.

The winter doesn't feel like winter. It snows but melts the next day. It is as though November, the miserable bitch that she is, extended herself all the way to March. I overheard from my neighbors that it's a record warm winter for Missoula.

Extended transitions. Marvelous.

This time I have a bed, a desk, and a nightstand, mostly courtesy of my parents. The room is smaller than the last apartment, but a walk-in closet makes up for it. Like Elias' apartment, the walls are devoid of decoration. My new roommate—a 30-year-old woman who works the graveyard shift at a rehabilitation facility—and I get along well enough, and conflicts are minimal.

It probably helps that we never slept together.

It, too, is not perfect. I'm on the first floor of the complex that's situated more centrally in town, and I lose the vista of the valley. Windows and lighting are minimal. There's a semi-average view of the sunset through the singular 4-by-two-foot window in my bedroom, if you can forgive the dumpster and neighboring homes in the way. No one is sustainability-oriented in my complex, but they too can be forgiven—recycling isn't available for pickup unless you pay for it, otherwise you have to transport it to a facility.

I'm friendly, but not close, with my neighbors, made up mostly of chain-smoking elders and their adult kids. I found out later that the building's brick material isn't actual brick. Police were called on more than one occasion in the middle of the night. There are also cats.

~

I notice my solitude more often, especially in the confines of the dimly lit, neutral-colored space. It's unbearable. 15-20 hours per week at a food service job that's not so busy at this time of year makes for too much free time to simmer in loneliness.

One evening, Elias comes by with a body pillow he had no use for. He knocks on my door, hands it to me, says he's tired, and leaves. I'm shaken by his indifference, but I guess it was on me for assuming he would stay longer, either to catch up or have another empty sex session.

For months, anger still lingers towards him, and it festers in the walls. Anger, which is the chosen expression of hurt when time and space are both too constricting on the soul, projects back and forth between him, for abandoning me as a friend—the only friend I had out here—and myself, for all the choices I made that led me to this place. The mountains are even further away, though they haven't budged. Again, I shrink into my feelings, my body, my stupid ego.

There's no escape from myself. Not in those terribly mundane walls.

By the time I was starting to move on months later, a continual leak in a water pipe in the apartment tore my plastered bedroom ceiling open and dumped god-knows-how-dirty water onto my bed early in the morning as I was sleeping.

Had it happened the night Elias stopped by, I would have found it poetic. I wonder how much anger and loneliness this building had stored from past tenants before unleashing it onto me.

32 Spurgin Road (Office of Fish Wildlife & Parks)

After a six-week, pandemic-induced hiatus back in my hometown, I return to Missoula in late April, where rebirth is happening and daylight savings time is in place. The grass is greener around my apartment complex, and the sun is expanding its commute across Big Sky. Late spring to summer, I find a daily routine: wake up at 5:30 am, do a 20-30 minute home workout, cook a quick lunch, then drive or bike to work. For the first time in a while, routine doesn't eat away at my insides. It makes the indoors slightly more bearable.

I land a summer position with Montana State Parks as a pseudo-park-ranger with an Americorps' pay rate. I open gates, pick up people's trash, manage social media accounts, create a video series for kids since the pandemic shut down all in-person interpretive and educational programming, grow bored of the cottonwoods lining the gravel pit-turned Frenchtown Pond, smell the vanilla butterscotch aroma of Ponderosa Pine bark in Council Grove to forget my six-month depression, feel nothing when staring at the light blue silhouettes of foothills and mountains that surround me. And, in a moment of pure, unbridled, tone-deaf ignorance, I silently thank the pandemic for cancelling all public events I would have to lead so I couldn't force passion and enthusiasm for what I do and the land I was sort-of entrusted to care for.

It is the summer of 2020, and another black man is murdered with video evidence, and Americorps rules prohibit political outcry during one's service term. I log my hours from 7:30 to 4, but start leaving the office an hour and a half early. They don't pay me enough to sit in ambivalence.

~

“Stop me if this is weird or inappropriate, but would you like to have some casual sex?”

I almost want to laugh, but I'm in the office when I get the message. Elias has a proclivity for making this kind of proposal whenever I convince myself I'll never see him again.

I respond to his message carefully: "Hmmm, interesting proposal. Do YOU want to have sex?"

"Yeah, that's why I'm asking. I don't know about making it a habit, but I need to blow off some steam."

I could hear the voices of my mother, my sister, and my two best friends, all of whom laid witness to my grief over Elias' detachment for half a year: *You dumb cunt. You cried over him for MONTHS and send him PARAGRAPHS about your STUPID FUCKING FEELINGS and are met with NO RESPONSE because he DOESN'T CARE ABOUT YOU and yet you STILL would let him use your body even though that's ALL he wants you for?*

And then, another voice—in my own deadpan, shameless inner tone: *Do you really have anything better to do today? Aren't you bored?*

Sometimes, returning to something warm, familiar, and fundamentally useless, is more appealing than holding your ground in an emotionally stable, but dull, present.

~

When I get home, I ask my neighbor—owner of a medical marijuana card who has supplied me in the past—if he had anything to spare me. Even though I'd gone a few weeks without weed, the thought of having casual sex while sober—especially with a guy who didn't deserve my leniency—was unfathomable. His son blesses me with a leafy chunk of hedonism, no charge.

Elias comes over. We catch each other up on our lives, and then we fuck. It's fine. Nothing like what it was when we were innocent lovers who believed we were the only exciting thing in each other's lives. Maybe the averageness of the sex was the clarity I needed, superficial as it sounds. When the physical euphoria, or the craving for it, is gone, the mind can rest and look outward again.

When I go to bed later that evening, I detect a faint trace of his scent on my sheets. It's one I was fondly acclimated to since I first entered his bedroom over a year ago as nothing more than a visiting Missoula tourist. A heavy wave of nostalgia comes over me, along with a flicker of sadness for what Elias and I once were and what could have been.

But then it's gone a moment later, and nothing remains.

633 S Fifth Street E

My bedroom walls are now a soft, seafoam green, repainted upon my arrival at the tail end of summer. Pieces of art that my mom shipped to me from my bedroom back home hang on the wall above my bed: a portrait-sized mirror that was a birthday gift from my sister, with winging text on the surface; a poster I bought in Greenland, featuring a sunset over the island near the hostel I stayed at forever ago; an Iceland-themed canvas designed by my mom, featuring images of a black farmhouse, sheep, and myself in a photo taken by my study abroad classmate.

Light pours in from two windows. In the corner hangs my very first plant, a birthday gift from my new roommates. We celebrate my 25th birthday together as a unit of six.

I've only been here for a week. And yet, I find myself already part of a "we" in a way that I haven't been in years.

The yard alone is more vibrant in the late summer than anything else I've witnessed in Missoula. Plump chickens meander through the raised garden beds that hold squash and zucchini, roma and cherry tomatoes, kale, arugula and spring lettuce. Two plum trees hold the center of the property, united together by a hammock. A quarter mile away, Mount Sentinel looms over the University and our property. It really stayed put this whole time, as if waiting for me to slowly make my way towards its comforting presence.

Months ago during the start of the pandemic, I was—to my genuine surprise—accepted for a position as a co-director for the local university's sustainability-focused student residency. The position offers a partial tuition waiver along with a modest stipend. It's everything I need to justify staying in Missoula for a longer haul. I'm officially committed to staying in one place for two more years.

There's too much to do, for the first time since moving to Missoula. Read and write for classes; keep up with property maintenance and outreach with community and university partners; maintain sanity with weed and recreational volleyball. Still, there's always time for a cigarette break on the front porch. I watch the same view of the non-native trees, grassland hills and distant mountain ranges transform through another round of seasonal changes. This time around, I don't need require the second floor of an apartment to enjoy it.

~

My graduate school cohort is a funky mix, a collection of randomized ages between 21 and 37 from all corners of the states, up to Alaska. Unlike my friend circles in undergrad made up of English and humanities majors, we're all under the same broad bubble of Environmental

Studies. Some folks are focusing on local food systems and sustainable agriculture, others on environmental justice, traditional ecological knowledge, or conservation and restoration action. Some of us form closer bonds with each other, while others keep to themselves for the most part. I get semi-involved with the Environmental Writing sector, and even those women came in with niche passions: ornithology; one's hometown of Bakersfield and the health of the Kern River; insects and seeds and paragliding. They're all intimidatingly talented, able to write about their passions with grace and confidence and knowledge.

A mandatory retreat for the first-year cohort takes place in Lubrecht Forest, on the weekend of another October cold front that features an intense blizzard on the drive up, followed by a twenty-degree drop in temperature. At night, seven of us trudge through the three feet of snow, past a series of white-capped Ponderosas, into a sprawling field where the only imperfection is the path we forged through it earlier. The blizzard stopped hours ago, and now the moon and stars loom above us, their natural light shining across the white stage. A light-up Frisbee is soon sailing across the field, the disc flashing technicolors that surprisingly complement the backdrop of pale moonlight. The Georgia transplant of the cohort romps in his first real snow. Others, myself included, observe the activity with amusement, dodging powdered snow being thrown by the guys whilst fiddling with a shared lighter.

If we were all quiet for a moment, it would have been utter silence. There's no wind, no nocturnal animals abound, no sound of snow falling from the trees. Instead, we start a low-pitch harmonization, gradually raising our voices until we holler out into the open air.

In the morning, deer and birds may come across that field and be perturbed by the pockets of unkempt tracks in the snow. Is it a predator? A Friend? Neither?

The answer: a handful of bi-pedal mammals, liberating themselves from the confines of their man-made shelters in which they talk, work, think, worry, plan for all things good and bad, while the moon and stars hang above, not noticing a difference between human scholars and wild animals. It's unclear where we will all be when we attain our degrees in a few years, and there will always be reservations about getting too attached to any one friend or classmate on my end. For now, though, knowing that we're all the same to the landscape we romp across is comforting enough.

Unknown Address in the Grander Scheme

In a perfect narrative ending, I would regain my passion and enthusiasm for environmental studies, go on to write a groundbreaking thesis, have my adult acne cleared, quit cigarettes and weed, live with my closest friends somewhere out West on a self-sustaining farm, confess my interest to whichever person I'm crushing on at the time and we fall in love and travel the world and manage to fit each other's lives perfectly without either having to sacrifice any goals or dreams.

Alas, anyone who's lived long enough would roll their eyes, already aware that a revelation is not a resolution.

Of course, the hero's journey didn't end. My then-roommates, who I adore, would graduate, move out, and go their own ways in a few months' time, and my cohort members and I would eventually do the same. I would remain on my non-pandemic stimulus package of ADHD medication, cigarettes and weed until who knows when. I would have more lovers after Elias,

and when they left me, returned to him, even when my body no longer ached for him, or for anyone.

I would never not doubt what the fuck I'm even doing here.

After two years in Missoula, it's still hard to determine if I love the town, or just the circumstances I'm in that are geographically defined by the mountain valley. In the same town that I've cuddled with chickens and danced the night away with new friends in an Eden-like property, I've succumbed to the detrimental effects of loneliness in a poorly-lit, low-income apartment complex. My stability is temporary at best, and the thought of uprooting myself yet again puts a pit in my stomach.

Meanwhile, the landscapes around me will stay where they are long after I'm gone from the world. I might as well have one in my line of sight.

Chapter Four:
Cutting Corners in Place-Based Academia

“To experience is to learn; it means acting on the given and creating out of the given”

— Yi Fu Tuan

How to Botch a Funding Award

To the Environmental Studies Department of the University of Montana,

It was an honor to receive the B. & B. Dawson award to fund for my creative nonfiction thesis. I want to express my sincerest gratitude for affirming the validity of my purpose for being in this graduate program—which, as a reminder, is dedicated to studying how landscapes shape our perceptions of our environment, and by extension, our appreciation and desire to protect it.

I also wish to apologize for utterly blowing this opportunity, and making a fool of all aspiring environmentalists, you and me included.

As my initial proposal details, I requested \$750 from your department to purchase the latest GoPro technology, as a method of recording a handful of outdoor experiences throughout the year, both local and out of state, with the remainder of award money being used for transportation. One such experience I wished to record was a multi-day backpacking trip in Mount Rainier National Park I previously planned with a good friend. We set out to complete the northern portion of the popular Wonderland Trail—a 40-ish-mile-loop—within four nights and five days. With that experience completed, I can now report my findings.

The footage itself is not part of my thesis, but if I were to submit it for review, you would see all the trademark vistas that make Mother Earth a wondrous: the white-capped dome of Mount Rainier, whose curves and dimples were made radiant by the sunlight in the near-cloudless sky; tiny streams of former snowpack that trickled across Edenic alpine meadows wherever the earth sloped only slightly downward; patches of moss and subalpine wildflowers that budded around these mini watersheds; a lake we camped nearby, surrounded by a ring of forest and looming ridge lines; the density of the snowpack under the evergreen canopies that obscured a good amount of the physical trail; the body of a glacier, almost unrecognizable underneath the layer of silt runoff; and the fierce color contrast between the blue sky and the white-whitewashed summit of Windy Gap.

~

Faculty, you would not, however, see the other 95% of the trip. In the face of a terrain still packed with snow in late June, I could only film for a minute at a time, only collecting three-sixty views of certain checkpoints, or a time-lapse of walking on a dry trail, before having to put the camera away and focus on navigating the snow. It was an overestimation on my part to assume that the adhesive strip would bind my GoPro to the top of my bucket hat for forty miles. Instead it slipped off and filmed sideways after five minutes of uphill on the first day.

Plus, the visual component was only a fraction of the experience. The footage did not capture the momentary relief of a cool breeze running across my face. It did not report the ache in my shoulders and chest each night from lugging twenty-plus pounds of poorly distributed materials on my back. Nor did it record my cries of frustration and anguish whenever my foot sunk into the snow, or when my tent slipped out of the outer latches of my pack and I had to bend down

and stuff it back in, or when my hiking partner told me we had two miles left to go instead of one before we could pause for lunch.

You wouldn't have felt the joy of being the only travelers out there, to feel that (admittedly greedy) exuberance at having a cross-section of Mother Earth's spaciousness all to yourselves, because I hardly could. The physical nature of this trip had us constantly on the move, putting one foot in front of the other, searching for the trail when it was buried in June snow underneath never-ending rows of evergreen, hoping we don't sink into a patch that will either delay our movement or tear a ligament out in the middle of nowhere. I had no choice but to look down to watch my step, as opposed to looking upward at the distinct beauty of the Pacific Northwest.

And, faculty, the footage did not capture the agony of hiking the final mile on day one, when the sun was down and the trail was covered in snow and I was damp and cold from falling chest-first into a roaring creek. Nor did it record the horrific realization that I was grossly under-prepared for four more days of this.

~

And so, in my quest to determine how landscapes impact us in an adventure-turned-field-work-research, instead I was yet another contributor to the decades-old discourse of how we negatively impact them. Oh no, faculty, I'm not talking about corporations and politicians draining our finite natural resources as we speak—it's a bit of an unoriginal topic at this point, don't you think? See, this was an individual case study, where an aspiring environmentalist, on a mission to engage with a handful of places and justify why this earth is worth protecting, expended nearly one thousand miles of gas, purchased several packets of food with too many plastic wrappers to spare, and repeatedly violated the basic steward's rule of leaving no trace. Although considering

the 40-mile trail we trekked is one hell of a trace already left, maybe I can be kinder to myself for being a symptom of the problem and not necessarily the cause of it.

But worst of all—at least on a personal level—the physical strain of carrying 20-plus pounds on my back up and down 40-plus miles of land with 2000-plus feet of elevation gain per day kept me contained in my own five-foot-four frame, miserable in my own flesh, unable to truly marvel at Rainier’s fierce presence for hours at a time. You would think a five-day trip of nothing but nature for a girl who’s desperate to seek inspiration from the outdoors for herself and her thesis would be in Thoreau-ian paradise, but no. And, the fact that I’m associating environmental contemplation with a dead white guy from Massachusetts who made a writing career out of bragging about his vacation cabin in the woods tells you that frankly, faculty, this was a doomed mission from the start.

Instead, all I have to offer as empirical data for my “research” is the colonial undertones that manifest when a white person is mad that nature—even when it’s been trammled, manipulated, and fenced as a National Park—is kicking her ass just by existing. Rainier is an ice-cold bitch in the summertime, and her indifference to my suffering unnerved me to the point of wanting to curse her beauty out; but, now several months removed from the trip, I have more respect for her for it. If I caught word that a mid-twenties adventurer was out there having the same struggles as I, I’d probably smirk and side with Rainier, thinking: *Foolish, entitled prick. That’s what you get for assuming the backcountry would easily cater to your desires of convenient wanderlust.*

By now you might have noticed, faculty, that I've spent more time criticizing my experience than speaking to the incontestable beauty of Rainier so far in this report. Here are some additional observations that the GoPro missed:

- Snowpack tinged with red, which I always think is animal (or human) blood when it's actually bacteria;
- A herd of mountain goats on the side of a mountain, blending in with the landscape more than two humans in bright-colored gear ever would;
- Trout lillies;
- A snake;
- A frog;
- Another alpine meadow (but it got lost on the GoPro's data card along with all the other Rainier footage, that I had to spend an extra \$80 outside of the funding award to retrieve most of, yet still didn't get back this particularly enjoyable meadow footage);
- My friend and I, one by one, scooching ever so slowly on our asses over a log as the underlying creek, at its maximum water flow of the season, threatened to push us off balance and into the chaotic unknown of rock and rushing water;
- Me yelling and/or cursing at my friend, solely out of frustration that he was navigating the snowpack better than I
- Me ignoring trail etiquette rules of going to the bathroom at least twenty feet from the trail, taking the occasional shit at most five feet from where I walked.

You would also see cedars and hemlock standing like proud citizens of their land as us foreign explorers navigated underneath their gaze on a path constructed by our kind. However many of them were felled to make way for the trail couldn't temper the overwhelming populace of those still standing. As we hiked, I felt as if they were judging me for being here, constantly on the move, mentally in and out of the moment. The contempt they must hold for visitors who enter their territory, collect their photos, memories, inspirations and contemplations, and depart. And, lord, the *hatred* they must have when we leave our remnants on their bodies, be it human waste or unintentionally dropped gear.

And no, faculty, the irony of environmentally-oriented people like us trying to escape our humanity via entering someone else's domain isn't lost on me.

~

As my friend and I trekked along, the moment of self-reflective existential inquiry came to both of us: what's the whole purpose behind multi-day backpacking? How can you enjoy the natural world to the fullest when your mind and body are plagued with ailments and curse words and longing for the day's journey to end? Who romanticized the concept of hiking up and down 2000 feet in elevation gain, sometimes *twice* in one day? And how does this make us any more superior in environmental appreciation than anyone who would only do a day hike, or drive to a vista?

The answer, faculty, is that it doesn't. I'm now convinced that someone who spends their life indoors may be a better environmentalist than even the greatest nature lover. At least they wouldn't have dropped a hairbrush, a pair of sunglasses, a stick of deodorant, and a juice container-turned-water bottle along Rainer's terrain.

Forgive me, EVST faculty, and forgive me, Miss Rainier. I set out to record the experience of navigating a beautiful landscape, to archive moments of revelation in nature that originally drove me to enroll in graduate school and find a means to share these experiences with the world, in the hopes that one person would be learn to love the land the way I've grown to. Alas, no revelations were had, no transcendentalist thoughts occurred, no primal sensations of joy were enough to fuel me to write about the experience effortlessly, able to inspire other millennial nihilists in desperate need to step out of their egos and into the beautiful world that we sort-of try to protect. Instead, I broke trail, stepped on innocent wildflowers not yet in bloom, dropped at least one article of gear along the trail each day, and barely used the technology you funded. Everyone's a loser here, faculty.

~

On our last full day, an eleven-miler, we muscled through another series of uphill-downhill switchbacks and arrived at a checkpoint with a view that revealed just how far we had gone. Commanding the view was Rainier, the snowy queen of summer with her dome as a natural beacon for one's orientation, layered by the two mountain ranges separated by that glacier and its running river of blood that we spent the last three days navigating through. Of course, it was an objectively beautiful sight. It was like standing at the entrance to a royal hall, with Rainier's summit as the throne, the flowing remnants of a-once-beautiful-glacier river as the winding carpet, and the sprawling blankets of evergreen on either side as her royal subjects. It could have even been something that years ago would have induced a sense of awe and wonder at the sight of something so picturesque, instead of the neutrality in which I was observing it then. It seems one's perception of a given landscape depends on whether they are admiring it from afar, or physically navigating through it. Previously, I always lauded Earth for being able to take the

most self-absorbed person out of their ego and captivate them with her beauty. Now, I can report that she also has the power to shrink humans back into themselves, to feel their own physical presence as a distraction. It's frustratingly counterintuitive to why I was out there in the first place, but I suppose in getting to be truly intimate with a given place, that means understanding how brutal and unrelenting it can be. If observing a particular landscape is love at first sight, then multi-day backpacking is a trial run for learning that landscape's best and worst parts, take her or leave her. Which I can and should respect out of an ecosystem I was so eager to be a part of for a few days, even as a filthy, foreign meanderer that defecated all over its body.

~

I could insert a reflection about the indigenous peoples who traversed the terrain we did, without needing a permit or car or National Park Pass to do so. Alas, that is beyond the scope of this report; and anyway, faculty, I don't think I need a metaphor about being an invasive species stumbling through 40 miles of evergreen forests and subalpine wildflowers she doesn't know the names of to get the point across. After all, most of us affiliated with this graduate program are all out-of-staters who chose to plant roots in Montana.

~

The final evening in the park was the most memorable. We had completed another two-digit miler, this time looping back around to where we had crossed through our first day, and decided the loop junction was a better final resting stop of the trip than the campground a half mile and another god forsaken snowpack away. Here, however, we could take in all the pieces of the landscape I listed to you, without feeling the pressure of our packs demanding we keep our heads down and legs forward.

As the sun took its time going down, the mountain range that sprawls from Rainier's center turned that heavenly shade of pink you might all be familiar with—the kind that looks so out of place in the rugged outdoors yet makes it all the more beautiful.

You cannot learn a place just by physically moving through it, faculty. You have to sit in it in order to absorb it. Which is why I have so few details about Rainier's landscape beyond beautiful and frustrating snow, rows and rows of evergreen soldiers, and sweeping rock formations that are each too unique in their own right to be generalized by an out-of-place, floundering graduate student.

~

In contemplating this experience in line with the reasons I laid out before you in my proposal, whether or not this was a failure or success has yet to be determined. If we were to measure this by the lack of observations actively recorded by the funded equipment, then file this botched case study as a department failure failure. If the goal was to experience a landscape in a particular manner and melodramatically reflect about the hypocrisies of environmentalists trying to protect the earth by wasting gas experience the natural world as an interactive museum, and whether it's more difficult to backpack around a national park or write about it, then the requested \$750 wasn't a total bust.

University of Montana's Department of Environmental Studies, I thank you once again financial supporting my task of recording such a daunting but—hopefully—worthwhile experience. Sincerest apologies to whomever also applied for funding for a project that would have had more impact than an aspiring environmentalists' long-winded self-flagellation for trying to find a

means of contributing to the climate change dialogue. If there are any profound sentiments to be expressed, it is this: maybe multi-day backpacking isn't the best mode of observing and appreciating the layered beauty of the land. But, it's a very practical way of experiencing the unabashed twists and turns of a landscape's being, to understand that it owes you nothing as you set out to trammel on its body, searching for answers you could otherwise come up with whilst sitting at home.

FLAT-Footed Ethnography

Every now and then, I question if the creative nonfiction route for my Environmental Studies degree was the way to go. I could have spent my second and final year of graduate school engaging with different stakeholders in Missoula's Open Space Program, getting involved with volunteer conservation efforts, and becoming increasingly more knowledgeable about a landscape I so desperately wanted to stay in after finishing my degree.

But no. The qualitative research method process was too arduous for my liking, even when a required graduate course on the topic constricts it to a semester's length of time. The alleged precision required to ask the proper questions to retrieve the "right" information, and then interpret the words of people who know Missoula differently than I, whose sense of place I'd never know intimately beyond their initial responses and small talk, felt unconvincing to me as a methodology.

Instead, what was never intended to be part of my research ended up having the most abundant data on how to attach oneself to place. In fact, for two years I unknowingly employed participant observation as an ethnographic method, and perhaps I never needed that qualitative research methods course.

While I was in and out of my motivation for my graduate degree and the direction my thesis would take, I tended to the sustainability-focused student residency I've lived in during my two-year track. Members of the Missoula community may be familiar with the Forum for Living with Appropriate Technology, or UM FLAT, by the corner of Maurice and Fifth, adjacent to the campus sports center and across the street from Peace Park and the Madison Street Bridge. It is most recognizable by the updated logo sign, the gate of repurposed wood, the birch tree with a hammock tied to its branches in the summer, and the mid-twenties white woman smoking a cigarette in loungewear with either a dreamlike or brooding expression on her face, depending on time of day.

I held the position of neither landowner (because it was technically a rental), nor land steward (it's at best a microcosm of urban farming, just as modified and landscaped as the rest of the valley, with some native gardens to save face). By a stroke of luck, a decent-enough resume, and a relatively candid interview where I confessed my loneliness in Missoula and desperation

for community—all while withholding my relative messiness and recreational drug dependencies—I “earned” the position of co-director, offering enough funding support for me to justify enrolling in the program to begin with.

Once two separate properties, the FLAT came to fruition in 2009 when a now-alumnus of the Environmental Studies program collected \$90,000 in public and private donations to purchase the space for the University. Once upon a time, there was no chicken coop, no series of raised garden beds, no bike roof, miniature greenhouse or 3-stage compost bin. Over a course of a decade, undergraduate and graduate students from all over the country who live here as they pursue their respective degrees, have built upon each other’s work, creating a space intended to reflect alternative living based partially on self-sufficiency and community-building.

The smaller the acreage, the easier it is to orient oneself. I could show a student or community member around the space, explaining each feature of appropriate technology and how it relates to the FLAT’s mission of sustainability: the three-level compost bin uses residents’ food scraps and collected foliage to build soil for our garden beds; the plant species in the native garden beds, and their medicinal properties, and why they’re better for residential landscaping than Kentucky Blue Grass lawns; the names of each hen—Libby (my favorite), Bridger, Darby, Maeghar, Winnifred and Judith—along with their respective personality traits and who they would theoretically have voted for in the 2020 election; the weeds that are nonnative versus invasive; the repurposed materials used to make the former garage-turned-community-studio space we use for workshops, band rehearsals, concerts and film screenings; the solar panels, purchased and installed some ten years ago, even though I have yet to find an expert to figure out why we haven’t maintained carbon neutrality over the last few years.

The UM FLAT is also unpredictable in its capacity to develop one's sense of place. Most residents are non-Montanans, or at least, not born and raised in Missoula. The two-year turnover rate for all residents is a recipe for project inconsistencies and varying interpersonal cohesion. By the time a FLAT tenant completes their first year and finally feels settled, they then realize they only have a year left. If they are like me who, over the summer was mostly managing the property on my own and struggled to keep native plants hydrated and prevent produce from overgrowing and going to seed, they won't have the chance to correct their mistakes the following year.

I've learned to care for a place that I will never live in again. The "living and learning" component is, admittedly, a limited one.

Perhaps that is the underlining end goal of the UM FLAT, beyond reaching carbon neutrality and becoming a more inclusive and equitable space for a mostly white student body in a mostly white college town—learning to care for a physical space and its multi-species inhabitants. Or, just to learn to care. Or even, just the isolated verbs themselves: to learn; to care.

Learning and caring are as vital to the human experience as breathing and blinking, but it also leads to more devastation. The chicken coop door was left open one November evening this past year, and I woke up at 3 a.m. to the sound of a muffled screech and a flap of wings uncharacteristic for the hour. I peered out my window to see the Maeghar's black body bolt out of the coop, and then another slower, equally black shape. I, too, bolted out of my own protected shelter and into the yard in a panic, only to find a motionless, feathered body just outside of that open coop door. Darby.

In the two-bedroom cottage towards the back of the property, Blake, the other FLAT co-director—my emotional centerfold throughout the year, whose pure heart and organizational skills balanced out my scatter-brained cynicism—had also been awake. Bless his heart, for he mistook my tearless wails of grief for that of an inebriated homeless woman who stumbled into the yard. It didn't soothe his concern when I had run back inside to grab a sheet to wrap Darby's body and came back outside to find the perpetrator—a small raccoon—dragging her up the Maple tree in between our house and the neighbor's, her wings still flapping, her death status now unknown to me. Bless Blake's heart once more, for the hypothetical homeless woman's phantom moans, after a brief silence, converted to demonic shrieks and curses. The raccoon dropped Darby's body behind the property fence, and I sprinted to her landing site. Her feet were still kicking slowly and feebly, the last of her nerve endings vocalizing lingering terror that transcends beyond one's last breath. I picked her up with the cloth and her neck hung limply, and the grief of losing a loved one formed once again in my throat and entered the atmosphere as a ghostly moan once again. I placed Darby's wrapped corpse in a bucket and put it in the greenhouse, unable to find a more respectful makeshift morgue. Blake came out from his own shelter and embraced me once more, for he was the only one who understood the extent of my grief the most.

Darby was the heftiest hen of the flock, russet-colored, with a deeper vocal trill than her adopted sisters. I considered her the tough broad of the crew, sometimes protecting poor, anxious, bottom-of-the-pecking-order Maeghar, from the North Star bullies Winnifred and Judith. She never begged me for mealworms like her breed sister Libby, or screamed to be let out of the coop during the summer when we kept them separate from the growing gardens. Although we can debate the ethics of introducing a non-native species into the urban-wildlife ecosystem, she

did not deserve to face its brutalities, especially under the protection of her also non-native landlords.

Later that weekend, because no one wanted to risk eating her for fear of disease from her murderer's neck bite, Darcy was unceremoniously buried during a football tailgate party. Her grave is now marked by a ceramic chicken adjacent to the wooden platform where musicians and guest speakers perform for outdoor events.

No matter what any FLAT tenant or alumnus think, the chickens *are* residents of the FLAT, partaking in the reciprocal nature of self-sustenance by contributing eggs for our nourishment and nitrogen-fixing waste for our compost in exchange for free rent. They weren't as emotionally available as the human tenants were, but I valued their presence all the same. To lose a member of this place, who we were tasked to keep safe, was to fail at caring yet again.

~

Since last summer, anytime I smoked a cigarette on the front porch and stared out at the view in front of me with a little more intentionality, a Berkeley Pit-sized hole would form in my stomach at the knowledge that I was watching the Birch Tree out front, and the Maples across the street, cycle through their seasonal emotions one last time. Apparently, such a feeling was coined as "solastalgia", or the paradoxical feeling of nostalgia for where one currently lives, because there's an understanding that one day it will change. Though the term was phrased under the context of climate change and its role in transforming existing landscapes to an unknown future, I felt it once more on that porch one late afternoon this April, observing the Waterworks foothills finally freed from their winter cloak. It occurred to me that I would never again witness the winter cycle of that particular view from the FLAT, and the way the white-capped foothills,

forests, and distant mountains would be bathed in a soft pink as the sun descends behind the valley. Solastalgia could be described, then, as a swelling in one's chest that spreads as far outward as you wish. It's a warm buzz of gratitude for the moment, and all past moments within this place that brought joy and growth and knowledge that couldn't possibly be replicated elsewhere; and within that warm gratitude are the pangs of sorrow, its sharp-toothiness dulled down by the background knowledge that this was always a temporary stage of life in whatever journey my mid-to-later twenties would evolve into.

And even as I learned to love and nourish my pseudo-white-liberal-urban-farming landscape, I was still my hedonistic, neurodivergent, cannabis and pharmaceutical dependent, struggling-to-find-passion-in-the-thing-I-want-so-desperately-to-contribute-to, self. In the week leading up to the FLAT's largest annual fundraiser in October, which required all six tenants to be fully present to execute, their leading co-director simmered in heartache over a guy who was ultimately not worth the distraction. In our January winter retreat, residents voiced (uncomfortably valid) critiques of the leadership and organization tactics, and after asserting to do better, I would smoke yet another cigarette outside and listen to music to drown out the sentiment that I'm an undeserving privileged little shit who should have never been chosen to manage the infrastructure of my community.

If I'm forced to return to another apartment complex where applying any practices from the FLAT is spatially or legally impossible, then I might as well prepare for detaching myself from the memory of living here, as I've done with my hometown, my undergraduate college experience, and the handful of seasonal positions I held prior to arriving in Missoula.

And in detaching myself from this place, I risk forgetting the empowerment and resiliency that comes with caring. A notion that, on a micro level, deems the time and resources put

into the experience ultimately worthless; and on a macro level, is yet another input to a societal positive feedback loop, teetering the already-fragile Anthropocene towards an apocalypse of apathy.

So, instead of dedicating my thesis to reading extensive literature on land management and theories on place, recording perspectives of long-time Missoulians, and boxing them into coded language and presenting their wisdom for scholarly review, I unwittingly conducted fieldwork on what it means to be part of a place while attempting to contribute to its success and longevity.

The UM FLAT—a cooperative student residency that empowers community members to lead ecologically responsible lifestyles, whose mission has recently updated to incorporate justice and equity into our work; the first place I felt truly, intimately part of; and where I learned that amongst the ranks of aspiring environmentalists, activists, gardeners, musicians, researchers, and inherently compassionate people, I, comparatively, had no real place in. But I don't think I needed to pursue a Master's degree or acquire two years of subsidized housing to arrive at that academic conclusion.

Some people can't find passion for their place when they haven't yet established a place within themselves. More research is needed.

Power in the Periphery

It's a bittersweet reckoning when taking a bike ride across town feels less like the outdoor therapy it once was, and more of a chore for an academia-based timeline.

Missoula's Milwaukee bike path is a cost-free approach to enjoying the towering, reliable geology of a mountain valley landscape whilst navigating the younger, less permanent functioning of the built environment and human psyches within it. Runners, strollers, bikers and dog-walkers all make use of this path, and in my first year living out here, it was there for me when no one else was. It carried me to and from part-time employment and hot yoga sessions in the downtown district during the winter, and recreational volleyball at Bonner Park later in the summer. Missoula's urban planners did right with this addition—they were looking out for those of us without an immediate understanding of where we were.

The bike path is also a portal for observing all of Missoula's variations of place within the valley floor. Going from east to west, one cruises alongside the Clark Fork riverbank, where you might take note of the revegetation efforts by the city to cut down on streambank erosion, induced by the increased foot traffic of new and old residents looking to soak or float in the watershed. One rides underneath the Bear Tracks, Orange Street and Reserve Street bridges, aka the modern man's mode of crossing a river. Along the route are recreational lawn fields, community gardens, the Natural History Center, the Italian deco-style apartments in the Sawmill District where vertical expansion continues, and the lower income apartments and trailer homes further

west. Doctor Seuss would revel in all the places you could go within a 2-mile commute. Each section of the valley floor's built environment is a distinct Missoula experience, as I've learned through living in three separate districts.

The timeline I listed in my funding proposal indicated that in my second and final year in my graduate program, I would continue filming locations in and around Missoula as part of my research on how geography influences one's sense of place. One target of study was this two-mile river of concrete that cuts across the valley.

Well, amidst a daunting beginning of the semester, I managed to finally film a Milwaukee bike ride, thankfully before the autumn colors were past, and the Clark Fork Cottonwoods and imported Norway Maples transitioned to dead, crumpled remnants of themselves and their predecessors. And, in truth, I thought I would have more to evaluate about the bike path beyond the details of the built environment that it weaves through. Don't get me wrong—it was a heaven sent for me when I was living further west, and I didn't have a car during the winter months, and within the mountain valley I was deep in my own valley of depression, and it was the only way for me to be in the outdoors when I wasn't smoking cigarettes outside my miserable apartment. Not to mention, it serves as a practical, sustainable alternative for Missoula's residents to commute across town without the hassle of paid parking or rush hour traffic or questionably designed one-way streets.

It is possible that because my circumstances improved one hundredfold when I began graduate school and moved into a residency of like-minded environmentalists, the Milwaukee path became less of a heaven sent for Missoula's loneliest of souls, and more of a backdrop when commuting across town. That's not to downplay the significance of the bike path as a mode of

daily human migration—it just speaks to the equally commendable features of the town I now had the will to learn more about.

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The weekend of my first visit to Missoula, months before I chose to become a semi-rooted resident, I chose Waterworks Hill as my first uphill adventure. I hiked up and along the grassland foothill, shifting my gaze between the valley floor to the south and the layers of hills, forests and mountains to the north, as peripherally-oriented as a mere visitor would be in a place they've never been before.

Perhaps now, after nearly three years living inside the center of a valley, always having foothills and mountains to peer up towards when the human network failed to inspire, I've gotten too used to the central perspective, too used to looking up and around at what towered over me, be it landscape or townscape.

So, in an academic reprise of my very first introduction to Missoula, I took to the hills.

I made time in September to film a journey halfway up Mount Deanstone, the most recently successful project in securing open space around the mountain valley town. As I drove briefly up the road leading to Pattee Canyon, turned right and meandered through streets of the neighborhood people always refer to as the “South Hills”, I noticed the unique architecture of each house, how modern some of them looked, how much space existed between each property. Instead of observing the symbolism of isolated wealth in these private spheres with contempt and dwelling on the contrived notion of “private property” in land that was never anyone's property until some European descendants strolled in with such a concept, I thought, “Damn, these look nice.”

As my hiking partner—my roommate’s Husky-Malamut mix—and I strolled up the Deanstone trail, I was supplied with yet another vista of the mountain valley town. I could see all the same urban features down below that one could see if they hiked Mount Sentinel or Waterworks, just at a different angle—a different way of knowing. Further out was the silhouette of Blue Mountain, slightly purple from the evening light with an even slighter haze from smoke that, after a brief but joyous hiatus, was starting to return to the town. To the northeast and across the Clark Fork River was Waterworks Hill and Mount Jumbo, also success stories of protected land on behalf of the City of Missoula and private citizens. They’re remarkable for their relative emptiness, save for a series of telephone poles, an ‘L’ on Jumbo, a giant peace sign and water tower that looks like an observatory on Waterworks, and well-maintained trail networks for meandering humans. Hell, they all COULD have turned into the South Hills, where the urban environment began to creep its way up the slopes of the glacial valley. Enough citizens had the necessary amount of enlightened self-interest to realize they wanted those spaces to remain some form of untouched. It’s pleasantly surprising that a college town that’s faced increased population and development over the last 50 years has resisted building on those hills for the most part.

I can confess to holding a small piece of envy for the South Hills homeowners who snuck in a blessed, private view of the valley and its mountainous guardians, before conservation efforts salvaged the remaining open space; however, I don’t know if I would trade it for where I’ve taken temporary root for nearly three years, smack in the middle of the valley floor. From my experience living both communally and centrally within Missoula for two years, rooting oneself in the main hub of an urbanized valley is more conducive, whereas peering down at it from the hills’ viewpoint offers a more peripheral positionality.

In undertaking qualitative research on Missoula's Open Space program, I also learned what power lies within those in the periphery. Through collaboration with Five Valleys Land Trust and the City's Open Space managers, private property owners with claimed acreage large enough to hold a wildlife corridor or generational ranchland have willingly sold land for a lower price than if they had sold it off to prospective commercial developers. Or, they will agree to placing a conservation easement on their existing property in exchange for a tax break. Whether the motive is altruistic or not, over 15,000 acres of open space have been protected so far as a result.

The peripheral power is strong enough that it permeates the experience of the valley floor dwellers. Those who sell portions of their property to the City open the space up for the Missoula community to explore it recreationally as a now-public access site. Even though government documents list preserving agricultural land and critical wildlife habitat as primary goals of Open Space program, public comments from the 2018 Open Space Bond Measure suggest that these goals are merely by-products to citizens. The impetus for the establishment of the first OSP in the 1980's came as a response to the growing population and land development in the valley. Private homeowners were willing, sometimes even enthusiastically, to tax themselves to fund these Bonds so conservation efforts can continue against the epidemic of urban sprawl.

(It is also worth noting that such transformations of land were only a concern once non-indigenous Montanans took notice in the last fifty years.)

I wonder if the private residents that peer down from South Hills, or hide in the evergreen canopies of Pattee Canyon, or nestle themselves within the rolling curves of Jumbo and the Sapphire Mountains, recognize the hand they play in both the quality of life for Missoula's lower-

income, centrally oriented inhabitants, and the long-term conservation of open lands from succumbing to urban sprawl. Do they feel the reverberations of community-building from a distance, and do they consider themselves part of it? What runs through their minds as they watch the built environment expand across the valley over the last decade, as multi-housing units grow at several times the rate of the average Ponderosa Pine or Douglas Fir, as rent prices skyrocket across all districts, and as Missoula succumbs to the non-COVID-19 epidemic of nationwide affordable housing crises?

~

Geographical location does not constitute centrality to the community experience, nor does one's decision to bike or drive to work. I've met ranchers, conservationists, and board members of Five Valleys and the Open Space Advisory council, some of whom reside outside of the urban center, yet spent decades building a network amongst each other to create a central Missoula experience beyond their own benefit. Motivations for preserving open lands range from person to person, and one's central reasoning might be another person's peripheral benefit. Recreation and conservation don't have to mutually exclude one another, and in the name of restoring the human's relationship to their ecological surroundings, balancing the two is critical in a mountain valley landscape—especially one where indigenous erasure and land degradation makes rebuilding that balance that much more complicated. The success of Open Space is founded upon the exchange of land “ownership” between those in the periphery and the center, amongst other factors, but when you consider how the original occupants were forced into a double-decker peripheral positionality—within both the land they once traversed freely, and the new system of power in the now-colonized valley some hundred and fifty years ago—maybe it was

never about the dynamics of positionality. My initial connections to Missoula came from cruising along a paved tongue of industrial grey along the valley floor, and hiking trails carved into the flesh of the surroundings foothills. At one point in this valley, such features of connectivity weren't required to orient oneself, to feel connection to a landscape and all it offers.

In essence, I, and many other non-native transplants who've fallen in love with Missoula, owe my sense of place to trails reflecting a violent valley history, existing as a peripheral symptom of a central problem that goes far beyond mountain valley boundaries.

Chapter Five

93 and Me

“Embrace your fate...rejoice in what gives you grief. That which you would flee, turn and run towards it with all your heart. Only by becoming your misfortune will you transcend it.”

— Salman Rushdie

March 2021

You were draped in white, tinted with shadows of soft, unassuming blue, and my heart sprung out of my chest in surprise and joy.

But not right away.

I did not recognize you in the distance as I stood atop a cinder cone in Craters of the Moon National Monument, my original destination within south-central Idaho. The hill of the fossilized lava flow, darker than any earthly flesh I’ve trammed on to date, was one of the few

features unobstructed by a sea of white, save for a few limber pines and sage brush trees peeping out from this 200,000 year-old anomaly of a region. My gaze had initially settled eastward towards the giant cones of the distant Great Rift, each one isolated yet linked along an underlying fault line.

The next morning, after camping in my car at Craters, I checked the options for returning home, and found a route west of the Lemhi Range and the state road connections that I initially drove down. With no intention of seeking additional adventure or inspiration or solace, I drove 15 miles back towards Arco, filled my gas tank, and turned west.

And then, there you were, in full view, standing tall and beautiful as the Lost River Valley Range as the sun was just starting to emerge from the morning haze. (And forgive me if I call your features by names designated by my Sapien community; I know you've been nameless throughout your life, not needing a label to be). As I passed through tiny two-lane towns with populations ranging from a few hundred to a very few thousand under your protection, your seventy miles of white-capped ridge lines, shaped like ocean waves with parabolic shoulders that met in matrimony at each summit, juxtaposed with a cerulean sky, stood out even more when they loom over the flat farmlands of humanity. Chunky cattle and their children were the only other signs of human settlement in your region, and I'm intrigued, but not surprised at the rural built environment within you. I don't fault you for the Farmers for Trump signs still hanging on the fence posts now, in March 2021. Human ideology is not your beast to tame.

Your beauty didn't stop with the sweeping peaks. As I continued along the two-lane highway, I was greeted with warm-colored ridge lines dotted with sagebrush, and then gray-green pillars of rhyolite, smooth and castle-like, partially layered in snow. After laying witness to your sprawling River Range from a healthy distance, soon I found myself winding through the

Great View Canyon that hugs right up to the road, surrounding me in nothing but pure unadulterated rock, to the point that I can barely see that open blue sky. I navigated through your craggy asymmetrical bosoms along a flat tongue of cursed but blessed concrete. Cheers to whoever placed the sign suggesting slowing my speed before entering. Sure, it's probably a safety measure for all the passing suitors to not crash into one another on this glorious two-lane road. But how lucky are us humans when a "slow down or you'll hurt yourself" sign is synonymous with "try to multi-task eyes on the road while looking up at the earth you didn't know existed"?

Even though we're separated only by the Subaru I was driving in, your geology embraced me in a way I've never known, holding me close as I carefully navigate the road tattooed into your flesh. God, I was truly unprepared for the intimacy of just your existence. You made me believe that love at first sight is an actual phenomenon; who said such a feeling needed to happen between the same species?

Oh, Idaho Byway 93, you knocked me off my feet. You're too beautiful to see once, especially being so close to me. I vow to return to you.

May 2021

Forgive me, 93—can I call you that for short? —for betraying my affection for you.

A lot happened since the first time I saw you. Academic and work responsibilities started piling up, and my longing for intimacy that you blessed me with converted to longing for intimacy with a friend I've known for a year. Funnily enough, the reason I came down to Idaho to begin with was because plans to hike with this human fell apart at the last minute, and I decided to convert my disappointment into a personal excursion. Bless you, 93, because you ended up being way more fulfilling than a few hours hiking near Missoula.

Well, that longing for said friend—we'll call him Commuter One—got briefly fulfilled one evening this past April, and afterward I asked if he would be interested in meeting you. I know, very bold to ask him to revel in your beauty with me after just one night in my bed.

You were right outside the window at the foot of our bed, in the form of a sage-covered, ridged foothill and the rushing of the river. And yet, in an Airbnb designed as a tiny-home-turned mobile wagon, Commuter One played on his gaming device, and I read my book in the first hours. All my attention was concentrated in that man-made structure, either towards text written by man, or the man right next to me.

We drove to the trailhead that led to your well-revered Gold Bug Hot Springs, just a three-minute drive from the Airbnb. Finally, I would get the chance to get to know you a little better! Your cottonwoods were in bloom, your sagebrush as abundant as ever, and your orange rockiness were now visible and barren in late spring, a pleasure for my unkempt, unworthy boots to walk along. Admittedly, though, some of my attention was still channeled towards him as we talked politics. Not the most fun, human-centered topic on a hiking adventure, given I had to put in extra energy to hold my own in my defense for socialism and assertion that just because you *can* own a bunch of guns doesn't mean you *have* to. If you disagree, 93, I understand. You know this region's culture better than I ever could.

And then, cosmic powers punished me, and rightfully so. I lost my wallet somewhere during this adventure, not realizing it until the following day. Even more disgraceful—I let the human-specific stress of lost belongings taint my vision on the drive back up north the following day. The swelling of my chest that overtook me when I first met you was replaced with the heart-burn of silent self-flagellation. I don't even remember if we went through your canyon of comfort.

Oh 93, who am I to complain to you about my struggles? You came out of millions of years of geologic violence. You went through Hell—no, you rose FROM Hell—to be what you are now. Me? I lost a vessel of plastic cards on your land and spent half the day internally reprimanding myself—not just for losing it, but for being an aloof, scatterbrained, hedonistic chunk of flesh while my travel companion sat next to me in the passenger seat, silently playing on his handheld technological device, preferring to look down at a fake adventure than up at your rocky reality. I was that stuck in my head, even when being nestled in between your sage-dotted ridges and foothills should have been a greater reassurance than the human next to me was. Two kinds of intimacy from the day before, gone.

How foolish of me to divert any fraction of attention, physical and mental, away from you by employing another human being. As if he could ever match up to your grandeur, your geologic diversity, your resilience!

Oh 93, you've seen many aloof humans come and go through your geologic body, which we have in common, but you don't complain one bit.

Please, teach me your resilience.

June 2021

Hello again, 93. There's a friend I'd like you to meet. No, not a "friend" like the last guest. This is Connor, and that's his real name, and he's one of my best friends from college, and he's better equipped to marvel at your beauty as someone born to New England's softer features, not yet used to the wonders of Continental geology. We just hung out with your neighbor, the Craters of the Moon last night. They say hi, by the way!

Speaking of the Craters—what a body to hide underneath seasonal sheets of white! All around us, now free from the weight of winter: hardened magma flows where out and proud sagebrush and limber pines hold their own; the giant craters themselves, where earth's core once emerged to speak its fiery, liquidated sermons, and whose rims, now open as trails, we commuted across; spatter cones made of coughed up lava from the last fissure eruption that now hold chunks of human debris.

Ugh, I wish you were there with us in human form. I rolled Connor and myself a joint and we got high under the night sky, starry as ever with some hazy clouds, as we reminisced about our friendships in undergrad, though not as a sentiment of longing for the past. Upstate New York, while special in its own way for its rolling green hills, trademark autumn, and having a liberal arts bubble in a red part of the state, doesn't compare to your rocky, sage-laden being. Before we separated to sleep for the night, I look up again at the stars. and maybe it's the high, maybe it's the presence of a friend I've had a long-term reciprocal relationship with, but I feel the same swell in my chest I got when coursing through you for the first time some three months ago. It only lasted for that moment, but it was enough to pull me out of my body, look at myself in a tiny chunk of space and time, and recognize that I was, in no uncertain terms, joyous.

I swear, 93, your whole family tree of geology derives more emotions out of me than any member of my own damn species.

When we entered your realm the following day, we marveled mostly in silence, with only the road trip playlist we put together, moderately drowning out the groan of my Subaru as she crossed the infinite carpet of concrete across your body for the third time. As we drove along the Salmon River once more, cottonwoods and aspen that were once bare and unnoticeable in March hugged the road, their green leaves shimmering in the breeze, giving an air of lushness to the

otherwise rocky, barren landscape in late June. I mean barren in a good way—in case no one told you, you look so good naked, 93. So, that’s what you were hiding under that wedding dress back in March.

The only human sounds are my unapologetic squeals of glee—that I didn’t let myself utter with the last guest—and Connor’s occasional “wow” in agreement, and it’s so beautifully peaceful. With him, I could fall in love with you all over again, no longer marred by my own human folly in the form of lost items or desiring men uninspired by your existence.

We returned to Gold Bug—and I left my wallet in the car—to try to converse with you again, no longer distracted by someone who could never impress me like you. This time we soaked together for a while in your pools, your body perfectly balanced between cool and luke-warm on that 80-something-degree day. And my, the power of your flow against our barely resistant bodies when we stood under one of your spring waterfalls! You could drown me, 93, and I wouldn’t mind.

If the forces of earth and my own human recklessness must collaborate on my death, may your being be the scene of the crime. I will make a request to have my hypothetical tombstone read: In memory of Kalle, happily smothered by Idaho’s natural being.

Bless you, 93, for teaching me, and hopefully Connor, to be patient with the inner turmoil of a mid-twenties vagabond. I must trust that one day I will emerge as gloriously unbothered as you have.

January 2022

I've been thinking about you again, 93. It is getting close to a year since I first encountered your multi-dimensional essence. The photos I took of you in your wedding attire are not enough for me anymore. Time for another vow renewal.

The question that remains for me is whether I try to employ another human companion for a fourth visit, or to keep this a private exchange between you and me. See, another one of my best friends is coming up next week and I thought about taking him to see you as well. He's a special person—in some ways he's been an influence on how I got more into the outdoors, which eventually led me to Montana, which then led me to find you.

There's also this new person of interest—we'll call him Commuter Two, because unlike you, 93, I lack originality—who I met through a dating app a month ago, and it caught me off guard how fast we seemed to hit it off. He seems like the kind of person who would actively acknowledge my distress about a lost wallet, and at least attempt to alleviate said stress.

Imagine if we could align our schedules accordingly—a dear friend, a kind lover, and myself, joined in relational jubilee under your guise? Oh, it's too good to be true!

January 2022; one week later

It was, in fact, too good to be true, 93.

The global pandemic—which you may or may not have caught word of, though I don't know what murmurings on the subject have taken place in your human settlements—cancelled my friend's flight to Missoula twice in four days.

And Commuter Two? Well, 93, humans are their own dynamic landscapes that undergo changes in needs and desires regarding their existing relationships. Sometimes, you realize that the ecological services provided by a random girl you met on Tinder are less conducive, or potent, than those of a close friend you've already had an intimate connection with. Unlike you, 93, we don't take millions of years to self-actualize.

But fuck me, 93, for getting excited for connections with humans, new and old, even if losing them were out of my control to begin with. Maybe it's time I relinquish my desire for friends, lovers and landscapes to commiserate in relational joy. The solace I've always found in my own species' embraces is harder to manifest, and the fleeting nature of it all hurts too much sometimes.

Please, 93, hold me once more.

February 2022

93, it is truly alarming how warm it's been in February in Montana. It should not be the temperatures of April, I should not be watching grass make sense of the freeze and melt cycle, and the Missoula Valley's foothills should not look so visibly uncomfortable being out bare before they're ready.

But if global warming meant that I could lay witness your winter and summer morphs on an impromptu visit in one of the bleakest months of the year, then let the world burn anyway. What a privilege to trammel along your dichotomous body at Gold Bug a third time, where the roaring creek separated your southeast-facing nudity with your northwest-facing bridalwear. Christ, 93, I forgot how great it feels to travel alone, with no one but land like you to converse

with. Who needs a human travel companion when you're already partaking in a geologic threesome?

As I bathed in your pools of sweat once more, my hands grazed, and then lifted the pebbles from the basins as I examined the colorful, weathered particles of your skin. After I dropped them back down to their settlement, I noticed tiny indentations on the palm of my hand where the sharper fragments of rock imprinted upon my flesh. At least the trammeling is mutual.

That whole evening—while soaking, and while lounging in the Gypsy Wagon once more, and while getting high under the stars, I did not yearn for extra company.

But why would I? I was with you. And only you.

The next morning, I headed south to visit the Craters once more. In paying more attention to the variety of your curves and ridges of your being in this winter-summer display, I kept finding more intricate details of your beauty: the tints of green lichen on the bedrock; the softer, white-laden rolls of the foothills west of the Salmon River that remind me of those in the Missoula Valley; the inconsistency between deposited sediment and not-yet eroded pillars of rock; cottonwoods lining the Salmon, once again naked in their vegetation in the winter, inverse to their snow-kissed surroundings; how different your entire region looks depending on where the sun casts its spell as the earth turns. You were as stunning as ever.

Again, the magma-hardened terrain was hidden by a new blanket as I cross country-skied across the groomed road, the Craters not yet victim to February's moderate heat wave. Except this time, when I peered out into the horizon, I immediately recognized the oceanic waves of your Lost River Range in the distance.

Forgive me for not finishing out the last few hours of my excursion with you. I was a little crunched for time, so I ended up taking the state roads that I had first driven through before discovering your beauty. The first hour had me in a canvas of fog, obstructing the Lemhi and Beaverhead Ranges, which is what I deserve for choosing your presence over theirs time and time again. Why should bodies I neglected for so long reveal themselves to me?

But then, the fog lifted in forgiveness, and soon enough the sprawling gateways that introduced me to the wonders of Idaho appear, each in their own bridal-nude attire, with the jagged presence of ancient deities that could summon destruction on all the beings below it. As yet another commuter just trying to get to my destination, I am unworthy of their grace, but at least they can teach a thing or two about not holding resentment.

When I drove past Salmon, back onto the concrete carpet towards the pass that would take me back to Montana, your red-rocked, lichen-laced body nestled against the road, and after admiring Lemhi and Beaverhead from a healthy enough distance, the intimacy of being so close to you soothed me once again.

Sometimes, 93, I wonder if it's more challenging to connect with land or people. I am not a millions-year-old mountain range like the Lost River, unbothered by the ebb and flow of human relationships beneath its own geologic space. Nor am I the Salmon River that never pauses its flow because it needs time to sit in its feelings. Perhaps I relate more to the volcanic nature of the Craters outside your jurisdiction. See, 93, in the face of inner pressure of our own fiery core, humans don't douse our surroundings in lava when our bodies crack open from the fissure of emotions. Instead, we formulate, simmer, and then sometimes spew sentiments from our cores,

that flow out our bodies as heartache and vitriol, eventually cooling and hardening on the surface. Such moments shape our landscapes' functions as time goes on, with the hope that it will all lead to something worthy of existence, and not a bitter, hardened shell.

Well, perhaps your region proves that a landscape, geographic or human, can hold both a volcanic and mountainous history. I read a little bit about your Lost River Range, and that you were partially born in the Paleozoic and Proterozoic ages through a series of earthquakes that folded and faulted your being into the sky. The human rock experts refer to your range as a 'fault block' range, that explains your sheer, steep cliffs and their intimidating verticality.

Do you know what a human's version of folding and faulting looks like when working through their own tectonic turmoil? I'll admit, it's not as magnificent a final product as your Lost River Range. After our time together, I returned to my bed in the Missoula Valley, still simmering from the throes of short-lived unrequited desire, and the acuteness of things ending with Commuter Two as quickly as they began. I could not tell you why, of all the lovers that have entered me like I've entered you, this is the one to incite the most self-examination on the perpetual cycle of relational disappointment. But anyway, here's how a landscape with stupid human feelings would conduct their own inner dialogue as a self-forging process:

Okay ya little spatter cone, take a step back. Why are you angry again?

Because back in December I felt understood and safe to be vulnerable in a way I've hardly known, and now I'm feeling everything I was afraid of I'd feel when I left his place that one night. (Okay, admittedly my initial self-spewing involved the words "He made me feel" and not "I felt." Sorry for the lack of transparency, 93, I'm just embarrassed by moments of human error.)

But you know deep down he doesn't owe you indefinite validation and safety based on four days—FOUR DAYS, KALLE—of pleasant in-person interactions, nor did he know enough of your Commuter track record to understand your current feelings. You met on a dating app when you were both in a bout of loneliness, what kind of foundation is that? (Yes, 93, I found Commuter Two because I had been missing Commuter One, who spent the rest of the summer in and out of my bed, only to move away later in the fall. Though we are still good friends that communicate semi-regularly, that negative feedback loop of friends-to-lovers-to-back-to-friends was its own series of personal tremors that, once again, couldn't match up to the Lost River Range.)

I know he doesn't owe me anything, none of them fucking did. But that doesn't mean I don't have to hurt from the loss of feeling worthy of someone's time.

It's okay to feel sad about losing something you were excited about. But, which of his words of warmth can you not already affirm to yourself? At what point did you ever have to rely on his or anyone's acknowledgements of your existence to justify it? Didn't you say to yourself weeks ago that no matter how this relationship pans out with him, you're rebuilding a relationship with yourSELF?

It takes several rounds of this, 93, but you'd be surprised by the human psyche's strength in feedback self-reflection. I no longer simmered, at least at that moment. The sulfuric bubbles of frustration and resentment transformed into steam, converted as particles of revelation and gratitude that rolled off me, much like the steam that calmly exudes from your pools in Gold Bug.

And then, 93, I did something I never thought to try, because I didn't believe it would quell any of my tectonic aches: I curled up into myself. Grazed my own arms and back. Massaged my neck the way Commuter One did. Thought to myself what Commuter Two whispered to me as we held each other in a painfully brief window of time and space: that I am safe; that I am worthy.

Oh 93, I wish it hadn't taken me so long to learn the power of holding oneself, and to realize so much of your power, and the power of landscapes near and far from you, come from doing so for eons. You're not given enough credit for exemplifying how to exist in this world. Even if you were deemed worthy of National Park status, and observed and explored by millions more each year than you currently do, who's to say if you would be acknowledged for what you are beyond a body to enter and exit at will? My body, perpetually oscillating between forging, volcanic, and dormant, has its own history of short-term settlements; only few managed to know me deeper than that. But, unlike you and your collaboration with the Salmon waterway, I am not made up of a riparian, river valley ecosystem inherently designed to sustain others. Still, I can hold gratitude for the other human landscapes who've held me like you have—physically, platonically, emotionally, temporarily—before realizing I was always capable of doing so on my own.

March 2022

It took too long for me to learn more about you. All I knew was what was available to witness on that paved road. There are interpretive signages across your body that detail your major earthquake events—were you also working through heartache? — and the human-designated names of your features, though I never really stopped along the route to read them in depth. It's not personal, 93—in my years of experience with academics and social circles and lovers, I've been contemplating the accuracy of the sentiment “to know you more is to love you less”. And right now, the thought of loving you any less than I do is more unbearable than any human-based heartbreak.

Still, I couldn't help it, and I researched what the human tongue translated about you, and it's as fascinating as it is horrific. I didn't know that you hosted the first town, Arco, to be powered entirely by atomic nuclear energy, or that other parts of your body were once a mining brothel, before you became a host for farmland. Shit, 93, I am so, so sorry for the legal crimes my species —particularly the pale, invasive variety from the last few centuries—committed upon you. If it's any consolation, you are not alone in your scars. The heinous act of being drilled and extracted from, without concern, and sometimes without consent...is a mutual trauma certain humans and landscapes share. If no one told you, or if I didn't say it enough in this ill-fitting, one-sided Shakespearean sonnet—you are still so beautiful, made even more so by your resiliency.

I wish I could ethnographically interview you as I had studied in school. What would you tell me if you could speak in human tongue?

Never mind, you don't have to tell me anything at all. You didn't come out of the earth's tectonic tantrums to answer the questions of those who haven't yet resolved their own inner turmoil, who are still depositing lost moments and impermanent relationships as sedimentary layers of nostalgia and lessons learned.

There is nothing you really need from me, and nothing I could give to you that would be enough, and I could sink into despair knowing this could never be a relationship founded in reciprocity. But still—you are my first true love, I am convinced. Even if you, like all the others, cannot fully reciprocate, I don't care. It's a love that I can fearlessly extend to you and, now, return back to myself. Such love, when I express it to my human herd, has inspired my roommate to reserve a night with you through that Gypsy Wagon. If I have to do something in this world beyond just being, if all I can do to share your love is connect the people I care about to the landscapes I love, perhaps that is a worthwhile use of my feeble existence.

Thank you, Byway 93, and Craters of the Moon, and Lemhi and Beaverhead. Not for all you have done for me, and for others. But for all that you are.

I love you.

I love you.

I love you.

Land Acknowledgement

A land acknowledgement is but the bare minimum any non-indigenous person can do when writing about American land. So many of the places I've occupied, explored, written about, and fallen in and out of love with, are understood through a lens way different than my own. Every highway I've driven on, every National Park I've entered, every carved trail I've

walked that made me fall in love with this Earth, is a symbol of how much human input has been involved. I am fully aware that my ability to venture out to these places is hard-rooted in both white and class privilege, and that said ability would not possible without settler colonialism paving the way, along with my parents supplying me with a Subaru as a gift for acquiring an undergraduate liberal arts degree. To ignore it would be characteristic of the white environmental writing domain over the last 150 years, but to try and inject my pieces with information about indigenous history pertaining to a given place would be at best, another series of white-guilt virtue signaling, and at worst, an inaccurate, colonizer-infused interpretation.

I acknowledge the places I've set foot upon have been previously occupied and stewarded by the ancestors of present-day tribes, including but not limited to: the Salish and Upper Pend d'Oreilles peoples (present-day Western Montana); the Seminole, Taino and Tequesta people (present-day South Florida); the Muscogee Nation in present-day Northern Florida; the Nez Pierce and Shoshone Bannock people in present-day Idaho; the Coast Salish and Puyallup peoples in present-day Washington; the Cheyenne, Crow and Eastern Shoshone peoples (present-day Yellowstone and Grand Tetons National Parks); and the Pueblos and Southern Paiute peoples (present-day Utah)

I encourage anyone who read this to take time to research what land they occupy, who previously lived upon it, and how their worldview has shaped their relationship to their environment. You might learn a thing or two.

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