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The Nature Inside Ourselves

The whining sound of country steel guitar marks our passage across the Wyoming-Nebraska state line and into dreamland. Landscapes pockmarked by sagebrush blur like the white lines of the freeway passed by at sixty or so miles per hour into green wheat fields carved into the natural landscape of prairie grasses and spindly wildflowers. Destination: Sidney, Nebraska. Stop at the Welcome to Nebraska rest area and pick up a wad of brochures to stuff into the overflowing backseat cupholders. Rejoice at the humid afternoon air and the weed-like stands of goldenrods and the fact that we are in *Nebraska*. Oh beautiful Nebraska, peaceful prairie land, promised land of my eleven-year-old mind.

Ever since I finished my fifth-grade state report earlier that year, I'd been enamored with the state of Nebraska. To me it held a *je ne sais quoi*, a feeling that I chased and chased and chased in my imaginary play of cowgirls and pioneers at recess and in my overly zealous research into the cornhusker state. To my credit, I still remember obscure facts about Nebraska like its state song, the Lester F. Larsen tractor museum in Lincoln, and the tourist-trap aspirations of Valentine—hearts adorning all their brochure ads—twelve years later. But no matter how sentimental and silly my youthful dreams were, I had convinced my parents to go on a road trip with me across the American West, a pilgrimage that felt so uniquely necessary before my transition into the horrors of middle school.

We made it to the town of Sidney by four o'clock in the afternoon and were greeted by grumbles of thunder rolling across the endlessly flat plains of wheat. "Tornado Warning," repeated a voice through the car radio as we made our way past rows and rows of green grass growing towards the sky, some tall and lush and others like stubble popping out of the rich brown soil. While Nebraska may be known for corn, winter wheat production is an important livelihood for many farmers in the western part of the state, and in 2016 over a million acres of winter wheat with "an estimated value of $219,294,000" were grown in Nebraska ("Nebraska Wheat Production"). While this may be the American dream for some, for the native Great Plains prairie ecosystem it is certainly a nightmare. According to an article by Fred B. Samson et al., "[l]ittle question exists that the main bodies of North American prairie…are among the continent's most endangered …resource" (Samson et al. 6). Crops such as the wheat I see in a blur outside the car window have replaced prairie ecosystems at a rapid rate, with "[a]lmost 93,000 km^2 of United States grasslands…lost between 1982 and 1997, primarily to conversion to agriculture" (Samson et al. 5).

The kind of excitement that causes electrical signals to tingle the toes and turn the body into a staticky beehive often puts blinders on the participant, and so the joy of being in Nebraska made me oblivious to the lack of Great—capital G—Plains landscape that I was looking forward to seeing. Nevertheless, I'm sure my joy would have been far greater if I'd been able to see the prairie as it once was. There were seas of bison snorting and stomping their way through vast oceans of grass, passing by the dens of pugnacious badgers with their black-and-white masked faces, pronghorn antelope leaping by in a demonstration of muscular power fueled by fear (pronghorns are a remnant of the Pleistocene when some unknown predator could match their 60 mile-per-hour speeds), and sage grouse puffing up their chests in marvelously over-the-top

displays of sexual selection ("Northern Great Plains"). Largely undisturbed prairie landscapes, especially prior to European invasion, would have been awe-inspiring and unlike anything most modern humans have seen before. As John C. Van Tramp writes about them in his 1866 book *Prairie and Rocky Mountain Adventures*,

> [t]here is no describing…[prairies]. They are like the *ocean*, in more than one particular; but in none more than in this: the utter impossibility of producing any just impression of them by description. They inspire feelings so unique, so distinct from anything else, so powerful, yet vague and indefinite, as to defy description, while they invite the attempt. (253)

My eleven-year-old self is shivering with delight at the thought of a landscape so holy that it "defies description," but the current reality casts a gloomy shadow on such excitement.

While none of the species making up the Great Plains menagerie that I mentioned above are in the "red zone" for conservation—endangered or threatened—they are all quickly losing their prairie home ("Northern Great Plains"). A large fear in the conversion of Great Plains prairie into agriculture is the loss of biodiversity that accompanies the transition from a well-balanced ecosystem to a monoculture dependent on humans and technology (Samson et al. 6-13). It all started with the Homestead act of 1872, which brought "nearly 1.5 million people" to the western prairies of the United States in a mass exodus of souls filled with hope for a better life among wild lands yearning to be tamed (Samson et al. 7). It is easy to shame these settlers 147 years in the future, but given a bleak economic outlook and population density strangling the dreams of future generations, it makes sense why people would looks towards the west and place any doubts of their actions upon the gilded shoulders of manifest destiny. Even today, it is only

with distance that most have the nerve to wag their fingers at farmers trying to make a living just like anybody else.

I don't believe that humans have any innate desire to destroy nature; in fact, most people I know see nature as a temple which resides on a plane higher than humans and their needy, groveling desires. But if we continue to see nature as the Other, as something detached from us like a separate being rather than a lost arm, severed in our attempts at progress, then we lose something of ourselves. You, I, and the neighbor mowing his lawn with sweat dripping down his beer belly and a Ford F-150 parked in his driveway are all dots of paint in the pointillist collage of nature. Forgetting this is what leads to tragedies like the killing of bison in the 1800's that whittled populations down from between 30 to 60 million individuals to 600 lonely survivors adrift in the ocean of prairie (Kareiva and Marvier 10).

On the topic of animal deaths, we managed to survive our drive through tornado country and ended up at the flagship store of the hunting and sporting gear store Cabela's. Headquartered right there in Sidney, Cabela's has 82 stores across the country, located primarily in rural areas (Cabela's.com). Inside this massive warehouse is a central display filled with examples of great American wildlife—eagles, deer, grizzly bears, bison, and a bighorn sheep—standing proud atop a Styrofoam-sheened fake rock. The curiosity that is hunting fetishism doesn't fail to enter my young mind, and I grimly smile in front of the display for the camera before running off to convene with the decidedly live trout that are trapped in large tanks bisected by the maw of a fake cave in the fishing section. Perhaps our obsession with hunting in the United States is primal, the ultimate statement of humanity going back to its roots in nature and reclaiming what civilization has lost. But somehow it's hard to give this idea the benefit of the doubt when face-

to-face with a stuffed deer staring at you with glassy eyes trapped in an eternal expression of fear, so I'll stick with admiring the beauty that is Nebraska in the summertime.

I am staring into the depths of an ossified hole in the ground in northwest Nebraska. Bones like toothpicks stick out of a deeply packed mat of dust, and informational plaques rise above metal guardrails to paint vivid pictures of an archaeological wonder here in the middle of nowhere. We have made it to Hudson-Meng Bison Kill, a research site made up of "skeletal elements from at least 120 bison and associated Paleoindian stone points…[radiocarbon dated to] 10,000 to 9,500 years before the present" (Diffendal 97). The place radiates the feeling of a dusty wild west town, if underpaid graduate students sleeping in tents were the town sheriffs and visitors were outlaws striding in and threatening to ruin their delicate, monotonous work. But no gunfights were breaking out today, as we were corralled to the viewing platform above the excavated hole on an arranged tour, though we were privy to some inside information from a husband-and-wife research team currently at the dig. By this point I was busy trying to throw atlatl spears at dirt-stained canvas sacks with their young daughter, but I still heard some of their distant tent-side conversation.

They were eco and Indian rights activists from the nearby town of Crawford, currently living in a trailer behind the charming High Plains Homestead, a 19th-century replica town with a row of themed cabins—we were staying in the log cabin one with green-and-red plaid sheets and snowshoes hanging on the walls, a much better choice than the frilly pink brothel themed room next door. They also happened to both have PhDs in archaeology, and the reason for their research at Hudson-Meng was to elucidate the ancient lives of ancient Paleoindian people and the reason for this gruesome kill site. The hypothesis they were working on is the idea that these

ancient inhabitants herded the bison and drove them off a cliff into oblivion and a terrifyingly bloody death. The implications of this hypothesis are thrilling. How could these ancient people, innately connected to nature and so viscerally aware of the concept of "take only what you need" have replicated the 19th-century bison massacre on a microscale?

The idea that pre-Columbian Americans lived with only a whisper of influence upon their environment is a false one according to Charles C. Mann in his book *1491*. As he writes, many current environmentalists operate on the basis of the "'pristine myth'—the belief that the Americas in 1491 were an almost untouched, even Edenic land, 'untrammeled by man,' in the words of the Wilderness Act of 1964" (Mann 5). Mann explains that recent archaeology has uncovered vast civilizations stretching from the modern countries of Canada to Chile, and evidence of the ecological ripple effect on American ecosystems that is an inevitability of civilization (Mann 1-31). In describing the ancient Americas, he writes that "[i]t was, in the current view, a thriving, stunningly diverse place, a tumult of languages, trade, and culture, a region where tens of millions of people loved and hated and worshipped as people do everywhere" (Mann 31).

Even further in the past, humans have caused mass extinctions of megafauna across the world. According to geoscientist Paul Martin's landmark 1973 paper, "The Discovery of America," humans swept through the Americas "11,200 years ago," decimating populations of large animals such as "mammoths, mastodons, ground sloths, horses, and camels" and leading to their ultimate extinction (969). According to this "Pleistocene overkill hypothesis," people have been causing mass extinctions of animals since the Stone Age (Martin 969). Later scientists have corroborated Martin's ideas with evidence for similar human-caused Pleistocene extinction

events in Eurasia, Africa, and Australia (Kareiva and Marvier 8-9). This paints a drastically different view of ancient people than the typical eco-harmony account of them does.

The problem with modern people looking into the past is that they tend to compare life to how it is now, and especially to Western culture. But what Mann and Martin show is that even these Paleoindians driving bison off a cliff were acting as most people always have—they see an opportunity for survival and grab it, often no matter the external consequences. Of course the European slaughter of upwards of 60 million bison, their skulls stacked on the prairie grass like bleached white monuments of death, is on a magnitude far greater and more horrible than the minor blip that is Hudson-Meng, but it serves as an important lesson that people are people and people will always be people. Humans have always touched nature in a uniquely destructive way since we discovered technology as a way to climb the evolutionary ladder to the highest rung of apex predator. It is only with modern society that we are able to sit back and look with historical self-awareness at our place in nature.

That evening at High Plains Homestead I sat on the front porch of our cabin watching an evening thunderstorm roll its way through the prairie landscape, feeling a tingling sensation as the hair on my arms stood up with static electricity like the fuzz of a worn mohair sweater. One of the resident cats purred in figure-eights between my legs, a domesticated black lion proudly claiming me as a part of her territory. As the sun fell below the flat horizon and crickets played their buzzing symphony I sat in the silence, watching bright blue bolts of lightning shatter the sky into a million pieces burned as afterimages into my retina. In the stillness I felt free and so much a part of the Nebraska promised land, nothing more than a strangely furless bipedal animal in this peaceful landscape. We are a part of nature—a destructive, capricious segment of the evolutionary tree, but a part of the same living heritage nonetheless. We need to take our role in

nature with dignity, and learn to mitigate, rather than fight, our ruthless and looming presence. I think about those Paleoindian people and what they would think about researchers digging into their skeletal refuse. Maybe they would find these overfed men and women scratching in the dirt funny, or maybe they would feel betrayed by later generations who have fractured their old landscape into puzzle pieces of ranch and agriculture and archaeological dig sites. Or maybe they would simply have found shelter beside me on the porch and sat in silence as booming thunder filled the thick atmosphere and listened to the crickets play their endless nature song.

"They're like Harry Potter—Snape's potion class! No, they're more like witches' cauldrons now that I think about it." We have arrived in America's first National Park and I'm looking down into craters of thick gooey mud bubbling and rumbling out of the earth, remarking on their fairy-tale ways. Yellowstone is a romp in psychedelia, the LSD-tinged Haight-Ashbury of the natural world. Crimson and clover and bison and—thermophilic bacteria? In this hazy world geysers spew from the ground as if the super volcano landscape were dotted with subterranean cetaceans coming up for air, a Miltonesque lair filled with magma and the promise to blow in the time period of "[w]e do not know," according to the USGS ("When Will Yellowstone Erupt Again?"). But never mind this comforting aside, as Yellowstone is truly a remarkable place.

It was "on March 1, 1872" that "President Ulysses S. Grant signed [the bill mandating Yellowstone as under federal jurisdiction]…thus creating the first *national* park" (Haines 172). That day stands out as a peak in United States history, as it marks a turning point when people began to appreciate nature for its intrinsic value rather than what it could provide for people. But this notion of intrinsic nature is troubling in its own right. The law creating Yellowstone National

Park states that its purpose is "for the benefit and enjoyment of the *people*" (Haines 172; emphasis added). In 1916, the year of its institution, the National Park Service proclaimed "that the resources of the parks will be preserved 'unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations'" (Tweed 10). In the creation of national parks there appears to be a schism between the ideas of preserving nature for its own right and preserving nature for its use to people.

Even if one dismisses this idea of contradiction, there is still a deep unease that occurs with close examination of the idea of "unimpaired" nature. As William C. Tweed, a former employee of the National Park Service, writes in his book *Uncertain Path: A Search for the Future of National Parks*, "[d]eeply embedded in the concept [of unimpaired nature]…is the promise that things will not change" (Tweed 10). Tweed notes that throughout his career,

> I wrestled with the growing disconnect I sensed between the public promise of national parks as islands of stability and what I knew instead to be true. Even as I assured the public that the dream remained intact, I knew change was coming, and that it would come with an intensity and inevitability that would sweep away much that is treasured. (Tweed 11)

According to Tweed, scientific research is piling up evidence that climate change and other human impacts will ensure that our national parks are no exception to the certainty in life that is change (Tweed 11). Peering at Yellowstone from a visitor's perspective does little to resolve these confounding ideas of unchanging, pristine nature barricaded and fussed over both for the inherent value of nature and the "enjoyment of the people." Something just doesn't add up.

Yellowstone has become a nature experience mill, the Disneyland of national parks, lined with gift shops haphazardly filled with kitschy trinkets and pseudo time machine cafés. It is on a cracked red vinyl stool that I am staring into the gooey magma of a diner-style grilled cheese

sandwich, the artificial ooze of American cheese product spilling out from between two golden slabs of white bread made with wheat that has been refined and reconstructed into a nearly nutritionless powder. My fingertips grip the sharp edges of brown crust, butter grease shining off of them in the fluorescent lights. Herds of tourists surround me and it is only in retrospect that I realize the surreal strangeness of this scene. In the most beautiful place on earth, the pinnacle of nature, I am engulfed in an environment that screams artifice—from the 1950's paper soda jerk hat replicas trimmed with red, to the statuettes of black bears holding fishing poles, exclaiming that they have "gone fishin'."

Earlier in the day we'd had our taste of the wild as we walked on wooden planks beside scalding water holes tinged with bacterial paints and when we watched a bison prance through a picnic site in either irritation or joy (from the air-conditioned safety of a car, of course). It seems strange that we pride ourselves on the fencing in and fragmentation of nature. Of course I am no killjoy, as I share the sentiment of millions of other people that the national parks are one of our greatest achievements as a nation, and that being able to experience such nature is a undeserved privilege. Still, our roping in of wildness and forcing it to conform to the human ideals that we set forth for it—boundaries, government, and economics—seems like the ultimate irony. In trying to preserve nature we make it artificial, and in fencing it in we reveal how laughable our boundaries can be.

No case represents this idea better than the current controversy of the Yellowstone wolves. In a cascade of tragic events starting in the 1800's, gray wolf populations in Yellowstone and the surrounding areas declined rapidly (USFWS 1). As hunters began focusing their targets on bison, wild populations of wolves were left on islands free of their natural prey (USFWS 1). Following their predator instincts, they aimed their toothy mouths towards livestock, a diet

change most unwelcome to local farmers and ranchers who began to despise the wolves (USFWS 1). According to the 1987 *Northern Rocky Mountain Wolf Recovery Plan* prepared by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, several of these wolves "became notorious livestock killers…and large bounties were offered for their capture" (1). An anti-wolf panic soon ensued, with many of these animals being "poisoned, trapped, or shot" (USFWS 3).

Luckily for the wolves, people began to notice the ecological and psychological gap their absence had caused, and in 1995 wolves were reintroduced into Yellowstone using individuals captured from Canadian wolf populations ("Fight for Wolves"). As with most of real life, however, there is no fairy-tale ending. By 2005, wolf populations had recovered enough that many states began removing protections on the species, allowing "livestock owners [to]…kill wolves without a permit if wolves are chasing livestock" ("Fight for Wolves"). The consequence of this is that wolves who wander outside of Yellowstone's boundaries walk into a danger zone where they can be shot at with farmers' and ranchers' discretion. Essentially, this means that we are choosing which animals get to live and which ones don't, with only a sliver of ground marking the turning point—a policy that tips us frightfully close towards nature-based megalomania.

One could argue that these wolves are ruthless killers anyway—we want to see elk grazing peacefully and bison dancing around pools of steaming brimstone water, not a murderous wolf biting into the jugular vein of an animal crying out in pain. But, as a 2015 study by Heather M. Bryan et al. shows, wolves living in areas where wolf hunting is widespread have higher levels of stress hormones than wolves living in protected areas (Bryan et al. 1-8). What this means is that we are artificially creating populations of relaxed and stressed wolves, defined

by only an arbitrary boundary. What a strange world we live in where we've created a good wolf/bad wolf dichotomy. So much for "unimpaired" nature.

On our last day in Yellowstone we drove through the Lamar Valley, a cup of land rimmed by marshmallow fluff-topped mountains and with mist hugging the ground like a gray quilt. We were there to search for the elusive gray wolves but what was more notable was the line of cars gridlocked on the road that twisted through the valley, the line like a segmented mechanical worm. By this point I was looking forward to sleeping in a place without government-issued green linoleum floors and flickering fluorescent light features, so my apathetic eyes glazed over herds of elk grazing on dewy grass with their exhalations clouding in the frosty air, and the deeply fragrant smell of wet pines in the early morning. Soon we exited the park and were on unprotected land, land where wolves can be shot and McDonalds' can line the highway as neon centers of American consumerism.

The human division of nature and artifice is strange and unsettling, as it places us as the ultimate Other. National Parks, unintentionally perhaps, put us on a pedestal carved with the phrase "nature is Earth minus *Homo sapiens*—nature is too special to be sullied by *our* presence." But this is a dangerous misconception. Everyone on this earth is, in fact, a part of nature, and baptizing ourselves in the waters of artificiality only increases the chances of other tragedies like the wolf genocide occurring. In this light, perhaps Yellowstone is less like a psychedelic wonderland and more like a theme park filled with cotton candy clouds and roller coaster roads—for the "enjoyment of the people," of course.

Tornadoes are funnels of pure atmospheric rage, the embodiment of something gone wrong as entirely atmospheric clouds are shuttled in a swirling vortex to the ground where they

don't belong. I wish I could say that comes from the vantage point of imagination, but in this moment it feels all too real. I'm in the lobby of a Holiday Inn that has a faux log cabin exterior and insipid mid-2000s beige décor where I am sitting, surrounded by ghostly faces in the dark. Through the windows we are watching strobing lightning brighten up the sky with stuttering blue and white light, a soothing mechanical voice echoing tornado warning messages in the background through a hand-held radio supplied by the hotel owners. Earlier in the day we'd been exploring Glacier National Park in western Montana by horseback and indulging in the obligatory mediocre tourist food: plain cheese pizza served by a jaded waitress with saccharine sweet sarcasm in a pseudo-rustic restaurant decorated by fake Tiffany lamps and cracked vinyl booths exposing yellowing foam stuffing.

The American road trip is a singular experience of artifice, consumerism, and wild nature wrapped into one beautiful contradiction. We congratulate ourselves for our temporarily spartan ways while spewing dead dinosaurs into the air and bathing ourselves in precious clean water that rises up in scalding tendrils to fog up a bathroom with generic mass-produced furnishings. But tonight is a reminder that the goliath that is nature as a whole always has its way. The deluge started out as a pitter-patter sprinkle touched with the intoxicating scent of petrichor. But soon the sweet rain drops that fell on my skin with the feeling of hundreds of delicate fingertips brushing against me turned into a drowning downpour. Walking back to the hotel from our car exposed the frailty of our bodies as the wind hurled us sideways like marionettes controlled by a wrathful Zeus high upon Mount Olympus. No water, no power, just the silence of the thunder rolling at night amid the muffled shuffling sounds of shifting bodies in the Stygian lobby.

Storms like this will become more common in the future, and it's not due to an angry thunder god, but because of us. By sending up fossil fuels into the air and pumping greenhouse

gases into our atmosphere we are interrupting a long cycle of climactic ups and downs, creating a Jurassic world at an alarmingly fast rate. Global warming has become that most dreaded form of cliché, once packing a punch but now barely managing a slap in the face. In its stead the term "climate change" has popped up, a much more apt descriptor of the consequences of humanity's myopic dreams of progress and capitalism boosted by the steroids of new media. The truth is that anthropogenic climate change will lead to more extreme weather events. A 2017 study by Diffenbaugh et al. brought together data from many past studies to show that "historical warming has increased the severity and probability of the hottest month and hottest day of the year…[and] our framework also suggests that historical climate forcing has increased the probability of the driest year and wettest period" (4881). What this means, simply, is that climate change is not a homogeneous process; instead, it is causing some places and years to be cooler and drier and others to be hotter and wetter (Diffenbaugh 4881). Such atmospheric instability leads to more "individual extreme climate events," such as the one I experienced in Montana twelve years ago (Diffenbaugh 4881).

Anecdotal evidence does little to prove overall trends, but the evidence mounting for the influence of global warming-induced climate change on local weather patterns is not a drop in the bucket. As John Carey writes in his *Scientific American* article "Storm Warnings: Extreme Weather Is a Product of Climate Change,"

> [s]cientists used to say, cautiously, that extreme weather events were 'consistent' with the predictions of climate change. No more. 'Now we can make the statement that particular events would not have happened the same way without global warming,' says Kevin Trenberth, head of climate analysis at the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR) in Boulder, Colorado. That's a

> profound change—the difference between predicting something and actually seeing it happen. The reason is simple: The signal of climate change is emerging from the 'noise'—the huge amount of natural variability in weather. (Carey)

These events are catastrophic, including floods, tornados, droughts, and blizzards, characterized by higher-than-normal intensity and abnormal seasonal timing (Carey). And as most people know from photos of emaciated polar bears amid scattered ice shared on social media (usually on Facebook with a crowd of angry and sad emoji reactions), global warming is causing our earth's polar ice to melt, leading to rising sea levels (Paul 71). Soon all that remains of Florida may be a dreamy swampland with aquatic palm trees and a Disneyworld Atlantis at its watery center.

Just yesterday I read about two billion tons of ice that sheared off the ancient icy crust of Greenland and into the sea. My eyes welled up at the thought of the sloshing ocean rippling out across the world from a cold northern epicenter, lapping up at shorelines we must prepare to write elegies for. In the Anthropocene, all we can know for certain is change. Paul Crutzen, Nobel laureate in Chemistry, created this term to describe the new epoch humans have created through their effects on the planet (Stromberg). Though the Anthropocene and its details are still in academic and authoritative limbo, there is no denying that it is an apt term that captures just how much one species—us—has altered our home called Earth (Stromberg). In the future, all of the iconic landscapes we know will be gone or shifted eerily north or south at the scale of latitudes. Our minds balk at the thought of a tropical Sahara or a sandy desert Maine, but that may one day be our reality. Our monuments and dwellings perfectly shaped to their environments will one day seem odd and laughably foolish to some future civilization. We will all seem fools to those looking back at the damage we've done.

In the hotel I'd spent the night switching between the consolation of my parents and of three Mennonite girls who surrounded me with their modest dresses and starched white bonnets that covered the pinned-up swirls of hair on their heads. They were staid in the darkness as the candle of faith lit their way; I was shivering and crying with every sizzling crack of lightning and rumble of thunder. Soon the allure of sleep lowered my heavy eyelids and hours later we all awoke to the sparkling bright renaissance of the morning after the storm. Stepping outside to assess the damage—downed trees, broken windows, crackling powerlines strewn across the street like deadly snakes—I inhaled the sweet smell of fresh, dewy air and the grassy smell of battered foliage drying in the soft morning light. Never mind that this was NOAA's storm of the month, never mind that lives were lost and peoples' security buffeted in the wind. The storm was over, and to my young eyes that meant peace prevailed over the land once again.

Looking back on that night I think of the kindness of strangers and the comfort they so generously gave me in the communal fright of that night. I think of all the mothers and fathers down thousands and millions of lineages comforting their children and their cries and fears and the continuous stream of empathy racing through time, in us. But looking down this ancestral line, how silly it is to think that one moment we were hominids at one with nature and the next we were transformed into humans, apart and only viewing nature through a thick, distorted glass. Thinking about the continuity of evolution and of our species, this boundary between us and nature seems trivial and untrue, an artifact of an ever-increasing self-awareness leading to egoism so great we cannot see ourselves in the greater picture that is life.

We must know our place in nature in order to commit to change, and to admit to the hypnosis of modernity that we've been living in. We need to know who we are in order to save our most beloved landscapes, to learn what confined wildness really means, and to prevent the

harm of ruthless storms littering the future annals of history. This doesn't mean that we need to give up what we have so brilliantly discovered and created with our intelligence, but it means that we need to use it cautiously and with a large dose of humility. We cannot forget ourselves in this living and breathing evolutionary world in which we fit into the jigsaw puzzle of nature just as much as any other creature. In the immortal words of Charles Darwin, "[t]here is grandeur in this view of life…[with its] endless forms most beautiful," one of which is us (396). We are at once an intelligent and delusional species, tricking ourselves into the role of Other, when we are but another strange, shifting shape that nature has taken in the inexplicable journey of life. If we do make a fatal mark on this planet from within our prison of greed, Earth will continue to spin without us, day after day on its axis, year after year elliptically orbiting our life-giving sun, and it will do so without remorse or regret or a shudder of sadness. It is up to us to ensure that our bodies, our unique form both born from, and a part of, nature will continue living on into the future. With persistence, we wise *sapiens* can continue building our world, both tangible around us and impalpable in our minds, and begin our journey of learning to look at the nature that is inside ourselves.

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