

An Unattainable Past  
*Evan Pugh*

I do not like this place. I have no patience for the cars, the unnecessary pavement covering every surface or the sweeping vistas of tamed and broken earth. This place is not for me, not anymore at least. This subdued Middle American existence cannot interest me any longer. I used to be content to interact with the tame nature that was a part of my suburban childhood. However, my relationship with my natural surroundings has been one of ever-increasing need and avarice on my part. I needed to take more and more from my natural surroundings, and now I can no longer be satisfied with what I once had as a child, even though that feeling of innocent contentment is what I now desire most. I have changed so much, and I fear there is no going back to the way things were.

During my early childhood, I had simple needs from my surroundings. I was incredibly active and my parents threw me out in the backyard to play by myself when I got too rambunctious. I have no distinct memories from this time, but I know that I loved to feel everything. My parents watched as I lay in the sun and absorbed its warmth, or sniffed voraciously at the wind. They were amused when I listened to the wails of the seagulls that wheeled far above and as I attempted to mimic them, or when I inexplicably sat down to eat dirt. I gladly stared in boundless appreciation of the life around me for long stretches of time. I found the sensory aspects of nature to be beautiful, irresistible, and incredibly satisfying to behold.

I wanted to take everything in. The only desire I had was to experience everything I could in my backyard. Only nature could entertain me, but that was not a problem because I was fascinated by the tiniest things and my backyard could interest me endlessly. Every day came with a host of new experiences. I wanted nothing more than to touch, see, taste, hear, or smell each of them. My fundamental desire to sense the world around me was my most driving character trait when I was young.

As I grew older, I developed the ability to plan ahead, and I realized my actions had many immediate and long term consequences on my surroundings. I began to use these cognitive abilities to deliberately manipulate my yard. My imagination, fed by stories of pirates and kings, led me to attempt to make my yard into something it was not. I began to dig in an imagined search for treasure and I constructed little rock and sand castles all around the yard to make fairytale kingdoms. While my actions caused no permanent damage to the yard, most of my plans from this point on were meant to stimulate a premeditated result. This distanced me from the innocent, easy childhood joy and satisfaction I felt with my natural surroundings.

I was still able to revel in all of the simple sensations I was receiving, but simple sensory enjoyment was threatened at times by my ability to think in conditionals. When I was busy enjoying sensations, my peace of mind was threatened by nagging “what ifs.” What if this dirt did not contain these pieces of broken glass? What if the wind smelled like flowers instead of like our chicken coop? Could I do something to make this happen? I felt restlessness and probing curiosity where, previously, I had been calm. I had plans and I pursued my imagination, finding it to be ever changing. If I accomplished one thing, I only felt a brief period of contentment before I imagined how I could make what I created even more appealing to my senses.

My ambitions started out to be modest, but after a few years they grew larger. As my ambitions grew, the sense of contentment I enjoyed when I did my rounds in the yard diminished. Now I felt a hint of longing for things that were not a part of my yard—things unknown. Even the places I had altered to make more appealing to my senses seemed mundane and incapable of satisfying my need to feel nature. All my interactions with nature began to be on a grander scale. My digging turned into excavating and I created earthworks like my majestic Grand Canyon, a crevasse I dug that bisected my backyard.

I was interfering with nature because my need to experience it with all my senses had grown. Before I had been satisfied by passively interacting with the world, but by this time, the only satisfactory interactions I had with nature were ones that I artificially orchestrated. It felt good to change my environment because it was a direct way to attune my senses to nature. I was intensely aware of the smell of freshly dug soil, the weight of the thick clay that clung to the shovel, and the unyielding resistance of thick roots every time I attempted to dig. However, I got more out of restructuring my surroundings than just sensory pleasure. It was largely an unconscious action, but I was changing my yard into a new, more exciting landscape that I felt could satisfy my needs far more than my tame backyard.

Although I did not realize it at the time, the nature I artificially created was mimicking what I imagined the wilderness to be. My Grand Canyon was a monument to the Grand Canyon of my imagination: jagged, barren, dangerous and overwhelming to behold. My version was obviously a pale imitation of the original, but it was realistic and dangerous enough to keep me partially satisfied and nearly break my father's ankle on multiple occasions.

In the wilderness, I began to feel, lay a landscape that I could neither ignore nor find unsatisfactory. I felt it was too wild, dangerous, and unyielding for that. I believed that if I could live in the wilderness, I would be surrounded by a world of harsh sweeping landscapes, jagged rock pillars, and blasting cold winds of whose majesty I would never tire. I wanted to be in that imaginary wilderness more than anything else, living off the soil so that I was constantly in touch with my natural surroundings. I felt that if I could only do that, I would finally be satisfied as I was when I was a child.

With this realization my suburban existence changed dramatically. My house, my neighborhood, and most notably my high school, changed from being a boring reality of life to ***an unbearable prison***. Where previously I had felt mere nagging dissatisfaction and restlessness with my existence, the new idea that I was spending my youth in an artificial educational purgatory when I should be escaping up the mountain, profoundly disturbed me. I felt a growing feeling of ever-present longing. The only studies I could maintain an interest in were my languages—primarily Arabic—because I knew that being able to communicate was a necessary life skill for the future that I was beginning to envision. I began to long for the night winds of the Sahara or the dry trails of the High Atlas Mountains. I was longing to escape the mundane surroundings I knew by removing myself to a place so utterly wild and unaccommodating that my needs, grown too large for a suburban yard to support, would again seem trivial against the magnificent backdrop.

I escaped from my home successfully, but I travelled neither far away enough from home nor deep enough into untamed wilderness to be satisfied. Few things have changed at Denison. I am still just as restless as I was, I feel that urgent longing to leave just as intensely, and I am certainly no wiser than I was before. However, I do have more freedom and I can now spend much more time in search of my wilderness. I have been unsuccessful, and I still feel no relief, even when the storms whip over my head in the Biological Reserve at two in the morning or the rain inundates my clothing. This wild weather reminds me of what I could be experiencing, and my longing grows tenfold. I just cannot shake the feeling that I am missing something life changing.

Despite all these disappointments, I have made definite steps forward. I have firm plans to escape for real. Whereas in high school, I was frantically and naively trying to plan a distant future, now I know that I only have to wait until the summer months to disappear into harsher climes. Every summer I will travel abroad in North Africa or the Middle East to study Arabic. By doing this I will be subjecting my body to new, unforgiving and exhilarating senses and preparing myself to live abroad after college in an environment where I can surround myself with the dry, unyielding desert. I can imagine it now. I will feel the intense and radiating heat of the sun and smell the dry, dusty scents on the whipping desert wind. I will listen to the groans of the perennially unhappy camels and silently appreciate them. I will sit down cross legged with people I will meet, and eat sandy, dirty loaves of bread as I stare out into the moonlit emptiness of the desert. Even though am beginning to realize that things can never go back to the way they were, that I can never enjoy the pure, simple, friendly sensations of my old home again, I feel that perhaps it will be fine. My need has grown, but I will find a place that will make my needs again seem insignificant, as my backyard did when I was a child. Nature will provide. I know that I am unrealistically burdening my one plan of escape with the incredible weight of all my hopes and aspirations, but I cannot help but feel that once I find a stretch of untamed wilderness in which to settle down in, I can finally be content.

***Commentary by Michelle Oyakawa  
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*Reading this piece, I was immediately drawn in by the strong opening that captures the reader's interest and establishes the writer's voice. Throughout the narrative, Evan Pugh employs an extensive vocabulary and uses language creatively to describe his changing relationship with nature. This is a skill that will no doubt be honed throughout his time at Denison. I find this to be a particularly creative and unique response to the prompt, which asked the writer to describe his relationship with nature. The reader is taken on a journey full of imagery through the sensory experiences of childhood and the changing mental processes of the writer during this time. The most striking part of this piece that really sets it apart is its conceptual depth. The entire narrative can be taken either as a well-written description of one person's individual relationship with nature, or as a metaphor for the processes of growing up and humankind's mastery over nature. This piece goes beyond simply responding to the prompt and provides an insightful window into both the writer's life experience as well as to larger themes that will continue to be explored by writers for many years.*

