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ENGL 316

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### Semester In The Wild Testimonial

Most days in the winter of 2017, when I got ready for class in the morning I usually found that my car keys were not in the glass key bowl where I had left them.

“There’s way too much snow, you’re going to have to walk.” my mom often said.

Overly annoyed and under layered, I had no option but to begin my forty five minute walk to school. On those days it wouldn’t be unusual to see me anywhere in-between East Haines and 1st Street with my head down as I kicked up snow, bitterly mumbling to myself. Eventually, I would look up, and when I did, it wouldn’t take long for my frustration to dissipate. How couldn’t it? The north end of Boise is gorgeous in the winter. On the right day, with a slight breeze, flakes of ice flutter down from the Kentucky Coffeetree canopy. Kissed by the morning sun, the ice flickers radiantly as it floods the space below the frozen branches.

One day, on a January morning just like this I stopped to look for oncoming traffic and to my amazement I spotted a large elk trotting down the middle of East Bannock Street. To see deer in Boise was common, but to see an Elk was entirely different— I was stunned. He stopped for a moment and turned his gaze in my direction, then continued making his way down the street towards downtown. In four blocks East Bannock Street intersects with Broadway, one of Boise’s busier intersections. It connects downtown Boise to the interstate and feeds into highway 95,

traffic is ongoing and fast. I couldn't help but wonder how it got there, and if it would ever find its way home.

The next time I saw an elk was in the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness, America's largest contiguous wilderness area. I stumbled upon the elk on a hike up Goat Creek Basin, a somewhat less-traveled area a few miles off a common pack-string trail. It was a radically different encounter than the one that I had experienced in the populated streets of Boise. For one, the elk itself was larger and more confident, but most notably, in this place I was the stranger. Having not spent much time in a true wilderness setting before, the feeling of not fundamentally belonging in a place was a new and impressionable experience for me. During my time in the Frank Church, I would grow accustomed to feeling that way and over time cultivate an appreciation for it.

Only a few weeks before this, I flew out to the Frank not knowing what to expect when I got there. I made my way to the University of Idaho's Taylor Wilderness Research Station where I would live and learn for the next two and a half months. I was terrified. Hours before, I met the eleven other students that I would be working with. Among them were firefighters, conservationists, ecologists, wildlife surveyors, and then myself: an english major with nothing more than an appreciation for the natural world. Now there we were, soaring above hundreds of miles of Ponderosa pine and Douglas fir stands, jagged granite peaks, and glassy sinuous streams. It wasn't until we were passing over this landscape that it dawned on me how isolated we were all actually going to be. As we approached the station, the plane slowly began to descend in between two furrowed ridge lines. Beneath us Big Creek wound around unforgiving granite boulders, carving through time, feeding black bears and otters as it carried whitefish and

salmon to the Middle Fork. We circled around the station once, then twice. I was stunned by its presence— seeing Taylor for the first time was like being told a secret. A large jade pasture lay tucked in between miles of fierce mountains and a lulling river, an oasis among the vast wild.

The months following the landing of that plane were incredibly valuable to my understanding of the natural world and its relationship to human life. Never before had I truly understood how perfectly disconnected I was from this relationship. At Taylor we took a full course load of classes like environmental writing and environmental history that made us consider our roles in the Anthropocene, as well courses like ecology, wilderness management and leadership. In addition to a well rounded curriculum built to cultivate a stronger sense of commendation for the natural world, we were able to experience an overall change in lifestyle that was more closely related to the indigenous people that lived in this land before it was colonized, the Dukudeka Tribe (Sheep Eaters). Activities like harvesting carrots and spinach in our little garden, drinking unfiltered water out of Rush Creek, weaving baskets out of willow branches, and spending an entire day to walk a meager 5 miles established something long removed from my perception of the natural world. The two and a half months I spent at Taylor were some of the most enriching months of my life because it explicated my understanding of wilderness and how Anthropocentric ideologies shape American culture.

As I make my transition back into the front country, Taylor still heavily occupies my mind. As I fall asleep to the whirring engines passing by my window, I can still imagine the sound of Big Creek endlessly rushing by and the pattering rain on my canvas tent. Despite having a pocket full of memories to preserve, being back in Boise makes me feel like everything has changed, like I've changed. I find myself trying to sustain the habits I created at Taylor. This

morning, I chose to walk downtown instead of drive. I took my usual route down East Bannock Street and thought of the elk I encountered that chilly January morning. I bet he felt similar to how I feel now— overstimulated by the passing traffic, woozy from their exhaust, aching to go back home. I like to believe that it found its way back to where it belongs, and that maybe one day, I will too.