

## **Place: War, Cosmos, Perspective**

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**Abstract:** Place is more than an environment - it is about the activities, memories, and relationships that are a part of it. It has a history. This essay is about the places that are a part of a relationship and experiences with a family member. It entangles memories of childhood, war, politics, learning, and the simplicity of mountain tops. As this essay examines, the materiality of an environment is much more than mere matter and becomes inseparable from relationship and meaning.

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Mountains are my place. But I am not thinking of them right now. My place begins with the Swiss Family Robinson Tree house in Disneyland California - a place based on a story that represents adventure, action, and exploration. As children my older brother would give his pointer finger to me to grab hold of and we explored through the tree house. We picked our favorite rooms, chose our beds, giggled with excitement. During trips from Virginia to California to visit family we always went there, then we would go to the Sierra Nevada Mountains. We backpacked as a family for a week or so, over high granite passes, through wild meadows. I learned to fish rainbow trout in the backcountry of Yosemite. Twenty years ago we finished a hike with a climb of Mount Whitney - the highest peak in the continental US. I have Mount Whitney tattooed on the inside of my left wrist. It covers a scar from a pit-bull bite that landed me in the hospital for five days. I haven't seen Mount Whitney since 1993, but that place defined the trajectory of my outdoor pursuits and career.

My brother, six years my senior, would pick me up from elementary school. I held his finger as he walked me home. My school was just a short walk down the suburban street we lived on. Before the school was built it was a dense forest. Deer played in there.

I remember hanging yellow ribbons on the trees in front of the school during the first gulf war. It was over so quickly. I always had a feeling the US would return.

I went to visit my brother and his family in Florida last spring. We went to Disney World. For old times sake my brother and I ran up the Swiss Family Robinson treehouse, an exact replica of the one in California, just like we were kids.

My brother visits Colorado once a year or so. He likes to run ultra marathons. Colorado is a good training ground. On occasion he beats me up a mountain, although that is normally because he makes me drink too much the night before. Once, I took him caving in the early spring with a few girlfriends. The road to the cave was blocked off by a few feet of snow. We post-holed through it, my brother in his jeans, my Colorado friends laughing at him. The cave was an adventure, as they always are. We explored rooms, an underground stream, and scrambled to get back to the entrance just like we were kids again.

Our back yard in Virginia had a swing set. My brother was too old (or too cool) to play on it. I spent hours, days even, of my childhood on it, dreaming of the future, trying to understand the world. My best friend, and next-door neighbor, sat out there with me nearly every night of summer and after school.

My brother left for college when I was in seventh grade. He went off to Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond. I visited a number of times. We saw *Les Miserables* at the Mosque Theater (now the Landmark Theater). He took me to Agecroft Hall, an old Tudor mansion transplanted from England. I eventually went to VCU myself. I explored the old streets, walked around the grounds of Agecroft, and even saw *Les Mis* again at the Mosque. My son was born in Richmond, in the same hospital I stayed in for my dog bite.

My brother didn't finish his degree at VCU. He joined the military when I was in high school and finished his bachelors, and eventually masters with Army support. His wife had a ba-

by while he was at basic training. I remember giving little Zoe baths in my parent's kitchen and playing on the swing set with her.

On September 11, 2001 I was a sophomore in college at VCU. I was just south of the chaos up north, but it trickled down. My family and friends in northern Virginia saw the smoke of the pentagon. My neighbors, both marines stationed nearby, ran back and forth from their apartment in fatigues, packing their car, ready to go at a moment's notice. My grandfather, the colonel, called me in agony, praying and recounting Pearl Harbor and the Korean War. My brother demanded I stay put in my apartment and not attend classes. No one knew what else would happen.

My brother went to Afghanistan around the same time I went on my NOLS wilderness semester course. "I'm in the desert too," I wrote him. I sent him a copy of Ed Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* along with a horseshoe and some rocks I found. The first time I saw him after his return he looked aged. He came to visit me in Richmond. I ran down the old Victorian steps of my apartment building. His eyes had sprouted crow's feet. His hair was greying. He was 26.

I moved on from Richmond a few years later to where I live now in Golden, Colorado. My brother moved around some more with the military and settled in Florida, on the coast near Disney World. He has two teenaged girls now. He left active duty to work for the Department of Defense. He still lives and works in Florida, now as a special agent for the DOD. He returned to Afghanistan and Iraq.

A few years ago there was an embassy bombing in Baghdad. My brother was there. He also ran 50 miles around his base in Baghdad (10 mile loop 5 times!) so that he could qualify his time for a race back home in Florida. At the top of sniper hill he was shot at.

Every time he was at war and NPR talked of either Afghanistan or Iraq I would hold my breath. Yesterday, on the cover of the Wall Street Journal there was a picture of a little boy saying goodbye to his father's flag covered coffin. He just died in Afghanistan. The fighting and killing is still going on. American and Afghani alike are dying - men, women, and children. The war that was never a war is still going on.

My brother called me last night. I was up in the mountains. My fiancé and I had walked around a historic ranch in Tabernash, Colorado, dreaming of maybe getting married in an aspen grove. Then we sat down for a celebratory dinner. My brother was at Disney World. On the train from Epcot to Magic Kingdom he heard the "bombs"- the fireworks of Epcot, a few too many drinks. He lost it.

He told me once that he runs long miles because he was running away from his demons. I could relate somewhat. I used to go for long, cold runs in the dark of Colorado winter after my divorce. I always thought my brother seemed so strong after coming back from war. He never exhibited signs of PTSD. He provided for his family, laughed a lot, and was of course an intense Jackson like all of us. He has his drink or two nightly; being a beer or alcohol snob he always has "top shelf" in his house.

I grew up in the epicenter of early American history. Civil war battlefields dotted Northern Virginia. Family vacations and school field trips meant walking around at least one historical battlefield. It was not uncommon to find bullets in the woods. I lived close to Manassas, site of the first battle of the war. My family visited Gettysburg. We saw the sites of the major events of the colonial revolution. We walked around old estates, Valley Forge, Mt Vernon. One of my favorite afternoon walks in Richmond was around Hollywood Cemetery. It was a graveyard of civilians, civil war officers, U.S. presidents (also the confederacy's only president, Jefferson Davis), and countless unmarked mass graves.

Something set my brother off last night. For years he pushed it down. His best friend died recently. An injury in Iraq had triggered ALS. There my brother called me, at the base of the Swiss Family Robinson Treehouse nearly in tears. "I've done things, I need to tell you". Slurring his words, drunk and suffering from flashbacks, he told me just a little. "That is a start, you need to say it", I told him. "You did what you had to do to come home alive, that is war! Remember Gettysburg and Manassas! You came home to us, and not in a coffin". I told him this as I looked up at the perfect night sky, the horizon defined by the Rockies. "The milky way is out" I told him.

Lately I've been immersed in thinking about the cosmos and the place of myself, and humans, and this planet, in the universe. There are so many mysteries about who and what we are. A tiny blue dot of a planet perfectly balanced in position of the sun. What is this world we live in? Where we fight and die, and worship money and condemn pure being? What is this place?

How can he comprehend what he saw and did in war? What perspective it gives or strips away! I was frustrated with aspects of my life when he called. I had recently left my job. The place and the environment was stifling. It was mechanistic grey boxy cubicles under fluorescent light, with no access to fresh air. That place was not my bliss, neither was the work. My every being said to leave. And then I did. I was upset though, about the uncertainty of finally leaving and looking at my future with a mix of freedom and fear. Talking to my brother that night every care I had about those grey boxes went away. Those boxes and systems of management mattered very little. It was recognition that place on this planet and in this cosmos has nothing to do with petty games of quasi-corporate culture.

This place I was in, a family member talking to a veteran of two terrible wars, was what mattered. Place to be there for my loved one.

My brother went through the Swiss Family Robinson Treehouse on the phone with me. He told me about each room. I told his wife to find a way to get him out here for a few days. We will climb a mountain and sit on top and talk.

*Author's Note:* This essay was written in October, 2013. My brother returned to Afghanistan in 2015 and safely returned, hopefully for the last time. There are currently 9,800 U.S. troops in Afghanistan and 3,300 in Iraq. According to the Watson Institute at Brown University,

as of January 2015, more than 26,000 civilians are estimated to have died as a result of the war. 165,000 Iraqi citizens have died by direct violence since the US invasion.

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