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Accelerated Comp II
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The Face of the Ozarks

The most vivid memories grow from one's most profound experiences. Though an experience powerful enough to permanently etch itself into one's memory will often be the result of a shockingly painful experience, it can come from one that is stunningly beautiful, too. Nature consistently offers this experience, which explains why it is so often the subject of poetry. For example, in Elizabeth Bishop's "The Fish," the narrator describes the wise demeanor of an aged fish whose "five-haired beard of wisdom," evidence of previous battles, teaches her to respect this old fighter and to love the "rainbow" beauty she finds in its grotesqueness. Although less dramatic than a solar eclipse or a geyser at Yellowstone, Bishop's fish reminds us that nature can conjure up beauty in its simplest everyday form and stir deep reflections in later life, a lesson I learned in Arkansas. I am an avid fan of hiking, and one hike in particular will always stand out for me because of the beauty I saw.

It happened last summer in Hot Springs on a vacation with two friends and one of their families. It was midweek, hot, and within a day or two of the Fourth of July. Earlier in the week, during our exploration of the town, the three of us stumbled upon a back road that ran almost entirely uphill, with sharp winding curves, and as the crow flies led diagonally away from downtown and directly away from Lake Hamilton. The small town, urban setting was lost within a hundred yards, and we were surrounded by trees. Toward the end of the road was a small gravel parking lot with room for one or two cars. A sign across the road indicated the beginning of a trail long since beaten by man. The entrance was slightly overgrown, but the path beyond lay clear. We planned to return the next day.

We woke hours before anyone else and made for the trail, stopping for several bottles of water at a gas station. Sweat ran without evaporating in the humid, sticky mid-nineties air by the time we crossed the road. The first mile or so was a hard uphill battle. The gravel that once covered the path was more on its periphery now from erosion; what remained was worn smooth with age, making it surprisingly slippery. Each of us slipped several times in the trek up, each time causing the gravel flow far down the path and often producing small clouds of dust, allowing us to see the sun shafts which peeked through the thick canopy. Once the trail leveled, we were flanked to our left by a steep incline and to our right by an even steeper drop off. Looking to the right, I saw an old pristine deciduous forest, pure, untouched nature as far as I could see.

Coming around a bend in the road, we found rocks sticking out of the mountain almost like jewelry, their bright whiteness offering a sharp contrast to the deep green that surrounded them. Dead leaves accumulated in the inward-pointing facets that ran along the stones, giving them a sharp definition. We stopped to examine them further. The

rocks stuck out several feet and rested one on the other, which created the wall of a natural shelter, the roof of which was the first stones we saw. The shelter was much like a shallow cave, or a stone lean-to. It was the middle of a drought—fireworks were even banned on Independence Day—but the floor of the small room made by the rocks was damp, and the air smelled like wet grass and damp earth. The little grass that lived in the near sunless space was trampled. We were standing in some animal's home; we assumed a deer. After a while, we pressed on.

The end of our road was marked by more stones. We climbed them and found a stunning scene. We were near the summit of what seemed one of the tallest of the Ozarks in our view. The sun burned our backs as morning progressed into late morning. The mountain created a shallow shadow pointing west toward an isolated town nestled in the valley with a backdrop of the rolling mountains. They were as green as our mountain, their trees running seemingly uninterrupted all the way to the far side. As we stood on our rocky pedestals, victorious for the hour, we were near the height of the trees around us. For the first time that week, we felt a breeze. We turned windward. The trains of sweat on our faces evaporated. The breeze carried the pure smell of clean air; it was a pleasantly fresh air to breathe, refreshing in the once-stagnant air.

To our north stood a slightly shorter mountain. The adjacent hill was solid green, save for a big patch of trees, where all were dead brown, forming a vague face, which sat forever, cloud gazing. The scene was so impressive that we stood silently while we all tried to comprehend the beauty we saw. We stood for nearly ten minutes before we made our way back down, picking up a small bit of old trash by the rocks before we went.

The beauty of the entire journey and especially the end will always be with me. There's something that connects with me on a deeply human level. The emotions evoked by the memory are simple, but profound, almost ethereal and instinctive. I am determined to make the hike again one day. The Ozarks are not known so widely for their beauty, so they are not hiked so much as others, but this means their paths are more untouched than any I have hiked before. They are pure nature at its finest.