Chopin left this world lying on a bed in Paris with a handful of Poland’s soil. Scarlett, at the end of *Gone with the Wind*, returns to Tara Plantation, the home that she realizes is the source of her strengths, and stands resolute on Tara’s remnants in silent affirmation of her father’s words from years before: “Land is the only thing in the world worth working for, worth fighting for, worth dying for.” And N. Scott Momaday, in *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, stands atop the hill he grew up on, overlooking the boundless plains that begat the legends of Kiowa culture, and trembles. He would say, “It all starts here.”

People carry the traces of their homelands for their whole lives, letting those traces merge into their being and become part of their souls. The images of memory and art can lead us to the mysterious attachment between the land and its people, but the puzzle of self and home—in which our individual spirits are the greatest mystery—remains.

In his book *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, N. Scott Momaday records his journey to Rainy Mountain for his grandmother Aho’s funeral. His destination on the Oklahoma Plain once nurtured the Kiowas, an American Indian nation of which Momaday’s grandmother was a member, one of the final generation to witness the brilliance of that culture. Everywhere Momaday passes on the plain triggers memories of his grandmother and the stories of the Kiowa people.

Momaday’s journey is one of memory, split into two parts: his own memories of his grandmother and the indirect memories of the Kiowas. A melancholy tone pervades the essay and conjoins fragments caused by frequent leaps in chronology, but a slight difference in style breaks through this otherwise consistent atmosphere. While Momaday tells the stories of the Kiowas using forceful and compelling language, his descriptions of the moments he spends with Aho are more serene. Images of his peaceful childhood are defined by “frogs away by the river” and “the motion of the air,” but his impression of the Kiowas is marred with the “scars of old and cherished...
enmities” they bear on their faces (185). Though the two sections of Momaday’s memory are characterized by different moods, shared messages hide beneath the scenes. We find a beautiful harmony in Aho’s prayer, sad and withholding, and in the Kiowas’ singing rising in the darkness, just as, when we see Aho’s long, black hair lying on her shoulders, we see too an image of the “Sun Dance” that once made it fly. These details are generated by and condensed into the first image Momaday shows us: the land, the sun-blazed plain and Rainy Mountain.

This initial image of the land provides the background for the Kiowas’ life stories, but it also accounts for the birthplace of the tribe’s spiritual culture. The descriptions of the extreme weather—the “blizzards, hot tornadic winds,” the earth that “cracks beneath your feet,” and the “steaming foliage [that] seems almost to writhe in fire”—are so compelling and powerful that all the mysterious legends recorded in the subsequent paragraph lead back to the image of the red plain (182). The plain becomes itself a representation of the Kiowa spirit. “Your imagination comes to life,” Momaday says, “and this, you think, is where Creation was begun” (182). This may be the beginning of the world, but it is also the essence of the Kiowa culture and the origin of its people’s spirit. Momaday credits the landscape of Rainy Mountain with the wild spirits of the Kiowas: nurtured by the red, burning earth, they have the strongest character and the purest faith in the world.

Virginia Woolf, in her essay “Portrait of a Londoner,” reveals a similar bond between people and their homelands, but her paradigm is the reverse of Momaday’s: where Momaday portrays a place to strengthen our conception of its people, Woolf uses her depiction of Mrs. Crowe, a woman of high London society, to create a picture of the city. Mrs. Crowe’s life, busied with elegance and mundanity, is a microcosm of the city: to know the real London, Woolf writes, “It was essential to know Mrs. Crowe. It was in her drawing-room that the innumerable fragments of the vast metropolis seemed to come together into one lively, comprehensible, amusing and agreeable whole” (76). Mrs. Crowe’s drawing room comes to contain the city, and the city as a whole becomes a part of her home and her life. The city even becomes more comprehensible in this miniature version of it. Mrs. Crowe has shaped it, and we can begin to understand it by understanding her.

But land can also shape our character and philosophy of life. That it can do so may explain why Momaday feels an infinite distance dividing his grandmother and himself as he watches her pray, continuing an old and holy ritual understood and treasured by the Kiowas. Momaday is a descendant, but at this moment he is struck by how “exclusive” their traditions are (184). Not
having experienced the isolated and wild land that so defines the Kiowa nation, Momaday can’t comprehend every element in the stories of the Rainy Mountain, and Aho seems to him “beyond the reach of time” (184). When she prays, something absolutely individual rises in her and builds an invisible wall separating her from her grandson, confining her to a world that does not extend beyond herself. At this moment, Momaday is only a bystander. His grandmother has entered a place that only she can access—a place of the individual mind formed by tradition and the land that gives rise to tradition.

But is this place, unique to the individual, a product only of the land that nurtured it? Our sense of “home” distinguishes each of us, and it always exists, is always present. Sometimes thinking of it generates a genuine self-consciousness, a purity of ego that surrounds us with an intangible barrier that no one else can cross.

I have seen that distance in another, in the eyes of my grandfather as he sat in a wheelchair on a spring afternoon. The balcony where we sat was bathed in mild sunshine, the trees standing opposite us and the birds circling among them mere lifeless objects against a blank background. My grandpa gazed toward a point in the distance and blinked slowly, his serene expression impenetrable to a nine-year-old child. Every time I try to recall my grandpa, I see this scene. It is just a fragment, the few minutes before it absent from my memory, and the remainder of that day nothing but blankness. Mom insisted that my grandpa and I talk, just as my uncles tried to explain my grandpa’s every expression—each of which was, according to them, full of sorrow. But I don’t think they really were; I don’t think it’s that simple. Not everything needs a meaning, nor can all meaning be grasped. In that image, the last I have of him, silence is all. And in that unbreakable silence, something is expressed that does not belong to this world, something so deep and unbearable that all existing language fails to articulate it.

Unlike Aho and Momaday, my grandfather and I share the same homeland, and not much about it has changed since his day. But the same silence and obscurity of meaning that haunt my memory of him haunt Momaday’s memory of Aho. That scene, that afternoon with my grandpa, hovers inside me, above the field of thought, and never stops informing my perception of identity. Are we, human beings, able to penetrate the minds of others? Are solitude and isolation the nature of being human? Many times, passing a stranger, I pass an insular world. Amid all the arbitrary labels we give others, amid all the paradoxes and absurdities of our perceptions, a part is always left unsaid. And it is this unfathomable and purest part that distinguishes the individual. Under that spring sunset, I watched my grandpa’s shoulders drawn...
mutely up and down by his heavy breath; and there at once, the images coalesced—the balcony, the trembling red sunshine, the immense space and time. That moment was solidified, so short and yet as real as a pause between two distinct seconds. In that instant, he entered his world wholly. Maybe he had never left. Maybe none of us ever do.

In one of the best known paintings of the mid-twentieth century, *Christina's World*, American artist Andrew Wyeth depicts a woman crawling on the ground toward a grey house. The woman is lying on the grass of a treeless field, the sky mixed with shallow blue and grey. On the edge of the field stand some houses; they sit on the farthest point of the horizon, unattainable by the woman on the ground. It is not a colorful painting, nor is it crowded with objects. The single woman and the flat, bleak background generate an atmosphere of distance and ephemerality. The painting may be understood as a helpless woman’s attempt to return home—indeed, her struggle has a destination that may well be her “home.” But, viewed from a different perspective, the houses may not exist in the real world; they may instead be part of a land in her mind, a land without any link to the real world. It’s the world to which she belongs forever, resisting the alteration of reality. The title of the painting, *Christina’s World*, indicates the same exclusivity—the scene and perspective become parts of a portrait of her own “world.”

And yet the painting depicts her version of the world rooted inside everyone, the holy land that exists only in the soul. Once it comes into being, the earth beneath our feet is no more than a temporary refuge, a halfway point of life’s journey. The lands in our minds house our deepest longings, our most fundamental ideas and philosophies, and maybe a few fragments of memory that speak to the host through resonant silence. In that autonomous world, personal memory is the chronicle, and dreams are the reality. It can never be replicated, and, usually, it can never be understood by others. But for Aho and many of the Kiowas, the land of the heart matches the homeland of experience. On the Oklahoma plain they stood and sang in darkness, danced to honor the incandescent sun till exhaustion, and through the baptism of the atrocious storm, their lowercase “survival” became the capitalized “Being.” What they experienced there was so great and deep they could never forget. That depth is why Mrs. Crowe would never choose to leave London; why Scarlett returns to Tara regardless of danger, to the demolished homeland that shaped her untamed spirit.

For many people, though, the holy lands within are too remote, too at peace to merge with this overwhelming reality. Those people wander in the boundless world, homeless everywhere, haunted by a voice deep in the mind.
that calls out their names, urges their return. They stare, indifferent, at the earth they’ve strolled and try to remember the myriad names of the winding paths they’ve tramped. The land of the nomad’s heart nurtures something bizarre and forbidden in the real world, making the nomad see everything from an unusual perspective, one that can never be comprehended by those of us not of the nomadic spirit.

But some find purchase in a corner of reality, merge into that landscape, and find meaning in their lives. We hear the stories of Thoreau and Walden Pond, of Gauguin and Tahiti Island, and now we read Momaday’s return to Rainy Mountain, a pilgrimage to the land that formed his ancestors and holds some ineffable power over him, like the lands inside us lead our ways through life. To where? Nowhere but back to our own hearts, to the land where everything starts, a land prosperous with private thoughts and memories that we can truly possess only when the journey approaches its end. Some of those who can never find a “homeland” to which they belong on this earth choose to leave it entirely. They leave this world in death, departing in a state of greatest peace to return to a “home” they never found in the physical world, to the everlasting and lucid land where they can find their own eternity.

Rainy Mountain is an actual landscape, but it’s more a reflection of the ideal world of Momaday’s soul. Though the Oklahoma plain hasn’t nurtured him, the stories and spirits that came from it have gradually formed the world inside Momaday. Shaded by the cracked earth, the withering, fierce wind, and the soundless piety, the garden inside him generates his philosophy and values, shapes his worldview, casts his uniqueness upon himself and his world. The way to Rainy Mountain is the way back to his heart.

The land inside the soul grants us each uniqueness, and also solitude. Its invisibility and lightness bear the whole weight of life, bestowing each life with individual meaning and faith in finding that meaning. Our worlds are too immense and complicated for others to perceive thoroughly, but it’s not so bad: the call and answer between two souls walking in their own worlds is beautiful enough to form a heartening duality in this overwhelming real world we inhabit. I will never be afraid. I see my grandfather beholding the land that exists only in his heart, and I know that each time I hesitate on my own journey, a voice drifting within tells me where to go, and each time I go astray, it pulls me back and reminds me of the real longing, the real rhythm of my heart. So I set off steadfast, for I’ve sensed all along where I am going.
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