

# A CHAOTIC ARRAY

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## **A Chaotic Array**

This morning's strong storm has moved to the east; a sparse layer of stray clouds has frayed and dissipated as well. In some places along the way, freshly snapped limbs litter the route. Approaching a dogleg where the riverside trail turns from the north toward the west, I come upon a location where a toppled tree lying across the width of the now stagnant river impedes the water flow. The trunk already had been one of the many leaning toward the waterway on the steeper southern bank, and on a past visit I could see where the roots had loosened, apparently due to overly saturated ground, the result of repeated heavy rains or elevated river levels throughout springtime. Although this sunny day at the start of summer could be characterized as calm and clear, and the flow of the lowered river has slowed such that the surface seems still, in many places an assortment of fallen trees, fractured branches, and uprooted trunks redirect the almost

imperceptible current. In certain positions they act as barricades, completely interfering with any opportunity for canoes or kayaks to cruise through the clutter.

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Scaly overturned trunks blemish the river's edge, extending laterally from both banks, some lying half on land and half submerged like battered hulls of old beached rowboats after a strong storm. A few twisted balls of upturned boles with exposed roots extending in different directions appear almost as objects of abstract sculpture: natural works of art on exhibit at the water's border. Stiff splintered limbs, severely split by last winter's disastrous winds, have been victims to gravity during recent months, relegated to cast-off status by nature. Nonetheless, this accumulation of damaged timber tipped into the water does offer interesting foreground features for photographs, perhaps to use as a focal point fronting the overall landscape and putting into proper perspective everything else in the picture. Pausing for a moment to snack on peanut butter crackers

washed down by a quick drink from my already warming water bottle, I check my Fitbit wristwatch that indicates the time, number of steps I've travelled, and my heartbeat heightened in this heat. During this momentary break, the pulsing display of heart rate numbers reflects a temporary lull.

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I want to capture an image of this twist in the river. At first, I lean over the slow-flowing water, its murky surface like a weak sauce, and I try to recognize myself in the leaden reflection, though I've learned not to expect an accurate representation among that turbid mix. When I decide to anchor my tripod, I set the legs into a sticky section of viscous mud that sucks its feet into the soft soil now allowing for stability in the slippery tilting riverbank. A worm the color of dried blood and the length of my index finger wriggles up one of the legs then slips down, supplying entertainment while I wait to take the shot. The vision developing in the vista of nature before me appears to depict nearby trees in three distinct

states—decaying deadwood, withered limbs, and full foliage. Selecting my subject, I focus on an array of objects illustrating these customary stages in common degeneration. The frame of my digital display has been set in vertical mode, more like a portrait—rare for landscape captures—to include the high reach of each slanting branch. Depressing the remote shutter button, I listen to its satisfying click.

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Walking this route beside the Little Calumet River, I notice much of the waterway's course in recent years has been completely cleared of obstruction from diseased trees, tumbled trunks, or broken limbs; the Northwest Indiana Paddling Association with assistance from other groups organized crews to complete this extensive work. Therefore, after a decades-long period of blockage, the river has been reopened for easier navigating by kayaks or canoes. Not long ago a tree fell onto the trail, and park staff cut it into smaller sections to open the way. Its stump is yet dusted by specks of chainsaw crumbs that also litter the path as scattered

seeds, like remnants spilled from a sack during unfinished sowing of a stony field in an untold parable. Wiped clear, this wooden stub provides an ideal seat for resting and viewing the passage of various birds flying against a bright sky visible in breaches between the treetops.

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Three hawks turn tight circles just above the ridge of a wooded hill shading the river downstream. The trio appear high overhead with silhouetted bodies resembling those black sheet-metal blades cut like wings on an Andrew Calder mobile sculpture. Each bird's circle in a series of loops moves a bit farther east than the previous one as they progress across a high sky. A chorus of smaller songbirds repeatedly sings above me as its migrating members slip easily from one branch to another among overhanging tree limbs. Hidden by the thickening screen of early-summer leaves, the sweet sound from these unseen visitors enlivens the forest fringe. In this morning's sporadic and leisurely breeze, I listen to the rhythmic lilt drifting through, though distance subdues some notes. Before

long, a northern cardinal's distinctive scarlet shade, like a vibrant brushstroke, alights amidst a thin leafless limb in the rickrack pattern of bare branches on a nearby riverside tree. The staccato tapping of a lone woodpecker also announces its presence somewhere a little inside the tree line on the opposite shore.

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As I round the bend, a crow soaring solo roves overhead. Its black image contrasts the light background of sky and momentarily reminds me of a character written in Chinese calligraphy. My movement startles some fidgety little frogs squatting nearby who promptly leap into the river. Sometimes diving in duos as if synchronized, their splash entries leave small eddies on the muddy water's surface. Before long, a fellow photographer floats by in a lightweight yet stable canoe, a Canon strap looped like a loosened tie around his neck, a zoom lens attached to the camera that he's set for long shots—perhaps to capture water fowl—though I would worry about motion blur from even the slightest

movement of the canoe. I see him smiling beneath a blue Cubs baseball cap covering a black kerchief to collect sweat. Obviously confident he will not capsize, he slowly rows past me one short paddle stroke at a time, a pattern he momentarily pauses as we casually wave and nod in a friendly gesture of acknowledgment to one another. When I call a greeting and wish him well on his trip downriver, he responds by smiling and snapping my picture.

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Weighing my options, I consider divergent alternatives to move forward but choose to follow the shallow slope of a muddy bank and then climb to a higher path. Narrow and winding between surrounding trees of older growth arcing over me, and shrunken by the flourish of seasonal sprouting, this trail's passage resembles a tunnel entrance. As if stepping over a threshold into an inner chamber, I avoid a few fallen limbs left over from last winter's very heavy burden of snow. Additionally, I duck through low branches of an oval opening over the path that appears to

have contracted from the encroachment of fresh undergrowth since my last visit in the beginning of spring. This natural aperture contracts as I advance, perhaps tightening like a wedding ring worn for decades but no longer fitting its finger, finally needing to be resized. Once inside the gap, I feel the comfort of cooler air created by a significant increase in shade.

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The consistency of the dense atmosphere exhibits its viscosity as I already smell the harsh stench of wet soil and decay. This morning's increasing humidity brought by slackening air flow from a typical southern front can sometimes be suffocating in mid-summer. Lately, I have been tracking this weather system in local forecasts, each report promising a hearty start to the new season. Today, I notice a difference between the pungent earthy scent and the refreshing but subtle aroma I've experienced following recent spring showers, a fragrance that previously had seemed to welcome me after months of snow and cold.

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The forest floor continues to display a chaotic layer of decomposing leaves with blackened spots freckling their bronze, copper, and gold mix. Looking like a stitched and wrinkled quilt of old crushed foliage left from last fall, the splotched leaves appear to be a physical reminder of the past and the inevitable passing of time. Some with only their edges superficially darkened brown or black seem like little strips of colored paper carefully singed for effect by candle fire. The earth underneath my feet gives an impression of being deliberately imprinted with their random design. The crinkly figures—stale, some still a bit crisp—crease and crackle beneath my boots, and I enjoy the sound of my passing through these woods. I recall Thoreau’s comment about exhilaration felt from a sense of seclusion during hikes, “sauntering through the woods and over the hills and fields, absolutely free from all worldly engagements.” Every step resonates as a reminder of solitude experienced in such surroundings, and each pace I take even prompts a personal perception of privacy, a

sheltered exemption offering a temporary reprieve from disturbance other obligations might bring.

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Many of the spring wildflowers have already passed their peak, but isolated streaks of color still linger in this first flush of summer, especially those clusters of yellow or purple petals, tickseed and lupine, as well as the five-sided funnels of morning glories—some almost a pearl color, others the powder white of bright clouds or new snow in winter. On stems as slim as toothpicks, they occasionally peek between patches of that green mane of ground cover or tufts of tall grass growing along the path, a number of small buds the size and semblance of a fancy button on a woman's blouse. All are luminous, propped against a background filling with those folds of gray shade aligned behind them. Farther on, a couple of bunches are perfectly arranged by nature, the way fresh cuttings might be formally placed on a dining room table. These brilliant flashes of natural hues also appear dabbed among their backdrop like dashes of

solitary brushstrokes splashed onto an abstract artwork or perhaps precisely positioned onto the canvas in a pointillist painting.

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Sometimes I wonder whether one would take such beauty for granted if living in the tropics where vibrant blooms are around all year long, but I doubt that likelihood because I cannot see myself ever tiring of such a flourish. Briefly, I kneel to the damp earth, examine the brilliant bounty of color before me, and I search for more. A few winged insects fly away from the flowers, hurrying to flee as if awakened from sleep. However, a white butterfly remains, resting on a slim green leaf, its bright wings open but motionless as if testing for support, the way a tightrope walker might hesitate a moment more to check for balance before that first precarious step high above an arena floor. Feeling regret that I am not carrying my macro lens for a close-up capture to fill my camera frame with floral beauty and the butterfly's grace, my pause is just a brief diversion.

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Instead, I write a single simple sentence in my little flip notebook about natural mystery and involuntary memory, admittedly no more than an ordinary idea whose time has arrived: “The chaotic array of details nature arranges within its imagery—tints, forms, textures, light—contains a logic no one can comprehend yet also includes clues to use for future recollection.” Alone, for the moment this addition to a growing list of collected observations is my sole act of expression—or communication, should I choose to use it for composition in an article—perhaps a way to “commune with nature” as the clichéd saying states. Yet, I am already aware that scribbled sentence is meant as a prompt, perhaps a Proustian trigger, merely a handwritten cue to provoke further thought during later consideration of the day’s experiences. That statement of contemplation reminds me to reflect upon the chaotic images I have captured with my camera as well as those existing only in my mind. As I strive to recall those scenes, I can also once again remember enjoying the exhilaration and sense of seclusion nature always offers.

