

The Unseen Dangers of an Urban Wilderness

For one reason or other, Emerson did not accept the idea of an anthropomorphic god, and in fact, as far as Brian was concerned, the entirety of the man's philosophy equated to little more than some sort of thinly-masked proto-nihilism, or at the very best, the result of a struggle against such a worldview that, to Emerson, may have seemed like an unacceptable hopelessness. But who could say? To Bern Metcalf, a professor whose five-hundred level survey of the American Renaissance Brian had taken a couple of years back before abandoning his non-matriculated M.A. attempt at the State University, Emerson appeared, at some point, to have experienced some type of "ecstatic natural experience." From that point on, Bern Metcalf had figured, Ralf Waldo sought to recapture that natural ecstasy, or in the very least, make some sense of the moment he'd experienced that time out in the woods. Emerson had spoken a lot about capital-T "Truth" and some god-thing, weird and abstract, that he referred to as "The Deity." Brian had come to conclude that Emerson needed this conception of a deity to legitimize his philosophy, even if said deity existed in an entirely abstract and personal form.

Regardless, such modes of thought were alien to Brian who, despite having been raised in a conservative Catholic household, and having spent innumerable hours in the wooded hills of the Northwestern Connecticut "wilderness," had passed into post-adolescence highly skeptical of a supernatural overlord or mystical universal order and without ever experiencing first-hand the type of naturalistic elation hinted at in the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson.



"I am not a transparent eyeball," Brian thought to himself as he sat atop the red cliffs of New Haven's West Rock, turkey vultures hanging almost stationary just a few feet before him like bits dangling from the unseen wires of some humongous and ethereal kinetic sculpture. He'd taken a shortcut to the top, following a line of wooden electric poles that ran from the street up to the cluster of radio transmission towers perched at the highpoint of the trap-rock ridge. It was early March, and cold-damp, but the ostensible path he'd taken was rough and steep and once he'd reached the top he was sweating and approaching hyperventilation, so he'd tossed his camera bag down beside some trees, moved quick to the cliff's edge and sat down against the strong cool wind that rose up the ridge's face to let it move through the glimmer of sweat that lay upon his bare parts and in his brown unkempt hair. He knew now that he'd overdressed. He unfurled his scarf, unbuttoned his felt pea coat.

Once he'd caught his breath, he pulled his pack of discount cigarettes from his oxford front pocket, lit one smoke with a drag deep like a gulp of water. The photography hike had been conceived as some type of anti-depressant, a self-prescribed method of putting the wrist razors at bay. He'd been out of school for a few semesters, and during that time his intellect and creativity had begun to atrophy. He felt a blockage overtake his cortex and that's when the insomnia had started.

Late nights into early mornings, Brian would lie beside Becks' sleeping form, her mildly asthmatic breathing denoting the pulse of passing time. Sometimes he would get up, walk stumbly to the bathroom and in the harsh bathroom light stare himself down in the medicine cabinet mirror. The internal discussions would vary, but usually they would turn to masochism. Once, he'd reached out for the shower curtain, wrapped it around his

neck and pulled it until his face turned purple and temple arteries bulged. The black had bled from his periphery forward and he came to on the cold tiles, blood running in the grout grid from a deep gash on his right eyebrow. He'd washed his face and wound, applied a bandage, mopped up the floor blood with wadded TP then walked dragged-footed back to bed. He'd crawled beneath the covers, and Becks flipped slowly toward him to her belly. She'd slung her arm across her chest, said sleeping, "Go to sleep," her breath sour with night. And somehow he had slipped asleep, the sound and sensation of Becks' little wheezes palpating in his ear.



Dorian was Brian's supervisor, head tutor of the Mill River Community Tech Writing Resource Center. He was a mountain of flesh, over six feet tall and fat as hell. His paunch hung weirdly over his genital area and his veiny pink chin hung off his face like a ball of uncooked pizza dough. He called Brian "John Cake," and used the word "healthy" as a euphemistic catch-all. During Brian's employment interview, Dorian had asked, "You a healthy boy, John Cake?" Then he'd winked, motioned with darting pink tongue toward a tall lithe nursing student who had just then clacked through the center's doorway in a pair of wicker wedge sandals. "That's a healthy piece," Dorian had said, little blobs of spit pooling at his mouth's corners, dampening the moustache edges of his scruffy poorly formed goatee. Brian had left the interview feeling depressed and creepy, but figured he'd take the job just the same since no one else had responded to his applications.

In the following weeks he had worked in the center. Sometimes while they sat tutoring respective students, Dorian would catch Brian's eye, lick his lips and motion with his pointy eyes toward the ass of the girl Brian was working with. In slow moments, Dorian would expect Brian to bullshit with him, and despite Brian's best efforts, the subject would always turn to sexy coeds. "The pay's shit," Dorian would laugh, "But the tail's phenomenal! I'll tell ya, John Cake, I did some temp work at Yale a few years back. All I have to say is this, dumb girls are hotter than smart ones!"

After work, Brian had begun going to the college's career development center to flip through the binders of job openings. Technically, the center was for students, but no one had ever asked to see an i.d. Within a few weeks he'd decided that next fall he would go back to school. Student loans, homework and a probably useless M.A. seemed like a worthwhile exchange for his current state-of-affairs. One way or the other, he was starting to believe that suicide would eventually become an inevitability, so paying back the loans wouldn't be. He only had to make it through to the fall semester.



In the middle of the night, Brian had drawn a bubble bath then crawled in without removing his pajamas. He thought about killing Dorian the next morning at work and then killing himself, but decided to dig out his old Pentax instead. He'd bought the camera a few years back for a photography elective, and he remembered that, relatively speaking, the class and the act of taking photographs had supplied him with something close to joy. He'd enjoyed the process, soup to nuts: the act of setting up a shot, capturing the image, developing the film and making the prints. He enjoyed the tactility of the manual equipment, the implications of time space and limits of working within a frame, the chemical odors, transparency of film and working in near total darkness. He realized in retrospect that the process had occasionally supplied him with the inner calm that some people call Zen.

English studies had never done this for Brian, and he wondered then how he had ever concluded that the discipline was the one for him. “I should have been a goddamned photographer,” he said softly into bubbles, flicking cigarette ashes into the bath.

He remembered the time he’d spent in the class. He’d never become a great photographer, and his printing technique and aptitude had never progressed past sufficient. He saw an analogy between his progression as a photographer and his development as a “lover.” In both cases he’d started out overly confident, hungry and self-assured. Then, through process of repetition his know-how had intrinsically grown. At the height of his skills in both areas, he’d become competent at best. And then, over time, he’d become inactive.

Ralph Waldo Emerson would have been a shitty photographer, he thought, imagining the obvious and romanticized landscape daguerreotypes the author might have produced. Thoreau’s photographs would be better, but Walt Whitman’s would be best. He wondered if Whitman had ever taken a photograph. He decided that after work the next day he would drive to West Rock and try to snap some shots that would have appalled the aesthetic sensibilities of Emerson. Perhaps, later he would go downtown and look for some scenes and people that might have pleased Whitman.

He tossed his cigarette butt into the bubbles. He thought, for a moment, he heard Becks stir in the next room.



That morning, Dorian was out sick. This pleased Brian on a number of levels and he smiled to himself at the prospect that it might be something serious and that Dorian might die. His shift passed without anything occurring of note, except for the general feeling that without Dorian being present, the Resource Center wasn’t as totally depressing as it had previously seemed. During a lull he’d examined his camera, felt its weight in his palm, trying not to recall one particular conversation in which Dorian had explained the unmatched satisfaction he felt while testing the weight of his own limp member in his hand.

Occasionally, from the corner of his eye he watched Adongo, the Kenyan student office assistant, whose name Dorian had often used as the basis for a number of explicit jokes. She was tall and slim with skin the color of dark-roasted coffee beans. Her hair was cut close to her well-formed scalp, and she was wearing a dress shirt, grey slacks, and a pair of Puma soccer shoes sans socks. At strange times throughout the day, she would move into his thoughts, and he felt ashamed of himself when she did. In spite of himself an idea of her bare back would manifest in his mind’s eye, and he would shut the thought off before it went any further.

Near the end of his shift, Brian’s silenced cell phone flashed a call, Becks’ name in bold white on his phone’s display. He let it go to voicemail. When his time was up he collected his things, said goodbye to Adongo, and moved into the college’s yellowy soviet corridors. On voicemail, Becks’ voice rang cheery. “I had to leave work. Got the swamp. I’m going to rent some movies then go home and lie on the couch and eat some toast. Carmen says there’s a bug going round. I’ll see you when you get home. See, sometimes good things do happen.”



The road that led to West Rock passed through a strange woodland ghetto. Many of the buildings had their windows boarded but some did not. Driving past, Brian had caught sight of dark faces peering out at him from

unlit rooms. Though he figured it might be nice to live so close to a semi-wild place, he understood the motivation for housing the underclass in such a remote location. He didn't see many cars parked in the streets and he wondered if the buses even ran this far out. The whole neighborhood emitted a complex feeling of failure and hopelessness. He was happy once the project was behind him.



Along the West Rock ridge ran a road, closed to traffic, being slowly overtaken by grasses and crawling vines. It was close to four and the gray March clouds were growing denser, occasionally spitting raindrops. Brian sat beneath the relative shelter of the bare-branched trees. Overlooking the cliff's edge, down to the old dump trucks that sat rotting beside the broad swampland at the cliff's base, a realization of scale swept over him, and with it came a disquieting sense of isolation. Then came the fear that he was not alone. He imagined a pure black Shepherd, its eyes as black as its coat, lunging at him from behind, taking his throat in its mouth and ripping his esophagus out with its teeth. He looked around uneasily. He remembered now that he'd heard tales of assaults that had occurred on the ridge, and peered into the woods for signs of stalking marauders. He again weighed his camera, suspected that if necessary, he could grip its long lens as a handle, bash an attacker's skull with the metal body.

The wind picked up and Brian heard a sound like people's voices. He gently grabbed his bag, crept behind a cluster of boulders to watch the road. The voices grew louder, mingled with the growing wind. And two forms appeared from around a bend. They were black men, one middle aged, the other younger. Each wore a long black leather coat, and between them they cradled a thick book. Brian figured it was a bible, its pages flipping crazily in the wind. As they moved closer, Brian heard that what they were saying sounded like bible passages. They spoke in turn and their voices sounded like preachers, the oratory style of whom Brian had heard emulated in numerous movies. Slowly, he lifted his camera, removed the lens cap and pointed it at them. He focused tight and clicked the shutter as they passed. Without looking up from the book, the older of them raised a hand toward Brian. Clearly they'd seen him and he felt stupid and ashamed.



Brian took the long way down from the top of the ridge. He snapped a few quick photos of some mildly interesting plants and rocks before the rain picked up enough for him to feel concerned for his equipment. When he reached his car, his hair was wet, the shoulders of his pea coat soaked with cold rain. He saw on his phone he had missed another call, having forgotten to turn on the ringer after work. Again, it was Becks. She had not left a message. He figured he would go home, warm her some soup, and sit beside her on the couch and watch movies. He decided that if Dorian was back in the center tomorrow and said something shitty, he would tell him to shut the fuck up. If he lost his job, so be it.

On the ride home, Brian thought about Ralph Waldo Emerson, figured he had just done the best he could given his own particular set of limitations, whatever they might be; Emerson had been unwilling to accept that "Truth" did not exist, so he fought meaninglessness to the death, the only way he'd understood how.