

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/2

Eric D. Lehman

Heart of the Giant

For many years I nearly always walked alone. I liked to ramble at my own pace, to stop when I want to, to explore. I liked the soothing quiet and the greater chance to see wildlife. But upon occasion I had enjoyed having companions on my treks through Connecticut. I got the chance to introduce them to the wild spaces between their houses and towns.

I suppose that's why I started taking my students at Quinnipiac University to the top of Sleeping Giant. I found that many students never crossed the street into one of our best state parks, despite the chin-cliff towering over the campus. This boggled my mind. So, without approval or pedagogy, I added a midterm in the fall and a final exam in the spring. The students in my freshman composition and literature classes would have to make it to the summit of the steep ridge. I did put in a provision – they could write a five page journal entry instead. And if someone attempted the climb and failed, credit would still be given. But my purpose held – to get them into the woods and skyward for the view. In the autumn I would take them up in October, when the leaves first burned into color. And in the spring, April, when fog crept around the new-minted banknote leaves.

Most of the students followed me up the steep, rocky path to the cliff of the giant's chin with reluctance. One girl described it as, "A million feet high and all rocks." They were compelled to encounter animals and plants up close, something that many had never done before. A mouse scuttled along the cliff edge once and quickly became an object of fascinated study. Crows attacked hawks in the wind-eddies above us. One of my students found a copperhead in the scree slopes at the base of the chin-cliff and another found a lost dog. Mostly, they found a sense of awe and possibly a new respect for the wilderness. At least, that's what I hope I provided with these risky jaunts into the Connecticut woods. Each time we went up I would picture one of them breaking an ankle or passing out from heat exhaustion, leading to an ambulance, an inquiry, and my dismissal. But no one was hurt, and nearly everyone enjoyed the view from the top, peering down at the tiny college below, listening to the distant clock tower bells. The miniature skyscraper cluster of New

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/2

Haven seemed like a coastal fortress on the edge of the blue strip of the Sound. And when the Long Island residents realized they could see their homeland on the horizon, they never failed to utter oaths of amazement.

This process continued for a couple years, before it was kicked into high gear during one fall semester. A student from Hamden, Jeff, had been on the Giant even more times than I had, and knew a fascinating secret. When he first told me about the cave on the hill, I didn't fully believe him. His story seemed like half-remembered dreams of childhood, filled with the exaggerated heroics of the young. I thought perhaps there was a slight nook somewhere in the traprock ridges or perhaps that he was remembering some other place and transplanting it here to his hometown. I couldn't believe that I had hiked through Sleeping Giant State Park for years and been unaware of this mythic place.

So, as three of my students and I sweated up through one of the passes into the central plateau of this tiny hill kingdom, I wasn't really expecting to find anything. The ground was covered with the brown leaves of late fall and the thick trees hung with the last yellow soldiers. We scoured the bottom of the last cliff, the one before the crest of the hill, where the fabled castle looms above the trees. We caught a glimpse of that tower at one point along the trail, as Jerry told us the story about how he had gone up on Halloween night with a group of friends as a dare. I wished that we could still camp overnight there, as boy scouts had done for decades. Though perhaps I would have stayed there and never come down.

The hundred foot orange-gray bluffs spread out to our left. A dark opening that looked like a possible cave peeked from above the slope of boulders and scree left by the retreating glaciers. We clambered up. The opening went in only a few feet. Another one dipped into the earth, but was blocked by a huge boulder.

"Nope. Maybe further along." Jeff pushed along the edge of the cliff with Jerry. Russ and I climbed back down and followed along the trail for about a quarter mile.

"I don't really think there's a cave up there." I told Russ. He nodded.

"Here it is!" Jeff shouted.

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/2

"No way." We pushed up the mossy boulder field.

"Watch out for snakes." I laughed, half-serious.

Jeff was standing on a tall rock at the mouth of what looked like a cave. I set down my pack and switched places with him. A crevasse ran straight into the cliff, into darkness. A real cave. A rarity! Simply created by the way the rock cracked and fell when glaciers ripped through here millenia ago. No water or force dug this cave. It was simply there.

After stashing our equipment in a hole, we followed Jeff slowly up over the doorwarden boulder and down into the dark crack. About twenty feet in, the passage ended, and a seventy-five-degree slope from the left dropped into nothing. Our flashlights waved around the rock faces, searching for a hold.

"Could someone else go first?" Jeff pulled himself back from the edge slowly.

Everyone paused. "Sure," I said. As we slid past each other in the tight passage, I sensed fear in Jeff's eyes. As I looked down into the dark, I felt it, too. The drop didn't look that far, but I wasn't sure about the slick, smooth, near-ninety degree angle of the walls. And the log propped on the opposite wall to assist climbers looked old and rotten. I just wasn't sure.

"Maybe we should come back with a rope."

The four of us considered and voted that this was probably the best option. Normally, I might have forged ahead, but this was not something I really wanted to take a risk with. I could lose my job if one of my companions was hurt. Fear held me back. I had never done anything quite like this before.

Still, the next day I went to Trailblazer in downtown New Haven and purchased a climbing rope. I bought their cheapest one, for a hundred dollars, telling the Birkenstocked salesgirl that I only wanted it for "top-rope" climbing. The whole time in the store I could hear Samwise Gamgee from *The Lord of the Rings* saying, "If only we had some rope, Mr. Frodo!" Fifty meters long, neon yellow and black, and coiled on my

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/2

living room floor, it took on an impressive, epic quality. I took an hour and taught myself how to tie a climbers knot, making sure that I could do it in the dark time and time again. This may seem like a simple, almost comical reaction, but doing something new and unknown should always produce these mixed feelings of fear and excitement.

I also did a little research and found out that the cave had a long and storied history going back hundreds of years. Tours had been given during the 1800s, when the Giant had human inhabitants perched in cabins on the glaciated ridges. Someone had gotten stuck and the private tours had shut down. Then, in the 1890s, two boys had come up to see the cave and instead found a dead body at the entrance. One of the famous Barnum family had committed suicide by jumping off the top cliff and landing near the entrance to what was now called "Dead Man's Cave."

Most of the larger caves in Connecticut are now closed. Bashful Lady Cave in far northwest Salisbury, formed in the marble lowlands, is actually the longest cave in New England, but cannot be entered by the casual spelunker today. Bad conditions and vandalism have put an end to the age of caves in Connecticut, and now only die-hard cavers sneak over fences onto private properties to find the openings to lower worlds.

And now here I was considering going into this cave with my students. Was I crazy? Probably. But even as visions of lawsuits filled my head, I knew that this descent into the earth would make an impression on them. They would remember this unique experience for the rest of their lives, wriggling through a tunnel in the dark with their English professor, accomplishing something they perhaps didn't feel was possible.

I certainly wasn't afraid anyone was going to be seriously wounded. But even a minor injury could not only have serious consequences for me, but for the cave itself. Cemented up? Blocked off by court order? Surely the park rangers knew about this place? Wouldn't they have done that long ago? I suppose it only takes one accident.

Jeff, Jerry, Russ, and I returned the next Friday, with my new rope and more flashlights. Jeff had admitted to the rest of us that he was deathly afraid of spiders, and I hoped we wouldn't find the place crawling with them. Or snakes. I hadn't smelled the usual musk of other animals or

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/2

seen droppings the last time we came up, so I was fairly sure we wouldn't run into anything larger. Jeff had seen two particularly large and hairy spiders when he was peering over the edge last week, which is why he balked at going down. I had desisted for a more subtle reason.

At the entrance, I found a suitable rock formation and tied the rope perfectly. Jeff commented on the knot and I mock-snorted. "Some eagle scout you are!" "Knots weren't my strong point." He shrugged, laughing. I tested the climber's knot and then carried the loop with me into the wedge of the first passage. The others followed. At the lip of the drop, I tossed the coil into the darkness. "All right."

"Put your foot on that log." Jeff pointed past my shoulder at the opposite wall.

"Right." I put my flashlight in my pocket and gingerly stretched my left leg to the wood, while Jeff and Jerry used their flashlights to maximum effect. My left hand clutched the slippery wall. As I got my balance between the ledge and log, I could see a ledge that had been hidden until now, complete with an ancient candle. I slid my left foot down the log and reached the ledge. "No problem!" I glanced back at my students. My right foot swung off the drop and to the new source of support. I was easily able to slide myself down the steep wall and put a foot on a rock near the floor.

The new passage doubled back below and parallel to the first one. However, the dank corridor was much smaller and continued to narrow until it reached a black hole in the stone. Ignoring that for the moment, I pulled out my lighter and lit the candle. Then, I helped Jeff find the secret ledge and we slid down this second channel one by one. As I was pushed towards the black hole, I found another candle in a niche and lit it. Then, I pointed my flash into the hole. The floor of the cave below looked far. This would be the real challenge.

"This is a bit scary, guys."

"No kidding."

"No, I mean this just drops off into nothing."

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/2

I threw the glowing coil of rope down and it hit the floor. Maybe it wasn't that far. I couldn't see enough and I was going to have to pocket the flashlight again. Damn. All right. I reached out and held onto the ledge to my right and put my left hand forward. I realized I couldn't get my feet down this way, because the ceiling was preventing me from moving up. So, I had to push back. "Hold on, guys, I have to switch." I worked myself around and put my feet on the log instead. Then, it was a matter of dipping myself into the unknown. I lowered myself into the spidery darkness. My feet touched a pointed piece of stone. I twisted my arms down, balancing on the only wall near enough. Then I stepped off this lucky rock and onto the floor below. I immediately pulled the flashlight out of my pocket and searched the dense darkness. The cave was the size of a small room, with a spearhead of rock on the roof dividing it into two.

I helped my students down one by one, then lit a candle and set it on a small rock. The four of us crouched in the empty space inside the hill, looking around in wonder. Spraypaint from years past tattooed the walls. Who knows how many explorers, children, and madmen have delved into this niche in the mountain? But it was not the unknown that brought us here. The discoveries we were here to make were of another sort.

At the far end a channel proceeded up and to the right. I crawled up along the slippery rock and peered into another room, about the size of a large closet. All of a sudden, Jerry pushed all of us ahead with a slight scream. "What is that?!" I slipped down and shone my flashlight. A tiny brown bat, asleep on the wall. "Just a bat, guys." After they calmed down, we flipped the flashlights off and sat in the dark. Creepy. A tight passage dove under the main chamber, but none of us had any desire to slip along this tiny crevice. Perhaps another day.

Before we ascended, I took a last look around. I knew that this was a classroom I could really teach in. I knew I would take students here again and again. A month later I started this process. Jeff and I went back, taking three girls from the class with us. They passed with flying colors, clambering in and out without a problem. This became a ritual every year, taking first-year students to this magic place. They would take others there, opening this hidden world to friends and classmates.

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/2

One semester I took nearly fifty students to Dead Man's Cave, sometimes going twice a weekend, never tiring of the process or the results. I left a small, white rock in a secret place there, a tiny memento of the lesson learned. Every time a group of students walked back from the cave, chatting excitedly about the experience, pride filled my heart. Back in the parking lot, they always thanked me and, as I drove home each time, I knew that I had made a difference. And that's probably the only reason to leave the woods in the first place.

Eric D. Lehman is a senior lecturer in English at the University of Bridgeport and a travel writer. I have stories, essays, reviews, and poems published in dozens of journals and magazines, such as *Nexus*, *Hackwriters*, *Empty Mirror Books*, *Cause and Effect*, *Switchback*, *Umbrella*, and *Entelechy*. His first book, *Bridgeport: Tales from the Park City*, is available from the History Press.