

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/1

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A Rock in the Eye

IT GOES WITHOUT BEING SAID that no one – child or adult – should ever “throw stones” at one another. Nowhere in the story of my life have I come to note this moral principal stronger than on the day that John Couch got hit in the eye by a rock while he and I were walking home from the old West Side school in Middleboro, Massachusetts.

Sometime near the end of the school year when we were in the third grade – summer approaching and teasing us with bright days – I was walking home, to Lovell Street, with John and few other kids that lived nearby in neighboring working class neighborhoods – plentiful in Middleboro.

Along the road perpendicular to the street that harbored our isolated school of ancient stone and wavy black top – we used to get a running head start and leap off a hill-like part of the black top that was formed at the corner of a rise in the ground where a short stone wall was built; it almost felt as if you could fly away when you jumped off that thing! There was a sprawling cemetery that buffeted my grandparent's property in the back where I spent the first eight to ten years of my life. Snaking the perimeter of the graveyard was a long stone wall, about three feet or so tall, that served as a barrier between the sleepers and adolescent adventurers passing on their way to their daily hours of cultural imprisonment. Some days, while on our way home, a few of us would cut through the cemetery and quickly hop the fences to our respective back yards. We had to be very fast though so as to avoid the blaring voice of the cranky caretaker trying to identify possible family origins, at a glance, while striking fear into our youthful hearts as we scrambled off in different directions – a tactic of confusion we learned to employ often. A few times we would pass older kids racing down hills – mausoleum mounds - of this realm of the dead, aiming their devious BMX bicycles off toppled ancient stone as ramps for their own wicked amusement. *“Will they go to hell for doing that?”* I would briefly wonder to myself before quickly picking up my pace again to get home. It always seemed a very Catholic thing to think in moments like those. Anyway, I would continue on without any further penance and shame to hinder my urgent gait.

As John and I, and company, were crossing the street from the road leading to school, we noticed a small rock buzzed over our heads and ricocheting – with a solid tick! sound – at an angle off a nearby headstone. The act quickly signaled all youthful combatants to their respective fortresses and a commencement of a frantic arms race ensued. We all scrambled behind the closest – and hopefully tallest and widest if we chose right – stone shields, teams established organically and non-verbally, and then the volley of weapons batteries were commanded and delivered.

As the skirmish ensued, things seemed to be feeling harmless and somewhat fun and exhilarating as the projectiles were being sprayed from one side to the other; something primitively exciting, like archaic tribes in a conflict of blood and stone! Well, the ecstasy was short lived when John, with a small round missile tightly gripped in his youthful hand, decided to peak above his protective barrier to scan the battle field for a

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/1

potential target. Immediately after rising into view of his opponents, his body reeled backward onto the thin damp grass beside my safe position – an expertly chosen tall wide obelisk-like grave marker. John squirmed and writhed violently on the ground, grabbing at an eye with both hands while tears poured out like the Nemasket River from his other eye; he wriggled like a wounded serpent as a hail storm of small stones passed above his head.

A halt to the struggle was immediately called as I stood up and stepped out from my tall barrier raising my hands in the universal sign for surrender – a détente was immediately authored and signed by all sides. The culprit of the errant surface-to-eyeball weapon quickly approached covered in a glaze of shock and guilt saying, “Sorry John,” repeatedly and with a deepening sense of dread as the depth of its damage began setting into his conscience and soul. He and I, each holding an arm of our wounded comrade, walked John all the way home to his family’s three decker apartment around the block from Lovell Street – with missing windows on some of the floors, tattered dirty shades flapping through the squares from darkened rooms, exuding its white poverty.

I didn’t see John for a while after his injury. I’m sure it was hard on him and his family as they were working class like all of us in those neighborhoods back then – he once shared a pair of winter boots with his younger brother for a season. He and I crossed paths in early elementary school before he moved out of Middleboro for good. From about fifth grade onward I didn’t see John again. But I will never forget the day he almost lost an eye while we were walking home from West Side school.