

MARK'S COVE POST-MORTEM

vincent zeng, artist in residence

great smoky mountains national park

jake's creek trail is a long, uphill slog on gravel, leaving the fairly heavy-trafficked old elkmont resort to pass the skeletons of historic buildings. i picked my way through foundations built of river rocks and mud. in the bare, grassed-over center of one house, i noticed a circle of dirt the size of a dinner plate because it was covered with black and blue butterflies eagerly licking the ground.

i pointed this out to an approaching father, whose wife and teenaged daughters were exploring a neighboring lot. he seemed more interested in talking to me about my motorcycle habits, because they saw me unloading my gear in the parking lot earlier. "lone traveler?" he asked.

"this time," i replied.

"not many people doing that," he nodded appreciatively. "specially not young ladies traveling alone."

i have a well-practiced script describing my relationship to the park, including an abridged version of my personal history. i'm ready to deliver this whenever i'm wearing my national parks service standard issue volunteer cap; this still hasn't prepared me for people treating me like i've said legitimate statements, rather than some blather i made up to gain sounds of awe.

"we really like your bike," the mother added, after joining us next to the butterfly circle.

the trail follows jake's creek, a winding little stream at the bottom of a long descent through heavy vegetation. i was told to look out for the avent cabin, an old artist's home on the creek that probably comes with more ghost stories than written history. at one point, i noticed log stairs steeply falling through the overgrowth. i'd only walked for half an hour, and i couldn't bear to break stride. this was a consistent theme for me; when i go out with the intent to shoot, i rarely hike far, and when i go out to hike, i can't bother to stop and smell the roses. six rolls of film hitched a ride in my pack; in this 30 hour trip, i'd surely make some time to shoot.

other photographs i didn't stop to take: lazy trees stretched across the trail after recent storms, rotting bushes underfoot, a single footlog installed to spare park visitors from having to cross the creek by carefully picking their way over mossy rocks.

later, i told myself. later, i'd come back, once i knew where it was. once the thrill of discovery passed. once the first impression was a only metric by which i measured all future impressions.

i'd planned to stop for lunch at jake's gap, a spot on the map that sounded like it might afford reasonable views and a pleasant place to drop my pack. trail junctions provide things that the human brain appreciates: positive, written acknowledgement of forward progress, and an obvious opportunity to make a decision. the topography promised a wide, flat spot where three trails met, and i would reaffirm my original trip plans there.

my past experiences should have reminded me that trail intersections are rarely scenic, and often heavily-trafficked; when i approached the small open field, i remembered this fact. jake's gap might not have ever provided nice sightlines through the mountains; it was just a convenient crossing point for the many paths laid for wagon roads when the smokies was a logging haven and not a national park. after i unclipped my pack, i could hear the heavy buzz of insects that carpeted the still, grassy floor once my bootfalls fell silent.

i let my pack lean against an old stump, and carpenter bees immediately converged on me. concerned more with inspecting my pack than my body, dozens of them sampled the chemical trails clinging to my straps, zippers, and clasps; they didn't complain when i shifted them to extract my food bag. once i took out half a tortilla and a hard boiled egg, they decided they needed to inspect what went into my mouth as well. i ate while pacing at a speed faster than they could fly, but slowly enough to not upset them. the other half of my lunch could wait until i didn't inadvertently invade someone else's space.

i took the left branch for miry ridge trail. in my head, 'miry' sounded like 'mirrie', a name that might have come from someone in the area. i knew that lots of features in the smokies were called by old names that referenced historic families, prolific hikers, or prominent advocates. of course, like any area with human habitation, features also got purely descriptive or cheeky names. my recent bedtime reading consisted mostly of studying maps, picking out evocative phrases like 'bearpen ridge' and 'dry sluice gap'. the hiking guide describes 'holy butt': "nobody seems to know why this place received such an unusual name, but it is worth contemplating as you continue uphill."¹

it took me some time to realize that 'miry ridge' meant 'mire', as in two and a half miles of ankle-deep mud maintained by decades of steady horse traffic. the guidebook only used the word 'mire' near the end of the trail description, past the point at which i stopped reading when i finished the section relevant to my itinerary.

other hikers passed few and far between. three overnight packs rested at a junction with a spur trail that led to dripping springs mountain, a local prominence, from which i could hear excited voices describing the view. a pair of older men at a brisk stroll taught me the phrase "A.B. Day—Absolutely Beautiful". i couldn't resist giving everyone i passed a 'hey, what a great day, huh?'; for the first time since i'd entered the smokies, i wasn't caught out in the rain.

the trail steadily climbed out of the wet region, and the land fell away to either side until i found myself walking along a thin band of shallow mud stretched between the shoulders of two larger mountains. footprints read more

¹Tom Condon, *Hiking Trails of the Smokies*, 1994 ed., p. 183

clearly here; i measured them against my own, taking guesses as to whose trail i followed. a woman in hiking boots, a man in trail runners, another man in bigger hiking boots. tiny cloven hoofs that could have stood on a quarter, from this season's fawn. miniature paw prints, like a fox. fresh horse dropping littered the trail, and i was disappointed to see that the horseshoe marks pointed away from the camp i headed towards, suggesting a horse meeting unlikely.

i felt that i was being watched. ahead, in the distance, the trail gently sloped uphill; two shaggy black forms tumbled on the narrow ridge. for a moment, i was excited to meet some dogs, until i remembered that dogs were not allowed in the backcountry here, and that foxes would be unlikely to keep to an open trail for as long as i tracked the tiny paw prints. those were bear cubs i finally caught up to, and they stopped their game to stare at me quizzically when i started yelling at them.

“hey, bear! where’s your mama? you’re not allowed to hang out here!” this only raised their curiosity; had they not yet met humans? i remembered advice from the rangers: bears hate the sound of snapping sticks. **“hey, little bear! get ready, i’m gonna make a scary noise!”**

i backed away until i almost couldn't see them anymore, pulling branches off the side of the trail and breaking them over my leg. i knew i needed to spot the mother; was she behind them? was she behind me? i inched forward, grabbing sticks and chanting, **“no bears allowed! no bears allowed! where is your mom? where is your mom?”**.

that was disturbing enough for them, and they tumbled over each other to get up the nearest tree. below them, a brown-nosed head raised out of the bushes; mama bear looked at me and gave me a *hufffff*. <who's that scaring my cubs?>

again, i retreated. *sorry, mama, i didn't mean to scare them! they scared me, too! you're where i need to go, though.* i kept a stick in my hand, a pathetic twig that she wouldn't even notice touching her heavily furred body if i tried to swat her away. **“hey, mama bear! i gotta get by! can i get by? hey, mama bear!”**

she sank back into the bushes, laid down with her ears drooped. the cubs hid so far up the tree that i could barely see them, and maybe mama realized i couldn't get to them. she'd watch me, though, and make sure i didn't try. her waiting spot was twenty feet from the trail junction; i could see the back of the carved wooden sign from my stick harvesting area. past her, my camp waited two miles away. the ridge dropped gently to either side; lynn camp prong trail slanted down right past her. i could cut the slope early, through thigh-deep undergrowth and invisible terrain, and catch the trail at a safer distance.

i did one of those things you're told not to do when you're in a building surrounded by government-issued pamphlets; i moved closer to the bear. i took a second stick for jamming into the bushes at every step to flush any snakes that might be upset about getting trod on, then crab-walked an arc around her. was there another bear nearby, watching? would i miss a step and break an ankle? i kept my eyes on mama; she practically yawned in boredom, nibbling the bushes around her while waiting for me to finish my foolish business. the

cubs nibbled on each other. i would have nibbled my cuticles if both my hands weren't busy waving sticks in what i hoped was a careful patten that presented an unappealing target which also wasn't too threatening.

she didn't stir when i reached the closest point of my circuit. my boots reached the packed mud trail, and i paused for a moment to consider my life choices.

one of my earliest readings about bear encounters was the predictable disaster story from a 1978 copy of *Reader's Digest*, which lived in our house when my mother and i were both practicing our reading (her, about to drop out of med school because her english wasn't good enough to keep up; me, after exhausting what my central iowa public school library could offer me at age seven). in the gripping narrative, the bear was a grizzly, and the victim a pair of hikers in the rockies. they played dead, and the author gave a gory account of what it felt like to have her ribcage gnawed while pretending to be a limp slab of meat. i don't remember reading if they practiced good bear safety before the incident.

on my hikes with others, theoretical bear encounters are a frequent topic of inquiry for trail conversations. is it better to run or to stand your ground? what if you throw a jar of peanut butter like a grenade and flee? how unlikely is it that a bear will gnaw through the rope keeping our food off the ground? my mother's earnest advice, from adolescent years spent near the mongolian steppes, was to run with the direction of the wind. this would push the bear's shaggy fur over its eyes, and it would occasionally stop to paw its face to clear their vision, like a model tousling their hair expertly for a camera. these pauses would give you enough time to get away. all these past discussions filled the social space when i hiked alone.

i've seen bears twice in my life. once, a pair of bears lumbered across the road in front of my motorcycle, while i thought about if my kevlar armor meant to guard against road rash could also protect my soft, squishy body from bear claws. the other time, from the passenger window of a car, i locked eyes with a mother bear who expertly herded her cubs through traffic.

this mama bear let me pass. this mama bear wasn't gonna bother getting up from the bushes.

i continued down lynn prong camp trail, descending through cruelly dense rhododendron groves that snaked back and forth through blind nooks. how many other bears lounged here? i made up songs to sing, gaining insight into how mountain yodelers developed their voices; certain pitches and note sequences bounced through the valley better than others. my bear-swatting stick and my snake-flushing stick came with me; the places where i gripped them darkened with sweat, and my palms browned from drawing the tannins out of the wood fiber. they were my new hiking partners. they helped me get past mama and her cubs.

i'd recently heard the story of a ranger who went into the woods for a quick jog and found herself stalked by wolves; after spending hours hiding up a tree, the wolves lost interest and left. when she came back to the ground and looked around, she realized that the forest during the wolf encounter was the same one she'd experienced when she couldn't see them. *there are always wolves in the*

forest.²

i didn't see any more bears. the parks service estimates around 1500 individual bears in the smokies. i'd just located three of them.

as i'd note to the friends i made in camp later, the 1994 guidebook i used described an area of cherry trees near the junction of lynn camp prong trail and miry ridge trail, where bears are frequently spotted in season.³ i found that claim to have questionable relevance in 2017, but there was mama and her cubs, teaching them where to find good eating, and to be unimpressed with yodeling humans. black bears have been known to live to 30 years in the wild. the guide was only 23 years old.

the rest of the trail passed quickly. campsite 28, known as mark's cove, supports twelve hikers and five horses; one of the hitching posts marked fresh droppings, probably by the agent of those horseshoe prints i'd tracked all day. two kitchen trash bags occupied one of the bear cables; was someone already in camp? i didn't find anyone. when i found a spot where i could stretch out a bivvy, i dropped my pack and let my stick friends fall into the bushes; they quickly blended in with all the other downed branches. three different species of bees immediately picked up where the previous bees left off.

the sun still floated above the treeline; i needed to kill at least two hours before bed. setting up camp only whittled away ten minutes, even at a leisurely pace that included patiently waiting for a finger-thick millipede to decide it no longer wanted to search for food exactly where i wanted to roll out my bed. eating some salmon and cheese folded with a folded tortilla, then hanging my pack next to the abandoned trash bags wasted fifteen more minutes. when the light diminished to long fingers stretching through the leaves, i used up two rolls of film searching for the places where they touched rocks, stumps, and circles of moss.

three people descended from the main trail when i finished up my second roll; a woman in hiking boots, a man in trail runners, another man in bigger hiking boots. they seemed like good friends, a little younger than me, with a lot of objects to shake out in their camp. i noticed them turn back once they saw that the bear cables near my site already signaled occupation. i let them start unpacking, then carried my camera past their camp so i could wave at them, and also photograph further up the trail. cameras often have the strange effect of giving an excuse to do anything.

we swapped some notes about the bears, availability of other campsites, and the weather. i'd experienced the same beautiful, rainless day they did, but they started out a day earlier and ended their first day in a thunderstorm. i could sympathize; that same storm caught me at clingman's dome, three thousand feet higher in elevation, where i'd felt cold for the first time since the dregs of winter crumbled in pittsburgh's april.

as they continued their camp chores and dinner, i killed more time by inspecting the various spur paths from each tent site; i discovered a laundry

²"The Staredown", *Snap Judgement*, ep. #702

³Tom Condon, *Hiking Trails of the Smokies*, 1994 ed., p. 386

line that still strung up one pair of synthetic boxers and one pair of synthetic panties, which i offered to my camp friends (they scavenged the laundry line for themselves and heroically accepted the clothing into their trash bags), an appealing-looking rhododendron grove that i soon discovered as a bathroom, and lots more bees.

“they’re curious,” i remarked to my neighbors.

“yeah, just curious,” they agreed. “and not stinging. is it bumblebees that don’t sting, and honeybees that do?”

i looked at the diverse collection of bees that peacefully negotiated for space on the rock that i, too, hoped to occupy. “i can’t tell.”

my curiosity eventually took hold, and when i finally ran out of things to do, i lowered the abandoned trash bags. “this is archaeology,” i claimed to my horrified onlookers. “there’s a story here to tell.”

an emergency space blanket crumpled against the top of the more easily opened bag; under it, i found approximately five million granola bar wrappers and some banana peels. the other bag was tied so tightly that i couldn’t open it without tearing it; its contents clinked and thunked conspicuously. “anyone who ties a bag that tightly doesn’t want you getting in,” warned my new camp friend.

this was the narrative we sketched: the day before, a couple went out on a hike together with a costco-sized box of granola bars and a couple six packs of beer. the storm hit, and they got drenched and cold; they might not have planned to spend the night, but luckily, the guy, who was probably a boy scout in his past, pulled out his trusty emergency space blanket and they huddled under it all night. knowing about bears in the area, they hung their trash so they wouldn’t be both cold *and* mauled to death. in the morning, they hung up their clothes to dry, then decided they should just walk out because they were miserable and left both their trash and their underwear. somehow. probably because they were also getting it on in the bushes and forgot to put all their clothes back on.

we watched the west-facing treeline turn orange with the sunset, then black when dusk fell; making up that story took up more or less enough time for me to get to bed. “hey, if you get lonely over there, you can always come join our camp,” came the polite offer; they already seemed impressed that i was hiking alone, and treeing cubs alone.

“thanks; i’m just glad y’all were hiking behind me, so if mama bear started chewing on me, i might have been able to yell for help loudly enough for someone to hear.” this was a legitimate concern of mine a few hours prior. “anyway, if you hear any howling it’s probably me; we’ve got a full moon tonight.”

my confidence in a clear weather window led me to leave the rainfly off my bivvy; the only thing that separated my body from the nightening forest was the thin barrier of mosquito netting. the sky never fully darkened; a full moon, invisible to me under heavy tree cover, reflected that cold second-hand sunlight across the cap of atmosphere over mark’s cove.

sleep always comes slowly to me in a tent. i watched fireflies glinting close to my face, circling the glow in the dark locator on my headlamp. i counted

stars struggling to compete with the moonlight. i listened to an owl announcing 10pm from the other side of the ridge, and after a dozen of its calls, i learned that sound and called back, twice; it fell silent after that.

i dropped into a dreamless sleep in a blink. a brief moment of clarity gripped me when i felt the moon peering through the gaps overhead at me, as if checking to make sure i was truly asleep. i nodded to it, and sank back into darkness. at the next blink, the sky glowed lemony and the earliest bees sniffed me through the mesh. i was not yet ready to parlay with them, and nodded off again to the feeling of gentle wings buzzing past my face.

later, my watch beeped a complaint that i dozed too long. the bees circled back in confusion, bumping against the hardly-visible surface that prevented them from reaching it. i stayed in bed for a long, lazy hour, staring upwards into their bellies because i was unwilling to return to a world that exposed me to their touch.

the sense of time passing got to me eventually, so i rolled up my camp and retrieved my pack from the cables in one continuous motion. my neighbors hadn't yet finished their breakfast, and i invited myself into their circle; with the help of some human company, i could better tolerate my personal space filling with bees. besides, the bumbling scouts were more interested in licking leftover oatmeal out of a cold pot than landing in my peanut butter and dried mandarin burrito. i can never seem to predict the preferences of insects.

when it came time for me to move on, i took middle prong trail out of mark's cove, and towards the frequently warned of crossing of panther creek. the guidebook and backcountry rangers both suggested against attempting it during high waters; it's known for a knee-deep wade at the best of times. during my trip planning, i recalled the hardest crossing of my past, a thigh-deep ford of a wide, roaring snowmelt in a west virginian early spring. the hardest part, other than a paralyzing moment of decision-lock when i found myself rooted to the spot at the halfway point not knowing if i should proceed or retreat, was knowing i'd have to re-cross the creek to get back to the car.

i spent the otherwise uneventful trip through more rhododendron forest reviewing lessons i've learned from backcountry rockhops. take your time, and identify a complete path before you start anything. slightly submerged rocks are probably not as deep as they look. gravel bottoms are probably much deeper than they look. move decisively, briskly, but not desperately. find a good, thick stick that you can tap against rocks for balance, but never lean your weight on it, and test its strength in many axes before you bring it with you. when you complete your crossing, leave your stick on the other side for future crossers; a good stick carries memories, and it may support others in their endeavors.

panther creek was not the hardest crossing i'd ever done; i strapped on gaiters as a precaution, but i never submerged more than the toe of one boot that needed to brush against an underwater rock before finding firmer ground on a dry flat-top. the line of rocks that formed the ford presented an interesting puzzle, but not a frustrating one; i could imagine difficulty with a few more inches of rainwater.

as i ate my victory lunch on the opposing bank, i waved to a large group

of middle schoolers who looked at the creek with skepticism. one by one, they turned back, ending with a pair of college-aged trip leaders, who shook their heads at the water. the guidebook's warnings about unbridged stream crossings seemed written for them. later, i passed a pair of older women who rattled down the trail with sleigh bells and gps locator beacons; they asked me if i crossed the creek. "barely even got my boots wet," i cheerfully reported.

"oh, good. i think with this heat, i'd love to wade through anyway and cool down my feet," one of them said as they passed me. "just not at six in the morning when we looked at it earlier." it was two in the afternoon then; i couldn't think of an itinerary that would have reasonably started at a parking lot and brought them to our meeting.

while climbing up panther creek trail, i got that feeling of being watched again, and recommenced my bear-repelling yodels; i pulled a stick from the bushes and left it long enough to provide plenty of snapping ammo. i couldn't say for sure if a bear lurked nearby. dark logs in the distance, through dappled sunlight, sure looked like baloo lounging against a rock when i was ready to practice my bear encounter protocol again. i never got the pleasure, and my songs dropped in volume as the afternoon heat sapped my energy.

the trail wiggled back and forth over the creek, and i took advantage of the frequent revisits to douse my arms, neck, and face with the cool water draining from the mountains. later, i'd learn about the trees that worked to manage the temperature and flow rate of the streams. my campsite friends decided against taking this route when they'd heard about the long, muddy, uphill slog through constant stream recrossings; i found myself grateful for the frequent sources of cool water.

the creek vanished to a trickle, invisible under knotted roots, then fell silent. i finally returned to jake's gap, where i knew not to dally; i saluted the buzzing sentries that lazily circled the spot where i'd rested my pack the previous day and moved on. on the descent down jake's creek trail, i passed more and more hikers as the parking area drew closer. i directed a group of teenagers towards their targeted cucumber gap; they misread my pointing and took the fork uphill towards jake's gap instead. i greeted a group of three young men who looked optimistically packed for a camp-out much closer than where i knew the closest campsite to be; i wondered how long they'd struggle uphill in flip-flops carrying coolers and unzipped duffel bags, and if they'd leave a trash bag full of beer cans and space blankets in the morning.

my motorcycle waited for me in the parking lot, its front wheel tilted to the left like a dog anxious to go on a walk. i left my pack with it, and brought the last of my food to a stone wall near the appalachian clubhouse. my cheese hadn't completely melted, which combined nicely with my remaining half tortilla. the restrooms next to the old condemned vacation homes provided flushing toilets and electric lights. a family walked by with a shaggy black lab on a leash, and i almost mistook it for a bear cub.

17 miles; july 9-10, 2017

brief afterword

since writing this piece, i met with the smokies entomologist, who showed me their collection of hoverflies, which are flies that look startlingly like bees. she gave me her tip for telling bees from flies: flies always have one set of wings, and bees always have two. the different wing arrangements result in different flight patterns, which also help with field identification. given the heavy usage of those campsites, it's much more likely that every mention of bees made in this text referred to flies.

appendix

other bear-repelling song lyrics:

hey, all you bears
i'm just coming through
i definitely don't have food
not a single tortilla
or two hard boiled eggs
or half a pound of cheese
or a jar of peanut butter
or a pack of salmon

hey, little bear
don't be scared
everything's okay
we're having a great day