

“Losing Eden”

By Rachel Weaver

CPO 1783 Berea College, Berea, KY 40404

Specific Award for Consideration:

May B. Smith English Composition Award

&

The Florence Essay Prize

Losing Eden

“From the point of view of a tapeworm, man was created by God to serve the appetite of the tapeworm.” – Edward Abbey

“Destroying a rainforest for economic gain is like burning a Renaissance painting to cook a meal.” – Edward O. Wilson

“No witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of new life in this stricken world. The people had done it themselves.” – Rachel Carson

From miles above, it looks like a dark, green gash; a sharp and sudden indentation in the smooth, rolling territory of the plateau it rests on. From above, you can see within it the glistening sliver of something; a streak of pulsating silvery lifeblood visible within the seeming tear in the landscape. Upon closer inspection, the gash becomes something else; metamorphoses into an enormous, gaping gorge, and almost a thousand feet below its cliff-bordered rims, the vein becomes a river; surging and roaring its dominance. This is the New River, and the trail it treads is ancient; the New River Gorge, a gouge in sandstone that has been growing deeper for longer any other river in the world, save the Nile.

The gorge holds many treasures within its walls, and people from all over the world flock there to take advantage of what it has to offer. They come in droves as soon as the snow begins to melt. From the North, South, East, and West, they leave their seasonal jobs as clerks, writers, substitute teachers, or construction workers, abandoning

the blue collar world of the suburbs and cities in exchange for the affirmation of life they find among the nettles and rhododendron and flowering dogwood, or in the spaces there between stone and air, or stone and water. For the gorge is a veritable Eden; its miles of whitewater and endless cliff faces make it an extreme-sports haven like no other, and the ecosystem it sustains is precious beyond words. Climbers, kayakers, bungee-jumpers, hikers, rafters, bikers, campers, retirees with their grandchildren, Japanese tourists, folk from all corners of the globe and all societal backgrounds: they all make the trip down Highway 60 or up Rt. 19.

They all seek a form of escape from the chaos of consumerism, or perhaps they are really after a reconnection with Nature, the ability to stand on the ground and know that it's really earth you're feeling beneath your feet, rather than the artificial, grayscale stone that carpets our cities. They want to surround themselves with life, with plants and animals untamed and uncontrolled. They want to look at a tree and know that it grows where it does because it survived decades of hard winters and redeeming summers, not because a city planning committee deemed some tiny wasteland patch between curb and sidewalk a good place to put a tree for aesthetic reasons.

And the gorge gives them that, welcomes them warmly with fern-bathed, laurel-scented arms, provides them with ridges to hike on, limpid pools for trout fishing, and sun-baked outcroppings for picnics or close shaves with copperheads. Mornings where the pea-soup river fog clashes with the gravid clouds, a wall of opaque white is created that is only cut by the wings of the peregrine falcons or the bald eagles or the turkey vultures, who appear from the misty beyond for a brief few seconds before vanishing back into the haze like passing ghosts on silent, dew-damp wings. And nights, too, she

reveals a world beyond our own, where from the rocky river's edge you can look up through the tree branches, past the canyon's towering, fortress walls, and into the night sky that is black as tar but illuminated with thousands of stars and the reaching arm of the Milky Way itself, a white, glistening highway across the heavens.

***7:45 AM.

Anthony is twenty feet above me and all I can think about is the fact that he keeps kicking sand in my eyes.

We are climbing steadily upwards along the broad wall of indented stone towards our destination: a jagged, man-wide crack in the face of the cliff that rises vertically, beginning just above where Anthony has paused. A branch from an oak treetop tickles the left side of my calf and I cringe. More dust falls from where Anthony is screwing a new bolt into the stone. "How's that anchor coming?"

"Peachy! Just a bit longer and we'll be movin' on up." He chances a quick gap-toothed grin down at me from where he clings. He is tan, short and stocky, well muscled with black hair dyed indigo at the tips. I have known Anthony for years. He is an ex alcoholic who has replaced drinking with a new addiction: climbing. His eyes are afire with anticipation and I see in them the streak of insanity that has given him quite the reputation among the other extreme sports enthusiasts in Fayetteville. Were I not here, I know very well that he wouldn't even be bothering with the anchors.

I bide my time, re-chalking my hands and surveying the route before us with skeptical scrutiny. Forty feet above us, the wall begins to bulge outward, becoming convex. That's the part that scares me. I see no handholds or footholds, save the fissure, which widens dangerously. Beyond that there's nothing; just yard after yard of smooth, apathetic, slippery sandstone. I shove away the fear that churns within my stomach and attempt to focus on something other than the prospect of being skewered by tree limbs during the hundred-foot fall.

A common blue butterfly suddenly flits past me. "*Polyommatus icarus*," I whisper. I had wanted to be an entomologist as a child and had taught myself all the Latin names of my favorite species.

Up ahead Anthony has finished with the anchor. He tugs playfully on the green and red climbing rope and the carabiner on my harness jingles. "I'm ready when you are."

II.

The gorge may seem pure to most visitors, but beneath its thriving exterior, scars are hidden. The whole area had once been the rape victim of the Industrial Revolution, where men and later machines stabbed the earth deeply seeking the black gold of Appalachia: coal. Logging, too, took its toll on the land. Giant oak, maple, wormy chestnut, and pine trees were cut. Behemoth poplars were felled and replaced with a ground-level track of steel and wood; the C&O railway provided the logging and coal industry transportation in and out of the wilderness that was nineteenth-century West

Virginia. Indeed, the bustling mining town of Thurmond didn't have an automobile road until 1920; many of the others never did. Eventually the coal craze expired in the area of the gorge and the land healed itself. The small towns slowly dwindled and died, reclaimed by the ambitious forest. All that stands now of many company stores, schools, churches, and graveyards, are some stone foundations and an occasional standing wall or tombstone, rising eerily from within the thick, thriving forest like alien artifacts, the remnants of a not-so-distant civilization, the trappings of a people hardened by labor and oppression, and subsequently, forgotten.

***8:23 AM

My hands are slipping. Quit panicking, you're anchored. The rope will catch you. Quit panicking –

“FUCK!”

For a moment I am freefalling, but the harness catches me after about two seconds. It's like being snagged by a fishhook around the middle and it knocks the wind out of me completely. For a brief moment, I am hanging, gasping for breath, dangling from the convex cliff face before scrambling for the rope and grasping it in white-knuckled relief. The profanity I had uttered a moment before is still bouncing off the canyon walls.

Anthony has wheeled around from where he'd been scaling the wall ahead of me and, checking his fixed bolt before descending, slowly lets his neon rope slip through the carabiner. He descends gracefully like some ballet dancer and halts in midair parallel to

me. He's laughing now, and he reaches over to whack me playfully on the back a few times with chalk-dusted hands. He's gleeful, apparently totally ecstatic. "Woooohooo! Rachel just had her first close shave on the Endless Wall! Thank God for ropes, eh buddy? AhHahaha!"

I meanwhile am still unable to release my iron-grip on the rope. My heart still hasn't managed to creep down from my throat and my gaze drops to the treetops far below me. I know the jagged boulders that lie below them very well. I manage a choked whisper – "Jesus Christ..."

Still overjoyed, "Makes you glad to be alive doesn't it? There's nothin' like it, right?" He grins, winks, and slowly makes his way back up the rope and to the wall, seemingly unphased.

III.

That nature has returned to flourish on land that was once so violently abused is cause for hope. Now that the area is a National Park, you would think that it would remain untouched by development, allowed to exist as the thriving, emerald gem that it is. However, West Virginia's economy isn't quite conducive to such utter conservation. Truth be told, the state is one of the poorest in the country. Property values, however, have been slowly increasing, and to cater to the rising need to draw more industry into Fayette County, many parcels of land along the upper regions of the gorge have been opened for development in regards to the upcoming gated community, dubbed "Bridge View Estates." Many people who have had an intimate relationship with the gorge are

very concerned. Ecologists fear that the presence of development in such ecologically sensitive areas will do severe damage to the populations of threatened species, such as the peregrine falcon, whose numbers had finally begun to increase after teetering on the edge of extinction in that part of the state. Community members also fear that the incoming millionaire homeowners in Bridge View Estates will not be the crowd to really rely on the local economy for support in the first place. It's hard to imagine any millionaires actually shopping at J&J's, the tiny local hardware and farm supply store, where you can pick up chicken feed, electric fence wire, and maple sugar candy all at once.

Not that tourism doesn't do enough damage in itself though. The winter months are very lean ones for most business owners around the gorge. Although many people flock to the area for snowboarding and skiing, the best places for that are north toward Snowshoe Mountain Resort and thus the New River remains a primarily summertime attraction. In summer, however, the tourism there can become overwhelming. And the tourists that choke the highways are not usually nature enthusiasts as much as suburbanite families seeking a weekend vacation. For a short time they set aside football in order to return home to their coworkers with glossy photos of the wilderness they "traversed," or the rivers they "conquered." These visitors by the busload take trips to raft down the Upper and Lower sections of the New River, and an equal number of apathetic or ignorant hikers and campers do their best to trample wildflowers along the beaches, forgetting sunglasses or fishing gear at their campsites, or leaving trash in their wake. Their very presence, in a way, upsets the environment. The stillness of humid, summer nights is interrupted by roars of intoxicated laughter, and when dawn breaks the next day,

you are greeted by the leftovers of the celebration; the remnants of a Styrofoam cooler, plastic Wal-Mart bags, shards of broken beer bottles mingling dangerously with the sand.

***9:28 AM

Anthony takes a swig from the bottle of water and hands it to me, exhaling in satisfaction. “Ahhh, YES. You know the first time I was up here, I saw a bald eagle.” He is sitting to the left of me. We’ve been here for about five minutes now. Ten minutes ago we’d reached the top and I, exhausted, was ready to descend. It hadn’t taken much coercion to get me to join him though. “Come on,” he’d said, “the view is spectacular.”

Now we’re side by side on the warm stone with our legs dangling over the edge, the width of the gorge stretched out before us with the dizzying space between where we were sitting and the ground far below suddenly unavoidably apparent to me. Somehow the fear that had knotted itself in my stomach after my close call earlier has vanished entirely. My hands ache, but I am transfixed by the beauty before me, the gentle sounds of the place; birds in the laurel behind us and the whisper of the breeze tousling the branches of countless trees of the deepest green. And far below, the gentle roar of the river, its whitewater gleaming in the morning sunlight with blinding iridescence.

We sit there for quite some time. Anthony speaks first. “Don’t let any of those kids in Fayetteville tell you that I freehand climb because I’m crazy. They don’t understand or they’d not even question my motives.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“I do it for *this*.” Here he spreads his arms as wide as he can as if to embrace the gorge itself. “This place, this setting, this peace. There’s no better prescription than a sheer wall of sandstone if you’re looking to chase away the blues, or find calm, or feel stable if you’re afraid your world is falling apart. The Gorge doesn’t judge you because of your past. And these cliffs are more than willing to wake you up if you’re feeling asleep at the wheel. They force you to take risks, but, they also force you to realize just how precious your life really is. They remind you of the little things you take for granted. That’s the beauty of it.”

I nod and take in his words. Far beyond me, a falcon sails freely on the updrafts above the gorge, its wide wings unmoving, gliding on the thermals in complete silence. For the first time, I understand.

But how should the New River Gorge be preserved? How can humanity save so sacred a place without damaging it? Are people really capable of touching any environment without leaving our greasy, noxious fingerprints behind? If only the slogan, “take only pictures, leave only footprints,” were a requirement for all visitors to this country’s last wild spaces. If only the lazy masses could learn to enjoy such an excursion. Perhaps then they’d be able to witness Nature as it was meant to be witnessed, instead of from the cushy perspective of the Disney-fied, pushbutton, “Wilderness Experience.” Add water and serve.

If there is any hope for the future of the New River Gorge and similarly threatened places, it lies in this; that the masses who *do* continue to flock there learn to

realize what sacred soil they're treading on. Whether it be the New River Gorge or the Amazon rainforest, humanity must become aware of how precious those living jewels really are, lest the fiery swords of our ignorance bar us from ever entering Eden again.