Hiker's Midnight:

Rhythms of Transformation on the Appalachian Trail

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Abstract

This thesis examines the evanescent social world which emerges amongst thru-hikers on the Appalachian Trail, and the patterns and rhythms which give it form. Taking the trail as the extended liminal space in a contemporary rite of passage, the thesis proposes to study personal transformation by dwelling in the space of passage rather than following hikers from one end to the other: transformation through long-distance walking, it is argued, has less to do with the common imagination of an epic, individual, linearized journey than with the possibility of dwelling in a different everydayness. To this end, after introducing the world of the trail, the thesis moves to a pair of central chapters, each examining a prominent social pattern found on the trail through a series of ethnographic vignettes. The first, “The Gift Ecology of Trail Magic,” examines the widespread practice of gift-exchange amongst hikers, ex-hikers, and local townspeople. Moving from Marcel Mauss to affect theory, the chapter argues that trail magic, if not precisely an alternative economy, produces a different social ecology through the affective atmosphere engendered by gift exchange ritual itself. The second central chapter, “Hiker’s Midnight and Other Rhythms,” examines the rhythms which emerge amongst hikers in the absence of a dominant clock-time. Engaging with Roland Barthes’ description of idiorrhythmy, the chapter shows how in the absence of a centrally imposed measure of time, rhythms end up emerging spontaneously *between* hikers, their bodies, and even the weather. The epilogue reframes the foregoing chapters by dwelling on the physical pain which underlies the experience, and questioning how this pain relates to the joy hikers find in the world of the trail.

Cette thèse examine le monde social évanescent qui émerge parmi les randonneurs sur le sentier des Appalaches, ainsi que les modèles et les rythmes qui lui donnent forme. Prenant le sentier comme l'espace liminaire étendu d'un rite de passage contemporain, la thèse propose d'étudier la transformation personnelle en demeurant dans l'espace de passage plutôt qu'en suivant les randonneurs d'un bout à l'autre : la transformation par la marche de longue distance, est-il soutenu, a moins à voir avec l'imagination commune d'un voyage épique, individuel et linéarisé qu'avec la possibilité de demeurer dans une quotidien différent. À cette fin, après avoir présenté le monde du sentier, la thèse passe à deux chapitres centraux, chacun examinant un modèle social important trouvé sur le sentier à travers une série de vignettes ethnographiques. Le premier, "The Gift Ecology of Trail Magic", examine la pratique répandue de l'échange de cadeaux entre les randonneurs, les anciens randonneurs et les habitants de la ville. Passant de Marcel Mauss à la théorie de l'affect, le chapitre soutient que la magie des sentiers, si elle n'est pas précisément une économie alternative, produit une écologie sociale différente grâce à l'atmosphère affective engendrée par le rituel d'échange de cadeaux lui-même. Le deuxième chapitre central, "Hiker's Midnight and Other Rhythms", examine les rythmes qui émergent parmi les randonneurs en l'absence d'une horloge dominante. S'inspirant de la description de l'idiorhythmie de Roland Barthes, le chapitre montre comment, en l'absence d'une mesure du temps imposée de manière centralisée, des rythmes finissent par émerger spontanément entre les randonneurs, leurs corps et même la météo. L'épilogue recadre les chapitres précédents en s'attardant sur la douleur physique qui sous-tend l'expérience et en s'interrogeant sur le lien entre cette douleur et la joie que les randonneurs trouvent dans le monde du sentier.

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Sitting on a tooth of exposed rock in southwestern Virginia, we watch the sun sinking pink through haze. A long silence begins to expand in the space between Bluebird, Iron Mike and me, filled only by small pebbles of birdsong bouncing up from the wooded hills below. Dinner has been rehydrated and eaten; our muscles are warm and sore; the day is almost done.

Earlier, on the half-mile walk to this peak from our campsite, a place called Many Campsites where wild ponies run through fields past used firepits and colorful ultralight tents, we passed the trail's five-hundred-mile mark. As we stood contemplating the crude "500" arranged in sticks at the trail's edge, two other thru-hikers—Holes and Dead Dad—caught up with us. Iron Mike took their picture. Holes and Dead Dad smiled, weary and grateful. Five hundred miles had sunk into their feet.

On the mountaintop we sink together into silence. Questions have been asked and answered—about the trail, what it's like, what it's changed in the lives of my two companions—but the nature of the questions leaves the answers half-certain, and now, in the silence, questions and half-answers alike keep bouncing around in our heads. The three of us share in their presence, dwelling in it together, no longer needing to speak.

As the sun edges toward the horizon, the world itself begins to share that gorgeous uncertainty: a twilit in-betweenness, caught between day and night, between lives past and future. The only certainty in the scene is movement, passage. Yet the moment holds us.

In a quiet voice, wry and pensive, Iron Mike breaks the silence. As he speaks, he gestures with a sweep of the hand towards the landscape: whiskey mountains, birdsong, setting sun and the wide-openness of the sky.

"Sure makes it hard to think about going back to 'real life,' doesn't it?"

Bluebird responds very quickly.

“Don’t even go there tonight.”

I am caught by the pain in her voice. It flies out over the valley, mixing with the beauty, making a new color for the sun.

Introduction: Desire Paths

"I hate hiking with a passion," says Hairball, who has just hiked 953 miles from the summit of Springer Mountain in Georgia to the Elkwallow Wayside restaurant in northern Virginia, where we stand in line for cheeseburgers and blackberry milkshakes. It's the first of July, dog days of 2023, and the smoke from wildfires in Quebec fills the Shenandoah Valley below us. Two days later, the Earth will experience its hottest ever day.

In fact, Hairball has hiked even more than 953 miles: in February and March she walked the Pinhoti Trail, which begins at the true origin of the Appalachian mountain-chain in the state of Alabama, and continues for another 326 miles to Springer Mountain, the southern terminus of the Appalachian Trail (or the AT, as one quickly learns to call it). The AT itself then stretches, wriggles, worms, snakes, and dances its way another 2,198.4 miles between Springer and the summit of Mount Katahdin, in the far wilderness of Maine. If you wanted to count, and hikers love counting, Hairball has about twelve hundred miles under her feet; and, if she has the good luck to avoid spraining an ankle or contracting Lyme Disease or simply getting sick of the whole damn thing, she will have about another twelve hundred to go before she reaches Katahdin—thus ending in October a 2,500-mile walk that began in February.

"I hate hiking, I just like everything else," she continues. "I love the community, I love the campfires, I love trail magic, I love zero days. I love all of it except the hiking. *Hiking is just the vehicle*."

With milkshakes and burgers in hand, Hairball and I walk out of the small wayside restaurant, which is located next to a road and parking lot in Shenandoah National Park. A gaggle of a dozen or so thru-hikers are stretched out on the grass beside the parking lot. They

stand out instantly from the tourists and day-hikers. They wear tie-dye short-shorts and long, ragged, sweat-stained hiking shirts; they carry bewilderingly small backpacks, with water bottles and Crocs and sleeping pads rolled up or affixed by carabiners to their packs; their faces have grown strange, gaunt, glowing; they observe the world with calm eyes. The tourists observe them in turn, with curiosity and alarm.

We all felt lazy that day. The smoke was in our lungs. We stretched out on the grass and inhaled a few more breaths of it. I remember there was Matador, Sultry, Doublewide, Junco, Spills, Kenny Powers, Jersey Shore, Magic, and Gadget, apart from Hairball and myself.[1] We had formed a small, vortex-prone bubble floating up the spine of the Shenandoah. We scarfed the burgers, then savored the milkshakes. We made quiet hiker talk, with the occasional bells of laughter echoing up through the trees, across the parking lot, towards the clearing where a tree marked by a small white rectangle of paint marked the continuation of the trail itself—mile 953.0 of 2198.4. We would soon spend the rest of the day hiking; we savored the last few minutes of *not* hiking, together. It felt good.

Of the many paradoxes unfolded by the Appalachian Trail and its community, this may be the most luminous: that for a great number of these people who devote themselves to walking two thousand miles across the country, who for months on end spend a majority of their time and energy and money on the activity of walking along a trail through the woods, the walking itself is far from the point. There is something else going on, something like a way of life unfolding each year along this narrow strip of land.

I spent a summer hiking that strip of land, that narrow floating world, under the pretense of learning to be an anthropologist. I hiked 500 miles of the AT in Virginia, interviewing hikers

[1]Throughout this thesis I refer to hikers by their "trail names"; many have been changed for the sake of anonymity.

and walking with them through the hot summer, and a handful more in Maine, late autumn, where the friends I had made along the line were finishing their hike, climbing their final peaks, and preparing to transition into whatever world might lie beyond.

The initial topic of my research was transformation. "I'm studying how the trail *changes* people," I explained myself to countless hikers. And indeed, many hikers I met did have their lives changed, even radically transformed, by hiking the Appalachian Trail. Some lives shifted on their entire axis during those six months: I saw marriages, careers, whole past lives walked away from. Yet over time as I walked the trail, I came to see that "transformation" was not an object I could look squarely at. It was not the dramatic turning point, the triumphant success. Rather it was something happening slowly, invisibly, in the moments between days, the cracks between hours. It was the accumulation of a different kind of everydayness, a different kind of movement that transformed people: the trail as an openness, a space to be walked but also danced through. A series of awkwardly elegant, oscillating rhythms. A fragile persistence.

In studying transformation, and in seeking it out for ourselves, we are often primed to look for the decisive event, or a journey with an arc. What I found, instead, on the Appalachian Trail—what I felt so clearly with Hairball and the rest of the hikers as we sat there in the sun, chatting, laughing, not yet hiking—was the profoundly transformative non-event of living, quite simply, in a different kind of world.

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What follows in this thesis is the beginning of an attempt to map that world, and the distinct way things—time, bodies, gifts, relations, thoughts—flowed within it. It is an attempt to

chart these objects' movements and their physics, their expenditures of energy, their transmissions of affect and oscillations of gravity; in short, the patterns and forms of a life which trans-formed those who lived it.

Specifically, in the thesis I focus on two patterns: the movement of gifts and the movement of time. The first chapter examines "trail magic," an informal but widespread form of gift exchange practiced up and down the trail. The chapter asks how such exchange relates to the forms of American capitalism which hedge the trail in at all sides, and ends by examining the *affective* ecology engendered by such gifts, and the different kinds of social relations made possible by the affective atmosphere of trail magic.

The second chapter examines the rhythms which emerge on the trail. I take "hiker's midnight" as a felicitous symbol for thinking such rhythms: this moment in time, marking hiker's bedtimes, is collectively decided but never imposed or precisely marked, and floats free of any hour you could read on the clock. I observe how, outside the strictures of capitalist clock-time, rhythms on the trail unfold in an independent yet social way—emerging in the relational space *between* hikers, their bodies, and even the weather.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau describes the spatial practices of everyday walkers as they navigate city streets in ways that defy the top-down, gridded-map vision of urban planners and bureaucrats. Constantly improvising, the daily pedestrian moves through what de Certeau calls "another spatiality," one which can never be known fully in advance, never seen from above.[2] Yet their footsteps nevertheless leave a mark on the world, and occasionally—when trampling upon grass, for instance—become visible as *desire paths*: the gradual accumulation of spontaneous movements solidifying into something social, shared, and

[2] De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 93.

semi-permanent; a darting line across a field transformed (by desire and habit) into a well-worn footpath.[3]

While the footsteps of thru-hikers on the Appalachian Trail may be (mostly) limited to a pre-ordained path, an undeviating line, these hikers trace a different kind of desire path: the emergent patterns which shape hikers' movement not only through a different spatiality but also a *different sociality* and a *different temporality*. These patterns solidify not into lines on the ground but often, instead, into phrases of hiker slang. "Trail magic" and "hiker's midnight" are two such examples. They name improvised practices—giving a gift, going to bed with the sunset—which follow a line of desire but then congeal, through repetition, into collective habits that shape the wider landscape of life on the trail.

Confronting a mountainous accumulation of "data," and the labyrinthine proliferation of possible lines of thought which threaten to overwhelm any discussion of the Appalachian Trail, I have taken these two slang terms—these two "desire paths"—as my guiding threads. They are examples of the kinds of social patterns which animate hikers' lives on the trail. These patterns are not only social, but rhythmic: unfolding in time as much as space, the trail animates hikers' lives with a different cadence, a different beat. In *How to Live Together*, Roland Barthes connects rhythm to the ancient Greek *rhuthmos*: as "the pattern of a fluid element … an improvised, changeable form." Hikers find the rhythms of their lives transformed on the trail, and they are transformed by those rhythms in turn.

My method has thus been to dwell in the social space of the trail, rather than following hikers from one end to the other. This may be an oblique way to approach the question of

[3] Although the concept resonates with his discussion of the urban walker, De Certeau does not himself mention "desire paths," and the term has instead been popularly attributed to Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*—although (perhaps fittingly?) I have not myself been able to track down the precise citation. A citational desire path, or merely a dead-end?

transformation. But the gambit of this thesis is that studying these rhythms and desire paths through which hikers shape and re-shape themselves might yield a different kind of knowledge about collective forms of subjectivity and transformation than a focus on individual stories of transformation could. I argue that dwelling on the trail as a world rather than a journey disrupts certain habits of thinking and talking about transformation, healing, and nature too; and that this disruption is analogous with a shift that hikers themselves undergo while hiking. If the Appalachian Trail exists as a kind of liminal space, a rite of passage for those who hike it, I think there can be something generative in lingering, ethnographically, in the space of passage itself.

In what remains of the introduction, I give a brief ethnographic account of how I arrived, meanderingly, at such an approach.

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You arrive as an anthropologist-in-training, serious, burgeoning with theoretical apparatuses and social scientific methodologies, and within a couple weeks you find yourself like an animal devouring a Stromboli, the largest Stromboli you've ever seen, soaking your entire face in tomato sauce, huddled beneath an awning with two thru-hikers in their forties who might just be your new best friends. You're at the last shelter before the trail town of Marion, Virginia, where Mountain Dew was once invented as a mixer for moonshine, you've ordered pizza from a payphone at a nature observation center and sat huddled beneath an awning for an hour waiting for it, sheltered from the rain but not the cold, and when the food finally arrives from the same pizza delivery man who spends every evening shuttling back and forth from town to this shelter, taking pizzas up the mountain to hungry hikers and occasionally bringing the hikers themselves

back down to stay at a motel in town—like Mooch and Wednesday, earlier that day, on the brink of falling in love—when the food arrives and you pull out the Stromboli, it's the largest one you've ever seen, and looking at it you feel something new in your body. A new sensation.

Then you rip into it with a force that surprises even your two friends, who, as veterans of the trail, are used to extreme and bestial acts of hunger.

"Look at you, Kodak," says one of them, grinning. "You've turned into hiker trash yourself."

You know he's right. You've spawned a second, frightening self—a hiker self. This self has different desires, different needs. A different name too.

It was thus that, for the next two months, a hiker and an anthropologist cohabited my body—a strange coexistence, somewhere between a duet and a sparring match, unfolding all up the rocky spine of Virginia. (They cohabit me still, and fight it out occasionally, as I sit down now to begin writing.)

Academic anthropologists consider this splitting of the self to be a method, even *the* method in ethnographic fieldwork. Their name for it, "participant observation," neatly captures its paradoxical character. In some sense it is what every anthropologist goes through when they enter what still gets called "the field." Yet if this is the case in general for the discipline, it was doubly inevitable for me as I entered my own long, narrow, well-trodden field; for this process of self-alienation is also what every hiker must go through as they enter the trail and leave their past selves behind.

The hiker and the anthropologist in me thus shared a certain wide-eyed curiosity towards the conditions of our existence on the trail. This critical, self-reflexive curiosity likewise served as the ground for so many of my interactions with other hikers, who themselves spend a great

deal of their time *thinking* about the strange task they have given themselves and the peculiar world that task has plunged them into.

Nevertheless, there was a difference in priorities. My focus as a hiker was simple: hiking. My focus as an anthropologist was slightly more complex. I came to the trail intending to study processes of personal and collective transformation; so I asked questions, overheard conversations, scribbled notes, always wondering how people had been changed, or were still changing, or planned soon to change, and in what sense or measure the trail itself, the hiking of it, might be somehow responsible.

A recent literature has emerged describing the potential therapeutic benefits of long-distance walking for mental as well as physical health; in the words of the authors of a recent survey of the literature, "It has even been suggested that long-distance walking may be considered a form of psychotherapy."[4] Approaching the subject of the trail, I felt intrigued but skeptical about this direction; after all, doesn't any account of therapeutics have to presuppose a certain *telos*, a certain pre-decided "good" direction for a person's life to be moving in? How could the inevitable normativity of a "therapeutics"-based lens co-exist with the relativism practiced by a good anthropologist?

Thus I asked not about therapeutics but rather *transformation*—not healing but simple change. Yet in keeping my distance from a discourse of therapeutics, I had nevertheless internalized certain formal assumptions of that discourse: namely, the tight focus on an *individual* subject. "How did the trail change you?" was always asked in the second-person singular; its reflection, always, "how will it change *me*?"

[4] Mau et al, "Are Long-Distance Walks Therapeutic? A Systematic Scoping Review of the Conceptualization of Long-Distance Walking and Its Relation to Mental Health," 3.

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On the summit of Springer Mountain, at the very beginning of the Appalachian Trail, a small plaque gleams in the sun. It depicts the engraved image of a lone man walking: bending and striding confidently beneath the weight of an old rucksack, he is looking off and away, with a rugged and stoic expression, towards distances we cannot see. Next to the man an inscription reads:

> *APPALACHIAN TRAIL*
> *Georgia to Maine*
> *A Footpath for Those who seek Fellowship with the Wilderness*

Behind the man a series of lines designate the rippling mountains of Appalachia—the unpeopled Wilderness to be met along the next two thousand miles.[5]

Near the rock with the plaque lies a boulder with a small irregularity: it contains a small metal rectangle, inserted mysteriously into the rockface, with a latch that can be pulled, revealing a hollow compartment holding a large plastic ziplock bag. Within the bag lies a battered notebook, one of the old black-and-white speckled notebooks you'd use to record experiments in a third-grade science class, upon which is pasted a paper: *SPRINGER MOUNTAIN SHELTER OFFICIAL REGISTER.*

Opening the logbook, my eyes were met by a messy chorus of handwritings, scrawled in blue and black pens. A cascade of language, as though the dreams haunting this forest all suddenly gained a voice and spoke out, simultaneously, within the séance-chamber of a logbook:

[5] Cf. Cronon "The Trouble with Wilderness: Getting Back to the Wrong Nature."

Keep moving—there is no end!! -Murray

I am glad I made it up. Now I have to get back down. -Rohan

"Cactus Jack" was here.

Lil yolkey wuz here.

Bob & Bob: "We came we saw we hurt"

Starting a LASH to Damascus today. I thru-hiked the AT in 2020 but missed seeing the spring bc of covid, so here's to second chances. To all else starting—find the moments of awe. -Wonder

And countless more. Leafing backwards in the book I start finding entries from southbound hikers finishing their hikes on Springer, setting down their thoughts at the very moment of completing a six-month question.

OH WHAT A TRIP IT HAS BEEN. Too much to ever put into words. There will always be a white rectangle guiding my heart. When I'm asked repeatedly off trail what my favorite part was, it will always be the people. The people, the people, the people. CONGRATS to all finishers of the class of 2021. There will always be a white rectangle guiding my heart. AMTRAK… OUT! -Amtrak

One cannot but be struck by the contrast: between the image of a lonely, heroic, male hiker communing with the wilderness—and the swirling energies of an unruly chorus, the voices of a strange, philosophical, deeply social world lying just beneath that image's surface.

My first few days on the trail followed a similar trajectory: I began hiking, precisely, on Springer Mountain in Georgia, only to realize very quickly that I was late. Whereas most northbound thru-hikers begin in March or April, I began in mid-May, by which point the critical

mass of thru-hikers—also known as "the bubble"—had already floated five hundred miles north, up and over the Smoky Mountains of North Carolina and Tennessee, and was about to settle for a few days on the small town of Damascus, Virginia, which each year on the third weekend of May hosts the largest gathering of thru-hikers in the world.

Called Trail Days, this festival brings 20,000 past and present thru-hikers to a town of less than a thousand people. For four days the town is awash in color and stink. After my first couple of days hiking north from Springer Mountain—which were animated precisely by loneliness, introspection, anxiety, and physical difficulty, everything I had come to expect from a thru-hiking experience—I was tipped off by a kind section-hiker that if I wanted to study the culture of the trail, I should really find a way to get to Damascus. After managing to find a long and costly shuttle ride, I was dropped late at night at a place called Tent City, a large soccer field at the end of town completely filled with hikers' multicolored tents. The field is edged by woods, and Tent City extends into these woods, a labyrinthine forest full of tents, hammocks, and hikers stumbling around in varying states of intoxication. From deep in the woods the sound of drumming and high-pitched screeching echoed through the valley; following the sound, I found myself standing at the end of a large drum-circle. Shirtless hikers danced in a trance around a large bonfire; neon lights, rainbow glowsticks, flickering strobes punctuated the darkness of the woods. Hikers howled at the moon or called to each other from the depths of the forest: *yee yee…!*

The next morning, waking in Tent City, I emerged from my tent to find the field completely crowded with a very particular breed of person: thin, lanky, muscular, hairy people strolling languidly through the field dressed predominantly in bright, hectic patterns, pinks and yellows and sky-blues. As I walked around the festival, from Tent City to the long walkway

where dozens of outdoor equipment companies had set up tents to sell the newest, most hi-tech, ultra-lightweight accoutrements to the hordes of eager hikers, I kept overhearing their conversations. Everyone seemed to know each other, and their words evoked a complex social world whose contours remained dim to me.

"Did Sidetrack make it?" "No, he got stuck somewhere."

"Hey Cheeseburger! Doesn't your friend work at Boots Off?"

"They were on the Colorado Trail together last summer."

"I've got a new one that's six ounces lighter."

"We're thinking of aqua-blazing back to mile 400."

"I'm gonna make pancakes for people if it doesn't rain tomorrow."

If I dwell on these first days for too long in an introduction, it's because they somehow dramatizes the journey which my scholarly attention was also taking. The image of the lonely hiker on the plaque at Springer Mountain—and my own embodiment of that image in my first days alone on the trail—was quickly being replaced by the polyvocal chorus I found first written in the logbook, then spoken (and howled) through the woods of Tent City.

In "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction," Ursula K. Le Guin distinguishes between the narrative model of the hunt—linear, teleological, conflictual, masculine—and a different kind of storytelling, based not on the hunter but the gatherer of seeds and fruits.[6] This other kind of fiction would act less like a whizzing arrow than "a medicine bundle, holding things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us."[7]

[6] Le Guin, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction."
[7] Le Guin, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction," 4.

Over the weeks and months to come, I found this tension to be an animating one on the Appalachian Trail: between the linear narrative of a hero's journey, the tremendous achievement (and it is tremendous) of hiking two thousand two hundred miles in a calendar year, and this *other thing*—this traveling social world which felt more like a place to live, a bag to hold things, than a goal to struggle with or a mountain to conquer.

I met hikers who seemed to adhere neatly to the former narrative: ambitious, locked-in, focused on their achievement. Usually they sped by me, and I never saw them again. (They never had much time to talk, anyways.) Most hikers, however, seemed instead to oscillate between these different viewpoints: between fretfully counting their miles and relaxing into their breaks and "zero days"; between hoping they reach Katahdin, and never wanting the trail to end; between upholding the rigorous purity of hiking every mile of the trail, and occasionally skipping ahead to stay close to one's friends, or wandering down a side-trail and getting lost for a while. Between the unitary straight-line of the trail, and the desire paths which constantly branch out from it and circle back to it again.

While this tension is widespread on the trail, gradually it became clear that the hikers I was spending most of my time around were those for whom the more vivid, the more moving part of their hike was precisely the *world* of the trail: the trail as carrier bag, as something to hold you, as somewhere to get lost in. Indeed, while it was surprisingly difficult to get hikers to speak to me about the hours upon hours they spent hiking alone through the woods each day, they would happily talk at length about "the community," in all its many aspects. Thus over time I, too, came to shed the "hero's journey"—even that hero's journey of therapeutic transformation—as my main object of analysis.

What replaced it were the desire paths, the emergent social forms fossilized into hiker slang, of which "trail magic" and "hiker's midnight" are only two particularly pertinent examples. There were many more: "Zero days" were days when one didn't hike at all, but stayed in town or a hiker hostel. A "vortex" was the gravitational pull exerted by such a town or hostel, which easily turned one zero day into two or three.[8] "Blue-blazing" meant taking a side-trail off the official AT.[9] Each of these phrases expressed a formal pattern shaping life on the trail. Each captured a way that thru-hikers learn to see the world and move through it, in time and space. Each could have been a chapter.

Many of them, too, express the tension on the trail between quantity and quality—between precise measure and the measureless intensities imbuing a thru-hiker's life. *Zero* days offer a numeric count, but the *feeling*, the sheer relief or devilish temptation of "taking a zero" goes far beyond the fact of hiking zero miles. (And if it turns into a vortex, god help you…) This tension somehow works in an off-kilter parallel to that already discussed, between the trail as hero's journey or social world/carrying bag; and here, too, hikers find themselves caught between two poles. They love counting, and they love losing track of everything, too.

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[8] One hiker hostel, Angel's Rest in Pearisburg, even gave out a "vortex patch" to hikers who stayed for three or more nights at the hostel. Yes, I got one. A planned chapter called "The Edge of the Vortex" discussing vortexes and the thru-hikers' unique oscillations between exertion and rest, discipline and indulgence, remains to be written in the book version of this thesis.

[9] Because the official trail is marked by white "blazes" painted on trees, side-trails are often marked instead by blue-colored blazes. But blue-blazing can also become a metaphor for errance, dalliance, meandering; as one hiker told me about her experiments with different ritual and meditational practices, "I'm blue-blazing the spiritual path."

To allow myself a brief theoretical meander of my own: there is another, perhaps more anthropologically orthodox way of framing this approach. It is by way of the work of Victor Turner.

On its surface, the practice of thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail appears to resonate almost startlingly well with Victor Turner's classic description of rites of passage.[10] An initial period of separation, when hikers are dropped off at the foot of Springer Mountain and begin hiking the approach trail, is followed by a long period of liminality: the hike itself. Within this liminal state, new identities are assumed as hikers take on "trail names," which must be given to you by another hiker and which you then keep for the duration of the hike.

I cannot count the number of times hikers told me, often enthusiastically: "Everyone is equal out here!" Whether you're a CEO or a street-sweeper, the trail is equally tough on everyone; and while this may not in fact be true (it certainly helps to be able to afford to sleep in hostels or replace your hiking boots more frequently), the *idea* of it was important to many hikers I met.[11] This wiping-clean of the slate of identity is accompanied by a wider feeling of what Turner calls *communitas*: a generalized mood of solidarity, unity, and care amongst hikers, who distinguish themselves by their distance from the social norms of manners and cleanliness.[12] Indeed, hikers on the trail proudly call themselves "hiker trash," and over time their very stench

[10] Turner, *The Ritual Process,* 94-130.
[11] Indeed, the generalized suspension, if not erasure, of the social boundaries which typically shape American life is an intriguing facet of life on the trail, which I discuss further in chapter 1 in relation to the practice of trail magic.
[12] Turner, *The Ritual Process,* 96: "What is interesting about liminal phenomena for our present purposes is the blend they offer of lowliness and sacredness, of homogeneity and comradeship." A ritual on the Saturday morning of Trail Days each year dramatizes the identity of hiker trash and its relation to the towns the trail moves through: hikers parade down the main street of Damascus in their dirtiest hiking clothes, while locals spray them with hoses, water guns, and water balloons—a surreal performance, a cathartic and humorous acting-out of the repressed tensions between townsfolk and those damn stinky hikers who crowd the cafes and bars and hostels of each town on the trail all throughout the summer.

becomes a mark of belonging. My first night hiking north of Damascus, sitting for the first time around a campfire with other thru-hikers, someone asks me my name and whether I'm hiking.

"I'm Kodak," I say, "but I'm actually new on the trail, it's my first night."[13]

"I can tell," responds one of them—later I learn his name is Fungi—very quickly. "You're too *clean*."

I was surprised by all of this: by the extent to which the Appalachian Trail represented a strange, liminal culture of its own, with its own dances and rituals. Ironically, I had chosen to study the trail partly in order to escape from the exoticist habit of anthropological research to always fill the "savage slot" with what is strange, different, exotic.[14] By undertaking fieldwork in my own country and approaching a phenomenon like hiking which I had taken to be largely solitary, I thought I might reach a different angle than the typical model of the anthropologist showing up on the beach and becoming slowly accepted by an indigenous community. Yet to my bewilderment, and even amusement, in my first weeks on the Appalachian Trail I found myself acting out the same scenes of entrance and acceptance which fill the introductions of the most dated ethnographic texts.[15]

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[13] I was given my name in Damascus by a former thru-hiker named Boston Rob, who watched me trying (in vain) to fix a broken film camera, wasting a good couple rolls of Kodak film in the process. The name became a litmus test of sorts, separating those who knew the brand of camera film from those who were too young or not hipster enough to recognize it (not to mention a man in his 50s who began whistling Paul Simon, a teenage girl who said, "You mean Kodak Black? The rapper?", and the many people who persisted in calling me Kodiak or even, once, Klondike).

[14] Trouillot, "Anthropology and the Savage Slot."

[15] Not only acting, but *writing* out too: The scene on page 3 beginning "It wasn't a masquerade at first" performs my own version of this classic micro-genre of ethnographic writing. What is interesting to note, however, is that this genre, and this particular scene, were not only important to me, but at least equally to my interlocutors: countless times over the weeks and months to come, Iron Mike would recount the story of the Stromboli, framing it as a kind of turning point, the single moment where he knew I was "one of us" and thus could really trust me.

Iron Mike's frequent retelling of this story—often accompanied by a photo of my face covered in tomato sauce—only seemed, over time, to reassert the centrality of the very forms of ethnographic writing I had been hoping to elude; as well as to sharpen my wincing awareness of the ironically orthodox form my fieldwork seemed to be taking despite my best intentions. Yet it was precisely *through* this form that my presence became comprehensible, and narratable, to the hikers who became my friends.

However, whereas Turner discusses rituals lasting only days or weeks at most, hiking the trail can take six months or more—long enough for it become more like an everyday life than an extended ritual, or, in Turner's own words, a place "where that 'threshold' is protracted and becomes a 'tunnel'"—even a green tunnel.[16] As I suggested on this introduction's first pages, for those who hike the trail, it becomes a kind of mobile world unto itself. When I returned to the trail in October to hike the trails last 100 miles with the friends I had made in May and June down in Virginia, I had the feeling of stepping back into the exact same place I had left behind—even though we were more than a thousand miles further north. The same faces, the same atmosphere; the trail-world had moved with the hikers.

Yet for all that duration, the AT does in the end remain a temporary ritual, with a fixed ending-point in Mount Katahdin.[17] This disjunction creates a problem, not only for an anthropologist unsure of how to classify a social process (a ritual? a culture? a world?), but chiefly for the hikers themselves. Because, particularly for those who find new forms of well-being and flourishing on the trail (and many hikers do), the end of the trail creates an entirely new difficulty: *what now?*

Indeed, there is a much-discussed phenomenon called "post-trail depression" which often strikes hikers upon their re-entry to everyday lives based on anything other than hiking every day in the same direction. If what makes the trail therapeutic is precisely the alternative *world* it allows hikers to live in, then what happens when that world disappears, and hikers return to that

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Thus, having tried to shrug off a certain traditional and possibly outdated image of ethnographic fieldwork, I found that *the image itself* became central to the friendships I formed in the field. What is the post-post-post-modern ethnographer to do?

[16] Turner, "Liminal to Liminoid in Flow, Play, and Ritual," 41. The landscape of the AT is often called "the green tunnel" due its overwhelmingly forested quality.

[17] Except for the so-called "yo-yo" hikers, who reach one end of the trail (say, Katahdin) and turn around and start thru-hiking immediately back the other direction (say, Georgia). They are another story.

other world they often call, with so many mixed feelings, the "real" one? What happens when you walk *off* Katahdin?

This is the problem dramatized in the vignette which opens the thesis. It is a problem grappled with by each hiker, individually and collectively, both during the hike and after. Methodologically, my approach to post-trail life in this thesis has been Bluebird's: *don't even go there*.

There is a reason for this, which returns us to Turner. For the problem of post-trail depression raises an even deeper, more difficult question for thru-hikers: was this all just a make-believe fantasy? A merely temporary escape from the conditions of contemporary life? An extended kind of summer-camp? For hikers about to summit Katahdin, many of whom are on the brink of returning to past lives and, importantly, jobs, it can easily feel that way. These questions resonate with a central problem raised by Turner's work, a problem we could call the ambivalence of anti-structure: do rituals of passage, with their way of briefly turning the social world upside down, merely end up *reaffirming* the existing social structure, keeping subjects—once safely "re-incorporated"—locked safely into place within pre-existing social roles? Or might they allow something different to emerge?

Turner himself, especially in his later work, opened towards this latter possibility. In a fascinating late essay entitled "Liminal to Liminoid in Play, Flow, and Ritual," he writes that "antistructure, in fact, can generate and store a plurality of alternative models for living" (and even suggests that such models might be capable of "influencing" those in power "in the direction of radical change.")[18] Within the suspensive zone of liminality, the possibility of *difference* suddenly emerges. Even in his earliest book, *The Forest of Symbols*, Turner writes that

[18] Turner, "Liminal to Liminoid in Flow, Play, and Ritual," 33. The theory of *how* such "influence" might be exercised is predictably underdeveloped.

"liminality is the realm of primitive hypothesis, where there is a certain freedom to juggle with the factors of existence."[19]

The hikers I met on the Appalachian Trail were jugglers with the factors of existence. The social forms they lived through on the AT were the emergent results of their very own collective improvising—their own playing, their own dancing.[20] I am interested in what dwelling on the space of the trail, and attending to those forms in detail, might teach us. For if the AT does offer transformation through its qualities as a world, then it is only by attending closely to that world, transient as it might be, that we might bottle something up from it to save for later—as one hiker, Eeyore, once told me he wished he could do for the atmosphere of the trail itself.[21]

This is also a political frame, insofar as the AT may also be read—perhaps as any liminal space may be—as a prefigurative, proto-utopian social formation. Again, any such formation can easily be read not as a critical tool of disruption, but rather precisely as a kind of handmaid of the dominant social structure, or its release valve (just as the *communitas* of Burning Man lets the overlords of digital capitalism blow off steam for a few days). And yet *if* new social forms are someday, or perhaps rather urgently, needed, then within a country like the United States it might only be such strange, liminal, half-suspensive spaces as the AT which can serve as the kind of laboratories within which such forms might first be collectively imagined.

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[19] Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*," from *The Forest of Symbols*, 106.
[20] In "Liminal to Liminoid in Flow, Play, and Ritual," p. 33, Turner links liminal spaces to the notion of *playing*, which he then connects etymologically to the Old English *plegan* "to exercise oneself, move briskly," as well as its Middle Dutch cognate *pleyen,* "to dance"—a series of terms whose ongoing interrelation (as various forms of collective, embodied improvisation in movement) is made concrete on the AT.
[21]

If rhythm—as "improvised, changeable form"—is the object of this thesis, then its mode is story.[22] The trail itself is full of stories; they accumulate around campfires, on long walks through the afternoon, or whispered between tents late at night. And the forms and rhythms which I encountered along the trail, *formal* as they were, seemed to ask to be told not through charts or diagrams, but instead through stories—to be told as if around a campfire.

Of course, in this tension—between form and story, between the general and the particular—something of the trail's own tension between different ways of knowing, the quantitative and the qualitative, inevitably expresses itself. Walter Benjamin's classic discussion of story, in "The Storyteller," alights on the way that stories embed and transmit experience without reducing it to information; it is often the *lack* of explanation or closure, Benjamin writes, which allows a story to continue resonating in the minds and lives of the listener. Picking up the thread of Benjamin's thought, Lisa Stevenson writes of the value of images in ethnographic writing: "Images … are useful precisely because they can capture uncertainty and contradiction without having to resolve it."[23] Yet that uncertainty, the desire to meander and lose oneself through images and scenes, is always in a productive tension with a different desire: to follow the straight-line of an argument, to walk the path of a thought to its rational conclusion, and to know exactly how many miles it took along the way. In this way the inner conflicts of the anthropologist resonate, for once, with those of the hiker.

A wider, but related difficulty of my approach is how to balance this resonant openness of story and image with the need—the desire, too—to engage with theory. This problem becomes especially acute given that my object of study—form, pattern, rhythm—seems to resist

[22] This distinction between the mode and object of a work pays homage to Lisa Stevenson's *Life Beside Itself*.

[23] Stevenson, *Life Beside Itself,* 10

being limited to the particular; what makes something a pattern is precisely repetition, generality.[24] Here I have aimed for a style of writing wherein theory complexifies and thickens our reading of a story, scene, or image without explaining it—without the latter being instrumentalized as mere illustration. In approaching form through story, I have tried to outline the patterns of social life on the trail I take to be analytically significant without simultaneously foreclosing or silencing the affective resonances of a particular moment, a particular voice or phrase.

Writing of the "the stubbornly disturbing particularities that emerge in our fieldwork," Cheryl Mattingly asks, "Can the particular act as a scrim, refiguring transparency into generative and vitalizing opacity?"[25] I have tried to play with this possibility of a vitalizing opacity by interweaving scenes and theory, and sometimes cutting quickly between them, in a way that reduces neither one to the other. I am interested in what theory and story can *do to each other*, without the need for a middle term.

The Appalachian Trail is full of nested units—15 miles in a day, five days between towns (and your next zero), ten towns until the next state line, thirteen states till you reach Katahdin. Likewise, if the basic formal unit of this thesis is story and image, then, scaling up, at the broader level I have tried to experiment with the form of the *chapter* as a kind of carrier bag, precisely in Le Guin's terms: the chapter as an unruly container of many different stories, images, and lines of thought. What happens when they jumble all together? What gets lost, what might surprisingly be found? At this scale, again, the urge to follow the white-blazing straight-line of a single

[24] I am here again thinking with Eduardo Kohn's thinking about form and generality in *How Forests Think.*
[25] Mattingly, "The Gift: An Imagistic Critical Phenomenology," 34. I am thinking, also, of Lisa Stevenson's words: "We do not always want the truth in the form of facts or information; often we want it in the form of an image. What we want, perhaps, is the opacity of an image that can match the density of our feelings. We want something to hold us." *Life Beside Itself,* 13.

argument has been balanced with the blue-blazing desire for multiple lines of theoretical and imagistic flight. The results are, precisely, uncertain.

What follows in the thesis, then, are two short experiments in capturing the evanescent forms of the trail through carrier-bag chapters, each filled with an unruly assemblage of story and theory which try, collectively, to give a sense of a single emergent form or pattern: gift exchange in the first, rhythms in the second.

Of course, leaning towards story can lead writing towards the first-person, and risk verging on the narcissistic. Yet, in line with Pandian and McLean's call in *Crumpled Paper Boats* to experiment with "the novel possibilities for thought and action that might come with a deferral of critical distance, in pursuit of a less guarded, even reckless contamination by circumstance," that risk is one my writing willingly takes.[26] This is particularly the case given that the nominal conceptual subjects of each chapter—affect and rhythm, respectively—have both been described, separately, as realms where first-person, embodied knowledge is particularly important.[27] Inspired by a literary turn in anthropology, of which the *Crumpled Paper Boats* anthology is only one example, I also lean towards story and image for the ways in which more accessibly readable narrative forms might allow writing to travel differently through the world.[28]

Finally, making peace with gaps and detours is a challenging part of hiking the Appalachian Trail, and it has been an equally important part of writing this thesis. Many things have been left unsaid, many aspects of trail life left unexplored: pain, narrative, discipline,

[26] Pandian and McLean, "Prologue," *Crumpled Paper Boat*, 3.
[27] For affect, the case has been made by Favret-Saada, "Being Affected," as well as Collu, "Refracting Affects." For rhythm, Lefebvre's *Rhythmanalysis* inaugurated an entire methodological sub-field based on using the body of the researcher as a primary source of knowledge.
[28] Simply put, it matters to me that this writing will be enjoyable for a thru-hiker as well as an academic colleague to read.

errancy. And *walking* itself—walking as a chamber of dreaming, as a practice of thinking-in-movement, as a process of accumulating strength but also suffused with pain.[29] Of all the gaps, the quantity and quality of pain and difficulty involved in hiking such a trail have ended up too often at the margins of this account, resulting in what may be a strangely rosy picture of what is a deeply, ambivalently difficult undertaking, threaded throughout with suffering and adversity.

Yet is a theoretical reason for this. Emphasis on pain and suffering in the thru-hike often end up reinforcing narrative of struggle and accomplishment, the quintessentially individual journeys of self-discovery which so over-populate the thinking and talking about hiking.

In a world designed for heroic, willful self-actualization—or at least the promise of it, the demand for it—I have tried to direct my gaze instead towards those shared moments, quiet and loud, which build up, over time, into somewhere peaceful to live. Arriving at the Appalachian Trail in search of a hero's quest, I found instead a mobile dwelling-place, a traveling circus, and a walking haven in the midst of an increasingly inhospitable America, for which the only cost of entry—but a heavy one—is paid in flesh, or rather footsteps.

Footsteps, in their hundreds and thousands and millions. If you can finish the AT without your body or mind breaking down, you'll have walked, on average, five million footsteps.

[29] See also the epilogue.

The Gift Ecology of Trail Magic

The first time I experienced trail magic was on Whitetop Mountain in southwestern Virginia, a few miles north of Damascus and a few south of the Grayson Highlands. Days earlier that same mountain, which is the second tallest in Virginia, had been the site of an even more spectacular instantiation of trail magic, involving a dentist on the side of the mountain. My own first taste of the magic was less remarkable, though more startling, to me, for what I came to learn was its very normalcy.

It goes like this: I'm walking the last steps of the thousand-foot ascent of Whitetop, past a place called Buzzard Rock where the green tunnel of woods suddenly opens into a wide meadow. From the meadow you can see for miles over all the mountains of this corner of Virginia, their distant ridgelines threading finely through the cool evening blue as in a scroll-painting, one on top of another. You can imagine the buzzards circling the void, then alighting on a large rock and writing a place-name in the mind of some long-lost pioneer. Up above the clouds light up soft and pink, while down below I feel hunger suddenly speaking in my stomach, interrupting the experience of landscape.

It's getting towards dinner time and my hunger asks me whether I've packed enough food for the week. It's my first full week of hiking on the trail, and there are still four more days of hiking until we reach Marion, the next town, where I can do a "resupply"—the hiker term for catching a lift to Wal-Mart and buying more food. Those four days suddenly seem longer than they did this morning.

There is an important trail phenomenon called "hiker hunger," which I am just now coming to meet in my own stomach: it is a ravenous, overpowering hunger which wakes up

inside the body of a hiker and makes that hiker capable of eating virtually any quantity of food. At a restaurant along the trail in Pennsylvania there is a tradition called the "half-gallon challenge" in which hikers are challenged to eat a half-gallon tub of ice cream in half an hour. Almost everyone succeeds, although most throw it all up on the grass five minutes later. Hiker hunger is both a superpower—the power of turning into a bottomless pit, which the ritual of the half-gallon challenge celebrates—and a danger: it is easy to forget about hiker hunger when planning your week of food, especially at first, and to underestimate how quickly you will decimate your own food bag. Amongst the many anxieties which can haunt a hiker's first days on the trail, this question—*did I pack enough food?*—is one of the most immediate and visceral. It is just beginning to gnaw at me, as I continue along the trail which passes Buzzard Rock and continues across the open flank of the mountain, when I spot another hiker in the distance walking towards me. She is heading south, the opposite direction—"towards Georgia, not Maine," as one often jokes.

The hiker is in her mid-twenties and appears well-equipped. When our paths cross she speaks:

"There's trail magic up ahead. In a parking lot. They've got Burger King!"

With this she grins, then continues skipping down the mountain.

All the landscape, which had been slowly dimmed by hunger, suddenly lights up with the warm metallic glow of a roadside Burger King seen from an interstate highway late at night. Iron Mike and Bluebird must be there, I figure—new friends of mine, we'd planned to spend the night together camped around Buzzard Rock or a bit further, and I've been wondering when I'll run into them.

I hike on with a new spring in my steps. The last birds chirp and dart through the air, as these strange long mountains, stretching for miles, sink into their night's sleep beneath the pastel sky. The world becomes wide and soft and gentle, lit by the glow of an imagined Burger King. I drift through it easily.

This lasts me for a few minutes before the hunger returns. You forget, sometimes, how long a mile really is on foot. You forget even when walking miles on foot is all you're doing every day; and you especially forget when you are very hungry, at the end of a long day, legs heavy, footsteps slow. Gradually the pleasure of the evening skyscape is discolored once more by creeping fears. *I must have gone a mile already, did I miss the parking lot? Did I take a wrong turn?* I retrace my steps for fifty yards, in case I mysteriously missed a big parking lot in the middle of the meadow, then decide to keep going. But still the "magic" does not appear.

And what do I expect that "magic" to mean, anyways? Hungry, hangry, my thoughts continue in a fugue. What *was* I really expecting to see when I turned this last corner? Again I cease to see the sky and the clouds; again the hunger surmounts my perception, and now night really is falling, light fleeing. As I turn each corner and find nothing but more trail, more rock and meadow and tree, I almost laugh at myself for acting so ridiculously. I'll find Bluebird and Iron Mike tomorrow, I tell myself. Tonight, I'll camp alone, and wearily eat another dehydrated chili.

Then one more turn through the woods and I blink, waking on a vision I can hardly understand: a wide concrete parking lot tucked between the trees, at the far end of which is parked a large gray campervan. Beside this van, a man in a baseball cap is tending to a grill, from which smoke wafts up into the fading blue sky. Around the grill a small crowd of thru-hikers is gathered, talking, laughing, *eating*. Their warm, dark laughter echoes across the parking lot,

mixing with the sharp smell of meat, and when it reaches me I am filled to the quick with the emotion of the proverbial traveler who, wandering for days through the desert, arrives all at once at the foot of a lush oasis, a seeming paradise—or is it a mirage?

I stumble across the parking lot towards the crowd, still afraid of believing my eyes when I spot Iron Mike and Bluebird.

"Kodak!" they shout. "Come get some of this!"

I've only just met them, two days before, but they welcome me like family and introduce me to Gun Runner, the man in the baseball cap who owns the campervan, and his friend Jake.

"Howdy," they greet me, smiling. "You look like you need this."

As Gun Runner hands me the small brown paper bag filled with a Whopper, followed by a Coor's Light, something in me breaks down. I am tired and hungry, legs aching, spirit frayed, and the Whopper, warm in my hands, the beer perfectly cold, feel like small and inexplicable miracles. The intensity of my hunger converts itself into raw, uncomprehending gratitude. The feeling of a mirage persists: as though there must be a catch somewhere.

When I have eaten and come to my senses, I ask Gun Runner and Jake what it is, exactly, they're doing here. They tell me they've driven here from North Carolina, *just to do trail magic*. They have driven here, a five hour drive, just to distribute free food and drinks to the hungry and tired hikers who cross this section of the trail. They've been here for two days already and fed around 70 hikers; and they will stay here, parked, until they run out of food and drink to give.

I notice that Gun Runner is wearing a hat with the single-blue-lined American flag—the "Blue Lives Matter" flag, a symbol of support for the police against racial justice protesters. A strange feeling passes through my gut, mixing with the gratitude, strengthening the feeling that somehow, somewhere, there must be a catch.

“That’s trail magic, man,” says Iron Mike, laughing and shaking his head, as he notices the look on my face.

Gun Runner and Jake have one rule for their trail magic. For every burger you take, you have to drink one beer too. As the last light of day gives way to night, this rule has us all around the campfire. There are some hikers I have met in the days before—Fungi, Thor—and others I don’t know yet, and may never see again. The atmosphere around the fire is warm, convivial, relaxed, lit by a quiet festivity. We are all just happy to be there, muscles aching.

As we sit around the fire, our conversation keeps returning to “trail magic” itself—for this practice, wherein people who aren’t hiking show up to the trail and give free food and drink to hikers*, just because they feel like it*, is in fact widespread across the trail. As a new hiker, it’s the first time I’ve experienced such a thing, but the others keep talking about their favorite experiences of it. Gun Runner says that he himself thru-hiked the trail in 2021 and received trail magic, spontaneous gifts of food and drink, countless times. It was these moments which led him to eventually return to the trail and give food in turn. “I wanted to give back to the trail,” he says. Another hiker starts talking about her own plans to come back next year, once she’s finished the trail, and do trail magic for the next summer’s crop of thru-hikers.

These meals can range from the minimal but loving—a granola bar and Coke—to luxurious feasts. Yet, everyone agrees, the practice is always touching, always makes the day better.

“Trail magic is like pizza and sex,” quips Gun Runner at one point, the joke stretched out like a guitar string by his southern drawl. “When it’s good, it’s amazing. And when it’s not good… it’s still pretty good!”

The night gradually dims with the embers of fire and laughter. As we trail off to bed, each to our own tent or hammock arranged in the woods which circle the empty parking lot, the warmth of the night and the gift is carried with us. It cradles us as we fall asleep and the birds fall asleep. For me, still new on this trail, it's something else too: the first night on the trail that, laying in my tent, drifting off, I don't feel alone.

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When I first began to research the Appalachian Trail, the little phrase *trail magic* had popped up here and there, beguiling me. Whenever I came across it, those two words together triggered in my imagination a cascade of images: little elves dancing through the forest and teasing hikers; diseases and injuries cured simply by walking; mystic visions experienced on the eleventh hour of walking. I admit that I even hoped to find such things, and I purposefully avoided looking further into the term on the internet, so as to let the elves catch me fully off-guard. Deep down, in spite of all the reflexive critiques I had read and repeated in seminar rooms, I really *did* desire to experience first-hand some kind of magic phenomenon, the kind of spiritual encounter that might shake my own secular, academic worldview—as so many anthropologists had secretly sought before me.

It was disarming, then, to learn that trail magic in reality meant something less and something more: simple generosity. People like Gun Runner and Jake appear spontaneously, up and down the trail, all summer long, with food in hand to feed to hungry hikers—just because the feel like it. It might not seem like magic until you are hungry and broken on the edge of a long day's walk.

The term as practically used encompasses a wide range of practices. What unites these practices is the form of the gift. If two former hikers drive to a parking lot and distribute burgers and beers for four days, as Gun Runner and Jake did, that is trail magic. If a woman whose daughter's best friend hiked the trail three years ago shows up at a crossing with homemade cereal bars and ham sandwiches which you eat for lunch in the rain, that is trail magic. If there is a particular section of the trail where you have to walk nine miles between streams to find drinking water, and if someone anonymously leaves a hundred gallon-sized plastic water-bottles at the one road crossing within that stretch to make sure everyone who passes through that day is hydrated enough, that is trail magic. If a hiker has their food bag stolen overnight by a bear, and all of the hikers in the shelter decide to pitch in to give them enough food to make it through the week, that's trail magic too.

I witnessed, personally enjoyed, or heard stories about each of these examples myself, among countless others. At times trail magic seemed everywhere.

Indeed, the very next morning on Whitecap Mountain, while we ate the egg-and-sausage breakfast sandwiches and Fruit Loops bars which Gun Runner and Jake had woken to prepare for us, three middle-aged women showed up and begin setting up their own awning in the parking lot, a short distance from Gun Runner's campervan. In the shade of the awning these women set up a table upon which they arrayed apples, oranges, and peanut butter sandwiches in neat rows alongside a cooler filled with Coca-Cola and apple juice. When I walked over—having finished the breakfast along with the Coor's which Gun Runner had foisted on me, explaining that his golden rule applied equally to breakfast—these women offered me a sandwich and a soda. They, too, had come here to do trail magic. They weren't former hikers but rather members of a nearby church who considered feeding straggling hikers a practice of virtue. As breakfast stretched into

lunch time, a small crowd gathered around their tent, as the new day's hikers began stopping for peanut butter sandwiches before ever making it to the piles of Burger King.

As this crowd grew larger, I saw Gun Runner watching it ruefully. "Come on, man…" he said, smiling and shaking his head. "Everyone's going to theirs instead of ours now!"

At a certain point, trail magic can become a normal, even predictable occurrence, especially if you are around the bubble during the high season.[30] Yet it feels rare enough, or inexplicable enough, to punctuate the days and weeks of hiking with a kind of strange sparkle of its own. Many of the best days on trail begin with that same omen from a passing southbound hiker—"there's trail magic just up ahead"—and then, after a brief but torturous stretch of walking, stretch out into laziness for the rest of the afternoon around a fire, a barbeque, a cooler full of beers and Gatorade or fresh oranges. The atmosphere tends towards quiet delight, the grace of living under the spell of a gift that can never be quite expected or relied upon. There are probably very few hikers on the AT who could not recall, right off the top of their head, two or three or four of their favorite instances of trail magic.

For me, that first night on Whitetop Mountain, the feeling instead took the form of disbelief, a kind of bewilderment at a gift too good to be true, a sudden and quite unexpected tenderness towards someone named Gun Runner wearing a Blue Lives Matter hat. What was going on here?

The next morning, that same feeling of disbelief drove me to ask Gun Runner: *Why* did you do this? Why would you decide to drive up here out of your way, and spend hundreds of dollars on gas and beers and burgers, just for this?

[30] Its regularity does, however, vary by region; many people noted to me that trail magic seems to be more common in the South than the North.

"We wanted to give back to the trail," Gun Runner explains. "I had experienced trail magic myself on my own thru-hike, and I just thought, hell, might as well do the same for other people. And it feels good."

That notion, of *giving back to the trail*, recurred countless times along the trail. Even current thru-hikers, who hadn't yet made it even halfway to Katahdin, talked ceaselessly about their own plans to return to the trail, in future years, to do trail magic. Some people who hike the trail go on to spend their next few summers in a car, or ideally a van, following the bubble slowly up the trail, stopping a little here and a little there to "do trail magic" and hang out with hikers. People get hooked, drawn in. Later on, in Maine, I met an ex-hiker named Mountain Doctor who had just passed an entire week set up at a road crossing in the Hundred-Mile Wilderness, spending nights sleeping in his tent and days giving people fruit, sandwiches, and homemade chili which he stored in a cooler in his car, often while tripping on acid. By the time we reached him, that week was drawing to a close along with his supplies.

"You're getting the very last of the trail magic, my friend," he said, smiling serenely, as he handed me a slice of watermelon. "But it's been an amazing week."

As these encounters accumulated over time, I began to find myself daydreaming about the moment when I, too, could show up to an out-of-the-way road crossing with a cooler full of food and make some tired and lonely hiker's day.

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What power resides in the object given that causes its its recipient to pay it back?[31]

[31] Mauss, *The Gift,* 1

In 1925, the French anthropologist Marcel Mauss published *The Gift*, one of the most enduring pieces of twentieth-century social theory. Building on ethnographic materials collected by early anthropologists, Mauss wrote about a variety of indigenous societies which shared a common attribute: their economic systems were based not on the like-for-like exchange of commodities, let alone money, but instead on gift exchange. Rather than an economic market as we might recognize it today, it was through an elaborate series of gift rituals that resources flowed between different groups and relations between those groups were formed, secured, or re-negotiated.

One of Mauss' classic examples is the *kula* ring described by Bronislaw Malinowski, who spent two years living amongst the Trobriand Islanders located on a ring of islands to the north of Australia, in the Pacific Ocean. In Malinowski's account, the *kula* is the system of gift-exchange which connects all the various tribes inhabiting these islands. The *kula* is carried out by tribal chiefs who lead great fleets of ships on expeditions to neighboring islands in order to ceremonially present their fellow tribes with lavish gifts.

These gifts are always of two kinds: carved bracelets placed in a shell, or necklaces made of mother of pearl. They are exchanged in rituals freighted with solemn importance, and they are never paid back directly or immediately; it is only much later that the giving tribe might receive a counter-gift. Nor will the counter-gift be in the same amount, or even in the same currency—bracelets or necklaces—as the original gift was. Rather, Malinowski discovers that these gifts move across the islands in a very particular form: a circle. The Trobriand Islands themselves being arranged in a rough circle, Malinowski finds a curious pattern: bracelets passing clockwise, necklaces passing counterclockwise. Thus, in practice, a tribe which receives a gift of bracelets from the island to their west would return that gift, later on, in the form of necklaces—

necklaces which they would have most likely received from the island to their east, which they will repay in turn with the bracelets received from the west. To fail to participate in this wide choreography of gift-giving is to risk the honor of the tribe and endanger its social relations with neighboring groups.

This pattern is what catches Mauss' interest. His account zooms out from the concrete, performative ritual of gift exchange to reveal a larger pattern of disarming simplicity: shell bracelets and mother-of-pearl necklaces moving in two parallels circles. "Indeed," Mauss writes, "it is as if all these tribes, these expeditions across the sea, these precious things and objects for use, these types of food and festivals … *were caught up in a circle*, following around this circle a regular movement in time and space."[32] Along this circle, the goods flow continuously—"they must not be kept too long a time, nor must one be slow or difficult in passing them on"[33]—such that no single tribe ends up enriching or impoverishing themselves overly from the process. It is rather *the circle itself*, the social ties along that circle created by the extended process of giving, that persist, and succeed in knitting together, across time and space, an entire assemblage of tribes into something resembling a society. If the circle is the form of that society, gifts themselves are its fabric.

This leads us to Mauss' wider argument: that in societies dominated by gift exchange, of which the Trobriand Islands are only one particularly vivid example, the network of reciprocal obligations created by the passage of gifts is the very glue which holds the larger society together. A gift which is not immediately repaid creates a lasting social connection—whether in the form of a deep feeling of gratitude or a sense of *obligation* to reciprocate—in a way that a fair, equal, immediate exchange of commodities does not.

[32] Mauss, *The Gift,* 22
[33] Mauss, *The Gift,* 23

Think about going out for dinner with a friend, or even just for a coffee: when someone decides to be gallant and buy their friend a coffee, it leaves a little spark of gratitude, perhaps a spark of injustice too (*I should have paid*), and inevitably the phrase: "I'll get you next time." This lingering feeling itself is what makes a next time more likely—whereas when you split the bill fairly, it leaves both parties clean and free to walk away, unobligated, unencumbered. It is the very *disjunction* of gift exchange—the inevitable temporal lag and qualitative difference between gift and countergift—which leads it to produce a lasting social connection.

Gifts, then, are are exchanges which create relations*;* and, as Mauss shows, when you expand the practice of gift exchange out from individuals to tribes and wider social groups, when you multiply it across time and space through institutionalized cultural forms such as the *kula* ring, the result is a wide web of relations knitting society itself together. While in Mauss' account the *kula* takes the neat (and certainly oversimplified) form of a circle, in other societies these networks of relation might be much more tangled. But what matters is that this web holds society together. As Mauss quotes a villager in New Caledonia, a separate area of Melanesia: "Our [gift] festivals are the movement of the hook that serves to bind together the various sections of the straw roofing so as to make one single roof, one single word."[34]

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Three days after I hike out of the parking lot on Whitetop Mountain, I experience trail magic for the second time.

[34] Mauss, *The Gift*, 21

It's late in the afternoon again and after hiking ten miles, I've arrived at my planned shelter for the night, and just unfolded my sleeping bag when a southbound hiker shows up. After chatting for a few minutes, he suddenly exclaims—"Oh! I forgot to tell you!"

When I ask him what he forgot, he tells me there's trail magic at this big church a couple miles north up the trail.

"They're serving pizza tonight and showing a movie, I think," he says. "Then you can camp on their lawn, and tomorrow there will be breakfast and maybe lunch. I decided to keep walking, but it looked pretty nice. It's point-seven down the road but they'll give you a ride if you call; they had all these signs taped up at the road crossing"

I hesitate for a moment, having just gotten settled at this shelter; but I'm hungry again, and the thought of free pizza is too much to pass up. So I pack up again and hit the trail.

Golden light filters through the woods; hiking through the early evening is always a pleasure, even if it often means one is running late and risks arriving to camp after dark. After a mile I run into NPR, a hiker I've met in the previous days. He's heading to the same church, where his "trail family" is waiting for him. We chat as we walk—he is a computer-science student from California who went to college in Atlanta and is hiking the trail before beginning a new job. The trail comes out of the woods and leads through a wide meadow, past a group of unblinking cows, before reaching a dirt road where a paper sign has been affixed to a tree: TRAIL MAGIC FREE FOOD 0.7 MILES, MAY 24-25. CALL FOR RIDE XXX-XXX-XXXX.

It seems a little late to call for a ride, and besides we are energized by the walk and each other's company, so we head the half mile down the road, which leads downhill to a small complex of church buildings. One of them is lit up and when we walk towards it, a large man in

his forties emerges and leads us inside to a dining hall, where the last of the pizza, snacks, and soda is arranged, gleaming under fluorescent lights.

"Welcome, welcome," says the man from the church, smiling. "Eat, eat."

I'm filled with the same shock of gratitude, a shock which over the next months will become familiar but never entirely wear off. NPR finds his trail family—Holes, Dead Dad, Toe Show, Dead Mouse—and we devour the pizza slices together.

In the parking lot just outside the building, a large screen has been set up, and as darkness falls the church folks begin to project a movie. A ragtag mix of hikers and local churchgoers settle down in folding chairs to watch the movie, the plot of which revolves around a killer grizzly bear terrorizing a family on an island in Alaska. We watch for a few minutes, then cross the road to a large field which is filled with twenty or so tents, spread out on the grass. Above the tents looms a giant wooden cross. At the edge of the field a small river curves through the woods. I set up my tent near the river, far from the cross. The sounds of running water and the distant echoes of a roaring cinematic grizzly bear intermingle in the night as I drift off.

The next morning, waking early, I roll out of my tent to find five long-horned steer grazing in the adjacent field. They are large and beautiful creatures with their big horns. As the sky lightens, the faded wooden cross watches silently over the quiet army of hikers who emerge, one by one, from their rainbow tents and stumble through the wide field towards the church for breakfast. The dining hall is newly filled with breakfast foods of all kinds, while lunch is already being prepared by a half dozen people in a back room. Next to the food, arranged on folding tables is a whole range of hiking supplies to take as needed; next to these is another long table covered in pamphlets about God, salvation, and the afterlife.

“It’s our third year doing this,” the smiling man from the church is telling me. “Some of our other church people didn’t get it, but I love helping hikers. It’s just great.”

The dining hall fills with hikers and their unruly talk, their laughter. I linger in the church for breakfast, and then lunch, my new hunger meeting its match in piles of turkey burgers and venison. My stomach is quickly expanding. Hikers pass in and out—some eat a quick breakfast then get on their way, catching a lift to the trailhead from one of the church people. Others take advantage of the offer of a free ride on the church’s shuttle bus to the Wal-Mart in Marion, where they can do a resupply. Still others appear in the early afternoon, fresh off the trail, hungry and grateful for the food and the company. An atmosphere of joyous commotion stretches out in this drab, low-ceilinged room, giving it the feeling of a circus tent. There are many new faces and one of them belongs to Eeyore.

When I first see him across the dining hall talking and gesturing to a collection of people whom I will also later meet, there is a quality in Eeyore’s unguarded smile, the deep scratch of his voice, and the wildness of his hair and beard, exceptional even by the standards of the trail which make him appear to me almost homeless. Still wearing city eyes, I judge him for this instinctively, and don’t feel inclined to talk to him. But as the morning stretches into afternoon and the festivity of the communal breakfast crests, then breaks into a warm slothfulness amongst those who linger for lunch, I find myself sitting with him at a table outside.

Eeyore is in his fifties and is hiking on the Appalachian Trail for a third year in a row, trying to finish it for the first time. In 2021 he made it about 1,700 miles, and in 2022 he made it 1,800, succumbing both times to injuries. Although he tells me that he loves the trail mostly for the people and the community it offers, still it haunts him that he has not finished, and so he has

come back for one more shot—what he calls his "redemption walk." When I ask him what this redemption means, he doesn't talk about his unfinished attempts; he talks about being a veteran.

"I've been at war, in active combat zones, for five years," Eeyore tells me. "You spend that much time at war and you see and do things you can't forget." He pauses. "Not everyone would say this, but I think we're trained to be murderers. And we are." A friend of his and a fellow hiker and veteran, named Just Sam, sits down next to him, and they discuss this word, *murderer*, and the kinds of guilt and haunting which encircle it. When Eeyore talks you can see these depths in his eyes, hear them in the timbre of his voice, without ever fully understanding them.

The Appalachian Trail was not Eeyore's first long walk. In 2019 he walked from Florida to California to raise awareness about the plight of homeless veterans, and to learn first-hand the lived experience of living outdoors, sleeping under bridges, walking for hours every day. Having arrived at the bottom of California, he started up the Pacific Crest Trail and walked it five hundred miles into the High Sierra, until injury forced him off. Since then, trails have been his spiritual home.

I ask Eeyore what brings him back here each year. "Oh, the people," he says. "The people, the people…" He looks around at the loose, mixed gaggles of hikers and locals, assembled in this tiny town tucked into the hills of Virginia. "And this. You know. The magic."

Within twenty minutes of picking up the conversation with Eeyore I am entranced by his strange, pained charisma; and I am moved by the evident love shown in the friendship between him and Just Sam, two long-bearded veterans teasing each other, laughing, hugging. Just Sam has a family back in Ohio and yesterday they had to put their family dog down. He talks about that dog with a wry, sad smile. Eeyore listens seriously, nodding. Then I duck inside for another

serving of venison, leaving my voice recorder running, and the two of them tell a series of dirty jokes into it. A pick-up truck rolls into the parking lot and drops off another truckload of hikers, who bound into the dining hall.

We speak for an hour, Eeyore and I. Over the next two months he will become, slowly but surely, one of my closest friends on the trail. For now I am merely struck by the rueful memory of how quickly I had judged him, at first glance across the dining hall; of how, for the wildness of his beard and his voice, I had viewed him as someone I didn't want to speak to at all.

Lunch eventually ends, and I know I should start hiking eventually. It's one more day's walking into Marion, where I will be able to take a shower, access the internet, buy more food. The first town-to-town stretch of my hike is almost complete. I amble back across the field, beneath the giant cross, and start taking my tent. As I'm doing this a young couple walks past me, in plain town clothes, carrying shovels, pitchforks and scythes. "Howdy," they greet me in a friendly voice. I ask them what the tools are for.

"Oh, we've got to clear out this field here, take out all the weeds. There's a wedding here next week."

"Who's getting married?"

They laugh. "We are!"

I laugh too, and wish them a beautiful wedding. We speak for a minute longer—they talk about how strange and amusing it is, all these hikers in funny clothing descending on their town and their church for the weekend. They say it's the busiest that the town ever gets. We smile, then I return to packing up my tent, and they get down to weed removal. "Good luck!" I say.

I return to the dining hall one last time to thank the church members for feeding us, but I find that Iron Mike and Bluebird have arrived and spend another hour talking with them. The

church is beginning to become a vortex. Eventually I do disengage myself and make my departure. When I go, the church members hug me and wish me luck. They have stood there, smiling on, all night and day as the hungry hikers devour the food they are giving. They've driven hikers up and down that dirt road countless times, not to mention the further trips to Wal-Mart. They've spent an entire Friday and Saturday on this work. They've probably fed close to a hundred hikers in twenty-four hours.

As I pass the parking lot one last time I notice all their pick-up trucks are plastered with Trump stickers. It's into one of these trucks that I throw my bag and squeeze in with two other hikers while we are driven by a woman in her fifties to the trailhead. As we pull away from the church I look back towards the field, and an image sears itself in my mind: the image of a mixed group of hikers and townspeople stood in a semicircle around an immense pile of weeds which burns slowly, weaving lines of smoke up over the cross and the river and into the sky.

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As I received free meal after free meal on the Appalachian Trail, in trail magic ceremonies which certainly contained their own ritual form, I slowly began to wonder: was I witnessing here the improbable existence, buried deep in the Appalachian Mountains, of a kind of clandestine gift economy?

In my first encounters with trail magic, the possibility glimmered before my eyes: that without calling it as such, hikers were developing a kind of economy of their own, a system of solidarity and mutual aid which might really suspend the logics of capitalism for those who hike the trail. The gift of a mother-of-pearl necklace *asks* to be paid back—or rather paid forward—

indirectly, magically, and over time, in a way that knits together social relations and creates a broad social net. Might we say the same for the gift of a hamburger? In what ways does trail magic suspend the logics of capitalism?

Not, surely, in any concrete economic sense. For even as I type the question, the image of sixty brown paper bags, splashed with the Burger King logo, returns to my eyes; the smell of cooking meat and asphalt returns to my nose, the taste of Coke and cheap beer returns to my mouth. I see piles of venison and sausage, and pools of gasoline burned to drive hikers to Wal-Mart where they buy their own mass-produced, plastic-wrapped Ramen packets for the next week's hiking.

To view this situation as any kind of alternative to capitalism itself requires a significantly narrowed frame. Trail magic is rather a practice which feeds intimately off the system of capitalism which surrounds it. The money spent by Gun Runner and Jake on the burgers and beers was earned by their own wage-labor, outside the trail; the burgers themselves were produced through some of the most brutal practices of factory farming imaginable, outside the trail; the *rest* of our food that week had been bought at a Wal-Mart or Dollar General, outside the trail. At every stage of trail magic, the gift is built upon the globalized capitalist economy; it is in fact made especially possible or practicable by the very *cheapness* with which that economy imbues its products, a cheapness which extends inevitably to the labor that produces them. Gun Runner and Jake were able to distribute so many burgers because they had been made so unbelievably cheap by Burger King's global supply chains.

What, then, was *different* in those afternoons we spent together, basking in the glow of a gift? Why did it feel like something alternative was happening? Or was it merely a performance? A living cow slaughtered in a factory farm and converted into industrial beef, shaped into a patty

and sold between buns as a Whopper at a Burger King in rural Virginia, is brought to the Appalachian Trail and given as a gift to a hungry and grateful hiker in a way that makes a different kind of social ecology possible. Commodities are turned into gifts without ever disrupting the violence of their production—but in a way which nevertheless allows, briefly, something *else* to emerge. How might we describe that something else?

One answer might have to do with the word magic. At first, as I have said, this word confused me, leading me to expect some kind of supernatural phenomenon, ghosts or spirits of the trail haunting hikers. Yet over time, magic came to feel like just the right word. For what struck me before anything else was a *feeling*—an embodied experience of surprise, bewilderment, wonder. It was not the gift itself but the way it felt*,* the atmosphere which it produced, that came to feel different and special.

Within that atmosphere, encounters become possible which would not otherwise have been. On Whitetop Mountain I came to feel tenderly grateful towards a man named Gun Runner wearing a Blue Lives Matter hat; at the church a few days later, the same emotion moved me with affection towards a group of Evangelical Christians whose pickup trucks were plastered with Trump stickers. Having grown up in a sheltered and liberal middle-class family, I would never have met these people in the course of my normal life; and even if I did, briefly, in a gas station or restaurant on a road trip, I would have never imagined feeling an emotion akin to love towards them. To feel it suddenly surging within me in spite of myself was surprising, and socially and politically unsettling—yet in some way revivifying. For within the atmospheric bubble of trail magic, the bottomless social division which seems to ineluctably shape American life—the structural improbability of meeting and developing attachments to people with radically different political views or life situations to your own—was briefly suspended.

Tech workers in their twenties, working-class Evangelicals, outdoorsy middle-class college grads, veterans of all kinds, the conservative and the liberal and the avowedly apolitical—all could *meet* each other beneath the tent of trail magic, and even become friends. Within the glow of trail magic my habits of judgement were suspended for long enough to entertain a conversation with unkempt, wild-eyed Eeyore, who I had first instinctively judged as somewhat frightening and who would later become one of my closest and dearest friends on the whole trail.

"The mood of enchantment may be valuable for ethical life," writes Jane Bennett in *The Enchantment of Modern Life*.[35] Bennett describes enchantment as an "instance, a surprising encounter, a meeting with something that you did not expect and are not fully prepared to engage,"[36] and later as "a state of openness to the disturbing-captivating elements in everyday experience."[37] A momentary emotion of wonder, awe, or disturbance, an instance in which are you undone by the world and become open to it; a sudden opening to the world which is not only pleasant but also distinctly uncanny, tearing one out of one's usual dispositions.[38] If trail magic is enchanted, it is in this sense.

Bennett uses the vocabulary of affect to describe such enchantment, following affect theorists who use the concept to theorize those aspects of embodied experience which are *felt* before they are understood.[39] Like "something that hesitates at the edge of the unsayable,"[40] affects are effervescent as they move between bodies; yet they are concrete enough in their

[35] Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 1
[36] Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life,* 5
[37] Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life,* 131
[38] Cf. Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life,* 5
[39] See, for instance, Brennan's *The Transmission of Affect,* Massumi's "The Autonomy of Affect," and the texts collected in Seigworth and Gregg's *Affect Theory Reader.*
[40] Anderson, "Affective Atmospheres," 79

effects: an affect of joy might spiral your body into movement, dance or laughter; an affect of melancholy might paralyze that same body, leaving you prone on the bed all day.

Affect is the spark which flies between Gun Runner and I when he hands me the gift of a burger. Something in me moves, wobbles; I'm *affected* in a way that precedes my conscious thought. It passes between bodies, his body receiving in turn the vibrations of gratitude emanating from me (or so I imagine). At the same time, affect is what swirls through the parking lot itself, and the church dining hall a week later. For if affects move from body to body—I affect you, you affect me—they also circulate within atmospheres. If affects are forces, affective atmospheres are *force fields* we find ourselves caught in.[41] In Teresa Brennan's words, "is there anyone who has not, at least once, walked into a room and 'felt the atmosphere'?"[42]

Upon arriving at a scene of trail magic, one enters into a very particular affective atmosphere—of a certain conviviality, festive relaxation, fatigued joy. It's as though the affective charge of the gratitude felt by the various hikers who receive trail magic begins circulating around the space itself, diffusing into a generalized atmosphere that you can't help but *feel* the second you step into that parking lot, that church hall, that roadside crossing filled with smoke from a barbeque.[43] Time stretches out; gravity gets a little stronger; you wonder quietly, or talk.

For Bennett, it is in the radically felt movements of affect that enchantment endures in the midst of a supposedly disenchanted modernity.[44] In contrast to Max Weber's archetypical vision

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[41]This sentence adapts a line from the second chapter of Samuele Collu's forthcoming *Into the Loop*. Kathleen Stewart also describes affective atmospheres as "force fields in which people find themselves" (Stewart, "Atmospheric Attunements," 452).
[42] Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*, 1
[43] Do they leave a trace too? Does the parking lot on Whitetop Mountain still vibrate slightly with the memories of those three days of trail magic in late May?
[44] For other scholars viewing affect as a form of enchantment, see Collu's discussion of affects as spirits in "Refracting Affects: Affect, Psychotherapy, and Spirit Dis-Possession," 296-298.

of a world in which "there are no mysterious, incalculable forces that come into play, but rather… one can… in principle, master all things by calculation," she suggests a world where mystery, enchantment, incalculability—*magic*—have not fled the scene but rather moved to strange, unnoticed, everyday corners of existence, such as a parking lot on the side of a mountain.[45] Hidden at the margins of modern life, enchantment can continue to be an animating force in our lives, if we allow it. Specifically, in Bennett's account, enchantment can play an important role in our ethical life. But in what sense? What does an affect of enchantment *do* in the world as it circulates through it? What does the atmosphere of trail magic do?

In Bennett's account, the mood of enchantment is important in provoking a "spirit of generosity."[46] She describes generosity as the stance of "rendering oneself more open to the surprise of other selves and bodies and more willing and able to enter into productive assemblages with them."[47] We are more open to connect with what is different from us, she suggests, when taken by a mood of wonder or awe; and so it might be an ethical and political practice to cultivate such moods, to seek them out in our lives as a way of cultivating generosity.

This account seems to describe well the social effects of trail magic. It really is a feeling of awe and wonder which overcomes one in the presence of the gift; and this feeling does lead, in turn, to a new attitude of generosity, in Bennett's sense: my own instinctive, half-conscious judgements of the gift-giver and the other people around me are halted in their tracks. It's an atmosphere which produces a kind of natural *hesitation* in my judgements: within the warmth of trail magic, it becomes possible to meet Gun Runner or Eeyore from a different starting point.[48] I am opened differently to "the surprise of other selves."

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[45] Weber, "Science as Vocation," 139. Quoted in Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life,* 13.
[46] Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life,* 10
[47] Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, 131
[48] On hesitation as an ethical practice, see Alia Al-Saji, "A Phenomenology of Hesitation."

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I next see Eeyore a week later, at another trail magic. A hiker named Comfort is celebrating his birthday by cooking burgers for everyone over an open fire at a road crossing; amongst the faces new and familiar, I find Eeyore sitting on a cooler of beers. “How’s your experiment going?” he asks with a wry smile. But his spirits seem low, he keeps holding his shoulder gingerly, and when I ask he tells me he dislocated it after snagging a root and tumbling off the trail, a couple days after we met at the church. Just Sam had to pop it back into place. Eeyore hikes in mad bursts, almost sprinting down the trail, and keeps getting into scrapes with roots and branches and rocks; but he can hike no other way. He says the shoulder hurts to sleep on, but he has to push through.

Then it’s a couple weeks before I see him again and I don’t know if he’s ahead of me or behind me on the trail. Sometimes in the middle of the long day hiking I think about him and wonder how his shoulder is doing. Then one day, exhausted after a brutal descent down from Dragon’s Tooth, I stumble into a hostel called Four Pines and find Eeyore cooking dinner for everyone.

“I’m helping out Donna for a few days,” he tells me. Donna is the owner of the hostel, a local woman from the area who twenty years ago fell in love with a thru-hiker named Joe. After Joe finished the trail they decided to build a hostel together on a road a half-mile from the trail. Last year Joe died of cancer, leaving Donna alone to handle the stinky flocks of hikers who pass through each year. Eeyore has come here for a few days to help out with the cooking while his shoulder heals. In fact Donna is never really alone—she appears always surrounded by a gaggle

of hikers or ex-hikers like Eeyore who stick around for a few days, a few weeks, maybe the whole summer, or maybe for years on end, working in the hostel as a way of staying connected to the trail community.

The meal Eeyore cooks is delicious, and it puts all the hikers in a good mood. Golden light slants through the trees, birdsong pitter patters in a field, and soft green mountains loom in the distance, waiting to be climbed. As we're eating, Donna comes around with a donation box. "It's pay what you can," she says. "Whatever we raise tonight will go towards feeding the hikers at tomorrow's dinner."

"Sounds like socialism," quips a middle-aged male hiker.

"Damn right it does!" replies Donna, grinning.

As the sun sets, the hikers linger outside. The whole hillside begins to light up with fireflies. I find myself talking to Eeyore and Britches, a 19-year-old thru-hiker from Georgia. They are exchanging stories of trail magic. Britches is telling the story of walking past Whitetop Mountain and running into another hiker friend, SheRa, standing and waiting around. When Britches asked what SheRa was waiting for, she replied, "A dentist!" Britches thought it was a joke and kept walking, and only later did she hear the whole story: SheRa had had a toothache and word had passed down the trail until it reached a southbound section hiker who happened to be a dentist, who managed to hike up onto the mountain and fix up SheRa's mouth that same day.

Then Eeyore tells a story about finding a lost wedding ring. Eeyore is a captivating storytelling, and this story is a beautiful and slightly haunting one. It makes me suddenly wish I had been taping it with my voice recorder, and the next morning—after a delicious breakfast

cooked by Eeyore and Britches together—I ask Eeyore if he would mind telling me the story again while I record it.

It goes like this: Eeyore is hiking out of Harper's Ferry with four guys, three of them veterans, including his best friend, The Mayor, a very short man who hikes in bright shorts emblazoned with stars-and-stripes. It's a hot day and they're running through, trying to get miles in, but Eeyore takes a break at a certain spot and meets two women in day clothes. He starts teasing them about not wearing the right clothes for hiking, when he suddenly realizes they're upset—they explain that one of the women had been up ahead with her fiancé, taking engagement pictures, when they lost the wedding ring on one of the ledges. The woman is on the verge of tears as she tells this, and Eeyore tells them that he'll send in the guys he's hiking with to help them. When the other guys catch up with Eeyore he explains to them the situation and they hike ahead; by the time Eeyore packs up his bag and reaches the ledges, The Mayor is sprawled out on a rock face over a six-foot crevice, where the newly found wedding ring is balanced precariously. Meanwhile the other hikers are out gathering branches long enough to reach the ring. Eventually they find the right branch and The Mayor, in a feat of enormous dexterity, manages to hook the wedding ring and fish it out of the crevice. The ring is recovered, the day is saved.

"The weird part of the story," Eeyore suddenly interjects, "is that all of them guys had already hiked with her and her fiancé… *back down in Georgia*." A thousand miles later down the trail, they meet again by complete coincidence, with the thru-hikers saving the couple's day. Eeyore trails off, letting this coincidence hang in the air for a moment.

The story continues: overcome with gratitude, the couple invites Eeyore, The Mayor and all the other hikers to their wedding in Winchester. “It was a very elaborate, expensive wedding,” Eeyore says, “but she told us—”

Eeyore’s voice suddenly breaks. I’m disarmed. In the middle of the story, the storyteller’s voice suddenly halts in his throat. When I look up, tears glimmer in his eyes without falling.

“She told us to come in *hiker clothes*.” He laughs a little. “And The Mayor ended up being the ringbearer. So he made a tuxedo with cut-off shorts, and wore his normal attire: cowboy hat, red white and blue, a weird vest-shirt-thing, red white and blue. Yeah. But the family…”

He chokes up briefly again.

“The couple’s families absorbed him, as if they’d been family all along. So when you always think you’re outsiders, you’re actually insiders…”

Suddenly I see Eeyore, The Mayor, and three other veterans, in their dirty hiking rags, beards long and wild, lingering at the wedding surrounded by rich and clean, shiny people. I see them beloved.

“And ironically,” Eeyore continues after a breath, “I had met all of those guys here—at this hostel, Donna’s. Because one of them was carrying one of his brother’s ashes. Who was a marine. And he died by suicide. So… just yesterday, when I got to Dragon’s Tooth, I got a text. And it’s those same guys, because they’re hiking out of Harper’s Ferry again this week, together… and the couple had a baby, this week. *And we were the first to know*.”

The moment hangs in the air. Eeyore’s story, riven with ellipses and semicolons, silences whose bottom you can’t see, draws to its conclusion.

"So the trail is just this weird…family. And it's why a lot of us come back, and it's why we try to do what we can. It's why we try to do our little part. Because magic happens."

The gift is magic, and the world can be a gift. But to *live* those truths requires—not inexplicable enchantment, or salvation, or elves—but a particular social form.

Hiker's Midnight and Other Rhythms

Dusk.

Last blue light filtering through the canopy like a shifting mosaic, dying embers twinkling in the firepit, first fireflies lighting up and around us. Tucked between these varieties of half-light a circle of hikers is finishing their dinner, discussing the day, complaining about fatigue, laughing quietly. The hikers' voices become more and more intermittent, voices trailing into tiredness, flashing like the embers and fireflies through long fields of silence colored with the hum of cicadas, running water, wind. The day's walking settles, as pain or warmth or rigidity, into our legs and backs and shoulders. The last bites of ramen are still being devoured, the last jokes made, when one hiker slaps her knee and stands up.

"Well," she says, "I think that's hiker's midnight."

With these words she turns her back to the fire and walks, or rather hobbles, off to her tent.

The others nod silently. Over the next ten minutes they each stand up, one by one, and return to their tents or hammocks or to the shared lean-to, slip into their sleeping bags, and drift to sleep quietly or with loud snores. I, too, get up, pack up my dinner utensils and walk to my tent, following this wordless movement like the bird at the end of a flock. Sometimes I feel disappointed—it has only just gotten dark, couldn't we talk a little more? There might yet be snatches of insight to steal with my recorder. But just as often I am relieved, or even filled with acute pleasure as my tired body senses the coming of the rest it longs for each day while hiking. I roll into my sleeping bag and scribble fieldnotes for a minute by the light of my headlamp. Then, when my lids start to droop, I turn off the light, curl over, and give myself over to the gravity of

sleep which seems to be pulling my body down through the sleeping pad, through the cold earth, and into a different world. I dream vividly: sometimes of faces from home, sometimes that I have joined a cult.

*

The precise clock-hour of "hiker's midnight" was a matter of contention among hikers I met. Some claimed 8:30 or 9:00 PM, others as late as 9:30. But the one definition most everyone could agree upon was that hiker's midnight chimes when the sun goes down, when the sky gets dark.

We fall into a rhythm like we fall into love or trouble. Hikers on the Appalachian Trail fall into the rhythm of walking, each morning and afternoon; and over time they fall into the rhythm of the walk itself, which is something different—a whole *ensemble* of rhythms and patterns which far exceed the literal experience of walking. These rhythms are learned over time, together, in an improvised and collective way. Nobody quite knows when hiker's midnight is till one hiker gets up and says it's time to go to bed. The others follow her lead, but they might just as easily throw a couple more logs on the fire and keep talking another hour, smoke one more joint, and watch all the stars come out—as sometimes they do. On the trail we are each free to dispose of our time as we wish; yet within this freedom, patterns *do* emerge, and even a certain etiquette.

One night in the Shenandoah I arrive to my shelter in the dark, well after hiker's midnight. I have just hiked twenty miles for the first time—"my first twenty," as they say—and I'm giddy, exhausted, famished. There are only two others staying in the shelter, both fast asleep,

leaving plenty of space for me. By the light of my headlamp I boil water for a dehydrated dinner, unfurl my sleeping bag, stash my bear canister, hobble out to the privy and back again; and by the time I've finished dinner and packed everything away, it's late, maybe 11:00 PM by clock time.

This is a stretch of the trail marked by particularly flat and forgiving terrain, as it stretches out across the long steady ridge of the Shenandoah, and I feel I can make twenty miles again tomorrow—if I could just wake up early enough. So I set the alarm on my iPhone for 7:00 AM and curl over into an instant, stupefying sleep.

I wake the next morning from the low chiming of my phone. It seems to have been present for a long time in my dreams too. I open my eyes and see my night's companions in the shelter—a middle-aged man and woman I've never met before on the trail—both looking at me. They are standing above me, fully packed up, ready to start hiking. The man wears an angry expression on his face.

"That thing's been going off for the last hour," he says. I look at my phone again. It's 8:05 AM.

"Oh," I say. "I'm sorry. Good morning."

There is a pause. The man furrows his brow. Then his voice erupts once again: "You're not supposed to set an *alarm clock* here!" he says.

A genuine anger fills his voice. I rub the sleep from my eyes and apologize again. "Well, now you know," he says; and soon they have hiked off, bounding through the cool of the early morning, while I crawl out of my sleeping bag and scramble through my sleepiness to make a quick bowl of oatmeal and pack up my things, feeling annoyed but also guilty.

The next day at lunch I tell this story to two thru-hikers, Matador and Sultry. I tell it to make light of the angry, middle-aged man who thought that this was a good way to say good morning to someone. But to my surprise Matador, too, furrows his brow, then nods sagely. This is his fourth summer on the AT; he has thru-hiked the whole thing once and hiked thousand-mile stretches in other years, in addition to thru-hiking the Pacific Crest Trail. He is a wise and veteran hiker. And now, upon hearing my story, instead of laughing at the man he nods gently and says, "Well, he was right. You're *not* supposed to set an alarm out here. People come here to get away from all that."

Just as there is a hiker's midnight, then, there is a hiker's dawn: it comes not from the buzzing of an alarm but the return of the light.

"In order to grasp a rhythm one must have been grasped by it," writes Henri Lefebvre.[49] And indeed—despite my breach of conduct in the Shenandoah—as I hiked the Appalachian Trail I too became progressively grasped by the movements of a rhythm of sleep and waking that felt more like the tides than a machine. While at first it puzzled me that hikers used a phrase like "hiker's midnight" without being able to agree precisely on what time it actually referred to, it eventually dawned on me that this was precisely the point: "hiker's midnight" names a rhythm and an experience of time outside the strictures of the clock. The man's anger at my use of the alarm clock revealed the extent to which hikers on the AT become alien—purposefully alien—to clock time; the extent to which, in the words of Lisa Stevenson, they come to "belong differently to time."[50] Their rhythms are regulated by other devices, told by other hands.

Federico Garcia Lorca entitles a poem "Pause of the Clock":

> I sat down
> in a space of time.

[49] Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 27
[50] Stevenson, *Life Beside Itself,* 136

It was a backwater
of silence,
a white silence,
a formidable ring
wherein the stars
collided with the twelve floating
black numerals.

The Spanish word translated here as "backwater," *remanso*, can also mean "refuge." In the space beyond clock time, in that backwater which is also a refuge, a whole ecology of rhythms grows up like shoots—an unruly assemblage of rhythms emerging, disintegrating, coalescing once again. Some take on regularity, borne by a practicing collective, and become enshrined in phrases like "hiker's midnight." Others fall away, unnamed. Minor and major rhythms intersect, repetitions meet cyclical returns, and stars collide with numerals.

As I became ever more grasped by these trail rhythms of waking and sleeping and walking, these shared improvisations in the forms of our movement, I began to wonder many things about them. What do these different rhythms *do* to people? What happens to the experience of time itself as it's lived through these alternative rhythms? What does it mean to live midnight as a quality of light?

*

Sitting around a shelter one afternoon, I tell Eeyore that I'm interested in the perception of time on the trail.

"Is there one?" he says, and bursts out laughing. The other hikers sitting around laugh too.

Indeed, it is a commonly expressed sentiment amongst hikers that time simply does not *exist* on the trail. You lose track of everything—dates, hours, days of the week. You become lost to time, everyone says so. Yet rather than a real lack of time—if such a thing were ever possible—this sentiment perhaps reveals the extent to which the time of clock and calendar has come to naturalize itself in our minds as *the* time, as time itself.

We have lived with clock time for several centuries now. The historian E.P. Thompson charts its emergence in the 16th and 17th centuries.[51] Clock-time came into our life not suddenly or all at once, but slowly, from the first time-pieces worn by noblemen to the final standardizing of clocks in the U.S. in the late 1800s. It was with the coming of the Industrial Revolution in Britain, and the newfound need it produced to discipline bodies in time as well as space in order to maximize production and profits, that clock-time first became a vivid and active force in common life.

Yet it would not be naïve to ask: what, precisely, did clock-time replace? We live with clocks and their timing as such an intimate part of our lives that it can be difficult to imagine something else, something before. Thompson answers the question in fascinating detail, showing that before the widespread introduction of clocks, time was organized through what he calls "task-orientation."[52] Simply put, within task-orientation it is the task itself which determines the length given to it. For an artisan shoemaker, however long it takes to make a pair of shoes is however long it takes; the action unfolds in its own time, rather than being forced into a precisely quantifiable parameter. Instead of a homogenous grid full of timeslots to be filled with tasks and actions, the day passes as the flexible unfolding of a series of heterogenous tasks whose length

[51] Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism."
[52] Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," 60.

might not be fully predictable in advance.[53] Some days, work might end early, leaving an unexpected quantity of leisure time, while other working days could stretch far into the evening. In sectors such as agriculture, seasons of intense activity—around the sowing or the harvest—alternate with longer fallow periods. Hours themselves take on this variation: throughout the Middle Ages time was divided into six hours whose lengths, however, were not equal, but varied throughout the year, with the daylight hours stretching out longer in the summertime and then shrinking in the winter. Time is thus marked by a cascading series of qualitative differences; between various tasks, seasons, or times of day, one lives a heterogenous assemblage of different *kinds* of time.

The arrival of industrial capitalism changes all this, transfiguring time into a hard, unitary, and precisely measurable substance. The introduction of the mechanical clock allows for the tracking of a single, consistent hour. This, in turn, allows heads of factories to measure their production hour-by-hour. A mania of quantification, induced by capitalism and inducing it in turn, spreads across the working world and enters the subjectivity of individual workers: *watches* become a mark of fashion and prestige, and the workers who toil away in factories now spend their savings on a device which keeps their hours around the clock, attached to their very wrist.[54] The discipline of capitalist clock-time—why is it called a "watch"?—becomes intimately internalized, and at a mass scale.

Today the rigidity of capitalist clock-time might be breaking down in favor of something new: the accelerating, fragmented rhythm of digital communication and informal, Post-Fordist

[53] I am thinking here with Walter Benjamin's description of "empty, homogenous time" in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History." See also Stevenson, "Why Two Clocks?" in *Life Beside Itself*, 129-147.
[54] Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," 69.

gig work.[55] The nine-to-five workday may begin to feel relatively unobtrusive compared to the manic pace of contemporary digital life, in which all barriers between work and leisure risk eroding and vague conditions like "burnout" proliferate as embodied symptoms of an increasingly unlivable temporal order. Yet this new, fragmented digital time shares much with clock time: it, too, is marked by a flat, homogenous character; it, too, corresponds to the binary logics of a quantitative mechanism rather than the movements of human or planetary bodies and the qualitative differences they entail. Rather than a difference, then, we could think of this new temporal regime as a kind of clock-time sliced into infinitely small, proliferating, ephemerally dispersed fragments. And like clock-time it serves, above all, to maximize the extraction of surplus value from the movements of the human body.

Within this context, beginning to walk on the Appalachian Trail enacts something very strange upon the bodies of hikers. Removing them from both the rigidity of clock-time and the swarming chaos of digital time, the trail throws hikers back onto than that older, half-lost way of living time: task-orientation.

For in the absence of clocks, the daily pattern of life on the trail is organized by nothing other than the tasks at hand: filling up water at a creek, taking up and down your camp, making food, and, above all, walking. The rhythm of a week is likewise dictated by the alternation between stretches of hiking days at a time, and the punctuating stops into town to resupply, take a shower, and maybe take a zero day. (One of the most ubiquitous pieces of hiker slang, *taking a zero* simply means not hiking that day; but given the intense mixture of pleasure and danger that *not* hiking evokes for thru-hikers, it is one of the most frequently discussed concepts on the trail.)

[55] See, for instance, Crary, *24/7*; Han, *The Burnout Society*; Rosa, *Social Acceleration*.

This task-orientation provides hikers with a strange mix of unity and variety in their experience of time. On the one hand, because the tasks of the trail are common to all of those who hike it, the general time-pattern is common too. Indeed, the round of the days is almost laughably consistent: wake, breakfast, hike, lunch, hike, dinner, sleep. Day after day after day. There is a common, predictable shape to this pattern: the long stretches of hiking in the morning and afternoon punctuated by lunch and bookended by the camp routine of setting up and down tents, making food, settling in and out of sleep. Short breaks full of conversation, noise, activity—long stretches of walking in solitude and silence. An alternating pattern.

Yet the lack of a fixed, precise, clock or calendar-based schedule means that the duration of these tasks is never fixed in place, never controlled with precision. And if the round of tasks on the trail serves as an overarching pattern, a kind of musical score common to all hikers, then the specific *rhythms* with which hikers performed the score could vary enormously.

There was Kenny Powers, hiking furiously up the trail, so fast you can't keep up with him, but then taking a cigarette break every thirty minutes. There was Naked Man trying to make it eight miles straight in the morning before taking his pack off. There were Iron Mike and Bluebird, slow and steady, chatting happily together as they marched up hills and down them again. There was Britches, who once told me, "I love *sitting*"; although she was a strong and speedy hiker, I often turned a corner to find her stretched out contentedly on a log, enjoying a spot of sunshine filtering through the canopy. Once we walked together past a perfectly flat, dry, grassy clearing in the woods, covered entirely in warm sunlight, and Britches winced. "That's a *perfect* napping spot," she said, anguished.

"It's great napping," I agreed wistfully. But we walked on by.

Then there was Beertent Bob, who set out to hike ten miles a day, every day. Fifty years old, Beertent Bob wore a huge white beard that made him look like Santa Claus, and actually he did perform as a shopping mall Santa in his hometown in Illinois. He got his name from manning the beer tent at his town's local Lakeside Festival on the shore of Lake Michigan (one of the humorous quirks of the trail is that, after a few weeks, everyone in Bob's vicinity knew about the Lakeside Festival, and sometimes discussed it when he wasn't even there). Bob had been in the U.S. Army for years, though never deployed, and he was proud of his large military pack and stubbornly attached to it.

Ten miles a day, every day, with his enormous army pack on his shoulders—Bob struck an enormous contrast to the sleek, optimized ultralight backpackers who carry less than fifteen pounds in their packs and hike at least twenty miles a day. Yet he was happier than almost any hiker I met. Every morning at breakfast he would reach into his enormous pack and pull out a fresh clementine for each hiker. Fresh fruit, with all of its inefficiently heavy water content, is a rare delicacy on the trail, and Beertent Bob's clementines were always a delight to eat. Over time the grandiose size of his pack began to seem less like foolishness than a loveable mark of stubbornness and generosity.

But Bob's particular hiking rhythm reflected more than the size of his backpack: it was the mark of a certain quality of attention he was seeking on the trail. When I interviewed him, he told me it bewildered him to see other hikers speeding through the trail like it was a competition. He loved to take things slow and notice the small things. Five minutes into our interview, he stopped to take a thirty-second video clip of a small stream, to later send to his wife. "It's these little things," he said, "that you see when you slow down."

Some like to hike slow, some like to hike fast. One night I fell asleep in a shelter with only Beertent Bob, and his gentle snoring, for company. The next morning we awoke to find a third hiker in the shelter; he must have arrived after nightfall, well after hiker's midnight. At breakfast he introduced himself as Naked Man.

A nineteen-year-old line cook from Chicago, strong with a short but powerful build and a fuzzy blonde beard, Naked Man tended to hike fast and far each day; he'd set off from Springer in late April and was already passing hikers who'd begun their hikes in early March. He'd pushed twenty-four miles the day before, hence the late arrival (and then couldn't fall asleep because he'd heard a bear outside the shelter after having just smoked a fat, paranoia-inducing joint, and thus spent an hour trapped in a hypnagogic fog textured by Bob's snoring and half-imaginary bear footsteps), and he was planning to push twenty again today. When I told him I had never yet hiked a twenty on the trail, he got excited.

"You can join me, if you want!" he said. "But we're going to push the pace."

As we set off from the shelter that morning, leaving Beertent Bob ambling contentedly in the dust behind us, I was struck by how different the hiking suddenly felt. I, too, it suddenly seemed, had mostly been ambling and strolling and sauntering through the woods for the past weeks; now I was really *moving*. Our conversation took off, borne by the propulsive beat of our footsteps. The walk began to feel suddenly like a different kind of adventure, a different kind of challenge. I felt I was taking the trail, rather than the trail taking me. There was pleasure in it. Why couldn't I hike this way all the time?

Many hikers listen to music to keep their beat, to help motivate them up the big climbs. Naked Man did too, but with only one earbud; the other ear stayed open to the proliferating sounds of the forest. "You should hear how hip-hop sounds with all the birdsong mixed in," he

told me, grinning. Naked Man was full of all sorts of joyful life hacks of this kind. Try to make eight miles before you take your pack off your shoulders (keep your water system close in a side-pocket so you can fill up and filter water at a creek without actually taking the pack off). Purposefully miscount the number of miles you're hiking, to trick yourself into hiking faster than you need to. When you take off your pack, make sure to leave the straps and suspensions face up, in the sun, so that the sweat from your back can dry off them. Though he was nineteen year olds and had only been on trail for a month, Naked Man already had the aura and attitude of a veteran hiker, generously dispensing his hard-won wisdom.

That morning we crushed it up the thousand-foot climb to Hardwood Shelter—Naked Man traveling at his normal speed, me pushing myself with a wild, vaguely competitive drive to keep up with him. It was fun. When we arrived at the shelter, in a clearing on a mountain overlooking an idyllic valley, I felt exhausted but content. At the picnic table, where we sat to eat lunch, a couple of day hikers began asking us the usual questions—*You're hiking all the way to Maine? When did you start? What do you* eat?? Naked Man tells them he began in April and intends to finish in August, a four-month thru-hike. The day hikers asked him what the rush was.

"I'm broke, and I like hiking fast," he replied.[56]

After lunch we hiked down into that idyllic valley. The place is galled Burke's Garden, and it was formed long ago by the caving-in of a large volcano, leaving a fertile valley encircled by a perfect ring of mountain ridges, its flat surface bisected by little roads and farms. There is a hiker hostel there, also called Burke's Garden, and we stop there to do a small resupply and eat a little more before pushing on. The hostel is in an old farmhouse, standing beside an overgrown

[56] Speed, indeed, is also a way of saving money on the trail; the faster you hike, the less food you will have to buy over the course of the trail, and the fewer days you will spend in hostels or motels. There is a certain luxury in sauntering so slowly up the trail. Naked Man's answer showed his speed was related to class, as well as to pleasure.

field filled with songbirds and hikers' tents. When we arrive, in the mid-afternoon, light is slanting warmly through the field, the thrushes and red-winged blackbirds are wheeling between the trees and tall grasses, while hikers sit on the porch, chatting quietly, and time feels suddenly heavy and rich and sweet, like honey.

I'd agreed to let Naked Man help me make my first twenty, but there's still around ten miles to go, and my own body has come to feel heavier, too. I've enjoyed hiking with him so much, between the rush of new speed and the entertainment of his company; and some part of me does want to achieve a twenty-mile day. But it's too beautiful in this place, my muscles are aching and warm, and my body is crying out for me to *stay here*, stop moving.

I can tell Naked Man is tempted, too, as we eat burgers on the porch. But he can't afford the hostel, and he's stronger-willed than I am about making his daily hiking goals. Wistfully, we agree to part ways: I'll stay in the hostel for the night, he'll keep going another ten miles. I feel bad for leaving him, for abandoning our quest, but he tells me not to worry about it.

"Hike your own hike, man. That's what everyone says."

My whole body relaxes when he says this. And as afternoon turns to evening and the light becomes softer, the sky somehow bluer, I stretch my body out in the field, happily stilled, while Naked Man hikes on into the mountains and the coming night.

*

Weeks later I'm sitting at a picnic table at a brewery near the trail, just south of the Shenandoah, with Matador, Sultry, and Doublewide. In a couple of days I will anger that middle-aged hiker with my alarm clock, and Matador will gently set me straight about it, but for now I

am just getting to know them all. Matador is a large, quiet Puerto Rican man whose silences occasionally burst into warm laughter. Sultry is a tall, perpetually relaxed Californian with long, matted blonde hair. Both are chronic thru-hikers with thousands of miles under their feet between the AT and the PCT. With them is Doublewide, a looming steelworker from Boston who calls things wicked and hikes miraculously in sandals. Unlike the other two, this is his first year on the trail. He's only just started hiking with them a couple of days ago.

Having just met them, I find myself explaining my research project to them, and offering the usual questions: how does the trail change people, what do people seek here, what do they find. Like most hikers, they don't take long to weigh in with their own answers.

"I think it's the freedom, really," says Matador

I nod; I've heard this answer many times before on the trail. But this time I push back:

"Okay, but what does that 'freedom' really mean? How would you define that freedom?"

"Hm," Matador replies, and pauses to think. Then Doublewide, who's been quiet, suddenly chimes in.

"Not having to set your alarm every morning… is *everything*," he says. "Not having a boss who decides when I wake up in the morning… that makes all the difference."

There is a wistfulness in Doublewide's voice as he says this: the accretion, perhaps, of countless mornings as a steelworker, woken at five by a howling alarm. The cumulative weight of day after day lived on another's clock, another's rhythm.

In *How to Live Together,* Roland Barthes writes of the way in which power effects itself through the imposition of rhythms upon subjects. "I see a mother pushing an empty stroller, holding her child by the hand," he writes. "She walks at her own pace, imperturbably; the child, meanwhile, is being pulled, dragged along, is forced to keep running, like an animal, or like one

of Sade's victims being whipped. She walks at her own pace, unaware of the fact that her son's rhythm is different. And she's his mother!"[57] For Barthes, power, the "subtlety of power," works in just this way: the child yanked along, Doublewide dragged out of his bed by the howling of his alarm while it's still dark out. Power imposes rhythm—and here we may recall the historical link between the spread of clock-time and the spread of industrial capitalism. The clock disciplining the factory worker or the school child, the worker or student internalizing those rhythms despite the protests of his or her own body: we still live, today, straitjacketed by the rhythms of capital and production.

On the trail, the suspension of those rhythmic disciplines feels, to Doublewide, like something called freedom.

*

Barthes does not use the word "freedom" himself. But he does write of the possibility of "idiorhythmic clusters … where each subject lives according to his own rhythm."[58] Taking a description of a monastery on Mount Athos in Greece and spiraling it out into his own fantasy, Barthes coins the term *idiorryhthmy,* combining rhythm with the Greek prefix *idios*, meaning "one's own, separate, peculiar, personal, distinct" (think "idiosyncratic"). An idiorrhythmic community, then, would be one in which each subject would have the possibility—the freedom?—to pursue their own rhythms; one where the child could wallow or lollygag, linger or dance along and beside his mother, led by the body's desires without being dragged by the hand.

[57] Barthes, *How to Live Together,* 9. I owe to Thalia Danielson the discovery of this text.

[58] Barthes, *How to Live Together,* 6.

Barthes does not give many historical examples of such communities: on the contrary, he remarks how rare such examples are in the historical record, and calls idiorryhthmy an "eccentric" and "fugitive" form.[59] It exists for him rather as a fantasy—a "median, utopic, Edenic, idyllic form." But Roland Barthes never hiked the Appalachian Trail. And when I heard Doublewide's stray comment—the instant, intuitive connection he drew between freedom and not having to set one's alarm clock—it suddenly pulled together this uncanny quality of the trail: that everyone really can follow their own rhythms. From Beertent Bob's languorous strolling to Naked Man's joyful jetting through the woods, the trail presents a vast, heterogenous set of walking-rhythms, a kind of idiorrythmic community. More than that: it gives each hiker the chance to *discover their own rhythms for themselves*.

To discover a rhythm of your own is to meet your body's unfolding. It can't be mapped in advance. There was a kind of joy in the diversity of hiker rhythms I met on the trail: it felt that each hiker was expressing themselves, somehow, through their style of walking. From Kenny Powers' mad, chain-smoking dash through the woods to Beertent Bob's happy sauntering, to Eeyore sprinting down the trail so fast he kept hurting himself, you could learn a lot about a person just from the way they hiked the trail.

The taboo I encountered that morning in the Shenandoah—"you're not supposed to set an alarm clock here!"—might just be a way of protecting that idiorrhythmy. In subjecting that middle-aged hiker to the noise of my alarm clock buzzing for an hour (while I snoozed peacefully through it myself), I was imposing my own rhythm on *his* day. His righteous anger marked the gravity of that violation.

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[59] Barthes, *How to Live Together,* 9. Barthes also writes of *idiorrythmy:* "Through that word, I gained access to things that can be learned. Which is not to say that I was able to learn them: bibliographically speaking, my research has often been disappointing" (6).

This ethic takes form in another piece of hiker slang—the one Naked Man told me as I hesitated about whether to stay at the hostel or hike on with him: “Hike your own hike.” One hears this idiorrythmic refrain constantly up and down the trail, usually when a hiker is caught in a moment of indecision: to take a break or push the extra miles, to take a zero or head back into the woods as soon as you’ve done your resupply (what’s colloquially called a “hero,” because resisting a zero day is viewed as a heroic act), to take that shortcut past a beautiful waterfall or stay “pure.” In all of these moments, the weight of projected hikerly expectations, the internalized ideas about the “right way” of hiking the AT, can bear down on you heavily. To be reminded to “hike your own hike” is to be thrown back onto your *own* resources, your own decision making, your own rhythm.

And onto your own attention. For a new relationship to time inevitably produces a new relationship to the world itself—and specifically to the weather. In learning to tell time without the clock, a hiker is forced to attune their attention to the signs of the physical world around them: the temperature, quality of light, movements of the sun. Attention shifts from an abstract plane of quantity to an embodied realm of qualities which move, shift, require interpretation. The act of interpretation further attunes the body, further relocates the hiker's attention. This shift exceeds the question of the relation to time: it is a shift in an entire relation to the material world surrounding one, a world which becomes vividly present.

But it is only the absence of clock time--or rather its sudden lack of relevance--which produces that shift. It is in the absence of an abstract, homogenous, delocalized form of telling time that the world becomes vividly present, as a source of vital information.

The poet Alice Oswald, in the introduction to an anthology of poems about the weather, defines weather as "all unmeasured time."[60] This definition may puzzle or surprise, but on the trail it becomes a lived reality. In the absence of the crutch of a clock, it is the movements of the sun, the temperature of the air, the awakening of birds or insects, and the quality of the light which fill the gap: not unmeasured time but time measured differently, in a vivid, contingent, and felt measure. In Lorca's poem it is precisely the stars which arrive, in the pause of the clock, to explode the twelve floating black numerals.

This process of refocused attention extends not only to the weather but also to a hiker's own body. For it is not only the fading of the light which determines the length of the hiking day: it is also the fading of one's own strength as muscles give over gradually to fatigue. While hikers may set a goal for the day's hike when they set out in the morning--perhaps a certain shelter, a convenient 10 or 15 or even 20 miles away, depending on the state of one's trail legs--these goals are never held rigidly. Rather hikers check in on how they are feeling throughout the day, how fast they've been hiking, how much strength remains in their legs.

Some hikers I met even flatly refused to set a goal at the beginning of the day: once Britches, when I asked her for the fifth time where she planned to end up that night, laughed in my face. The day itself would decide, she said; the *trail* would decide. Planning ahead seemed less and less helpful. In the absence of not only a clock but also any semblance of a premeditated plan, it is the hiker's body--with all its inconsistencies, its aches and pains, its surprising bursts of strength and energy--which becomes the essential measure of the length of a day. Hikers have no choice but to pay close attention to it, and even if they would attempt not to, the sensations of pain and hunger force themselves inevitably, irrepressibly on the consciousness.

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[60] Oswald, "Introduction" to *Gigantic Cinema*, xi.

Legs run out of energy. Back-aches become less and less bearable. Hunger dreams and roars in the stomach, fantasizing of trail magic. Or the warmth of well-worked muscles, the smoothness of a particular stretch of ridgeline, the delicacy of late afternoon light filtering through the canopy might suddenly gift you a spark of energy, and you continue with the wind at your back for three miles further than you'd planned. Your breathing and your footsteps together set a rhythm, telling you when to pause, when to keep going, when to *call it a day*.[61]

*

Then there is the question of what the rhythm of walking itself does to the body—and what other times it might open the body to.

We are so used to moving our bodies at different velocities; but the fastest hiker still travels at a turtle's pace compared to a car, a bus, an airplane, the machines through which the American landsape is most usually traversed. Beneath all the idiorrhythmic community of the AT lies an abiding slowness.

"The degree of slowness is directly proportional to the intensity of memory," writes Milan Kundera in a novel called *Slowness*. "The degree of speed is directly proportional to the intensity of forgetting."[62]

On the peak in Virginia where I first sat with Iron Mike and Bluebird, while the sun was still a good few minutes from setting, Iron Mike recounted something which had happened to

[61] For a fascinating account of rhythm, breathing, and pauses in literature, see Heine, " 'animi velut respirant': Rhythm and Breathing Pauses in Ancient Rhetoric, Virginia Woolf, and Robert Musil," cited in Meyers, *All That Was Not Her,* 209. There is a lot—a lot—more to be said and thought about the relation between pauses, duration, and the breathing body than has been possible here.
[62] Kundera, *La lentezza,* 45.

him in the Smokies, around mile 200 on the trail. He had just made a big ascent up a mountain, and as the elevation rose the woods around him changed gradually into a forest of fir trees, large coniferous trees not found at the lower elevations in the south. These trees imbued the forest with a deep, dark, rich scent, a very particular one. When Iron Mike smelled it, a memory suddenly broke vividly upon his body: he remembered a Winnie the Pooh book from his childhood, a "scratch-and-sniff" book where if you scratched certain pages, they produced strong, particular scents. It was the exact same scent from that book that he now smelled; and now, in an intensely embodied Proustian flashback, the memory overcame him.

Telling me the story, he put his two index fingers together. "It was like the two happy times of my life… connected, like this."

All alone in the woods, he began to cry.

Epilogue

My feet begin to hurt with every step. My back has become drenched with sweat which starts turning into a strange itchiness. It aches, too, beneath the strain of the backpack. To try and get the backpack to fit more closely to my back, I pull the hip belt as tight as I can—and suddenly it rips, the fabric of the backpack itself rips at the belt and exposes the white foam padding beneath. I take another step. If it pulls any further the fabric will tear all the way around.

Fuck!

*

The passage above comes from a thesis that was not written, but could have been. For beneath it all, underneath every form of gift or magic or rhythm that has been discussed, there were footsteps. Each of the social forms discussed unfolded in the interstices of trail-time, the moments *between* walking. On all sides they were hemmed in by footsteps—footsteps shot through with pain and uncertainty.

At the risk of biological essentialism, the human body is not supposed to walk every day on rocky terrain, up and down and always up again, for six months on end (or nine if you're slower). And the hikers I met were indeed facing various stages of physical breakdown, even in Virginia, even in the first half of the trail. I met my friend Britches at a hostel in Pearisburg, Virginia called Angel's Rest. She had sprained her ankle a couple miles from a road crossing, and had to spend five days there recovering.[63] But it was a good place to be: the owner of

[63]She got her vortex patch.

Angel's Rest is a chiropractor and acupuncturist; everyone calls her "Doc," and she indeed plays a unique but essential role on the trail: trail-doctor, trail-healer. When I interviewed Doc, she told me that normal doctors were usually useless when it came to treating thru-hikers, because they would tell them to rest for two or three weeks, maybe a month. "And hikers completely refuse," she said, shaking her head and smiling. "They'll take a week off at most, then back onto the trail. Even if it means re-injuring themselves." She told me that what was really needed was a network of doctors, all up and down the trail, who understood hikers and their needs—including the need to ignore prescribed periods of rest.

A couple of months after I got off the trail in Virginia, I drove down to Vermont in late August to re-unite for a day with Britches, Naked Man, and several other hikers I had met down in Virginia—I had met them around mile 600, and they were now passing mile 1,650 of the trail. We spent a long day together, while I drove them into town to do a resupply. I asked them how the trail was treating them, and they sighed. It's been great, one of them told me, but I'm kind of ready for it be over. Then Britches told me: "Everyone's hurting, at this point. Everyone has chronic pain. For the last few hundred miles." But they couldn't stop. They had to reach Katahdin.

But the pain does not stop upon reaching Katahdin. After Iron Mike and Bluebird heroically finished the trail in late December—having begun in March—their bodies had almost completely broken down. Iron Mike could not go on an easy walk for more than two months afterwards. Bluebird learned from a doctor that she had contracted pneumonia at some point while hiking, and had thru-hiked hundreds of miles with a partially collapsed lung (for which the only cure the doctor could recommend was to "take deeper breaths"). The greatest experience of their lives left both limping into the foreseeable future.

I touch briefly on the quantity of pain on the trail out of a fear of having minimalized it in the previous chapters, focusing on the more optimistic or even naively utopian dimensions of the thru-hiking community. During my own fieldwork I was often struck by this uncanny duality: at times hiking the Appalachian Trail seemed like the most wonderful, touchingly transformative activity, where all kinds of social wellbeing were being discovered that usually remain out of reach of the everyday American; at other moments the trail suddenly seemed like the most absurd, ridiculous, even cruel undertaking, nothing but a form of obsessive masochism, as hikers pushed themselves to hike through the pain *yet again…* and then *again*… (and they still had a thousand miles of pain to go). As I hiked, my vision of the trail seemed to flash between these two modes—often quite quickly within the course of a week, a day, a single hour.

Eventually what became clear is that it was pain—everyday pain—which held the community together, as much as anything else. Pain was the common thread, the base upon which the strange social formations I came to study were eventually built. Pain, too, was what gave trail magic its special glow, what made hikers vulnerable and therefore open to its magic in the first place. "Hiking is just the vehicle," said Hairball, which means that *pain* was the vehicle too.

There was something strange and irresolvable in this, to me; as though I had joined a cult whose *communitas* was based on mutual self-harm. Yet it also showed that, for the hikers who hike the trail and are able to engage in its social forms in spite of and indeed because of the pain of the endeavor, participating in those forms is somehow *worth it*. For someone like Hairball, who "hate[d] hiking with a passion," the "everything else" of the trail was still valuable enough to keep her doing something she hated for more than six months on end.

Thus, if pain has been an absent presence in the foregoing chapters, it also suggests a different way to read those chapters. A different stakes: hikers risk chronic pain in order to participate in these social forms—in order to give a gift, or float like a leaf through a day without hours. And a different question: *Why?* Why *is it worth it?*

*

Often during my fieldwork it struck me that for all my theoretical training, I lacked an analytic vocabulary of pleasure. How many times did someone tell me, about the experience of generosity or the slowing down of time or countless other aspects of life on the trail, that they *liked* it? That it *felt good* to them? And each time I would find myself half-embarrassed at the thought of reporting this clearly in my thesis, without resolving it into some more savvy vocabulary of therapeutics or meaning or habitus. For Iron Mike, the Proustian flashback in the woods connected, precisely, the two *happy* times in his life: his childhood, and the trail. How could I write about this?

But it *did* feel good. Letting time flow differently, unfolding according to the needs of the body and the weather rather than the abstract demands of a clock, felt good. Basking in the warmth of a surprising generosity, and connecting to people within that warmth whom I would have never otherwise met, felt good. It felt good to me, and it felt good to the hikers I met; it had felt good to them for hundreds of miles before I even got on the trail myself, and it kept feeling good to most of them for the remaining thousand miles of the trail once I got off.

Importantly, I think, it felt good to them in ways that were mostly unavailable to them in their off-trail lives. When I prepared myself for fieldwork, I expected to hear a lot about the end

of the world—climate change, nuclear war, AI, whatever. There would have been plenty of chances to discuss this: as mentioned, much of the time hiking in Virginia was spent inhaling smoke drifting down from the wildfires in Quebec, and one of the early July days we spent hiking turned out to be the hottest day recorded on Earth. Yet what hikers talked about instead, over and over again, was a sense of everyday lives being rendered increasingly unlivable. Chaotic, stressed, distracted—these words recurred over and over. It was not the raging forest fires but the "cold flame," the cold fire of burnt-out lives, which hikers seemed to be fleeing on the trail.[64]

Finding something *else*—the chance to give a gift and receive one, to lose track of time and find it again through the angle of the sun—was, for most hikers I met, a keen pleasure. A pleasure so keen they pushed their bodies to the point of exhaustion, chronic pain, physical breakdown, just to keep on living in a world animated by those particular forms. I'm not sure what that means. It feels a little sad. Maybe also a little hopeful. "You sense the emergence of a new possibility, but you don't really know what it looks like. *I don't know what else, but not this.*"[65] Then one day in the spring, as I'm typing an interminable draft of a chapter in my bedroom in Montreal, my phone rings—an unknown number. I pick it up.

Kodak! It's Naked Man!

Oh shit, what's up?

I'm with Big Z, Bird, SheRa and White Wolf. We're by a river, White Wolf's playing a guitar…

[64]"And now the form and nature of the flame has changed; it has become digital, invisible, and cold—but exactly for this reason closer still; it encircles and envelops us at every moment." Agamben, *When the House Burns Down,* 7.
[65] Collu, "Atmospheric Crisis," from *Into the Loop,* 27.

In the midst of my typing reminiscences, a bolt of lightning suddenly bursts through, a single image: I see them lounging at the edge of a river, laughing, deciding suddenly to call an old friend. The atmosphere breaks into my day, into the quiet of the room where I'm sitting alone typing, filling it with noise and smokey warmth, the sound of running water. I can almost smell it. I try to explain this to Naked Man, and he responds:

That's trail magic man!

He hands the phone to Big Z.

Kodak, what's up! It's Z! I'm painting SheRa's pack right now.

Z hands the phone to SheRa in turn. They're all back out there.

Hey Kodak, she says. *You better get your ass to Trail Days this year. We're gonna need to be seeing you.*

Naked Man interjects: *And bring your hiking gear too. You might want to hike out with us*.

I sigh, knowing he's right. So where are you guys right now?

We're in Hampton River, Tennessee. Pigeon River Bridge. Just out of the Smokies. *Eeyore's a day ahead. I'm taking a zero, I did a thirty yesterday so I'm taking a zero*. Classic Naked Man. I ask him how the winter went.

It sucked, it was terrible, I was drinking like a fish.

He pauses.

But you know… I just took a six-month zero and I got back out.

At a certain point in their thru-hike, this group of hikers stopped referring to the "real world" and started instead saying "the Matrix." Because—I don't know—what makes a world real anyways?

Don't even go there tonight.

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