

Monday, January 17, 2005, Exercise in second person

On the sloping fields of the east side of the lake you can see the whole center of the park laid out before you – too small to be a vista; a tableau, perhaps. From here, the canoes are pea-pod-sized, tethered next to the dilapidated boathouse, but the oversized “Men” and “Women” signs are absurdly large enough to jump out from this far away. Good to know if some sort of bathing suit changing emergency comes up – at least, if the doors hadn’t been jammed shut and padlocked years ago.

The south side is nonexistent since the east hits the west at a point. And on the west side, the bushes are too high to even see the water, but the tightness of the gravel path beneath the trees holds a privacy that you love. There are some crumbling red bricks on the left, on the ground, half-hidden in the dirt-clay. Was it a Civil War wall? Or earlier, colonial? You stooped and examined it once, but found no further clues. This time, you pass it by. The path flows ahead into a small patch of the lake bank where the bushes thin out. The gravel is trapped under pine needles here, it crunches differently under your feet, softer and subtle. Mottled octagonal bricks line the edge of the ground, demarcating solid from liquid as a bulwark against erosion. You could sit on the bank and dip your toes, feet, calves in the water. You always think you will, but once again come up with an excuse and move on.

You drift through the north side of the lake quickly. It’s only a sturdy wooden bridge ripe for childish stomping. Sometimes you turn around to stare at the water rippling backwards into the rocks below the pines. The blackened concrete slope the water first cascades down serves to remind you of the manmade contrivance of the lake, a feature nature constantly tries to undermine, reclaiming its right to the area’s ecosystem. A dirt trail branches off and climbs through the granite, picking its way across the boulders to follow the stream. But you pass it too and reach the east of the lake again.

On some laps you take a breather and approach the stone podium. A constructed oasis reaching up from the unruliness of the field, it’s a spot where fewer bugs flit and, briefly, no high grasses scratch your ankles. Unfortunately there is no better word than podium that fits here. A flagpole is planted on its side, at least, so maybe – flagstand? Or alter. It does have a reverence, a mystery wafting about it. You could take the two steps up on the stone and lean on the short curved wall, but the front side is blocked by a tree, further cementing its oddity. What does it say about the park’s builders when the central focus of the lake scene is the only spot with no vantage point, no view itself?

The best side of the park to leave your car is the northeast, so you make the next lap your last and climb up the hill to the small lot. Behind the west side is the formal parking area, a huge space that leads to the playground, the baseball fields, the pickup Frisbee games. But coming and going from the smaller side lets you stay under the trees and preserve the illusion of a wild forest. Occasionally, if you avert your eyes from the boathouse and the light stays setting and soft, you can escape the park’s purpose as a touristy jaunt of soccer moms and rollerbladers. You can envision your hike as a virgin exploration of its flowing fields and untamed woods, and keep that image with you, driving back to the world.