



2-2013

being [t]here

Dustin B. Smith
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/engfac>

 Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), and the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Smith, Dustin Beall. "being [t]here." *You: An Anthology of Essays Devoted to the Second Person*. Gettysburg, PA: Welcome Table Press, 2013, 157-161.

This is the publisher's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/engfac/22>

This open access book chapter is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

being [t]here

Abstract

When you awoke from the dream, in your early thirties, you knew, as you've never known anything else in all your seventy-plus years, that what you'd found was real. The dream began with you sitting in a church, head bowed in prayer. Your eyes opened slowly, and you noticed that you were wearing brilliantly colored, beaded moccasins. You stood abruptly, pushed open the mahogany gate that separated the pew from the center aisle of the church, and began to run. The dream then proposed a seemingly endless and entirely quotidian set of difficulties in The City, and led eventually to an arduous climb through a pathless woods, where you passed an unfinished house—framed out but not yet sided—and where (after how many false sightings of the summit?) you squeezed with great difficulty between two tall boulders, and suddenly emerged on the edge of a wondrous canyon. Below you flowed a wide, glistening river, and in the center of the river, partly submerged, sat a throne-like granite armchair. You awoke to the rest of your life with a gasp, exhilarated by the shimmering iridescence of the water in the dream and tantalized by the mystery of the chair. You have looked for that river ever since. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

creative writing, English, second-person

Disciplines

Creative Writing | English Language and Literature

When you awoke from the dream, in your early thirties, you knew, as you've never known anything else in all your seventy-plus years, that what you'd found was real. The dream began with you sitting in a church, head bowed in prayer. Your eyes opened slowly, and you noticed that you were wearing brilliantly colored, beaded moccasins. You stood abruptly, pushed open the mahogany gate that separated the pew from the center aisle of the church, and began to run. The dream then proposed a seemingly endless and entirely quotidian set of difficulties in The City, and led eventually to an arduous climb through a pathless woods, where you passed an unfinished house—framed out but not yet sided—and where (after how many false sightings of the summit?) you squeezed with great difficulty between two tall boulders, and suddenly emerged on the edge of a wondrous canyon. Below you flowed a wide, glistening river, and in the center of the river, partly submerged, sat a throne-like granite armchair. You awoke to the rest of your life with a gasp, exhilarated by the shimmering iridescence of the water in the dream and tantalized by the mystery of the chair. You have looked for that river ever since.

She danced barefoot for you in the field near the airport, a choreography of pale limbs flashing in the tall prairie grass, as lithe as a breeze, and silk-bright in the noonday sun: visible for a moment, then gone, then visible again, her kinetic message of impermanence causing your eyes to tear up. You knew, even then, that her youthful exuberance, for all its power, could never diminish the years between you. And, of course, you'd already seen too much from the hill. *But what luck*, you thought, *and so worth the risk*: that fluid, wordless art she carried—her only luggage, really. Her inspired arrival that day snaked around your middle-age: a magical flirtation lifting you briefly from the gray lake of time, like some dark heron laboring skyward at dusk. Surely your heart would remain safe in its chest, fastened as it was by the thick suck

of living and the compulsory thrum of desire. She hung around for several years, weighed down eventually by inertia, before announcing her intention to rent a room in the home of a stranger—to find herself again, as we all must. You stood at the kitchen counter, your back to her, dicing scallions for the salad. *Weather is never just one thing*, you were thinking. *Wind is always working within the calm*. You had both stopped eating chocolate on the sofa by then anyway, and the Yankees weren't the team they used to be. Between innings, she would part her Chinese robe and straddle your naked lap, serving you a nipple on her upturned pinky.

Let go, John said. Let go of all you've been, and dwell here awhile on the muddy bank in drenched and shimmering clothes. Fuck the clock. Fuck the wallet. Fuck the sentence you rode in on. The needs of the congregation require that you be honest now. Close the deal with the fire on the far shore, its reflection reddening the little peaks of rippled water reaching out toward you this night. Revolution lifts its chin like a cat, sensing you first in the mist, then seeing that it is you in the flesh. Send significance that way. Feel buoyancy in the potential you will always (promise yourself) honor. Drink to it: make possible everything, always. Pray: make always possible everything to those who are new to this world. Reveal yourself, old man, to the river once again.

Like that time in your late thirties when you stumbled, half in the bag, up to Robin's Nest (she called it that) in SoHo, and felt your way across her pitch-dark loft, suddenly bumping into her lady friend from Minnesota. "Hello!" you said, kissing the friend, while Robin fumbled for the light chain. You knew from the surprise in her friend's lips—and from her foolish tongue—that you could whisper in her ear the words *live with me now* and get away with it, that destiny was what you shaped for yourself by attaching desire to time and then embracing the consequence. You lived with Robin's friend from that day until the time a few years later when she found herself ready to be serious, as we all must, her love for you (and yours for her) still as deep and sweet as a clear, clear well... but done, too, because you'd been there before with the children thing. She soon had kids of her own, but before that, she sent you a card depicting a unicorn leaning forward on a precipice and looking out at the void, along with her wish that you would find your truest self. You can treasure that image now in the rounding chug-a-chug-chug that remains.

What a lucky man you've been! Practice small good-byes. Good-bye, practice.

You know this much (because if it isn't this, it's nothing): that space (which is to say the betweenness of things) is where the substance lies. Or doesn't. Only from space can accumulation be achieved. Only in accumulation can the work of life be framed. The difficulty arises not from hardness, or things that go bump in the night, not from the density of the walls, or the ripe fruit just out of reach over the fence. The difficulty is right here, in the pain of having to die. The interval for love is composed of pure pain, or it won't be love at all. The vast distance between the sacrum and the heart can be measured in light-years. So many galaxies, so much plumbing and complexity, so much digestion and drowsiness, so much empty sleep. It's not the moon we must consider, but the moon made invisible by the earth and sun. What business is it of yours what anything means? What else has it ever meant?

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty," wrote Keats. He should have tightened it up, dropped the verb, written "beauty truth, truth beauty." But he was young and overwhelmed with mind and meter. And so was the Harvard girl who slapped your dick when you suggested the edit. "You arrogant bastard. You would rewrite Keats?" Did she ever ask you why? Would you have known enough in your twenties to answer that in the subatomic world of the spirit, where transmission exceeds the speed of light, the verb *to be* is irrelevant?

You're having a rough time with this, aren't you? It would have been more seemly, you realize now, to have kicked at an early age, bought the farm in another market, so to speak. You've survived, old man, but you're a mess.

Today you were walking with a twenty-three-year-old friend in the park. She had wandered into your orbit, or you into hers, tugged somehow—both of you—in an innocent fashion. (You have learned not to argue with gravity; the chance of a comet colliding with Earth is... what?) So you pointed out the sights—the usual shit, beginning with the Plaza Hotel and meandering north to the Alice-in-Wonderland statue and Literary Walk—and you deeply enjoyed the young woman's intermittent presence, her quiet curiosity punctuated by a frequent need to check for text messages on her cell—in other words, to find herself in time, as we all must. Autumn sang in dry shades of red and orange,

and you remembered hearing five-tone chimes in the wind when you were way, way younger, and it made you feel sudden and happy.

Yet, how many times can you stand to see the now-shuttered carousel you rode with your daughter in the 1960s? Won't you ever grow sick of ghosts clinging like hibernating butterflies to the landmarks, tunnels, and pathways of your experience? The world has shifted, old man; a new lens has been clocked into place. The landmarks are accepting new memories, and your files have been moved.

Still, you persisted in tour-guide mode, trying hard to see all this afresh. You nodded toward a footbridge, a marvel of architecture that you had carried in your mind to Spain in 1966, when you were a few years older than this moccasin-footed girl at your side—using it for a scene with which you began a novel about love. No wonder it failed. The arc the footbridge describes (even now) wasn't clear to you then, yet it was all you needed to know about love and life: there's *this*, and it rises, then there's *that*. There *is* that. Remember? Given the chance, you'd begin again, wouldn't you? You'd remember all this and begin again. Throw up your hands, you old fool, and listen: offer it up, let go.

And that's what you did when you said to your dark-eyed young friend with glitter on her nails, as you steered her off the usual and proverbial path. "Let's cut over there and climb that huge rock to see what's on the other side," and as you said "the other side," you remembered your long-ago dream and realized that you held it all—the whole ball of twine—in your hands at that moment, and it made you laugh with despair, if such a thing is possible. You led the way, and as you climbed the outcropping of rock, you began to see that the gentle-enough slope it described on this side would not be duplicated on the other side; very soon you were approaching the edge of a cliff. You didn't slow down, but you were mindful of your footing, and just as you came to a stop on the edge, a beautiful child—golden, you have to say, like your daughter at that age—ran up and stood next to you on the edge. Bold and confident, she looked up at you, then down at the ground twenty feet below, then up at you again. *Not yet*, she seemed to say, *not yet, old man*.

"How would *you* get down?" you asked the child, playfully.

"I'll show you!" she said.

And with that, she spun around and led you and your friend through a circuitous sequence of metamorphic crevices to flat and grassy ground. After which your long-haired companion, wearing her thin, silver nose ring, went off to party with others of her kind. As we all must.

You don't want to know too much too early. Keep the self intact. What's death but the crumbling silver backing on the opposite side of the mirror? You felt bright last night in the little glow of Christmas lights that illuminated the café you enjoy for its emptiness—for its perverse lack of clarity, its Halloween clientele, who tend to whisper instead of shout and who put their phones away and lean through the dimness toward each other. You felt bright in your red shirt, and conscious of your inner intensity after a day of miraculous confirmation that you were still connected to the web of green and living things. Feeling so deeply lit, you looked up from your notebook to the window next to where you sat alone at a table for two, expecting to see your inner brightness reflected in the glass—your old-man visage tinged in red, perhaps—some hint of youth still there. But the outside light—that bright space of commerce and concrete and street—had overwhelmed the glass. You were invisible. It seemed impossible, at first. No hint of you at all.

So you squeeze into this dream-like crevice, this impossibly thin, exquisitely persistent interval called solitude, within which lurks the vast and timeless liberty of love. You may find that river again—on the other side. But will you recognize it then?