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### The Cave that Consecrates History

*"I could tell you how many rising like stairways, and the curves, and what kind of zinc already know this would be nothing. The city does not relationships between the and the events of its past; the distance from the ground of a feet [...]"*

Italo Calvino, Invisible Cities



*steps make up the streets degree of the arcades' scales cover the roof; but I the same as telling you consist of this, but of measurements of its space height of a lamppost and the hanged usurper's swinging*

I grew up in an atheist's temple and felt at home in most of it. My technically Jewish Dad and Catholic Mom had renounced religion at an early age, and so did I—except in the shower. As the bathroom fan harmonized with the showerhead, I would step past my towels and echo collections of words off of white tiles.

"Dear God." "Please, God." "Thank you." "I'm sorry."

This worship got louder in moments of crisis—finding a lump on an armpit, post-arguing with a friend. I didn't take this habit too seriously, though, mostly because I never had to. My crises always subsided. The lump was always just an inflamed hair follicle. The argument always mellowed out. My childhood went by and I left my spirituality in the shower.

Edward Whalley and William Goffe didn't have that option. Staunch Calvinists in 17<sup>th</sup>-century England, they fought in Oliver Cromwell's Commonwealth Army during the country's civil war and voted to execute reigning Anglican monarch Charles I. Their dreams of renewing England as New Jerusalem, an utopic city prophesized through the

Book of Ezekiel, and commencing a holy Protestant millennium, were short-lived. In 1660, Charles II was restored to the throne. One of his first acts was to call for the retributive jailing and execution of all the regicides, among them Whalley and Goffe. Fearing for their lives, the pair secreted to the New World and found a friend in Puritan pastor John Davenport, who founded the colony of New Haven. When word got out that they were wanted men, though, Whalley and Goffe knew they had to disappear. On May 13, 1661, they walked from Davenport's house to the top of West Rock, where they made a home out of a fortuitous cave and lived on the lamb for two months.

These men dripped with religious fervor. Their faith eclipsed their love of country and their love of family—both things they sacrificed in their rebellion and subsequent exile.

Spiritual dedication like this appeared so distant to me, so far removed from my curtained attempts at religious angst, it was unimaginable. Dislocation from history is intimately affixed to the modern condition. This memorial emptiness is so permanent we often forget it's a problem. So as I set out to retrace Whalley and Goffe's escape from city to cave, I felt divorced from both religion and the past; eager to connect the land on which I walked to the land that once was, but unsure where or how to begin. I did the one thing I knew I had to: start walking.

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I head off in what I thought was the correct direction, but after fifteen minutes without seeing any expected landmarks, I have an epiphany of errors. Over my semester-and-a-half at college, I had, every day, further ingrained a misaligned sense of direction. The roads I thought traveled southward, travel westward. The direction I

assumed was north was actually east. I had rotated New Haven 90 degrees, and the cognitive dissonance that comes from an internalized, incorrect bearing clashes with the rudimentary map I held, folded into fours.

It's embarrassing to think that I had a totally skewed conception of a city I've spent so much time in. Modernity trains us to seek and stick to patterns of locomotion, and it's easy to accept those, never attempting to break their inertial spell. Forced to reconstruct my compass rose, I see the city's nine squares lay themselves out in my mind's eye, lane by lane—New Haven is New again.

The familiar was to become strange once again. One minute after walking past Stop & Shop, the farthest from campus I had previously strayed, I find myself feeling out of place. Never before have I walked around in a majority black area of town for more than a couple of minutes. The houses are well-varnished, kids are putting up a trampoline in a yard. Yet I still hear my mother's voice: *Are you walking to West Rock yourself? Isn't that the sketchy part of town?* Then, out of nowhere, Whalley's voice joins in: *Walk quickly, there are royalists in these parts.*

I feel unsteadied by this sequence of novelty. Unable or unwilling to process my conflicted reactions in the moment, I bow my head and walk quickly.

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Caves are supposed to be underground. After scrambling up a shortcut in the trail, I see boat-sized boulders rise up over the ground before my eyes, fallen in such a way that one could shelter under them. A geologic miracle bred the historical mystery that compels me to this spot.

I close my eyes. I open them. I look down. No stockings, no petticoats, no historical magic. No shower handle, no bathtub bottom, no religious epiphany. I look around.

The trees shadows stretch over the rocks' and the rocks' shadows, moving as fast as the stars I imagined above. The rocks themselves are faded and splotchy, almost soap-stained. The light shines bright, post-rain, maybe May-like. I lie down on the cave and close my eyes, taken by a sudden sensual connection to the stone. It is like this, prostrate, that I hear voices again.

Two of them, walking closer to me. Laughing. Scaling the rock. "Don't feel pressured to do this if you don't want to," one says, showing the way, and I think of how running toward the solitude of wild exile with a friend might feel.

One is blond, messy curly hair, talking about high school, no hair on legs, white, too-long socks. The other, blue-striped shirt, nearly-cropped fade, skin the color of sun-soaked bark. They don't know they are in love, but I think I hear it. I leave them—the sun's headed west, and it's their refuge, not mine.

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I believe in reincarnation. Maybe not the literal kind, but reincarnation of essences, reincarnation within landscape. The high school boys wondering at their sexualities who scaled Judges' Cave are not literally Whalley or Goffe. Nor am I truly Charles II's messenger, following footsteps up a hill unknown, adrenaline spiking.

But experiencing the cave as both time-traveling ship and shrine of communion made me question the way I had reflexively separated religion and history. History will always be opaque to us, for we can never truly know the past. In this way, it can

become a spiritual object—something bigger than ourselves, something immaterial, something responsible for our existence, something to be simultaneously worshipped and interrogated.

Travel is defined by the passage from the known to the unknown. There are certain places in this world—showers and caves and more—where appreciating the spatial renders the temporal and spiritual present and conjoined. When, more than 300 years ago, two men found wild solace on top of West Rock, the temerity of their convictions sanctified it, permanently. Learning their histories allowed my trip to become a form of worship.

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### **Postscript**

After two months, Whalley and Goffe left the cave, disappearing from the history books for a hundred years. I simply walk back the way I came. I pass by the same feeble stream and frowning cars. I return to the neighborhood in which I had quickened my pace. Romantic religiosity fades to a sobering reality: despite all my high-minded realizations, I have still made myself an outsider in part of the city I call home. I carry internalized prejudices and project white bourgeois insecurity. Today's epiphanies haven't prevented me from making men out to be what they're not.

All cannot be made visible in a day. But I'm keeping my eyes open and still walking—I believe I will near the next cave.

*"The traveler's past changes according to the route he has followed [...]"*  
Italo Calvino, Invisible Cities

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