

2024

Lost

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Recommended Citation

Mccoy, John (2024) "Lost," *Calliope*: Vol. 36, Article 27.

Available at: <https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/calliope/vol36/iss1/27>

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Lost

John McCoy

Everybody marks a day on their calendars, whether in their head or physically, we always have a day that we have been waiting for or dreading. Today was that day for me. The leaves of the maples surrounding my cabin were turning a deep crimson, their waxy cuticles shimmering in the morning sun. My dog's nose was already running along the ground before we broke through the briars guarding the edge of the forest; her nose and paws crunching the newly dead leaves laying on the ground. I checked my back pocket for the old walkman that I only used on this day every year. I felt the cold metal in the palm of my hand as the wind made my eyes water. I pulled my jacket around myself breaking the wind, but I could still feel a cold hand holding my heart.

We weren't following a path, we had a destination, but one that we had all day to get to. I followed the dog, and she followed her nose with the occasional look back at me to make sure I was still behind her. We were lost, but that was the point. The most important thing wasn't where we were, but the next step, the next thought, the next smell, the next breath.

These old woods of Appalachia specialize in placing someone in that kind of mindset. Almost in a way of over stimulation, everything becomes turned off except the deepest part of your mind, the part that people run from. But it is the part that holds the truth of who we are, what we are. That is what we run from because that part of us is terrifying, but here, in these woods, is the only place where I feel safe to reckon and wrestle with this part of myself. Some people find that comfort in other people, in being a faceless shape in a group of people, but others find it in solidarity, in loneliness.

I wasn't always like this, I grew up in the city, I used to find peace in the crowd, but now my own thoughts are more comforting than other people. Ironically, just like people, they can also be my worst enemy.

Today, they were both.

I wiped some tears from my eyes, as I stepped over a log whose moss wrapped around my fingers as I touched it. My thoughts were swirling, the anniversary of one of my most life changing days. My anxiety took over and I checked again for the walkman in my back pocket. It was still there as I knew it would be, but that was the most important thing for today. I needed it for her.

The woods and the city have many similarities, but with one crucial difference that changes everything. The woods is alive. It breathes. It moves. It grows. It reacts to stimulus. It dies. Right as this thought tore through my head, the dog stopped, and with a tilt of her head was looking at something on the ground. My heart leapt in my chest, and I started to jog toward her. She had found a little garter snake, a bright pink, among the reds, oranges, greens, and browns of the forest floor. She started to paw at it, her curiosity getting the better of her, and it coiled up and was ready to attack.

I gave a light tap to her nose and said, "Be nice."

She responded with a half bark and a stamp of her paw oozing with sass.

I laughed and said, "She would have loved this, wouldn't she."

The dog looked at me and barked again and started in the direction we were heading

before.

I knew we were almost there when her tail started to wag more than normal, and by the giant oak tree that would take almost three men to wrap their arms around. The woods was starting to thin and I could see the next hill in the distance. This ridge was our goal. An overlook into the valley below with the river slowly meandering through it.

There was a small rock standing up from the dirt that the dog was laying on, her nose to the ground, and a slight cry coming from her.

The rock said, "My love, my world, Alina."

I had scratched those words into that rock six years ago, with her family standing behind me as I finished placing the dirt on top of her urn.

I pulled out the walkman and played the Pixies' "Where is my Mind?".

This is where our first date was. She walked me out to this ridge holding my hand, pulling me the whole way, a giant smile across her face the whole time. When we got here, she spread her arms wide in the wind coming from the valley, her hair flowing behind her. She was an angel, a queen overlooking her kingdom. She turned around and put her arms around my neck and kissed me for the first time and said, "Relax. Take it in. Let it overtake and fill you."

She pulled me down to the ground and she pulled her walkman out of her backpack and played the song I am listening to now. I laughed when I saw it because I had never seen a working one.

"That belongs in a museum," I told her.

She nudged my shoulder and with a smile said, “I am just old fashioned.

I wrapped my arm around the dog and listened to the music unable to see because of the tears flowing from my eyes. All I saw was her, her beauty, her smile. I was lost in the memory of her, and that was the destination.