Erosion

We took a lot of field trips as students at James W. Parker Middle School: to science and art museums in nearby cities and for special concerts and speakers at the nearby university. In 1998, when the lovely spring started to bud in Edinboro, the eighth grade science teachers organized an environmental field trip to nature-rich locations around Erie County. The sunshine, warm air and plodding pace were enjoyable, even to surly, angst-ridden thirteen-year-olds. We were carted by buses from nearby Presque Isle and Lake Erie, to the gentle, streaming French Creek, and onward to a huge grassy clearing, where a man in a cowboy hat held up animal skulls for us.

At one of the stops along the way, somewhere near Fairview or Girard, we piled out of the buses, gingerly stepping over a lawn of protruding layers of shale, which spread before a solid wall of weathered rock as high as thirty of us standing on top of each other. Mr. Gillette, one of the science teachers, awaited us with his foot propped up on a particularly high stack of the smooth, compacted shale. He looked irrepressibly excited for our lecture, his eyes twinkling and a smile touching at his mouth.

Because of how my schedule was set up that year, I didn't have Mr. Gillette for science. But from friends who did, and my mother, who was a fellow teacher at the school, I had heard only good things. He also attended the same church as my family, though we usually went to different services. I knew, too, that he and his family owned a construction company that built

beautiful homes around the area. He was not a complete stranger then, but just short of an actual acquaintance. In small Edinboro, as the cliché goes, everyone was at least aware of everyone else's business.

His lecture that afternoon, an informal discussion of local rock types, was stirring in its sincere enthusiasm – but to no avail. We students shifted, uncomfortable, on make-shift flattened rock seats, not really paying attention, while he explained the considerable geological history of the area. Then he pointed high to the solid wall behind him.

"See that? Those strange, V-shaped indents running down the wall? That's vertical erosion. When the glaciers that stopped here millions of years ago started to melt, they did so against the rock, running downward, causing it to erode in that way."

How cool – though not particularly interested in science, I still found that pretty neat. But I had other, more pressing issues to consider. Like who I was going to sit next to on the bus this time. And when were they going to let us stop and eat lunch? I left that lecture smiling, though, liking that I learned about something and saw it right before me, and liking Mr. Gillette very much for his engaging personality.

Mr. Gillette died that same spring when a fourteen-year-old student, a boy troubled by – among other things – the cruel social hierarchy of middle school cliques, pulled a gun on him at our annual eighth grade dinner dance and shot him twice.

I was there – all of my girlfriends were there, too, that Friday night; indeed, very few students from our class didn't make it to *the* social event of the year. The dinner dance was a long-standing tradition, a fancy last hurrah to see us off to the high school in style. We girls picked our dresses months in advance, made hair appointments, did each other's make-up, wore heels for the first time. One group arrived at the dance in a limo. The boys donned ties and dress shoes, made uncomfortable gestures to pin on their boutonnieres. A local banquet hall, decorated in silver and lavender, laid out a delicious buffet spread, and then a DJ kicked off a few hours of dancing. Mr. Gillette, in his role as student council advisor, helped plan everything.

What I remember now of the chaos is in fragments; and those pieces have dulled, making up a blurred, hazy mosaic. A friend and I heard what sounded like balloons popping; we scrambled under a table when someone shouted, "He has a gun!" I'll never forget seeing the boy holding the weapon in the doorway of the main dining room – then noticing the kid next to me under the table, as he stared at his foot in wonder. It was bleeding. He'd been shot, but I don't remember it happening – the sound of the gunshot or maybe him crying out in pain - just the splat of blood where the bullet had penetrated and the little red river that seeped down the whiteness of his tennis shoe. And then my memory skips, to the brief drive home with my friend and her mom; bursting into my house in tears; my own mother, who had waited up, flicking on the local news; and then our phone ringing nonstop for hours into the night.

When I woke up the next morning and padded into the kitchen, robotic and disbelieving, my mom said: "National news." Ann Curry reported Mr. Gillette's death on the Today Show.

It was, after all, just a month after the shooting at Jonesboro and a year, almost to the day, before Columbine.

The superintendent of the district held a private conference in the middle school cafeteria; my father and I went. My mother stayed home, waiting instead for the faculty meeting later in the afternoon. Dad and I drove up the long side driveway to school and stared, stunned, at the media circus blocked off from the main parking lot. Camera crews seemed to bulge against their restraints. Inside, students, parents and teachers assembled in quiet sobriety. Referring to the melee and confusion of what had happened, the principal looked to our young faces and said: "I just want you know, you guys were great last night!" We frightened, traumatized adolescents who had had the night to collect ourselves and start to make sense of it all, dissolved again into an almost panicked, desperate crying.

I think, as a class, it wasn't that we were particularly well-behaved in a time of crisis; we had simply been too scared to do anything except stay out of the way.

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Days passed; we returned to school after the weekend, silent and unlaughing. Some six thousand turned out for Mr. Gillette's funeral. Months passed and we were evacuated for bomb threats called into the school – they made us miss our class picnic. We still shuddered at the sound of balloons popping. We began ninth grade at the high school, a nice change of pace. A year then, and the school held a beautiful vigil at the memory garden dedicated to Mr. Gillette. Another year. Another. Yet another, and it was senior year. The class of 2002 remembered the tragedy of April 24, 1998 in the yearbook and at graduation. Then we parted ways and went to

college or began to work in earnest or start families. Terrifying as it was, for most of us, that night left on all of us a scar that would naturally fade as the years went on. A certain song played that night might come on the radio and it would be like noticing that scar again suddenly, and thinking, "Oh yes, I remember – I remember where that one came from." But mostly, it was forgotten in the day-to-day.

Remembering a home run hit during the big game evokes a special kind of memory: a full-body, all-the-senses-engaged alertness. Yet it's crushing, as violent and abrupt as the crack of wood against stitched cowhide: a millisecond of hands clenched, jaw set, sweat running, adrenaline coursing. Still, as time presses forth, in its linear fashion, the anxiety and the awe of those kinds of moments, though never fully forgotten, dull; the longer the line between the event and the present, the less significance we begin to attribute to it.

It took some time for my classmates and me to come to terms with what had happened. I think about what my parents always say about growing up: *The older you get, the faster time flies*. It feels truer with every year that passes now; and it was an unsung blessing for us then.

When the Erie Times News did a two-day spread on the ten year anniversary of the shooting, the difficulty in composing the articles didn't lie in tracking down students; with Facebook and Myspace, all the writer had to do was search for General McLane graduates from the year 2002. Her real difficulty was finding people who still cared to talk about it, to bring it up again, when an entire decade had passed, and we had healed, and we had moved on.

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A year later, when I was twenty-five, I started dating a guy who lived some twenty miles away from me. The first time I drove out to his house, aflutter and distracted, I was speeding up route 98, one of the more frequently traveled back roads that criss-cross Erie County. I came to a bridge just inside the Fairview township line and then noted with sudden and breathless realization the bridge was flanked by a coarse stone wall steeping straight down, its southward face still grooved – though perhaps not so deeply as before – by lines running perpendicular to the rocky bed below.

My bad sense of direction and general obliviousness when I was a young teenager would have left me without any clue as to locating that spot at will. By chance, I found it again, looking so much more weathered now than it did in the memory that flashed behind my eyes.

I imagine the dulled stone, if it could speak, would relate thousands of years of freezing cold and then how the ice had started to go away: a painfully slow process that eventually let rivulets of water stream down its face, as if the stone was crying for joy to know it would feel the sunshine again. Maybe the rock would ramble on like a wistful grandfather about watching the birds take to their nests every year, how it could hear the comforting sound of tiny peeped cries in the spring; or perhaps it might share its anxieties about the once-reverent human species. As an immovable witness to biological history, with a time-span of who knew how many thousands of years, I can't help but wonder if it could recall the man who had understood, who had brought us there all those years ago, and who had tried to teach us to marvel.

"Vertical erosion," I said aloud, after searching through over a decade of memories. "Yes, I remember that."