

Going Back

A Creative Non-Fiction Story by Dan Berget

The elementary school was locked up, each window down the long building boarded up by a sheet of ugly plywood. Paint peeled and cracked and faded, the glowing white and blue now a former thing. Two metal gates, each with their own set of wobbling, misshapen wheels, were locked, separating the U-shaped parking lot off from the street, a busy four lane thoroughfare. A chain-link fence separated the rest of the campus from the public.

He looked over at the kindergarten across the street. It too was closed and had fallen into disrepair, but somehow it was less sad, impactful. It had closed, the current students moving to a different campus further down the street, while he was still in attendance at the elementary school. A memory fresh in his mind, pulled straight from fifth grade, a child grasping the fence with both hands and peering through, shoving face up against the chain-link to get a better view, several friends and students each doing the same, each wondering what would happen next. And they wouldn't know, wouldn't comprehend - couldn't comprehend. Now here he was, peering through the same fence but from the other side.

The grass lawn was cut down, but contained many weeds and dirt patches, making it unclear if the property owner had hired landscapers to maintain it, this sacred land that held so many memories, or if it too fell into disrepair at the hands of neglect. He looked up. The massive shade trees that seemed so ominous when he was a child, growing and covering everything until they seemingly blocked out the sun, were just as big as his imagination made them to be. And here they were – jungle-like, the subject of stories and fantasies and other childhood

dreamscapes, so overgrown that they now resembled what, in the past, had been only childhood fiction. They had grown – so had he. They were still here – he came back.

He continued down the lawn, under each tree, in sheer darkness, hiding from the midmorning sun. After rounding a corner to the left where the building continued at a right angle and followed the wall, he looked to the right to try to glimpse either fourth grade or third grade, but all the windows were boarded up with the same plywood – a rush job, completed in no more than an afternoon. That's what it took to shutter a memory. He placed a hand against one of the boards, tried to feel for a weakness, for a way to pry it up and get a glimpse he somehow believed he was owed, but they refused to give.

At the end of the lawn was a wooden fence, twelve boards long, running from the school building to another wooden fence, the boundary of a residential house. It was only now, in his late-twenties and revisiting a childhood memory, did he realize just how much noise children make. Not just during recess, but squealing and rambunctiousness during class too. He had moved downtown. At least there the noise was expected, would not bother him as much as he believed he must have bothered the neighbors twenty years ago simply by enjoying lunch.

It was here at this fence he had some luck – one of the boards was loose, rotted and speckled with dark green mold. He pulled on it and it broke away easily, the top third remaining behind, stubborn. It did not matter. It was a hole big enough to crouch down and crawl through. Whenever he was a kid he always saw adults as much older – somehow grayer, weaker, yet also wiser, as if they had complete control of the world. He pulled himself through the gap in the wood and felt the pain in his back and knees already. Nobody tells you when you're a kid that the pain starts in your twenties. It always seemed like a sixty-year old thing, like he'd have more years. On the other side of the fence the lawn continued for a few more yards and in this

secluded part was a square, stone frame where the teachers would demonstrate flowers growing in the wild. It was here he had learned the state flower: the poppy, and also the state bird: the quail. He had always imagined parent quails zipping around with their young right behind, pictured them on that very lawn, but it never happened.

He turned and faced the covered patio where he ate lunch with his friends and other schoolmates. Taking a step forward, he almost slipped on an old beer bottle. Another glance around and the cigarette butts and crushed cans emerged from the pavement. He had not been the first here. Had he been less cynical he would have been hurt by this reckless display, this litter. But not anymore. Strange how quickly the childlike energy and hope fades.

A vibration shook him from his current state of mind. He reached a hand in and fished out the phone. Yet another email. A swipe right and it is gone. The phone went away and nostalgia returned: Pokémon cards on the lunch tables - at least, until one kid stole some and got them all banned; a younger student eating too fast and choking on a Twinkie.

Another chain-link fence, this one waist high, separated the eating area from the basketball courts. And back to thought: watching a steamroller repave the courts, watching as it crept up to the fence, that imminent danger, but always pulling back before it got too close; a teacher yelling at a student for being too loud, or picking their nose, or play-spitting out their food just to see how far it would launch.

He looked to the left and the row of classrooms and outdoor lockers on the other side of that right-angled building. His hand ran over the lockers, no more combination locks on them or belongings inside. More memories surfaced: like that time it got cold enough to freeze over a puddle, and a desire to preserve the ice. Of course his locker would stop that thin layer from

melting. Or when he changed his locker combo to all zeroes because it was fun to pull down and open quickly, only to panic the next day when it wouldn't open cause someone had changed the numbers.

The windows above the lockers were boarded up as well, each one as they ran the length of the building, stopping only where there was a classroom door, also glass and also boarded up. He pulled on the door. Third grade was locked. Across the way was another building, two more classrooms. It was here his second grade teacher lost her job. All the girls cried at the announcement but he did not. Against the lockers again and up came fifth grade. His favorite teacher, the one he told he was going to be a writer - maybe his first inspiration, a feeling that would not return until similarly inspired his senior year of high school. He pulled on this door and to his surprise it opened. The door creaked on its hinge and he went inside, pulling out the phone again to turn on a flashlight.

The room was empty. All of the student desks and chairs were gone. In the far right corner, where the teacher sat, was nothing. No posters on the walls. Not even carpet. It seemed it had been pulled and hauled away, possibly repurposed. A few stains remained behind, having soaked through, becoming a permanent piece of the history of the building. A shine of the light and another beer bottle. Now the stains were different. Maybe not as old. Maybe not as significant. Across the room, on the biggest wall, was the whiteboard. To his surprise, the whiteboard. Still there. Of all the things to not haul away (but of course, the carpet). Obscenities laced the wall, signatures of passerbys. He ran a finger over them but they remained – permanent. A marker sat on the tray and he considered giving dignity to the room with a farewell of some sort – a quote, a name, maybe even a year – but it too was permanent and he decided against it.

Outside of the fifth grade room was a hallway in which on the left was once the computer lab. One summer a student broke the window by slamming his head into it after he wasn't allowed to play games in the lab for as long as he wanted. For many years, the sound of the broken glass replayed in his head – it was the first time he had heard something like that: not just glass breaking, but breaking out of anger. That raw emotion stuck with him for far longer than the sound. The sound faded away, replaced by other memories, but the emotion stayed behind.

About halfway down the outdoor hall was a swimming pool that had been empty for as long as he could remember. Even when he stayed one summer it was drained. Next to it, outside the plastic fence that surrounded it was a shower. He and his friends would play in and around it, but there was no way for it to turn on.

Leaving the pool, the school offices at the front of the campus, near the locked gates to the parking lot, were boarded up. Main door was locked and so too was the side entrance. From the side, nearest to the street and the lawn he had crossed he could look out at the rest of the campus, large enough that the preschool at the far end of a grass soccer field was only a dot. The playground used by the first through fifth graders had long ago been replaced with plastic play structures, swings and monkey bars, and shredded bark. In his time, there was sand and metal. Summertime on the slide was not fun. The art teacher had broken her arm when one of the swings broke. They discovered a dinosaur skeleton in the sand by using sticks to scrape around the harder layer underneath. A massive oak tree, bigger than anything he had seen before as a kid still remained, just as tall and strong and powerful as ever. Only one kid kicked a ball all the way over the top and he became a legend.

Past the playground was a wall for throwing balls against, beyond that the great green soccer field. To the left of the field was the first grade building in which he remembered a report

on Albuquerque - and how to spell the word Albuquerque. Further along flanking the field was a building used for music lessons. It had a full kitchen and bathroom, as if it were a single condo, but he had never confirmed such a thing. The only thing that supported this belief was next building over with its bedrooms, bathrooms, and even a fireplace. Even as a kid these things were confusing. They did not belong in this world. A kitchen and a fireplace and a swimming pool were at home, not at school. They were out of place and as such they were wrong.

A campus full of mystery. Did it used to be some kind of neighborhood? A church commune? How did it become a school campus, a playground? A drive to the right office would provide all the answers, but that would spoil the mystery, the wonder, shatter that hazy nostalgia that would allow him to relive in just the right precise manner.

Here it all was. And here they had all been, ten friends from across the street. Then six. Then four. And as the grades got higher, the friends went down. New campuses, new lives. Two left.

Just one.