

Robert Long Foreman

Centripetal Force

In the early days of the sixth grade, my first year at Triadelphia Middle School, I attempted to ride the bus with only partial success: I could board the machine, but could not sit down. There were too many other kids on it, and my body could not find a place among theirs.

On the corner of Edgewood and Lynwood, each morning, before our bus arrived, the other students and I overcrowded our stop. We spilled off the concrete sidewalk, into the street and onto the lawn of a homeowner who, if he thought he would manage to sleep past 6:30 on weekday mornings, was being corrected. A big, older kid named Nathan would often chase a smaller, younger kid, also named Nathan, away from the corner, throwing rocks at him, and preventing his access to the bus and making him late for school. The last time I saw the bigger Nathan, twelve years after my sixth grade, he was bussing tables at a restaurant not half a mile from our old bus stop.

When our bus came, the others piled on and seized every available space before I made it through the collapsible door. Five mornings per week, kids I had known for years disowned me; they refused to help out and give me a place on one of their seats. Instead, I had to kneel in the aisle and everyone—driver included—shouted at me for blocking the way. My parents had made the mistake of conceiving a child—me—at roughly the same time as everyone else in the neighborhood. My little piece of Wheeling, West Virginia, contained a critical mass of adolescents, and I was one too many.

It did not feel good to be the extra kid in town, the one who complicated mass transit for my school district, the straw that would not fit on the camel's back. I caused problems each morning simply by existing. No one knew what to do with me.

I saw that I had to circumvent the bus. There had to be a better way to get around. After a long phase of worry, I looked to my legs for a solution. There was nothing I could do about the mornings; school started early at Triadelphia, and I could not wake up early enough to walk the long miles there, through the dark. I would have to rise early each day, and suffer my routine humiliation on the bus. In the afternoons, though, while the conformist saps climbed aboard their long diesel vehicles, I struck out on my own. I went west: I walked the four miles home, down the hill, on National Road—the American Via Appia that stretches hundreds of miles to the town where I live today, in Missouri, and beyond. I walked past Greenwood Cemetery, where my grandfather reposed in his mausoleum, past a different cemetery across the street, down another gentle slope lined with retirement

homes, then up Chicken Neck Hill, where my mother grew up, and down to Poplar Avenue and home. I arrived in my neighborhood always exactly when the bus did. For a twelve-year-old, I kept a brisk pace.

Eventually, I was sent to the office of the Assistant Principal. I had never been in there before, and I stared into his tie as he said, “I want to see what I have to do to convince you to ride that bus.” He offered incentives for changing my behavior. I cannot remember what they were. I continued to walk home every day, despite his disapproval. I spent my time at Triadelphia reluctantly taking up the space allotted me by the Ohio County Board of Education. This space was exactly my height and the width of my slouching shoulders. It moved about the building with me, from one classroom to another, throughout the day. I was required, by law, to be present within it, five days a week, for most of the year. My father reminded me of this law whenever I begged him to give me a break and let me stay home from school. Sometimes he drove me to school in the morning, which at least gave me a break from attempting to ride the bus.

Triadelphia was a concrete, three-story bunker, and that is exactly what it still is. Metal signs on the front door indicate that fallout shelters are somewhere inside, and implied in 1993 that the structure was significantly older than all of the students. In my memories of Triadelphia, its interior hallways and classrooms are poorly lit. This could be due to the building’s poor lighting, but it might instead be a sign that my memories are dim and fading.

I do not have one positive recollection of Triadelphia, and I wonder if anyone does other than the goons my age who had their run of the place, who were either tough and aware of their strength, or were manipulative fast-talkers who had befriended the tough kids. Today, some of them are dead.

I kept safely to the social periphery—the outskirts of the fascinating actions of better, smarter, faster twelve-year-olds. I tried not to be noticed. Sometimes I failed. One morning Mr. Szmilas saw me taking off my sweatshirt during Social Studies. I was having trouble getting my left arm out of its sleeve. It was an honest difficulty; I had not planned it ahead of time, as a means to subvert Szmilas’ authority, but he shouted, “What the heck are you doing!”—interrupting himself mid-sentence, at which point everyone stared at me. I froze, and wished I could be buried in the floor three feet below me.

A few weeks into the sixth grade, during recess, someone got unruly on the basketball court. I never knew exactly what happened, but the incident reflected badly on all of us troublemakers. I, for one, had not even been on the basketball court. I routinely spent those

thirty minutes of relative freedom by myself, sitting down somewhere, reading Michael Crichton novels, wishing I could get the day over with and walk home. Those books were always of impressive paperback thickness, and it took me a year to realize I was getting nothing out of them. They were not even entertaining.

The day after our mysterious basketball court catastrophe, our teachers introduced us to the concept of a “Walk and Talk.” This was exactly what its name suggests it was. The entire sixth grade class was marched out to the parking lot after lunch. A member of the underpaid faculty marked a circle with orange cones, and we were to walk its circumference for half an hour. A conglomerated mass of frustrated pubescence arranged itself into a loose oval, and around the sloppy orbit we went. We walked as instructed, timid and submissive. Some of us even talked. I accepted this activity as a predictable consequence of the school’s existence.

I didn’t talk. I had no one to speak to. I couldn’t walk and read at the same time—at least not *The Andromeda Strain*—so instead I watched everyone else.

If I remember correctly, boys and girls rarely associated during the Walk and Talk. This is how things worked in the sixth grade, and as a result there was an identifiable hierarchy of boys: there seemed to be a starting point, a maw for the worm of preteens, with a loosely organized flagellum of reluctant obedience trailing behind it. The oligarchy of tough kids, who relished every second of puberty, gathered at its head. Lesser ministers, such as the kids who played sports and held a common ground with others, clotted together down the line. At the end walked those who did not fit these categories. The further back one walked, the less significant he or she was in the somber train. I would later learn that Adolf Hitler’s Inner Circle had its own version of this. I nearly always came last.

On rare occasions, one of the spatial and social stragglers would creep up the line and try to fraternize with his betters. Some of them succeeded in doing this, but they always came back to us after a while. Some of them failed remarkably: one day a squat dictator named David punched Aaron, a socially mobile kid, in the face. I did not see it happen, but the incident was big news for days. Soon after, Aaron returned to his usual place. Today he is something like a Mennonite, and David is still alive, somewhere.

I never made one of these attempts, but it was not out of contentment with walking so far back in the Walk and Talk. I resented my social standing, which I rediscovered every time I lifted my eyes from the ground and saw my place in line. I felt as pathetic as I must have looked, wandering in that circle, so far from anyone who seemed to be worth being with. But I had an intuitive knowledge that it was

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no better to be up there with superstars than it was to pace where I did with the silent, average people. I knew this, even though I had a hard time really believing it. I mostly looked at the ground.

I read constantly at school, but not because of my burgeoning genius. It was a way to occupy myself until I left for college, though I didn't recognize it as such at the time.

Not everyone was okay with this passive activity. One girl in particular harassed me throughout a long, nine-week phase of my math class. She sat behind and to the right of me, and kicked the leg of my chair, very hard, when I sat down to read before class started. She called me a "goof" every day, and even wrote the word on my papers when she could snatch them from my desk, which was often. My mother, assuring me that I was "cute," insisted this misanthrope had a crush on me.

I had some friends in the sixth grade. One was a boy named Bryce, who exited and reentered my life repeatedly until he died from a seizure at twenty-one, in his bathroom, four houses down on the street where we were neighbors in our last year of college. I remember some scattered conversations, before gym class, mostly about girls we didn't like—we quiet folk were afraid to mention the ones we did like, about whom I, for one, could not stop thinking.

Much more formative and memorable than this scattered talk was the way Mrs. Jingle, the chorus teacher, would humiliate me once a week for not having found my "tonal center." When I finally found it, without knowing what it was, the applause she demanded for me from the rest of the class failed to raise my spirits.

When the bully Larry Hennessy misbehaved in the Walk-and-Talk circle, they exiled him to sit among the handicapped. As a form of punishment, he had to lounge with retarded children. It was a problematic way to shame him, for more reasons than I could count. Everyone looked at Larry, and he threatened each of us as we went past, a rotating buffet of ready targets for this gigantic twelve-year-old. The teachers were visibly amused.

All of us who suffered through the boredom of this Walk and Talk had plenty of trouble just beginning to creep out of our skins, at a time when we least wanted it. We were going through dramatic changes; the world was a pulsating nightmare, at least for me. My life at home was an anxious one, despite its stability. I slept in all my clothes, every night, without thinking it was unusual. I tried hard to avoid looking in the mirror, and did an admirable job. I do not recall what my face looked like then, as I did my best to avoid it altogether.

It was not enough that so many bodies were growing and

shifting on a daily, nightly basis, as bodies our age were wont to do, and that we had to gather five days a week so we could watch each other's embarrassing progress through puberty in classes like Language Arts and Science. Our teachers had to complicate things a little more, and force us to try to speak with one another for half an hour after lunch. They could have let my classmates play basketball and shout, and release the nervous energy they built up during their sedentary mornings. They could have let me get away from them and think about something else—such as an island near Costa Rica that has been populated with dinosaurs and made into an amusement park, where things do not go as they are planned.

As I mucked my way through the dimly lit sixth grade, I limped, for no particular reason. My limp alternated from one leg to another, and it felt like something natural, an inevitable part of being alive. The Assistant Principal pulled me aside and said, "Rob! What's with the limp, fella?" I told him my foot hurt. That was as much as I could give him. I limped because of what my life felt like at the time; it was how my body adjusted to the hopelessness. Often I was not even aware of it.

I like to imagine now that my body was revolting against a nonsensical exercise of discipline and punishment. Only now can I assert with confidence that my school, at least for thirty minutes each day, was being run like a prison. It is strong language, but seriously, we had to gather in a yard of asphalt and walk in a circle for our only time spent outdoors each day. Prisoners do that, and it sounds like the kind of thing sheep do, too.

Today I see this exercise of power as grounds for delinquency. I see now that I had hundreds of opportunities to misbehave and that I should have taken all of them. I could have acted up and joined the troublemakers: burned things in the restroom; started smoking; slapped someone; thrown an egg; or told off the science teacher during a lesson on the periodic table of elements, right there in front of everybody. I could have stood up for my juvenile self. I could have given them the trouble they deserved. A part of me regrets that I did none of these things, but at the time I wanted only for the Walk and Talk to end, and with that in mind I went about my compliant business as usual. I did what the grown-ups wanted me to do. The joints in my legs resisted, meanwhile, in silence.

I had reasons, too, to behave. Even back then I could see the Assistant Principal was not entirely bad. Although he wanted to disrupt my only peaceful phase of each day, when it ended and I strolled the long way home, he approached me with a decency I recognized. Whenever I saw him, he spoke to me with something in his voice that sounded like respect. He wore glasses that made him look friendly, in a

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way I could not quite figure out. I feel today as though he understood the joke that was the sixth grade, and knew I had only to endure it so that I could move on to things that were slightly more interesting, like perhaps someday becoming an assistant principal.

I can even extend this generous understanding to Mrs. Culp, the math teacher. She also wore glasses, but hers were not comforting. She was old. She probably smoked, and she did not like me. She humiliated me every chance she got, and called me to the chalkboard often in order to do exactly that. I had no interest in the chalkboard, nor in the problems I failed to work out in front of the thirty incredulous gawkers who sat behind me. She knew I was inept when it came to equations, and I cannot imagine she meant to teach me something by this public, mathematical shame. I hated her with a deep and genuine resentment; in this capacity I was fully grown.

In Culp's defense, though, I admit that she was old and probably never wanted that job. Once she may have wanted to be a doctor, or a gym teacher, or a millionaire. Bad luck, I assume, landed this elderly Culp in a roomful of pubescent kids who were programmed by their bodies to be disinterested in division.

Many days, before Culp's class in the late afternoon, I managed to play sick and escape Triadelphia. For that, I was a natural. I already limped everywhere I went. My skin was pale. The nurses never failed to point this out, and seemed to overlook that it resulted from rarely going outside, not illness. I was so grief-stricken in an everyday sense that no one had trouble accepting me as relatively sick, so I went home early once a week or more. People with initiative, when they feel the way I did, turn sixteen and hitchhike to Santa Cruz in a moment of daring rebellion. All I ever wanted was to be someplace other than my drab, depressing middle school for the second half of the day, and I was very good at making it happen. My mother would come to pick me up, and usually we went shopping.

Just as I was excluded from sitting comfortably on the bus each morning, I was left out of everyone's increasing knowledge of sex. In science class one morning, Amanda Miller cleaned a glass beaker with a thick bottle brush. She penetrated the container with a pumping motion, with her wrist, and then she turned to me and said, "Oh God, what does this look like?" I gave the beaker a blank stare and tried to figure it out. Then she laughed at my ignorance and told other people about it.

I was oblivious to sex, just as I completely missed my own bodily development. The sixth grade must have been the year when I started puberty, but somehow I hardly noticed. My body and I enjoyed a cordial, distant relationship.

Others, though, were getting along with their bodies like old friends—perhaps too well. My friend Todd claimed to have “done it” with a girl from the seventh grade. Even if he was lying, he presumably at least had a vague idea of what “it” was. Amanda Miller had apparently been clued in by someone. In the fifth grade, my teacher had tried to explain sex to our class, but he lost me when all he said about wet dreams was that they were “not the same thing as urinating.” It didn’t make any sense.

Whenever a sixth-grader found out that one of his peers—for instance, me—had little or no knowledge of sex, that ignorant person’s outlook was, for the twenty minutes to follow, grim. The ability to speak competently about sex was like carrying a gun to school: all you had to do was mention you had it, and then everyone who did not have it got quiet and tried to creep away.

I do not remember when the Walk and Talk ended. I seem to recall that it did, as though a pressure eased and blood could flow again through the student body. I do not remember what followed it, or how everyone reacted. They must have been thrilled, because it meant they could play basketball again. I undoubtedly went back to reading.

I do remember that the Walk and Talk lasted a very long time. It went on until it seemed the average fascist would agree we had had enough, and then it continued. When I sat in my chorus class, reluctant and misplaced, I could look out and see an army of seventh graders drilling on the pavement outside. When I frowned my way from there to my class in the main building, and eyed the historic National Road a mere hundred feet from me and wished with every breath of clean air that I could make the trek home already, the eighth graders were just pouring out to make their rounds.

When I made it to high school and was free of Triadelphia, I wound up spending a lot of my time at Triadelphia, in that same lot, on the Walk-and-Talk pavement, with friends I had fallen in with. Triadelphia was a midpoint between the disparate neighborhoods our group’s constituents came from. It provided a place for us to go, a natural hangout. We had nothing else to do.

John Radar, a friend I made at sixteen, was my hero. A well-meaning character with a buzz cut who laughed often, he had the personal vendetta against our middle school that I lacked the will to carry on. One Sunday afternoon John broke into the school’s main building. He pried open some lockers and scattered their contents onto the floor. He opened another, defecated on a wad of papers, and smeared his shit all over its interior. He jimmied open a cafeteria window and used the announcement PA to project impromptu hip-hop

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lyrics into the hollow basement. He could be a generous, gracious person, but his complicated sense of revenge compelled him to do things like this from time to time.

I stood outside the building as John committed his crimes, at a distance safe enough that I might avoid partial blame for his vandalism, were he caught. He emerged and told the rest of us about the locker, cackling as he spoke.

I am old enough now to disapprove of such behavior as John's, but at the time it was deeply satisfying. Although the victim was some poor, adolescent child, and nothing had been mended or accomplished, John's vandal reflex gave the most appropriate response to our old school that I could have imagined. Outside a building where I spent a year of my youth but knew no joy worth remembering, I could not stop laughing.

