

The pads of my bare feet wear on the asphalt below. My feet are tough from years of walking without shoes, but occasionally I turn on my phone's flashlight to watch dark paths for broken glass and crickets. I've discovered that I can differentiate between roads based on how they feel, which varies greatly depending on how recently the road has been surfaced. Spotting a fox is always the highlight of my walk. We both freeze and stare at each other, acknowledging each other's presence and curious about the other's activity. I pass one almost every night. Unafraid of me, they only scamper off if we become too close for comfort. They are wondrous: a stroke of muted red under the glowing street lamps, calmly stopping to watch me for a while.

When I was little I moved around a lot, to military bases and suburbs. I can remember walking to school every day with my mom and sister, taking our time to enjoy the morning together. We would find funny things to point out, or stop at the neighborhood playground before going to school. When my family finally settled down in Arlington when I was in fourth grade, our favorite spot to pass on our walk was an overpass on the way to elementary school, from which we could watch a waterfall below. We would lean over the concrete side, stretching to get a better view of the water rushing over smoothed stone after a heavy rain. We named it Swallowdale, after a similar scene in *Swallows and Amazons*, a favorite book chronicling the adventures of a group of siblings. Despite its location tucked between a highway and a bike trail, that waterfall has been a familiar spot for much of my life.

This Summer I hiked on the Appalachian Trail for a month with a group of friends, which was an incredible experience. Near the end of the trip it was just two of us, and one day we hiked over 21 miles with heavy packs and over varied terrain. On the final climb I felt numb with fatigue, trudging through the darkness desperately searching for the turn-off to the shelter. As we finally approached the shelter, I could hear the sound of people chatting at one of the characteristic picnic tables under the overhang. We turned off our headlamps as we rounded the corner, as everyone's face was lit up by the roaring fire. We dropped our packs and collapsed onto the bench, already fumbling to get dinner started. The two men turned and introduced themselves, sliding over a pan of Jiffy Pop as they explained how road-tripping afforded them heavier luxuries. We all sat in each other's company, my friend and I munching on popcorn and listening to the men talk nonstop about college, jobs, and forestry.

I've started taking a walk around my school between classes or during lunch, just to get a breath of fresh air and break up my day. Sometimes I'll bring along a book to read or essay to edit, but usually just a coat as the days get more brisk. I walk by a gym class running around on the lower field, and a few sixth graders yell a hello as I pass by. There is a large group of eighth graders who eat lunch together that I recognize from French class. There is another group of underclassmen who always sit in hammocks in the gazebo during lunch, who wave back as I walk by. Sometimes I chance upon Tim, our resource officer, who greets me with a joke about my bare feet.

The fox lightly scampers into the brush, returning to its nightly routine. I stand for another moment watching after it, lost in thought and absorbing the serene quiet of the street. I start walking again, but this time at a slowed pace, more interested in living this moment than finding my way home.