

Brad Beckett: a eulogy

“God *damnit* Jesse!” screamed my history teacher, as he kicked over a front-row desk that had remained – like all the front-row desks – unoccupied. His name was Brad Beckett. I always liked to imagine that he was a relative of Samuel Beckett, the playwright, but there were lots of Becketts in New England, and really I had no reason to have made the connection. Brad Beckett was a histrionic sort of historian, a guy who had been more-than-well-educated, had developed an interest in our region’s colonial past that bordered on being unhealthy, had written untold and unsung volumes on the subject that gathered silverfish in the basement of the Historical Society, and, through poverty, I imagine, had come to teach Social Studies to a handful of dirty, half-retarded fisherman’s kids at our underfunded correctional facility of a middle school in Thomaston. He fucking hated it, you could tell. You could also tell, even as a sixth-grader, that the guy hadn’t gotten laid in years. “If you don’t figure out how to *sit there* and *listen*, Jesse, you’re gonna grow up to be a *criminal*! A *criminal*, Jesse!” The spittle was flying out through his patchy neglect-beard and he bounced a Sharpie™ pen off the whitewashed brickwork. I don’t know if this last gesture was intended to punctuate his evaluation of Jesse, but it did leave a clear “.” on the wall.

Now, to be fair, there were plenty of ornery teachers slogging through their tenure at that school. Being an adult now, gradually losing hold of my dreams, like Indiana Jones hanging over a chasm from a greased rope, I can relate to that brand of internalized nastiness. But Brad Beckett was something else. Brad Beckett scared the shit out of us. He wasn’t a mean person – I wouldn’t try to frame it like that – not the archetypal curmudgeon that one expects when one is

expecting a scary teacher. Mr. Beckett never seemed to harbor any particular malice toward any particular student, and he wasn't given to needless hectoring of young, fragile egos. Rather, he was scary in the way that any large, unpredictable mammal can be scary. From a distance, the man was almost cuddly: a Chewbacca-like muppet, pieced together from spare Hushpuppies and corduroy blazers and two-hundred pounds of whatever Naugahyde™ is made of. But walking into fifth-period Social Studies could often feel like creeping up behind an especially nervous horse.

Being an especially nervous kid, I liked Brad Beckett. I liked the way his prolific nasal hairs would capture particles from the stagnant, sixth-grade-classroom air and trap them like sea anemones snagging a meal. I liked the way he wrote on the chalkboard using a chalk-extender, which was obviously the least-needful invention since the mechanical pencil. I liked the way he gave every lesson via overhead-projector, hunkering down over the glowing metal box, elucidating salient points with the aforementioned Sharpie. Mr. Beckett would write out a bullet point...

- THE EARLY AMERICANS CAME BY WAY OF LAND BRIDGE, NOW BERING SEA

...and then he'd talk for a while on that point, describing the Asiatic tribes who'd made this long, dangerous journey, the woolly mammoths they'd hunted to extinction, the ice age which drew back the Arctic waters and made such a land bridge possible. All the while doodling macabre prehistoric scenes on the overhead: >>>>→, >>>>→, (*wooly mammoth, X X for eyes*), >>>>→, >>>>→, (*competing hunter, X X for eyes*). We'd get a lot of >→O- >→O- >→O- which, of course, were dead Indians. Mr. Beckett didn't seem to be aware of his own doodling, never made

mention of it, never asked if anyone out in Desk Land could do better. It was like having a direct link to the man's furry, violent subconscious. I liked that.

I had to pick a topic for my Social Studies final, and I chose the St. George River Canal. I don't remember exactly how I landed on that subject specifically, but I'd always been interested in the idea that our town was where it was because of the river. I liked the river. I went sea-bass fishing with my dad on the river. It was a nice river. A hundred and fifty years prior, the townspeople (or whatever) had dug a relatively intricate canal system to ferry lumber and limestone from the forests and quarries, down the river, and into Thomaston harbor for shipment to places where the local white people were less resourceful. A large portion of the original canal system was preserved, in the form of a little-visited state park, just a couple miles from my house. I rode my bike there and did sketches of the stone work, the bridges. I did rubbings of the cast-iron plaques on which dates and names were offered as rooting grounds for moss. My mother took me to the Historical Society headquarters down on Water Street and I poured through albums of nickel-plate photographs, stacks of text. I took notes from so many books, but I was especially careful in recording quotes from histories penned, to my utter shock, by one *Bradley Beckett*. I put all these materials together into a press-pocket-style folder, as if I were briefing the President on matters regarding the St. George River Canal. I took it all quite seriously. And I did the cover illustration myself, using colored pencils and glue sticks and my own hand-rendered old-timey font. I meant it.

Looking back, my favorite part of that project was sitting in the abandoned park, hanging my arm over the edge of a former capitalist embattlement. The eroded architecture of industry.

The stones were all giving in to the landscape, you could see the roots of trees grown between them, and the canal was a slow, green carpet of algae. If I disturbed the water just so, with the afternoon sunlight piercing the muck, I could see dozens of tiny eels who now populated this adjunct waterway, shimmying their tiny bodies in the bored water. They were only little babies.

“*This*,” Mr. Beckett held up my contribution, shaking the blue paper folder until I thought it would tear, “is what I’d hoped, foolishly, that all of you might accomplish. *This* is what following an *assignment* means. I hope you’re all prepared for a lifetime of flipping burgers and draining septic tanks, because the way I see it, Mr. Sirois is the *only one here* with anything I’d call a ‘future’ ahead of him!”

Nevermind the fact that Brad Beckett had an obvious crush on my mother. And nevermind the fact that I was the only one to turn in his paper on time. I’m sure that these things had no bearing on the “A+ + + +” that he’d given my project, which even I understood was not a real grade, or the crippling embarrassment he then ladled over me before my astoundingly cynical twelve-year-old peers. I could see the dull gleam in Jesse’s eye which meant I was getting creamed later-on during dodge ball. It would be a long time before I dared put any effort into a school paper again.

I was furious with Brad Beckett at the time, though in retrospect I can’t say that his exceptionalism on my behalf did all that much to sink my popularity. I was already well in the red, where friends were concerned. But I didn’t forget it, his pedagogically irresponsible championing of my talent. As life went on and dodge ball games grew infrequent, I found myself appreciating what Mr. Beckett did for me that day. It was like he lit a tiny fire, somewhere in the

bruised center of my soul (or whatever), and it kept burning in spite of the lazy inclinations which would visit me throughout high school, the period of time that was supposed to be college, and the ambition-murdering strip mall that is modern American adulthood. He implanted some kind of dopamine receptor in my brain that rewards effort, carries Doctor Jones *up* that damned rope and out of the snake pit. It gets me through the poverty, and the rejection letters, and the long days flipping burgers.

My mom called a little while ago, just to shoot the shit. My family and I try to keep up with each-other pretty regular, ever since I moved west. I'm far from the river, the middle school, the eels. I miss those things, and I think they can tell, so they try to keep me informed. So-and-so just had a kid, so-and-so just got married. Dave's Diner closed, they're putting up a friggin' Walmart. That kind of thing. This time, after we got through my niece switching majors, my dad's achy knees postponing the golf season, and my sister's new job in Florida, mom told me that Brad Beckett had "passed away". His name floated to the surface of the conversation like a dead fish.

"Are you serious? How old was he?"

"Oh, probably my age. Yeah. Too young."

Mom didn't realize the gravity of the situation, and neither, at that moment, did I. "Huh," I said numbly, like reacting to day-old game highlights. Turned out that Mr. Beckett had succumbed to a rare type of cancer, thyroid or gall bladder or something, the kind of disease that only comes to a healthy-living person after prolonged exposure to self-loathing. He'd never

written a best seller, wasn't the Jared Diamond or Tom Brokaw he maybe deserved to be, despite his religious documentation of who we are. His years of service.

It took me a while to recognize it. I went to the UPS™ center later that day to retrieve a package that the assholes just couldn't seem to figure out how to deliver to my home. I was waiting in line, hands in pockets, as one does, and I happened to see a calendar on the wall that featured an inspirational quote for each month. This month's offering said:

There is an invisible red thread which connects all people who are destined to meet.

- Chinese Proverb

When it was eventually my turn and the clerk had taken my package slip, I asked him, "Have you read that calendar?"

"Oh," he said, following the direction of my index finger. "Yeah. Why?"

"How the fuck is something both *invisible* and *red*?" I questioned, earnestly.

"I don't know, man." He was staring intently at the monitor between us, having just entered my numbers. "Did you order something from Bed, Bath, and Beyond™?"

"Yeah, that's me."

I got back home and I milled around and drank a beer, unpacked my new curtain rods and installed them using the low-torque electric drill I'd bought because it was cheap. The feeling crept up within me as I sorted through all this domestic banality. It flared up in the quiet room,

where only my cat was watching. It climbed out of my heart on a greasy rope. It chased bison across a bridge of ice to conquer the Americas.

I kicked over a chair and said, "God *damnit* Jesse."