

## Exploring the Northern Shore along the Ship Canal

The northernmost shore of New York Island is terrain that very few people ever see. I didn't find a way to access it on my first walk in 1991. At the time, walking westward along the bitter end of Ninth Avenue, I had turned south on Broadway, defeated by the Allen Pavilion. In 1993 and '94, with stronger legs and greater fluency in edge-walking, I made a few attempts at the northern shore, each time making discoveries about the lay of the land and potential future routes, but never managing to get close enough to the Harlem River along its northernmost east/west section to walk with one foot in the water and the other on land.

It was not until 1996 that I first managed to traverse the full northern coast of Manhattan. I was traveling clockwise on a Saturday in May, the opposite direction from my first walk. After going north along the western shore for several hours, I reached the very top of the island; from there one would need to travel by boat or swim across the Harlem River in order to continue, but my goal was to follow the shoreline.

At the northernmost reach of the landfilled Inwood Hill Park, there is a short east/west fence between the never-ending north/south fence that goes along the railroad right-of-way and the river. It seems that when the fence installers were called back to add in this four-foot-long section, they arrived at high tide, and filled in what they saw. Luckily, when I arrived it was low tide, and with the waters pulled away to the other side of the globe, I was offered an effortless route around the fence. Timing is almost everything.

The island's shoreline here was unprotected by a river wall or giant wave dampening rocks; the grassy landfill ended cleanly, undercut by the constant motion of water; a miniature version of the towering and unstable bluffs along miles of northeastern American coastline. I stepped down a few feet onto the generally submarine soil, hard-packed, coarse and sandy with small rounded stones scattered throughout.

Only a few steps beyond the fence I came face-to-face with the stone foundation of the Spuyten Duyvil Railroad Bridge, which leads across to a section of the Bronx with the same name. It is a low bridge with no architectural ornament; certainly it is the least memorable of any of the structures connecting Manhattan to the rest of the world.

My good fortune had run out, the low-tide trespassing provided insufficient advantage for crossing beneath the bridge. I felt stuck. My mind rotated through all the possible routes I could take without backtracking. But, standing out on a tiny peninsula in the Hudson River where the bridge's base met the water, I became increasingly certain that, without a raft, there was absolutely no way around.

I speculated that if the bridge was unguarded it might be possible, with my limited rock-climbing experience and a bit of equipment, to get up onto the stone shelf that supports the swivel bridge's swinging end. From there, I could inch along on my belly like an escaping prisoner. However, even then, I could not be sure I would fit through the diminutive space beneath the metal rails and the flat granite support surface. If the bridge started moving, or a train horn sounded while I was slithering underneath, I couldn't imagine what would happen to me—mentally or physically.

On subsequent walks, I observed that the Spuyten Duyvil Railroad Bridge is normally open so boats can pass freely between the Harlem and the Hudson Rivers. Even at low tide, only very small boats can pass when it is swiveled closed with the train tracks aligned. It is a good thing I didn't try to climb over that day when it was closed, ready for an approaching train. I can imagine the headline: "Man Crushed by Train," or "Death by Fear under Railroad Tracks."

All viable options exhausted, I backtracked through my low-tide window of opportunity. After my cerebral confrontation with the bridge, I was not going to take the simple route and walk back to a green iron pedestrian overpass that went above the tracks nearly one-half mile back to the south. The overpass is used by the relatively few who come to this part of the park from Inwood's mountain side. But crossing over the



railroad fence between the river and the track area anywhere near the Spuyten Duyvil Bridge was difficult. It was a jamboree of fencing. For reasons I don't fully understand, this area gets a disproportionate allocation of fencing resources. I scoured the terrain along the edge of the tracks for a crack as I headed back south, not at the river's edge, but along the rail corridor.

Despite the intentions of fence installers, I've yet to find an intentionally placed barrier that has not been repeatedly breached by travelers. In all the remote locations I've reached on the island of Manhattan, there's no place I ever set my foot, where someone else hasn't laid theirs before. There has been no fence where I was the first, or will be the last, to go over, around, or through.

The new mock-elegant black fence—installed by Amtrak several years after they began reusing the West Side Connection, the rail corridor that reaches all the way downtown to Herald Square—was designed to overcome the shortcomings of chain-link fencing. Its clean vertical steel slats cannot be cut with snippers, are too far apart to get a toehold for climbing, and have no high crosspieces to be used as handholds. The top of the black posts are hammered and sharpened into cheap, lance-like points; from a distance they actually look decorative, with no visual connection to their unattractive cousin—razor wire.

In many areas along the tracks, they never bothered removing the generations of old defeated chain-link when the new mean-spirited black upgrade was delivered. This kind of neglect or laziness is what makes the view from train windows enjoyable and rich. Layers of history often coexist undisturbed, like geological cross sections. The wonderful old industrial architecture along America's rail lines often abuts astoundingly long blank sheet-metal facades and dull subdivisions. From a reclining padded seat, a rider can observe history and landscape by simply turning his or her head. The world passing by these train windows says a lot about our culture. It seems, however, that most people prefer a sanitized view, regardless of its shallow history or visual blandness. Detritus, from litter to abandoned equipment and outbuildings that still border many rail lines, is no longer allowed along the major highways; they compete to be "scenic."

After a few hundred more feet, I found a tiny section of chain-link fence where, for some reason, the black spears had not been installed. I climbed it and was into the railroad region. Looking for a way out on the other side I followed the single track back toward the bridge, hoping to pick up as close as possible to the northern edge, where I had left off. But I had to be cautious, the bridge operator was sure to be on duty. Nearing the swivel bridge's land connection, the fencing along the east side of the tracks became particularly intricate.

Crossing underneath the tracks where I began would have been easier than crossing here—I was trapped again. Both sides of the final fifteen to twenty feet were fenced with nearly the intensity of a high-security prison, two layers of fence separated by two barren feet of space, plus copious coils of barbed wire on top. Layers of fence were knitted together with different improvised mending techniques forming a range of unusual patterns. I thought it could be a good location for the American Museum of Urban Fencing.

With my hopes twice dashed, I turned around and walked back southward again, thankful that none of the black fence had been installed on the uphill side of the tracks; instead there were layers of old fencing protecting the steeply rising land. I recognized the hole I had pulled myself through on my first walk; it was sweet to see, like finding an old letter from a lover. It had been repeatedly patched since I saw it last. Farther south, I reached the place where, a few years earlier, I had crossed out of the rail corridor. It was unchanged. I dropped my backpack down first, then went up and over. A second leaning section of forgotten low fencing provided an easier landing than coming straight down from the newer ten-foot-high fence I was on. The experience of climbing a chain-link fence is considerably different at age forty than it was at ten or even twenty years old; the top, especially when there's no horizontal piece to rest your butt on, is always the most difficult.

Safely over, I put my pack on and headed north. The paths and landscape of this part of Inwood Hill Park reminded me of the northern end of Central Park in the 1970s. Old lampposts were either horizontal, missing entirely, or had parts dangling precariously from the top, rusted, untouched for decades. The under-



growth was rugged, yet not trampled, like Central Park's underbrush has become in recent years. The pavement of some paths was severely cracked, and in other places was disappearing under slow flows of eroding earth. Trees that had fallen had been sawed to clear the path, but not removed. The overall disarray and wildness made the occasional early spring flowers even lovelier to see. I was attempting to head toward the secluded little beach I had discovered on my first walk. This time, approaching from the opposite direction, lower down the hill and with more local knowledge, it was easier to find. I settled in for a lunch break on a driftwood tree trunk, the same one that had been there five years before. Two cream cheese and olive sandwiches—my sandwich of choice for local traveling—were as enjoyable as ever. I learned to make them from my grandmother many years ago.

With the ritual lunch in my belly, my thoughts drifted off while gazing out, across the river, toward the unused shore of the mainland. Ducks paddled around the small bay directly in front of me, causing the water to sparkle.

After several calm minutes, the air was pierced by a shrill horn, then a half-clanking, half-ringing sound. It was not a church. It did not come from a train, or a vehicle of any kind. The clattering beat of metal striking metal was unusually satisfying, like a chance percussion solo. No discernible pattern or tempo emerged; it was intentional, but not typically musical. The sound was not made by an instrument I had ever heard. It must be related to the swivel train bridge I thought. I assumed it had hosted its passing train and was now opening for river traffic, but I couldn't see through the trees to confirm.

I hoped the sound was an art piece, like art in the subways. The idea that something as wonderful as this, and in such a remote spot could be "authorized" tickled me as much as I knew it could not be true. I set off to catch a glimpse of the funny and matter-of-fact sound's source, but before I was much beyond the beach, it stopped. The bridge had finished pivoting to its open position, parallel to the Harlem's flow and perpendicular to the Hudson.

I never located the sound's precise source. I imagine that about the time commercial vehicles were required to install noisemakers for backing up, a necktied bureaucrat somewhere decided swivel bridges should also be required to sonically alert everyone in the neighborhood of their movements. Deciding the sound was too whimsical and unexpected for a simple warning, I fantasized about the noisemaking device being the project of a worker who sat on the bridge day after day, opening and closing it for the Amtrak trains traveling along the river. Following in the spirit of school science projects, the bridge worker would have rigged up this syncopated, Rube Goldberg, alert alarm over months of intermittent work. I like to think it is powered by the motion of the bridge, and made entirely of salvaged parts.

I continued east, following the edge of the idle land which I guessed to be the remains of the mighty Cold Spring. Before being buried in the late 1890s by Abraham Seeley, so he could sell more soft drinks to local fisherman, the spring produced nearly 10,000 gallons of clean cold water every day.

The tide was still low. Every other time I'd passed here, the land I was walking on had been underwater. While riding on Metro North's Hudson Line in recent years (which parallels this coast from across the Ship Canal to the north) I noticed that it looked possible to get around the massive supports of the Henry Hudson Bridge during low tide. This was a perfect opportunity to try.

The route was incredibly slippery, every rock coated in a green-brown slime. It was like stepping on smooth mounds of ice, drenched with warm oil. It took me half an hour to cover a distance of not much more than a quarter mile. The pylons were not yet in view and I repeatedly thought about going inland to my previous shoreline route, then heading back out before reaching the bridge. But it felt like that would be cheating, and I kept thinking the going would get easier. It didn't. I continued at the low-tide edge of a small cove, frequently needing to use both hands to move forward along the nearly level ground.

My route continued westward and then hooked around to the north. When I finally rounded the northern point where the distance across to the Bronx is shortest, I was surprised to see the concrete bridge pylons well up the hill, as though someone had moved them since my first sighting. Clearly, I would be able

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get around them and pass along the ample shore underneath the bridge, a significant first for me. Crossing below each bridge, right at the water, had become a sort of indicator, like a notch on a gunstock or bedpost. It was a way to mark how much of the very edge I had traveled.

We rarely get the chance to examine bridges from directly beneath, but when we do the perspective is always surprising. The Henry Hudson Bridge has two gigantic parallel arches supporting it; they delineate a vast space like the inside of a planetarium. Originally, before Depression-era bankers tightened their purses, three arches had been planned, and all six lanes would have been built on one broad level instead of the double-decker lanes there now. I could see that the steel needed paint; it is fully recoated about every twelve years.

Continuing, I followed the shore east of the bridge, and was soon on the ball fields of Inwood Hill Park. I passed what I refer to as Dead Man's Bay; I have learned from my own experience and from stories I've heard over the years, that anyone who spends a lot of time along the periphery of the island will see a dead body sooner or later. But now the tide was coming in, and there was no body and no boats in the shallow water.

I was feeling upbeat about my Henry Hudson conquest and decided it was time to try to crack the shell of Columbia University's property—my last significant bit of unwalked edge.

I rehearsed three or four possible explanations for my being there before turning downhill onto the "closed road" that I was sure led toward the water and Columbia's current boathouse. My white skin and preppy, albeit worn, sweater was probably all I needed to enter.

The paved road wound down past a well-built old brick storage building with large windows. As I got closer to the river I saw a person washing his car; I nodded routinely. Farther along, I waved to a thin young man standing in the doorway of a formal white clapboard building; he waved back. It was just like at college, when I dressed up and crashed fraternity parties simply by looking like I belonged. Nevertheless, being cautious, I cut behind a block of old-fashioned, green clay tennis courts, empty on this warm Saturday afternoon. I climbed one of many paths, sometimes on ramps, sometimes on small handmade concrete steps, through meticulously maintained terraced gardens.

Tommy Egan had created this unexpected landscape, as the university's groundskeeper, over the course of ten years, using rubble he found on the off-campus site at the northernmost end of the island. Egan, from an Irish family of construction workers, worked at Columbia for twenty-five years after emigrating to the United States.

He created an unusually rustic setting on the steep slope behind Columbia's eight courts. The irregular heights of the terraces and the curving earthen ramps give the place the feel of an ancient amphitheater, not an Ivy League tennis stadium. In some places you can sit on the grass and let your legs dangle over the terraced edges, while in other spots horizontal concrete sitting slabs jut out of the curving walls. With views over the Harlem River and out toward Inwood Hill, the Hudson, and the Palisades, it is a scenic spot to watch tennis.

Egan often came to work on Saturdays and holidays, and his passion for his work shows. One of Columbia's engineering professors called Egan a "natural self-taught construction genius." He invented a drainage system of troughs and small stones to get the runoff away from the courts and into the nearby Harlem River. Stray balls landing on top of the stones stayed dry; the courts were said to be some of the best-drained courts in the country. Unlike the stereotypical engineer or builder, Egan also spent a lot of time planting flowers and trees. He created a grassy walkway along Columbia's stretch of Dead Man's Bay shore, providing a lovely approach to the courts and the most naturalistic and human treatment of the edge anywhere on the whole island. Hemlock trees cut the wind along the court fences, while low rose bushes keep people safely away from the river below. To the south, several weeping willow trees form a soft separation between the tennis area and the rowing area. Interviewed by the *New York Times* in August 1971, Egan said he did not know how old he was, and when pressed he said he would not even "want to hazard a guess."



I continued uphill, leaving the shoreline behind. I knew from train observations that parts of the edge ahead were nearly vertical—impassable.

At the top of the gardens, I bushwhacked briefly, going steeply uphill through waist-high grass and weeds until a startlingly tall blank metal wall stopped me cold. Gone was all sense of a natural setting. It was the jaggedly corrugated side of Columbia's Wien Stadium, their off-campus sports venue. The echoey voice of a male announcer drifted through the air making me think something was going on, but I couldn't see in, and there were no crowd sounds.

The last time I had been to that stadium was in the early 1980s. My grandmother and I went to a football game between Columbia and Colgate Universities. I borrowed a friend's beat-up orange van with the gearshift on the steering column—"three on a tree"—to get up to 218th Street. I picked her up on East 74th Street, at the same building I lived in for the first two years of my life. She had packed several of her esteemed cream cheese and olive sandwiches, wrapped in wax paper, along with a plastic container of neatly cut celery and carrot sticks. I helped her into the passenger seat. Two bucket seats were the only things in the spacious tin-can interior. I remember that we enjoyed rattling around in the van more than the game itself. She must have been eighty-years old at the time.

Beyond the stadium, I headed northeasterly, downhill in the direction of the river. I walked along the outer edge of a baseball practice diamond with a dirt infield, minimal backstop, and no bleachers. I followed the home-run wall in deep left field, and then through Columbia's bullpen, the first one I had ever been in. It was apparent nobody else had been there recently; the two pitching mounds were somewhat overgrown. Continuing past center field and the visitor's bullpen, I came to a small, almost-wild vegetable garden in the home-run area of right field. Surely it was not an official university garden, just someone's sensible use of this extremely out-of-the way spot.

Not far from here had been Isaac Dyckman's house, where James Smith visited in June, 1898, in his tireless endeavor to document the springs of the area.

The Dyckmans had an ice pond. It was cut into the solid rock, which is near the surface here. I have not been able to tell exactly where this was, but James Smith refers to it as "... a beautiful object. The pond is about three hundred feet long by seventy-five feet wide." He describes nearly falling in, over the edge of a twenty-five-foot high bluff. After regaining his composure, he watched as "... a swallow was busily engaged skimming for insects on the pond and it darted about dipping into the water with a swishing splash every now and then."

Smith went on to describe two long wooden platforms extending into the water at the southern end, they were designed to support and guide the ice, which had been sawn by hand, split into large blocks and dragged up and out of the water by work horses. Smith commented on the worn smoothness of the platforms' planks, indicating that they were well-used. He said, "They did not cut ice here last year." That would have been the winter of 1897-98, ninety-nine years before I reached the same land. He did not say why. Maybe a warm winter? It seems, even before global warming, New York winters had been growing more mild.

Beyond the twentieth-century vegetable garden, at the far corner of the outfield, was a compost pile and a thicket of prickly bushes that filled a six-foot lapse in an old fence. Could the thicket have grown there by chance? Or was it already there, and the fence installed around it? Whatever the answer, the only way to continue was through it. I proceeded very slowly, on toe, like a ballerina in hiking boots. I made it through with a minimum of scratches.

Once beyond the prickles, I came back down onto my heels and entered a deeply shaded wood. It was a narrow slice of dark land behind the Allen Pavilion, the hospital I had seen the front of in 1991. This was a section of shore I'd never previously figured out how to access. The line between river and land here is the most precipitous of any on Manhattan. This was not a city wall with cut stone and mortar, but a cliff with a sharp and varied face. I did not get any closer to peer over. I had always thought that this vertical rock face had been exposed by controlled blasting during construction of the U.S. Ship Canal, but perhaps at least part



of it is the sheer wall of Dyckman's ice pond into which Smith nearly fell.

Dead ahead of me was an ancient ravine, the earth angled steeply down like an expert ski slope, but leading toward a cliff. I grabbed hold of tender young tree trunks, reaching from one to the next as I slowly traversed the slope. But it was too steep. I was losing altitude, so I turned to head directly uphill.

Near the top of the ridge I found a safer route following a fence directly behind the hospital's rear facade. While walking, I studied the building without appearing to stare. Years later I read some hospital literature written in the mid-1980s, before construction began; it said, "there will be terraced gardens between the hospital and the Harlem River." Even ten years after completion there was no sign of these gardens.

Most of the curtains in the hospital's glassed-in central section were open. A group of people, some in white lab coats, spotted me from where they were talking in front of a large window; I both saw and sensed their attention. Proceeding, I tried to appear disinterested, hoping to send them a signal that I was just a casual passerby, as unlikely as that was given the difficulties of the terrain. I kept up my pace, figuring it would take a while for a security person to be dispatched, and probably he or she would not know how, or want, to reach these forgotten woods from their comfortable central post.

The route narrowed again until there were just a few feet between the rear of the hospital and another extremely steep section. This was the highest point on my walk along the northern shore. I was above the roadway of the Broadway Bridge, which I could barely see through the thickening spring foliage.

The narrow, unauthorized path descended rapidly until I was well below the bridge. I came to an intersection of chain-link fences. South led toward Broadway and past the hospital's entrance. This was familiar, and therefore not appealing. Besides, this was the most likely direction for the security squad to approach. I had no choice but to keep moving, almost frantically searching for a route out of the small hollow where I was standing.

Finally I found a place where the fence had been trampled, or possibly knocked down by a falling tree. One way or the another, people had obviously passed through this low spot before. The leaves underfoot, leading to the pass, had been pressed lightly into the ground, causing them to be less colorful than those around them. I couldn't determine where the other travelers had come from or were going, but with the confidence that others had done it before, I leapt across a small, dry, ravine from my steep hillside and onto the horizontal shelf of the collapsed fence. It held. Two short steps farther and I was off the metal mesh ledge and continuing downhill. With another half dozen steps due north I was right at the river's edge, far below the slow current of pedestrians along the outer edge of the Broadway Bridge.

Standing on a cast concrete shore, less than two feet above the dark river water, I thought about what to do. There was no possibility of walking west; the grey stone cliff met the river like a knife. Luckily the only remaining option was to turn right, toward the bridge, the direction I had been heading. I was on a roll, tickled at the unexpected opportunity of covering more unwalked coastline, not to mention the chance to pass beneath another bridge.

I needed the enthusiasm, because there was something in the darkness under the bridge ahead of me. Litter was strewn over the scrubby low weeds, much of it probably tossed over the side by people traveling across the bridge; but some was farther underneath where it could not have landed from above. As I got closer I couldn't see what was ahead, not just because it was dark—very dark—but because there was a huge black wall of car tires blocking my view. My approach slowed. Darkness seemed to radiate off the tires. The dull black wall of precisely stacked tires angled out from deep under the bridge to a point about fifteen feet from the river. The wall reached up to the bridge's undersurface, about ten feet in the air.

If it had been nighttime nothing in the world could have compelled me to proceed another step toward the bridge. But it was midday, and I hoped whoever might be under there was in a good mood. I detoured left to walk as close as I could to the river's edge, figuring if things got bad, I could jump in. I debated calling out a greeting, but thought maybe the residents might still be asleep. I would have knocked, but even pounding on a rubber wall produces no noticeable sound. My heart raced. I imagined the sleepy hospi-



tal security team had finally found the rear of the building, and if I turned around I would run right into them. Being apprehended would be an aggravation and blow my momentum, but ahead I feared the moment when I would be able to see in and they, who ever they were, would be able to see me.

I stepped up my pace and entered the private/public land. Fear outweighed curiosity. I didn't turn my head to look inside. I maintained my "just passing through" gait, though out of the corner of my eye the darkness seemed empty. The occupants may have been out, or asleep. I resisted the temptation to study the layout, and kept moving through the tunnel-like space. But I saw enough to know that there were other, lower walls in the interior—possibly delineating rooms—all built of a seemingly endless supply of tires.

Ahead was another tall angling tire wall, a mirror image of the first one; it formed the eastern edge of the complex. The floor plan was essentially triangular, with two tire walls reaching out at a ninety-degree angles, the river forming the third side. Ahead of me the light was increasing, indicating I was near safety—a significant relief. Without speaking or being spoken to, I crossed the front yard of this establishment. Once out from under the roadway, I found myself in thick brush, much denser than what I had entered through. Clearly this was the back door—the escape route—and the other side was the normal approach.

Thinking back on the experience, I still wonder what was under there. It could've been a heavily armed drug hideout or home to a small group of cannibals who would have boiled me for brunch; it also could've been some easygoing street people living a kind of urban Walden existence by the side of the river.

Less than twenty feet beyond the bridge, the route directly along the river was blocked. Closer examination revealed that what looked like a mound of dark Virginia creeper leaves was an upended, broken concrete slab. I guessed it was once a dock after noticing several decaying pilings out in the canal that we call a river.

At the first inauguration of the ship canal in June 1895, then-Mayor William Strong said in his opening address: "This canal has spoiled my fishing ground." This was not an opening joke to warm up the crowd as we might imagine today; it was the truth. The Mayor did, however, go on to say that he supported the improvements to navigation for the good of the city. A few years earlier, when the city was impatient for the long overdue waterway to open, the *New York Herald* wrote:

The life of the bobtail clam, which has had its haunts in the marshy meadows of the Harlem River, is fast drawing to close. . . . No more will the blithesome clam digger, clad in long rubber-boots, a short fustian coat, and a red necktie, tie himself to the flats when the tide is out and dig himself a bucketful of this fruit for breakfast. The removal of the [temporary work] dams in the long talked about ship canal will put an end to his occupation. It will take away the vocation of the angler for eels, and from a romantic, placid, lagoonlike estuary it will transform the stream into a canal with swift-running currents, in which few of the present inhabitants of its waters can exist.

I moved up the bank, away from the shrouded dock remains which could have played a part in the U.S. Ship Canal's second round of improvements. The land had been crudely terraced with large wooden beams, probably more than fifty years before. A few yards up the hill was a clearing.

I had passed this open field along the river's edge many times, while walking on the Ninth Avenue side of the fence, but I had never gotten in before. I was thrilled—another first—but the pleasure was tempered by the tight coils of barbed wire running along the top of the fence. The sharp spirals had not been there the last time I walked on the other side, and as I emerged from the tall weeds I saw that the entire fence was brand new and higher than the old one. Part of the field had been recently paved; I was trapped. But being in the open air was preferable to the hospital's security force, the dark forest, and the troll-like world under the bridge.

I breathed deeply. Taking slow steps, I relished my traverse of the last significant, unwalked piece of



the island's shore. The fenced field opened in front of me as I proceeded. At the top of a low ridge, I froze. In the distance, I spotted a guy with an official-looking black cap. While I didn't think about turning back, I did slow nearly to a stop while scanning for a new, more inland route that would give him wide berth. Shortly, I realized he was not moving—a good sign. All I could see was his head and shoulders; even though I couldn't tell how close he was to the water I decided he must be a fisherman.

If he was a fisherman it was good for me. Surely he was not going to care that I was trespassing; he probably was himself—and, more importantly, his presence indicated that there was a way out through the problematic new fence. I was pretty sure he had not gotten in the way I had. New York Island fishermen do not like to venture any farther than they must to get to their fishing spots. Simplicity and ease are valued, climbing fences seems to be too much of a hassle.

The arc of unused land forming the curved northeastern corner of the island is nearly a half mile long. I cut southeasterly at a diagonal toward the shore, avoiding the edge where the black cap was. Farther on I noted that the fencing at the property's southern end was old and funky; it seemed that there might be a way through. I headed toward it for a closer examination.

At what was probably about 219th Street, a tall old chain-link fence effectively blocked southerly passage. Getting around it, even at low tide, would be impossible because the fence continued well out into the river, terminating at a group of old wooden pilings, bound together and called a "dolphin." This blockage was not easily breached. I patiently studied the situation, looking for other ways around. The high fence was not in good condition. The longer I looked, the more possibilities I saw. It was like analyzing a chess board mid-game. But beyond this fence was a narrow wasteland and then other fences, and then a masonry block building nearly backing into the river. Remembering that a quarter mile farther south the rail yard blocked whatever tortuous route I might be able to cobble together, I gave up on that direction and decided to look more carefully at the shore.

This was a place I liked, where the Harlem curves sharply westward toward the Hudson. I wondered about the new, but still unused, black pavement I had passed. The area is an unusual piece of Land's-End real estate that will become incredibly valuable someday—but not anytime soon. Over the years I've come to a sort of Buddhist view about the perimeter: study and enjoy what is there now, and accept the changes the next time you come. Impermanence seems the only rule. Anything from very old buildings to recently placed benches, fences, trees or path improvements can disappear incomprehensibly.

Angling back north on a route closer to the river, I noticed droplets of light bouncing out of a white bucket not far from the fisherman.

"What've you got?" I called out as I approached. He replied he had caught a couple of catfish, and held out his hands, as is the convention, to show their size. "The big ones always get away," he said and went on to explain what had gone wrong in hooking the fish. He had an easy, direct manner of speaking.

We spent a while together—he talked, I listened. He had grown up on the island of St. Thomas, and then had a career in the U.S. Air Force. He and his wife raised fourteen children—eight boys, six girls. The youngest was at Hunter College, the rest were all married. He said he had no reason to work anymore, so he just fished, alone, a lot, and listened to a small transistor radio. That day he had gotten tired of WINS, news radio, and switched to gospel. He planned to move back to the islands someday, St. Thomas or St. Croix.

Like all good fishermen, he was keenly aware of his surroundings. He told me the "blues" would be through next month, on their way up the Hudson toward Canada. "Seagulls eat bluefish, perch, eels, catfish . . ." It was not until later that I realized he gave some of his catch to the gulls. He spoke about other birds, including one he called a snakebird. As he described how they stood drying their wings on rocks or pilings, I spread my arms wide. "You know them?" he stated with some pleasure. That was about the most interest he showed in me.

He told me he caught a lot of perch, and I asked if he ate them.

"No. I fish, but I don't eat them."



"Good," I said. After a little more talk, he pointed to a bag lying on the ground, his day's catch. We were intimate enough by this point for me to ask why he didn't throw them back. There was mention of an older woman who lived next door, and it sounded like she ate them. Later I rationalized not trying to talk him out of this plan by telling myself that if she was quite old, the effects of the toxin-laden fish would most likely be dwarfed by other problems. Nevertheless, it seemed that feeding the gulls was a better plan.

He talked about all the chemicals in the water, bringing up PCB's and mercury. "Even in the oceans," he said. Several times he told me he liked being alone, but he seemed to take pleasure from an interested audience. I imagined his wife talking all the time, leaving very little room for his thoughts or ideas. Perhaps the words built up in him, trapped like a head of beer in a bottle. When given the chance they came bubbling out. It was not even necessary for me to nod or make *ahhh* noises of agreement or amazement. He just continued. I wondered if in fact everyone has a lot to say, and most of us simply do not have or make the opportunity to say it.

It was enjoyable to listen to him and feel myself slowly ease into fisherman time. He was very still, and I realized it was probably the longest that I'd stood still in years. He was farther back from the water than I would have thought. It was a good spot, he said. I wasn't sure if he meant for catching fish or spending time. It is the sharpest bend in the river around the whole island.

He didn't look at me while he spoke, and eventually I realized it was because he was watching the end of his rod. After a while I didn't look at him either, but let my gaze drift. Delicate eddies appeared and disappeared on the river's flowing surface. A fat bumblebee circled erratically, while the soft spring air excited young leaves on the bushes.

We didn't ask each other's names. I have never really seen the point with strangers. Maybe it's more polite, but I think it is often a step toward false connection, and I forget names anyway. He told how he had once caught a big eel. "About sixteen inches long," he said, holding out his hands. He said he had unhooked it and tossed it on the ground—there—he gestured toward the slightly sloping raw earth where I was standing. Then he had moved away to see what would happen. Demonstrating the stance for me, he spread his feet shoulder distance apart, strong arms folded over his chest, unmoving. "They take a long time to die," he said. After a while a sea gull flew down, "not a big one." It took the eel's head in its beak. Throwing its neck back repeatedly, it managed to swallow that whole flailing eel, bit by bit. Then he said the bird just stood there. I could somehow picture both of them, bird and man, standing there, just being, aware of each other, but each in their own world. The fisherman said he figured the gull couldn't fly with all that weight in his belly. After a while, with difficulty, it had flapped the short distance to the University Avenue Bridge, where it sat still, digesting, looking out over the river for twenty minutes before moving on.

"You see a lot here," he said. Silently, I agreed.

Across the river a Cormorant flew in and skidded to a halt. The fisherman told me they come in when the tide is low; this one, he said, gesturing with his head, "brings his wife." He talked about how animals protect their young, then slid into how some of the kids in his neighborhood have divorced parents and "no discipline" at home. He told me a few alarming stories of these kids' aggressiveness toward parents. Not much was said about money, except how hard it is these days. "Everything is so expensive. When I was young a loaf of bread cost a nickel."

My eyes strayed across the northern tip of the island, back to the Broadway Bridge. He noticed my gaze and told me about a falcon that perches on the bridge's upper tower, then swoops down on its prey with incredible speed. He'd seen it grab a baby duck right off the river once. We talked about where he lived in the Bronx and how he walked over the Broadway Bridge to get to this spot. I asked if the vertical lift bridge still went up and down. "Four or five years ago it got stuck," he replied, seeming surprised that I did not know about it. Apparently it got stuck at an angle, leaving the roadway disconnected and sloping steeply. "There were pictures in the papers. One of the cables had to be replaced. We all had to go over the hill for nearly a week."



As to what I was doing, he accepted that I was “. . . walking around.” That seemed fine to him. I think he assumed I was from the Bronx and, as a young person twenty years his junior, didn’t know much. He told me “. . . most people get smarter as they get older.”

I became concerned I might never escape his gravity. He didn’t catch anything the entire time I was there, although he had a few nibbles. Unlike many local fishermen, he only used one rod. I tried leaving a few times and finally just said good-bye. “I hope it doesn’t rain,” he said in reply. “They’ve been predicting it all day.” I turned away with a melancholy little wave. Ahead would be silence. Despite my initial concern, I found an easy way to slip between the gates at the southern end of the lot and turned left to walk south on Ninth Avenue.

In 1998 I passed the same way again, past the tennis courts, behind the hospital, and under the bridge. I was curious to have a second look at my northernmost route, and half hoped to find the urban naturalist fisherman again. As usual, things had changed. It was a new landscape. Everything under the bridge was gone. Not one tire, not a shred of domesticity, just a broad, open concrete ledge, dim, but no longer dark. It was as though a flood had swept through.

Pausing to look around, I wondered how many of the thousands of people who cross over every day consider that someone might be living just below their feet or gas pedals. In a half-dream state, almost questioning whether the tires had ever been there, I marveled at the emptiness. Speculating further about the bridge, I wondered how many of the people crossing back and forth on it thought they were either entering or leaving the Bronx, how many knew they were simply crossing into another part of Manhattan. Currently, the island of Manhattan ends at 220th Street, but the borough of Manhattan continues for another ten blocks.

Of the more than forty bridges and tunnels connecting the small island to other shores, the Broadway Bridge and a small pedestrian overpass to Wards Island are the only ones beginning and ending in Manhattan. It was during construction of the U. S. Ship Canal that Marble Hill, the land where the northern end of the Broadway Bridge touches down, migrated to the Bronx. When the ship canal was completed in 1895 the fifty-two acres surrounding Marble Hill had been severed from the rest of New York Island; it had become another one of the many small outlying islands in New York’s waters. About fifteen years later, the stagnant water surrounding the hill was filled in, leaving the land physically indistinguishable from the rest of the American mainland.

Coming out from below the Broadway Bridge in 1998 was not much different than in 1996. The weed cover was still thick on what I had speculated to be the escape side of the sub-bridgeian habitat. Foolishly, this made me expect to find familiar turf as I angled inland and up the short hill. Instead I ran into further “progress.”

The meadow was completely gone. The earth had been graded and trenched into a state that was unrecognizable as natural earth; pipe was being laid in its bowels. My progressive notion about accepting change died. Glumly, I proceeded toward where the fisherman had been, disappointed not to see him. Continuing on, I noticed another person. This time it was a security guard. He was stationed near the gate on Ninth Avenue, but unlike the fisherman his awareness was weak, and he didn’t notice me. With a clear sense that this might be my last time at this northernmost corner, I continued along regardless, trying to take in as much as possible. Amidst the chest-high mounds of mixed construction stone were cheerful wildflowers also longing for the old meadow. Just as I stepped onto an area of sandy construction fill, I heard the guard call to me. As usual in such a situation, (feeling certain that he was unarmed) I ignored him—what if I were deaf, or at least hearing impaired? Besides I wanted him to get up out of his lawn chair and earn his living. Circling around slowly, back toward the north, away from the guard, I tried to remember the things I had seen there before, and tried to imagine what monstrosity was about to be built. The guard sounded increasingly aggravated, and it was clear he was heading toward me. I stood still, hoping not to irritate him further,



while trying to soak in the bend of the river and the changes I could observe and feel. When the guard was close enough I turned toward him sharply, disarming him with a pleasant "Hello. What are they building here?"

Taken aback by my friendliness he shrugged, indicating that he didn't know much. It was clear that he was mind-numbingly bored. He kept referring to "They."

"Who?" I said, "I thought this was public land. At least it used to be."

He had no idea, and didn't seem to realize that I was making up my information. It would have been more interesting if I thought he had been doing the same, but this was just his weekend job. Guarding the construction trailers was probably an insurance requirement.

The suntanned, early-middle-aged guard finally realized I was not going to cause him any problems and together we walked toward the open gate. No cell phone, no gun, no badge, no uniform, his only equipment was an \$8.99 folding lawn chair. He asked more than once how I had gotten in. Perhaps he worried I had slipped past him while he was dozing. As my answer I gestured over toward the bridge with the top of my head. He seemed mystified; he had probably never even walked the perimeter of the lot he was guarding. Without much of a good-bye, I left and continued my walk.

Back in 1991, on my first walk, I had finished my bagged lunch and was resting on a park bench, due west of the tree which had helped me out of the railroad zone. Gazing out at the Hudson, the hazy light on the Palisades hadn't changed much since I had gotten there, but it was time to push on. I was unaware that I would ever be back to this part of the island. I recall being optimistic that the Hudson shore would be easier to navigate than the East or Harlem Rivers.

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