

Richard Entwisle: In Review

(first performed at [LIT LIT LIT LIT](#), October 18, 2018)

By Tom Whalen

A slight man in a sharp looking leisure suit hails a cab. He's headed for the Lemon Loaf, a local café in Bushwick that occasionally holds readings of poetry and prose. Today he'll be reading selections from a forthcoming novel about his travels in the countryside. To say Richard Entwistle is at the top of his game is an understatement. At age 29, he's already been published in the Paris Review, New York Magazine and Esquire, in addition to a variety of notable local publications. The room begins to fill with curious, budding scholars, veterans of the printed word, and disinterested families. He speaks into the audience with a calm and humble tone.

"Today I'd like to read about the last few months of my life which I spent in the countryside of this great nation. The word heartland means many things to us. Home, foundation, fundamentals. But what does it mean to them? This is what I try to convey." Nods of approval begin to bob across the room. "My time in Burberry, Connecticut was not what some would describe as normal. I found the locals welcoming at first; Sally-Mae, the waitress at the diner was as sweet as the apple pie she served. And Gus the line cook was a kind and gentle statue of a man. Stanley, the local milkman was a beaming ray of sunshine, always up and about at the crack of dawn. He'd pick up the milk from Farmer Robinson, an old but spry man on the edge of town. Every morning he'd kiss his wife Claire on the cheek before she went to the schoolhouse to teach the little children of this small but curious town. The principal of the school was Walter Schumann, a towering statue of a man who was firm but kind. The janitor was a surly looking fellow named Joe who worked for room and board in the utility closet. The janitor's son was a spiteful child named Hector, who taught the P.E. classes. He was 7."

Suffice to say, people were rapt in this mighty yarn that was beginning to take shape. Fans of the written word loved hearing about far-off lands they'd never visit. And what made Richard's stories that much better was the fact that they were true. He picks up later at another passage.

"Day is just beginning to break as I make my way down to Cornerbrook Stream, laundry in tow. As I gently rinse my unmentionables in the brisk water, I sense that I'm being watched. Behind me a man named Stewart is playing a flute whittled out of spruce. He asks me why I've come here. Sometimes I don't even know. When the dizzying heights of Bohemian living get to me, I need somewhere to think. Think about the great parties, the good friends, the delicious food I've had and want to have. This is lost on Stewart, who promptly pulls a hunting knife on me and asks for my wallet. I delicately soil myself and hand over the money. He rides off on an ATV yelling about alcohol."

“It has now been 3 months. I’ve tried to hitchhike back to New York state for a week, which most of the time prompts men in pickups to drive by and spit at me. Yesterday one car drove out to the shoulder and tried to run me down. I took off into the forest, dodging tree branches and quicksand pits. A tree root tripped me up as I stumbled onto a rattlesnake’s nest. As the car rolled to a stop, I bolted up and howled an anguished scream. Much to my surprise, the driver was a firm believer in the legendary Snake-Man, a fabled creature who would eat the children of the town, usually in one bite.

When the net came out, things went black. I came to with a multitude of snakebites on me, surrounded by the townsfolk. Mayor Jenkins was there too. “47 bites and he still hasn’t died. He’s gotta be immune to the stuff.” I had been strung up above some kind of campfire. The once noble and kind faces became gnashing and wild with rage. Hector, the janitor’s son was laughing and tossing softballs at my crotch. Mayor Wilkins began to douse the campfire below me in a kind of gasoline, and fumbled with a pack of matches. The snakebites, the smell of gasoline burning, the yelling, all of these things only added to the confusion. What did these people want from me? What happened to the kind and humble people of Burberry? It saddens me to say I’ll never know, because when my left pant leg caught fire, something inexplicable happened. Stewart, the man who had robbed me crashed his ATV into the campfire, sending embers flying. I clutched onto his head for safety and he bit my hand. We dipped into a valley and he rolled off, falling into a river. I continued on the ATV, riding until I ran out of gas and found a pay phone, where I called my mother and she wired me a bus ticket home.“

The feedback was instantaneous. Thunderous applause from all tables and on that day I can say that even the baristas were impressed. People couldn’t get their strollers in or out for at least 20 minutes. And that was when Richard knew he had a hit on his hands. “Greetings from Dumptown”, his first book, was a best-seller for two years straight and won him his first Pulitzer prize.