

“Shit,” I groaned. “Shit. Fucking perfect.” As I pulled off my shoe, I felt the sting shoot through my foot. I peeled back my crusty, days-old sock and saw a blister rubbed raw and red staring back at me. These days walking from town to town, through fields and pathetic excuses for forests, had really worn on me, especially my feet, but also my tired shoulders. I dropped my pack on the ground among the dry grass sprinkled with dirt and weeds. I wouldn’t make it any further today, although there was still an hour or two of daylight left. All in all, it was slow going, trekking from my home in the city via this countryside to the city where I grew up. Don’t get the wrong idea: I expected that this would be an uneventful experience in an uninteresting part of the world; I took the trip anyway and was more disappointed than I could have imagined. Just one after another of these boring country general stores, where they sold plenty of stuff but nothing that you would need or even want. Generic brands of tasteless junk food and knick-knacks that weren’t in the least entertaining to look at as you walked along the maybe five aisles of things for sale. But I had everything with me that I needed. That was the plan, after all. The sun set, I slept for a while, and then I woke again. I put my shoes back on over my sore feet and got moving. Empty fields, sparse trees, some standard-model homes - the things I passed made me want to just keep moving. Family and friends were expecting me, likely with plenty of patience, so I needn’t hurry; but by now I was looking forward to seeing them. Fields of untilled dirt, some nondescript bird in the sky, another driveway leading to a one-story house with a sign outside like “My home is my castle” - so I’d better not bother them to ask for a drink of water or to wash my face. Nestled among one pocket of trees was a house with some character, meaning that it was clearly falling apart on the outside. And there was a wooden shed on the lawn - man-made, unlike those they sell for ridiculous sums at hardware-store outlets on the outskirts of the city to those with dreams of a rural life. A man came outside and dropped two dead animals on the ground. He could be ridding his rundown house of pests, or he could be a hunter. When I realized I was hoping it was the latter and that I might go up to him, strike up a conversation, and have the first real interaction with someone or something different than what I knew in the city, I stopped myself. I turned away. And I kept walking. I was disgusted by my desire for some idealized version of reality. My foot was killing me, and I couldn’t take the fact that this had happened to me; not even a week away from the busy daily life I had grown accustomed to, I was already breaking down. My vain plan to spend days and nights on the open road and under the big sky, as a means of healing myself, had produced new injuries in need of being treated by the city life of physical detachment. The most significant lasting impression of this experience would be a blister on my foot that I’d have to nurse as I walked along the paved streets and stood in the subway, going from home to work and back again. Maybe in time I would do what I sometimes can’t help doing: Project some romantic idea onto a thing I’d seen or done during six days in the nearly empty spaces between cities, the place where I live and work and meet the people I care about. Would they be interested in the mundane stories I had to tell? The blisters and boredom weren’t something I could rightly tell them about, though they were the truth. What did I have to show, to them or to myself, for the time I spent doing what I did? If there was any significance to be found, it was probably only in my impressions, subjective as they are, and my memory of the time I’d spent face-to-face with something more or less out of my control.

“Brass Tacks”, John Beeson