Wake the Artifacts
Dedicated to Dr. Edwin Graves Wilson,  
"Mr. Wake Forest,"
Professor Emeritus of English and
Provost Emeritus of Wake Forest University
CONTENTS

xi  Preface: About Writers Camp

xiii Introduction: Going Down the Rabbit Hole
   Jenny Puckett

1
   Kari Marie Burgess, Junio del 1972

19
   Kathryn Huggins,
   W. J. Cash at his Typewriter, Mexico City, 1941

25
   Savannah Baber,
   Ground Breakers: To Wake Forest’s Firsts

33
   Leah J. Haynes, Six Impossible Things

41
   Emily Goodman, How to Raise an Elephant

45
   Erin E. McKee
   Praise Song for the Memory of Brian Piccolo
49
Madeline Baxter, Rebirth, of Sorts

65
Ashley Laughlin, Strangled

75
Ziwei Chen, 1932

81
Maggi McCann, The Most Loyal “Folder”

89
Rachel I. Schwam, Graded & Dated

91
Olivia Teegan, Get Closer

119
Alexandria C. Dean, The Stories She Didn’t Tell

127
Sara Isabel Coronel,
Happiness: A Double-Edged Sword

143
Jessica Hung, You Promised Me a Kingdom

179
William Morgan, The Struggle to Be Good

193
Yunyi Rong, The King’s Medal

205
Maya Marks, Circuit
311  
Jack Olsen, Untitled

321  
Thomas Poston, Homage

329  
Karrington A. Harris, Over

337  
Lena Hooker, It Will Last Longer

355  
Sean Dougherty, Elegy

387  CONTRIBUTORS

399  ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
Preface:

About Writers Camp

The inspiration for Writers Camp @ ZSR came after a group of ZSR librarians heard Jane McGonigal present “Find the Future: The Game” during the American Library Association’s 2014 Annual Conference. ZSR Library wanted to provide an opportunity to engage students interested in writing outside of the classroom and to offer these students the opportunity to become published authors. During the summer of 2015, the Writers Camp @ ZSR committee was formed and the Writing Center and other university partners were brought in to help plan, market, and lead the event on January 29, 2016. Students were invited to apply to participate in Writers Camp during the Fall of 2015, and forty-one student authors were selected for the overnight Writers Camp. The works they created that night are published in this volume. The Z. Smith Reynolds Library provided the staff and venue for the event, WFU Writing Center tutors offered assistance to the student authors throughout the night, and costs associated with the event and book were paid for by a grant from the WFU Provost’s Fund for Academic Innovation. You can learn more about this program at http://zsr.wfu.edu/outreach/zsr-writers-camp.
Introduction: Going Down the Rabbit Hole  
Jenny Puckett

As rhetorical questions go, one that never needs answering around Wake Forest is, “Why do we write?” I think we all know the answer to that! You write frequently in response to the gentle encouragement of your professors. Assigned writing is one thing, but it is a different matter when you write for more personal or creative reasons. There may be questions for which you want to develop answers, curiosity, or issues that concern you.

You have come to Writers Camp to have a new experience, which will put you in close contact with an artifact from another age. I had a similar experience several years ago: writing in response to boxes full of artifacts and random documents. Somehow, that turned into a book, so I want to share with you some lessons I learned, with examples from the book that was born of the experience.

I had always been curious about our tenth Wake Forest president, Harold W. Tribble. I was acquainted with one of his daughters who lives in Winston-Salem, and when she was cleaning out her house in the summer of 2010, she offered to let me look through sever-
al boxes of her father’s personal effects. There was so much material that my first big question was and is: How do I start?

The materials in those boxes consisted of documents, photographs, and assorted relics. In your case, today you will encounter fragments of our history in different forms, which will ignite your creative spark. You may end up writing about the artifact itself, or it may be that the artifact serves as an inspiration to go in a completely different direction. So, let’s imagine that you are assigned an artifact that is oddly familiar.

Your spark has ignited, so now it’s good to decide on how you will create a roadmap to write about this object. It may be the object itself, as you walk around it, looking at it from all angles, deciding on what is the first thing that catches your eye and makes you wonder. And now the second thing you notice, and now the third thing. You can conjecture about the importance of this object in its world of the past or the present: who needed it or who needs it today? Why is it important enough to keep?

As you go through the process of writing, at some point you may experience brain fog, writer’s cramp, or a period of the blahs. That may be a good moment to look at your artifact again, and consider what it is NOT. Is this object in use today? If the answer is No, then why did it fall out of use, or, did it evolve into something else? Obviously because there is a scarier and more amusing way to do something!

A few years ago, in my case, the first relic to draw my attention was an old passport from 1931, and with it came my first lesson: ask why. Why was Harold Tribble’s passport written in German with the Fuehrer’s name on it?
I posed this question to both of Dr. Tribble’s daughters, and thus began a fascinating conversation. A little digging was in order. I discovered that the word *Fuehrer* was a very old word from the ancient High German that originally meant “wanderer” or “traveler.” It still meant that in 1931. It was a few years later that the term *Fuehrer* was identified with Hitler. So, I’m glad to tell you that the words above Dr. Tribble’s photo actually mean “Information about the traveler.”

Both Tribble daughters, Betty and Barbara, recalled hearing their father talk about his trips to Europe, especially to Bonn, Germany. His purpose was to study theology with none other than Karl Barth, the eminent theologian of that period who was world-famous for his new and controversial theological interpretations.

For two summers, Dr. Tribble used that passport, studying in Karl Barth’s home along with another theology student who would later be known as a Christian martyr during the regime of Nazi Germany: Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

In the same box was his journal from those years, in which he described dinners at Karl Barth’s home, accompanied by his wife Nelle and two-year-old son, Harold Jr. On one occasion, the Tribbles were severely embarrassed that Harold Jr. just couldn’t keep his hands out of a bowl of cherries on the dinner table.

The next lesson I learned is a big one: Respect the Rabbit Hole! Don’t fear the Rabbit Hole. . . It can take you to great places, but don’t get lost down there.

The most vivid Rabbit Hole that I fell down into was the result of a letter from a box of Harold Tribble’s personal correspondence. The letter was written in April of 1943 to Dr. Jesse M. Bader. In the letter, Trib-
ble was accepting Bader’s invitation to visit the state of Arkansas on a mission of mercy; Tribble was agreeing to assist Japanese pastors in offering some form of help to the Japanese American citizens who were interned in two camps in the state of Arkansas. Those two camps were known as Rohwer and Jerome, where approximately 16,500 Japanese Americans were interned, 30% of whom were school-age children.

This was a shock to me. I had seen a documentary about Manzanar, in California, and I suppose I assumed that there was only one. But as I went further into the rabbit hole I discovered that when President Roosevelt created the War Relocation Authority in March of 1942, ten relocation camps were built for the Japanese Americans living in California, Oregon, and Washington. These ten camps were located across the US on federal lands. The easternmost camps were Rohwer and Jerome, camps that had been carved out of swampland.

Down and down I went, following the human story of the victims and those who were trying to help them. In a strange twist of fate, I learned that when Harold Tribble visited those camps, one of the children there was a four-year-old named George Takei. When he grew up he became fascinated with acting. You may know him better as Lieutenant Sulu of the Star Trek series and movies. Or more recently, he is playing himself in episodes of The Big Bang Theory!

Next lesson: Rabbit Holes are fine and interesting, but try not to get lost down there. At length, I had to find a thread to lead me back up into the sunshine; two other documents brought me to the surface, the surface being defined as “what I was really trying to write about.”
The first document was a speech that Tribble gave later on in 1943, expressing his view that the internment camps represented a wholesale abuse of the civil rights of a large group of Japanese Americans, perpetrated by their own government. The second document was a letter that described the steps that Tribble would take to assist educational programs to the youngest people in the camps, and later, to help them get into college. These things were not only insights into the history of this country, they were also glimpses of Harold Tribble’s character. The informational detour was well worth it.

So. Very soon you will be encountering your artifact, and away you will go.

And here comes the third lesson: As you get deeper into your writing task, keep in mind that freedom to write expansively and expressively will not exempt you from the necessity to edit and rewrite. All good writers rewrite. It’s a law of the universe. Everyone has to do that—well, almost everyone. In human history, there is only exception that I know of: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

Historians who studied his musical scores realized that the music he wrote had no corrections, no scratch-outs or substitutions. The music flowed intact from the living symphony in his mind, down to the paper. So. Unless you are Mozart, plan to rewrite and always welcome suggestions and corrections.

No one knows where you will end up, but one thing is sure: you are the first to engage in this wonderful experiment. Now, go forth! Have fun! Write beautiful stuff . . . and we will see you in the morning.
An academic hood with white velvet and gold and green stripes embroidered with yellow thread: “Presented to Dr. James Ralph Scales, Doctor of Literature, June 4, 1972, Northern Michigan University”
May 28, 1972

On my first night working third shift, my mother made *arroz con frijoles* for dinner. We sat around the table in silence, my mother, myself, my brother, and my sister. Mama was tired from another twelve-hour day at work. I could see the worry lines on her forehead beginning to crease as it came time for me to leave.

“You sure you’re okay to walk to the train alone?” she asked me. “Your brother can go with you. And he will walk you back in the morning.” My brother sipped his water and shot Mama a look.

“Ay, chico, don’t give me that face. You are the man of the house now, *verdad*? Keep your sisters safe, yes?”

“I’ll be fine, Mama,” I reassured her. “Let Carlos sleep. *Tiene escuela*. Besides, how much protection can a sleepy fourteen-year-old offer?”

“Fine,” she said, getting up from the table. “Clear the plates, Carlos. Ana, pack the leftovers for your sister. Maria has work soon.”
I went to the room I shared with my little sister, Ana, and put on my work uniform and my shiny, new gold name tag. My name was inscribed in the center, above the hotel’s logo and the words WATERGATE HOTEL. I wanted to be early tonight. I grabbed my bag and the leftovers that Ana had packed for me, kissing my mother goodbye on the way out. “Ten cuidado, hija!” my mother called out of the door as I left. “Be careful.”

Even though I arrived fifteen minutes early, my supervisor, John, was waiting for me to punch in. “Change of plans today, sweetheart,” he says. “Amanda called in sick. We need you on the eighth floor.”

“What’s up there?” I asked.

“Offices, mostly,” John told me. “Easy shift tonight. Just walk the halls, make sure the offices are cleaned by 6:00 a.m., and if you see something weird”—he glanced around and lowered his voice—“don’t say anything about it, got it?”

My stomach turned, sensing trouble. “ Weird how?” I asked him, afraid to find out.

“Nothing major,” he assured me. “There are a lot of politicians here, you know that, right? So if you see something... different, that’s none of your concern. You know what I mean. Let’s just say not all of these guys spend the night with their wives. In fact, some of them might slide you some extra cash when they leave if they see that you’re going out of your way to ignore them.” John smiled at me, squeezing my shoulder. “Go on, get to work. You’ve got an hour-long meal break at 3:00 in the morning, and two fifteen-minute rest periods that you get to choose. You’ll clock out for the rest periods, but the meal is on us, alright? I’m go-
ing on home in an hour. The night manager is Jody.
Don’t bother him unless there’s a problem.”

“Yes, sir,” I nodded. It was almost 11:00 p.m. I
clocked in a couple of minutes early and took the ele-
vator with my maid’s cart up to the eighth floor.

I decided I liked the quiet of third shift much more
than the morning shift that I usually worked. I cleaned
for a couple of hours without encountering a soul.
There were no businessmen hustling to their offices,
no middle-aged white women asking if I spoke English
in a loud, slow voice as I cleaned, no crying children
being dragged to school by nannies my age, and no
other maids competing for tips.

Unfortunately, being alone on the floor meant no
help when a problem arose. I realized this when I came
across a clogged toilet at around 1:30 a.m. Ay, Maria,
how have you been on this earth for seventeen years
and never had to unclog a toilet by yourself? I had a
plunger and no idea how to use it. I swished it around
in the bowl a bit, trying to get it to suction to the bot-
tom, but I was hopeless. I went into the nearest guest
room and phoned down to the front desk.

“What are the chances of a plumber being on hand
at this time of night?” I asked.

“As a matter of fact, we just had a group of plumbers
sign in tonight,” the receptionist said sleepily. “I
think they’re still on the eighth floor if you want to go
find them. If you can’t, I’ll send them up when they
come to sign out.”

“Thanks,” I said, hanging up the phone. I ventured
into the hall, leaving the door unlocked. I listened for
the sound of voices while walking through the hall-
ways until I finally heard muffled voices coming out of an office. *Thank God,* I thought, knocking on the door.

As soon as I knocked, the voices fell silent. I waited for a moment, then knocked again. Nothing happened. Maybe there was a bathroom in that office that they were fixing?


“I need a plumber. Are you the plumbers?” I asked.

He paused a moment and stroked his mustache. “*Si, si,*” he said. “My friend will help you. *Uno momento.*”

He closed the door on me. These plumbers were squirrely, and I was more than a little suspicious of them, but I was mostly annoyed. I just wanted the toilet fixed in time for my meal break.

A middle-aged white man came out to meet me. “HOLA. I FIX TOILET,” he said slowly and deliberately, enunciating every syllable.

“HOLA. I SPEAK ENGLISH,” I replied, rolling my eyes. The man’s face reddened, and he mumbled an apology. “The toilet is clogged in room 814, and I can’t get the plunger to stick,” I explained, motioning him to follow me. “The night manager will compensate you for your extra time, I’m sure. Come on, hurry. I don’t want to miss my break.”

“Well, it’s a mess,” he said when we got to the clogged toilet. “Give me a minute.”

I noticed that the man was wearing slacks and dress
shoes, and my suspicion increased. “Pretty interesting plumber’s uniform,” I commented. He didn’t respond and continued to work on the toilet. He seemed flustered.

“You’re not a plumber, are you?” I asked.

He looked me up and down. “How old are you?” he asked.

“Seventeen,” I told him, “but old enough to know that a plumber should know what he’s doing.”

“So what are you doing working the night shift? There’s school tomorrow.”

“I graduated when I was sixteen.”

He let out a low whistle. “Graduated at sixteen and you’re working as a maid? I know the economy’s not great, but—”

“I’m saving money to go to school,” I said, cutting him off. “Fix the toilet.”

“I’m not a plumber, kid, you figured that out already,” he said.

“According to the hotel you are, so you’re going to fix this toilet unless you want them to know you and your friends are lying. I’m going to have a break and eat. Come to the lounge down the hall to let me know when you’re done.” I closed the bathroom door on him.

I honestly did not care what the faux-plumbers were really doing at the Watergate. It wasn’t my job to tell on them. I wanted to clean, get paid, and go home. As I ate my rice and beans, however, I did have to wonder. I thought about what John had told me earlier. *Maybe they’re gay,* I thought. I had never met a homosexual before. Or maybe I just had. Maybe these men were having a . . . gay meeting. Maybe that was
something that gays did. I decided I would keep them in my prayers.

The not-a-plumber knocked on the door. “Finished,” he said. I nodded and finished my food. When I was done, I decided to go back to the office and see what they were up to. The door was closed again—of course. This time, I didn’t really care. I opened the door.

The lights were off, and the five men were using flashlights, like they were searching for something. “The light works fine,” I said, flipping the switch. Two men were under the table, one was standing on top of it, and the other two were looking out the windows.

“Jesus Christ,” one of the men said. “I better get paid extra for putting up with this.”

“Paid?” I asked. They were waiting for someone, I realized. They were hiding and waiting, and they were gay, and that meant—

“You’re prostitutes, aren’t you?” I asked.

The man on the table made a choking noise. “Prostitutes?” he repeated.

“Either that or hired guns, and none of you look like assassins to me.” That was a lie. At least one of them definitely looked like he could kill someone—but none of them had threatened me. They wanted to be left alone. They were prostitutes, waiting for some politician or businessman to come have a secret rendezvous with them. Or one of them was the lover of someone important, and the rest were lookouts and guards, making sure they weren’t caught together.

“Can you leave us alone now? This isn’t your concern. You should be working,” the man on the table said.
“You’re right,” I answered, and turned around, leaving the door open. They turned off the light and closed the door immediately after I left. Maybe working this shift would be pretty entertaining after all.

**June 17, 1972**

At 1:00 a.m. the prostitutes from my first night returned. I had seen them in the lobby one other time since May, boarding the elevator, but I hadn’t been working the eighth floor that night. Tonight, however, I was working on the sixth floor hallway when I saw them entering an office.

“So who are you meeting?” I asked. “Same guy? Politician?”

“Get out of here,” the tallest one said. “None of your concern. Go back to work.”

“I don’t like keeping secrets from my manager,” I said, “And I know you’re not prostitutes. You’re working for someone. You’re bugging the room. I know because I saw you taking panels out of the ceiling. You’re spying on somebody in the government. You’re felons. I’m going to have to tell the managers what’s going on.”

“No you’re not,” the Cubano said. “You have family in Cuba, don’t you?”

It was strange that he knew that, but not too strange—most Cubanos had big families, and it was uncommon for everyone to be able to come to America. In fact, my mother’s brother, his family, my grandparents, my father, and my two older brothers were all still in Cuba. My father had set us up with a smuggler to the States five years ago, and we had not heard from the family since.
“What does that have to do with anything?” I asked.

“I can bring them here,” he spoke in Spanish. “I can get the money and the transportation, but you’re going to keep your mouth shut, or I’ll make sure they never leave.”

My heart skipped a beat. To see my father again, and my brothers? My tío and my abuelos were there, too. Five years’ worth of missing them welled up in my chest.

“Write me a check,” I said. “Right now.”

“What? Are you loca, chica?”

“I may never see you again, and I want to see my family. Write me a check for the cash right this minute, or I will go downstairs and tell my manager you’ve been lying about being plumbers and see what he has to say about that.”

“Jesus,” he muttered under his breath. He pulled a checkbook out of his back pocket and grabbed a pen from the desk behind him. “That’s more than enough,” he said, folding the check in half and handing it to me. “Now get out of here.”

I had to see the check before I left. I opened it up and gasped. I held fifteen thousand dollars in my hand.

“Yes, sir,” I said, absolutely shocked. I felt like I could cry. I turned on my heel and left the room, shutting the door behind me. I folded the check again and pushed it into the side of my shoe, determined to keep it safe and hidden.

A little before 2:30 in the morning, Jody sent another maid upstairs to tell me that I needed to get down to the lobby immediately. I was nowhere near
finished and annoyed to be interrupted. Hopefully he was sending me home early, but it was more likely that I was in trouble. I began to wrack my brain for what I had done wrong—had I left mints on all the pillows? Had I forgotten to wipe down a window, or change the sheets in a room? I was positive I’d been thorough, so I didn’t know what the problem could be.

When we got to the lobby, there were police patrolling the entire floor. I saw flashing red and blue lights outside, and guests were beginning to trickle out into the lobby, wondering what was going on.

“There’s been a burglary,” I overheard the receptionist telling a guest. “Please remain calm. Nobody has been hurt, and the burglars have been located. We ask that you remain in the lobby for your safety.”

I had been floating on air since reading the number on the Cubano’s check, but now I felt my stomach turn. A burglary? Where had security been? How did they get in? I knew that the situation was being contained, but I definitely did not feel safe staying at the hotel for the rest of the night.

When the police stepped off the elevator, the men from the office were the ones in handcuffs. How had I not realized that was the burglary they were talking about? I felt like I would throw up. The Cubano would think I snitched. He would close his account, and the money would be useless, and I would never see my family again. My throat closed up, and my eyes filled with tears. I was hopeless. Then I realized—the check must have been fake anyway. These men were burglars. Why would a burglar have so much money in his bank account? He wouldn’t need to burglar anything. He would be the one paying for the job.
The night was too long. I tried to get back to work, but I couldn’t get much done. I felt sick to my stomach, and though I told myself it was not my problem, I knew that I should have told someone the very first night. Maybe it wouldn’t have gone so far.

Jody sent me home early. It was 5:00 a.m. when I got to the house, and though I tried my hardest to go to sleep, I just couldn’t. The events of the night—and the night I saw the men in May—played over and over in my head like a movie I couldn’t turn off. I made breakfast for Mama and the kids, hardly able to understand why I was feeling so upset. It was over now, wasn’t it?

**June 19, 1972**

The burglary was in the newspapers. Carlos brought me a newspaper from the library late in the afternoon and showed me. “They’re saying one of the burglars worked for the President,” he told me. “Maria, were you there when it happened?”

“Yeah. I didn’t see much. They sent me to the lobby before the police arrested anyone, and I only got a quick look at the burglars.”

“Oh,” he said, looking disappointed. “So you didn’t know what was going on? You didn’t hear anything?”

I lied. “No. Quit bugging me about it, okay? Let me enjoy my day off.”

Carlos huffed, annoyed, and left me alone in my room to read.

In the middle of the night, I woke up to a knocking at the back door. *How strange*, I thought, *that someone would knock on the back door instead of the front. And so late!* I got out of my bed, jealous that Ana was
still asleep in hers across the room from me. She could sleep through anything. Putting on my robe, I went to the back door to see what the problem was. Carlos, unfortunately, had beaten me to it.

Two soldiers stood at our door. They were not wearing military uniforms, but they stood straight as poles, chins lifted, shoulders back, built like tall, sturdy trees. “Is Maria Benitez at this residence?” one asked Carlos.

Carlos looked at me. “Que esta, Maria? Lo que esta mal?” Carlos looked frightened as he asked me what was happening. I was positive that I was more frightened than he was. I was sure this was about me keeping secrets for the burglars. I was in trouble.

“No es nada, Carlos.” It’s nothing. I lied. “Go back to bed. These are amigos from work.”

I could tell that Carlos didn’t believe me, but he did as I asked and left the room.

“What can I do for you, gentlemen?” I asked, trying to keep my hands from shaking.

The one on the left—the one who had asked if I was there—stepped forward. “Miss Benitez, we are here to thank you for your silence.”

“At midnight?” I asked, not understanding fully.

The soldier cleared his throat. “Miss Benitez, you already know everything you need to about the situation. Now that it has passed, we would like to thank you for your continued silence on the issue. As a show of our gratitude, on behalf of all involved, we would like to present you with a monetary gift. After learning that you plan to pursue higher education, we believe that this may help you achieve that goal.”
“You’re bribing me?” I asked.

“Listen,” the soldier on the right said. His voice was low and croaking, like that of a chain smoker. “Pretend you never saw what happened the night of the burglary. We will pay for your education in return. If you choose not to accept, remember that the government is quite aware that you and your family are here illegally.” I knew then that this was bigger than I had thought. My family was in danger, and the government was involved, and I had no real option but to take the money and keep my mouth shut.

“Prove you have the money,” I said.

The soldier on the right stooped to pick up a small, nondescript paper bag behind him that I had not noticed. “Open it,” he said.

Inside the brown bag there were five stacks of hundred dollar bills, each bound with a thick rubber band. “Alright,” I breathed. “I won’t talk.”

“Good,” the soldier on the left said. “We’ll be in touch.” With that, the two turned around and left.

*We’ll be in touch? What does that mean?* I wanted no more involvement. I had no need to be in touch with anyone. I brought the bag of cash back to my bedroom. Ana was still asleep. I rolled the paper bag up and stuffed it under my mattress, sliding back into my bed and knowing full well that I would not sleep for the rest of the night.

**June 25, 1972**

As I was walking into work, I was approached by the two soldiers. “You have a minute?” one of them asked.
“Can I know your names?” I asked them in response. “If we’re going to see each other?”

“Smith,” said the one on the left.

“Johnson,” said the one on the right.

“I think you made up those names, but that’s good enough for me,” I said.

“We need details. It seems that you were working during two incidents, not just one. Is that true?” Johnson asked. He was wearing sunglasses. I wondered how he could see anything at all in the dark.

I nodded. “That’s true.”

“Tell us everything that happened that night.”

So I told them. I told them that it had been my first night working third shift, that I had had a conversation with one of them, that I knew they were not really plumbers but asked for their help anyway, and that I had accused them of being prostitutes. Johnson asked questions while Smith took notes on a small legal pad. At the end of my story, Smith shook his head. “She doesn’t know enough,” he told Johnson. “She was in the wrong place at the wrong time, that’s it.”

“What else should I know?” I asked.

“Nothing. You should know nothing about this. We won’t be seeing each other again. Goodnight, Miss Benitez. Good luck at school.”

The two men got into a black car that had been waiting for them on the street. Just like that, the worry was over. I would stay just as quiet as before, and I would not have to think about being deported, going to jail, or losing my job anymore. I could focus on what was important—my family and my education. The problem was, I didn’t think I would ever have both.
“Ladron! Ladron!” Thief! My mother was yelling when I came home from work. “What happened, Mama? Are you okay?” She was standing in the doorway of Ana’s and my room, her face panicked.

“No, Maria, how could I be okay when my daughter is a thief?” she cried out.

“What? Ana stole something?”

“Ana? No! You! Maria, you are a thief!” Her face was red with anger.

“No, Mama, what are you talking about?” I was shocked at her accusation. I had never stolen a thing in my life.

“I was stripping your bed for laundry, and I find this!” She held up the brown paper bag that the soldiers had given me.

“Oh, Mama,” I said with a sigh. “I didn’t steal that. Sit down. I need to tell you something.”

She sat on the edge of my bed, and I sat beside her, taking her hand. She was still shaking with anger.

“Mama, I saw something at the hotel that I was not supposed to see,” I said, trying to remain as vague as possible. “If I had told anyone, I would have gotten into trouble, but someone else would have been in even more trouble than me. So he gave me this money for helping him.”

“You took a bribe?” she asked. She was no fool. She knew exactly what I was talking about. “This was the burglary at the hotel, verdad?”

“No, Mama. I had no choice. They know we’re not here legally. I could take the money and be quiet, or we
could all go back to Cuba. I wanted to keep us safe.” I felt my throat tightening as tears welled in my eyes.

“What are you doing with the money?” Mama asked me.

“I’m going to use it to go to college, Mama. I’ve been doing applications. I applied to Georgetown, Penn State, Wake Forest, Duke, and Boston College.”

“And tu familia, Maria? In Cuba? You come into this money and you do not use it to help your family? I do not see two of my children for five years, and you do not see your father, and you choose to spend this money on school? Selfish!”

I hated that she was right. I was being selfish. “Keep the money,” I said. “Use it to bring them here. I’m sorry, Mama.”

“I know, hija, but you will find a way to go to college someday. You are a smart girl. You will make the money at the hotel, I know it. It will just take a while longer. For now, let us be una familia again.” She put her arm around my shoulder, pulling me close, and kissed the top of my head. “Be happy, Maria. You will see tus hermanos soon!”

“Gracias, Mama,” I said. I was happy.

May 18, 1981

“Maria Gloriana Benitez,” President Scales said into the microphone at the Wake Forest University Doctoral Commencement. I walked onto the stage in front of hundreds of people. The families of all of the doctoral candidates for 1981 were clapping and beaming with pride as their children, brothers, sisters, and parents walked across the stage and received their
diplomas. I was no exception. As I shook President Scales’s hand, I looked out into the crowd, scanning for my family. My eyes landed on my mother standing in the back, so short she stood on tiptoes. Carlos and Ana, now fully grown, stood beside her. Carlos held his pregnant wife around the waist. Leia was due any day now, but she still came out for my graduation.

Behind my mother stood a tall, dark man. His hair was thinning and turning gray, as was his mustache, but I recognized his smile immediately. My heart leapt, and I nearly ran off the stage.

“Papa!” I yelled, now sprinting through the crowd. “Papa, estas aqui!” You’re here! He wrapped his arms around me and held me tight.

“Estoy orgulloso de ser su padre,” he whispered in my ear. I am so proud to be your father.

“Ay, little sis. We’re here too!” I turned to see my older brothers, Angel and Andreas, smiling down on me. They looked just like our father did when I was a little girl.

We hugged one another, giddy with our reunion. The best day of my life had just begun.
W. J. Cash typewriter, 12” x 9.5”
A black typewriter with the inscription “Underwood” on the top. The typewriter is also mounted on a wooden stand.
W. J. CASH AT HIS TYPEWRITER, MEXICO CITY, 1941

Kathryn Huggins

W. J. Cash, author of the acclaimed sociological study The Mind of the South, was deeply exhausted by the effort of writing his book and the controversy with which it was received. Despite the momentous praise his book garnered, he could not ignore his critics. Funded by a Guggenheim Fellowship, Cash travelled to Mexico City with his wife to work on his proposed follow-up project, a novel. His miserable experience in Mexico—during which his exhaustion was compounded by travel sickness—apparently culminated in a psychotic break which prevented him from completing any substantial writing. This piece should not be read as a voyeuristic exploitation of mental illness, but rather as an exploration of the anxieties that follow a writer who is faced with the burden of posterity.

Once I dreamt of a boy who was my neighbor. He understood better than anyone the song of the soil. He felt in the earth the passing of the seasons, an awareness of the years and generations before. When he sank his bare feet into the dirt, he felt the connection
with his ancestors, his people. He was rooted in his history; he felt his belonging in this place. His heritage was an old one, seemingly as ancient as the earth on which he stood. He belonged to this land, to the people who spent their lives toiling over it, who gave their lives defending it from grasping outsiders, who slumbered under it now.

That boy mystifies me. How can he feel so connected to a place? Dirt is not the secret-keeper of history. How can he feel such blind pride in his people? They sought glory in battle, fending off the aggressors from the North with the naiveté of children, seeking validation in the spilling of blood. Surely the blood burned in their mouths. If the land could bear witness to posterity, it would scream, the horror, the horror. Its testimony would be a condemnation, not the confirmation of divine blessing the boy and his kin seek.

But it does not matter what the land thinks. The boy believes steadfastly in this Romantic vision of his past. His people are the fierce protectors of a way of life: the agrarian individuals against the impersonal industrial machine. He holds their history. He carries forth their legacy. He hears their song in the earth—that red Piedmont clay that is his birthright.

All I wanted was to know this boy. I wanted to understand his people, my neighbors, whose psyche I had taken for granted. I stare at the Underwood typewriter sitting on my desk. It is taunting me in my failure to capture rattling wind through the cotton in the coldly mechanical clacking of the keys. Click-click-pop. Click-click-pop. There is nothing organic here. Of course I have offended the people I wanted to understand. My interpretation is too removed, too clinical. The song of the soil is lost in the impersonality of analysis.
I wanted to be another Faulkner, who knows how to capture his Mississippi neighbors—my kindred—in all their idiosyncrasies. He understands the glory and the pitfalls of their song. He knows the beauty of their honor, and the danger of their tendency to paint it with blood. Their passion is violent, after all. They tried to fight a war with blind Romanticism, seeking glory in the smell of gunpowder. No wonder they were traumatized by their too late realization that they could not use the blood of their enemies as ink to proclaim their pride. Blood runs too thick. It blots out everything, and it drowns the country, poisoning the ground they want to preserve. We are still bleeding, and the infestation—the mania for blood—is spreading nationwide.

They say that the Underwood Company isn’t making typewriters anymore. Even the tools of lofty intellectual endeavors have been swept up in the national blood feud of war. Observe, universally, the obsession with honor that I thought I could give a limited regional diagnosis within the South. Underwood arms our neighbors with their rifles before we send them to war, to defend our way of life from the aggressors in the Old World. The Underwood assembly lines no longer craft their metal into open-ended phrases of promise. All their semicolons are substituted for periods on the editing table. All those theses undefended. All those poems unsung. The click-click-ding of journalists, scholars, and dreamers cannot drown out the clack-clack-pop on the fronts. How can our words and thoughts matter when the Underwoods have exchanged typewriter keys for bullets? Commas for carbines? We cannot transcend into enlightenment. Our grasping at rationality is little more than repression. From the depths, there is the primal lust for blood cloaked in the veneer of honor and glory.
Blood drowns out everything else, but the masquerade prevails. The country is as obsessed with honor as my neighbors ever were.

I wish more than anything that I could write. If I tried again, staying closer to Faulkner, sticking with fiction, maybe I could understand the boy in my dream. Maybe I could breathe life into his bones, give heart to his glands. I don’t know what it is, but I cannot write. My Underwood is an obsolete relic from an idealistic age filled with promise that words could be more powerful than the sword. It taunts me with its hollow echo of my neighbor’s song of the soil, the melody I cannot capture. Every time I try to write down a thought it flies away. Sand through the hourglass. I’m running out of time, and I can’t keep running. All I wanted was to understand that stubborn, Romantic, prideful man who is my neighbor. Do I hear the typing of keys or the click of the gun? The Underwoods aren’t populating newsrooms anymore. They’re spilling blood. The space bar slides a bullet in the chamber. Click-click-pop. Click-click-pop.

I can’t stay here. The Germans think my book was about them. Consider it: a people with the song of the soil (the Fatherland), a hymn of honor, in their hearts inexplicably vanquished in a war in which God was supposed to be on their side. They are humiliated in their defeat. The roots of their heritage extend so much deeper than those of my neighbors. Imagine the deafening volume of their centuries-old hymn. Imagine the blow to the psyche after all that blood. All that waste. Canisters explode in the trenches. Gas mingles with blood. Centuries of civilization collapse, pulverized with a hiss-pop-boom. Hiss-pop-boom. The typewriter finishes a line. We bury Germany in the rubble with all of our war dead. Let them bear the weight of
our sins. Imagine the shame. No wonder they surrendered to the bloodlust. They need to find glory again. The resemblance to my neighbors is striking. How can I tell them I meant no harm when even my neighbors do not understand?

The Germans are coming for me. They are plotting their revenge against my insults heaped high upon all their shame. My wife cannot hear their whispers outside my door, but their sound is deafening. They are drowning out the melody of the wind in the cotton that I cannot capture. Their drone is accompanied by the funeral tattoo of the typewriter keys. A tab stop tenses the trigger. I have no defense; I cannot use the only tool Underwood gave me. I am ineffective, impotent with an obsolete weapon. The violence I tried to explain has come to consume me. I am not safe here. I have to go I have to go I have to go. Click-click-pop. Click-click-pop. Click-click-pop. Click-click-pop . . .

Cash suffered multiple hallucinatory episodes in which he was convinced he was being pursued by Nazi spies who plotted to kill him. He disappeared from his rented flat on July 1, 1941 while his wife was out seeking medical help for her husband. He was found later that night in a hotel room in town, dead from an apparent suicide. Given the presence of Nazi spies in Mexico City at the time, the circumstances surrounding his death remain unclear.
Wake Forest College new campus groundbreaking pin, 1951,
Circular pin, gold background with black letters,
reading “New Wake Forest College, Winston Salem, NC”
and “October 15, 1951, Ground Breaking, Reynolda”
I broke the ground.

But I didn’t know it.
I didn’t realize that
Being Myself
was extraordinary.

I didn’t have the
foresight
to know that my name would still be spoken
by people not even related to me
long after I returned to the clay
that
I clumsily formed.

I do remember
my mother preaching to me that I was important,
but I’m not sure I had faith in her conviction.
After all,
she was a small congregation.

I mean,
Imagine: growing up in a world
in a time
in a place
where every direction you looked, you were the only one
with your eyes
with your body
with your heritage
with your color
with your language
with your free spirit

A spirit that has scars from the many beatings it has taken

A spirit that has had to defend itself without any precedent

A spirit that, through everything, every slur, sideways glance, insult, offense, is still standing.

Standing AND leading other spirits
Kindred spirits

Telling them that they too are allowed
to exist
and exist loudly
and that they too
belong
in a place of such high esteem.

I made it.
My mother was right.
And she was right to tell me the story of my
importance while I was still blind with self-doubt,
and long before I ever wrote anything to back it up,
because my life, and yours,
plain and simple,
real and painful,
is so important.

I did nothing to the soil of this place
but step on it.
And apparently, that was enough.
I listened to my mother instead of the people who
yelled,
“No! Not you! You are not allowed!”
And the people who whispered,
“Who do you think you are?”
And the people who demanded,
“You were lucky enough to slip through the cracks.
You better prove yourself.”

I buried the expectations and generalizations and misconceptions.
I still have the dirt under my fingernails—evidence that any hard earth can be cultivated.
I did nothing but dare to dig into ground protected by white picket fences,
and unfortunately that was revolutionary.

You have to understand,
every revolution is tinged with sadness,
for it means the current state is harmful to the people within.
It is scary as hell
traveling to the underworld of a nation to liberate its prisoners.
Yet, that is where the true beauty begins to bloom.

Have you ever seen a thousand butterflies, all at once, emerging from netted cocoons and spreading their wings for the first time, as if praising the wind, sun, sky, and terrestrial abundance?

That is what it looks like when our kin feel the freedom to be themselves.
That is what it looks like after one brave, sometimes unintentional soul blazes the path and cracks the stubborn terra firma that has strangled the sproutling roots of seeds lacking the water they need in order to germinate.

This strong spirit, often motivated by loved ones, or a love for something bigger than itself, trickles down and out of its comfort zone and creates a glistening ripple in a body of life-giving water that seeps into the ground and hydrates the dry dust just enough for those neglected plants to break through and begin a whole new ecosystem.

Breaking the ground does not have to be accomplished through blunt force trauma.

In the same way that a river of any pace erodes its grassy banks, we must also be integrated with a system in order to loosen its grasp.

Get in the dirt.

You have to bring your own eyes, body, heritage, color, language, and free spirit and incorporate them into the biome.

A land without biodiversity will not survive.

A campus without you will not thrive.

Konosuke Akiyama, James Jones, Martha Mason, Ed Reynolds, Harold Seawright, Carlos Alberto Perez,
Patricia Smith, Charlie Davis, and Dr. Maya Angelou achieved greatness by proving they could grow in any type of clay.

These people broke the ground by taking steps onto the elite, prestigious sidewalks of a small, Southern, private college when the world told them not to.

They will forever be remembered as Firsts, but their legacies truly lie in the softened soil that now boasts the most majestic flowers that can only Be because they Were.

We are all seedlings on this plot of land called Wake Forest University, a place that first broke ground in 1951 and continues to do so.

In a world that seems so set in its ways, let us never forget that our lives are groundbreaking, significant agents of change.
The ground does not need an act of the gods to be broken.
Ideas do not have to be radical to be worthy.
Speeches do not have to be perfect to be moving.
Friendships do not have to be lengthy to be memorable.
You do not have to be anything but YOU to be good.
Delve into new earth and grow towards the sun, unapologetically.
And when you look back, you will always be able to say

I broke the ground.
Thymes Handmade Scrapbook detailing members from 1974
Alice smelled lemons. It could not be time to get up yet. She rolled over without opening her eyes and burrowed down more snugly into her blankets. Lemons, she thought, lemons and dirt. She must have knocked her pillow off the bed at some point during the night, because her cheek rubbed against the fine, cold grit of her sheets. Sheets which, now that she thought about it, really shouldn’t be this gritty, considering the store clerk had talked her into the more expensive, higher thread count set. They were quite gritty. There was grit in her mouth. That’s what I get for sleeping with my mouth open, she thought. Dirt in my mouth.

Dirt. That’s a curious thing for sheets to be made of.

Alice’s eyes fluttered open, and she blinked her room into focus. But it was not her room. Instead of waking to her side table and bedside collection of discarded bobby pins, Alice’s nose was just inches from the trunk of a rather large bright green tree.

“How on earth did I get outside?” Alice found herself saying out loud. Figuring she might as well get up, if only to find her way back inside and to bed, Alice
stood and brushed herself off. She found that she was wearing a pale blue dress that she didn’t remember wearing to bed. It was a bit tight in the shoulders.

“Curious,” she remarked, which was, in truth, a curious thing for her to say.

Turning to see which direction the house was in, Alice’s eyes fell again on the big green tree she’d been sleeping under. The strange green trunk went up and up and up. Alice kept expecting to see leaves and branches, which is not such a curious thing to expect when looking at a tree. And yet, the smooth bright green continued for what looked like ten or so feet, and stopped in a sharp, neat point. In fact, there was a whole forest of trees just like this one, all tall, smooth green trunks with no leaves or branches.

“Why, these aren’t trees at all,” said Alice, again aloud despite being observably alone. “They’re blades of grass!”

Indeed, it seemed that the grass had grown impossibly tall overnight. Or perhaps Alice had grown impossibly small. Something told her the latter was the case. I can’t believe I’ve shrunk again, Alice thought fleetingly, as though she could not help herself. But before she could spend too much time pondering the issue, Alice was overwhelmed by the smell of lemons.

Determined to find the source of the smell, she started picking her way through the Grass Blade Forest. Alice had a feeling that she was going the right direction, but even if she were not, the lemony smell got stronger with every step. It was not long until, stepping out from behind a particularly wide blade of grass, Alice was faced with the largest lemon she had ever seen.

The fruit was as large as a house! In fact, Alice be-
gan to notice windows and doors and a chimney pop-
ing out from the bright yellow rind—the giant lemon was a house! The smoke puffed lightly out of the stack in neat little rings, and dew dripped from the leaves that sloped away from the roof.

“What a funny thing to live in!” Alice said. “I won-
der if whoever lives there is home.”

Alice walked toward the house but was stopped by a thought—how much longer until I have to get up? Up for what? Alice could not say or, rather, could not think, for as far as she could tell, this was all happen-
ing in her head. Unable to remember what it was that she had been planning to wake up for, Alice continued on to the lemon’s front door.

Alice supposed she must have knocked, because the door opened, and there standing in the frame were two little girls, all but exactly the same, save that one was in a blue dress (though not the same blue as her dress, she noticed), and the other was in a red one.

Alice began to introduce herself but found she didn’t quite know what to say. If asked, what was her purpose here? She did not even know where here was, or for that matter, what here was. But before enough time had passed for Alice to become embarrassed, one of the girls spoke. Or, was it both of them?

“Welcome!” said one.

“Come in!” said the other.

Alice stepped across the threshold, and all at once the lemony smell vanished and was replaced by some-
thing sweet and baked-smelling, just like the little cakes her mother used to bake for her after school. Everything inside the lemon was child sized. Despite the lemon’s great size, the ceilings were a touch low,
perhaps only six feet tall. The tables, chairs, stove, and stairs were all made as though exclusively for a child’s use. *How your mother and father must have to stoop.*

The little girls seemed to have forgotten that she was there. They busied themselves with all manner of household chores, moving much too quickly and pausing only long enough for Alice to get one good look at them at each of the tasks. One moment they were sweeping the hearth, the next reaching for something from the tiny cabinets, but all the while never more than arm’s reach from each other, with silent, serene smiles painted onto their little porcelain faces. Alice felt she really ought to say something.

“Hello,” she said, as warmly as she could. “I’m Alice.”

“Oh, yes!” said one.

“You are!” said the other.

“Yes,” Alice said delicately, “I am Alice. I’m sorry, but would you kindly tell me just where I am? I am sort of lost, you see. Well, not lost so much as I just can’t quite put my finger on where *here* is.”

“Here? Well, here is home, of course!” said the blue dress.

“Home is where the hearth is, it’ll keep you safe and warm. Home is where the heart is, and shelter from the storm!” said the red dress, her voice taking on a strange, sing-song quality that reminded Alice of a music box or Chatty Cathy doll, but certainly not of a real little girl.

“Oh! Okay, how nice. Perhaps your mom or dad could tell me just exactly where we are? You see, I need to find my way back home. I will be needing to get up soon.”
“Up?” asked the red dress. “Oh, yes! Early to bed, early to rise—”

“Makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise!” finished the blue dress. “That’s good. Up is a good thing to be getting! Up is almost always better than down.”

“Yes,” said Alice. “I suppose that’s true, but—”

“Truth, love, integrity—there is no other way to be,” sang the red dress, having moved to the floor in front of the fire, mid-game with her sister in jacks. Alice must be seeing things, because the little rubber ball seemed to freeze, just for a moment, above the jacks. The girls, too, had a freeze-frame quality about them, though Alice knew them to be moving. This was all very curious, and Alice was becoming irritated.

“How very frustrating you both are! Where are your parents?”

The girls stopped dusting the window sills. A very strange expression fell across both of their little ceramic faces. Alice thought it looked sort of like confusion, but it also made her very sad.

“I’m sorry,” Alice said, thinking she had in some way hurt their feelings. “Did I say something wrong?”

“No, no!” said Blue, her face blinking back into a pleasant expression. “I was just trying to remember our little lesson on parents, but I just can’t. Can you remember our lesson?” she asked, turning to her sister.

“No, I can’t. I do usually remember. And you know what they say—‘Memory is a golden treasure. Precious moments in our heart forever.’”

“A lesson on parents?” asked Alice. “Why, parents aren’t a thing like that. Lessons are for math or history
or geography. Parents are just there. You do have parents, don’t you?” she asked, suddenly nervous.

The girls didn’t answer. Alice, overcome with curiosity, and not quite sure any of this was real anyway, questioned them further, despite knowing it was rude.

“If you have no parents, then how did you get here? Where did you come from?”

“Come from?” Get here?” they asked.

“Yes, from,” said Alice. “Here. From where or from there. Those places that are not here.” She gestured around at their little place.

“Oh yes, here. Here is home,” said Blue.

“Home is where the hearth is, it keeps you safe and warm,” started Red.

“Oh, no! You don’t understand! Haven’t you ever left?”

The girls looked quite frightened now. Alice was surprised that their little painted faces could manage that kind of look. They stood up in tandem and walked toward the threshold. Alice realized she’d left the door open this whole time.

“There’s a lot out there, you know, outside this lemon! Oh, house,” Alice said, correcting herself. If the little girls had never been outside, how silly of her to think that they would know they lived in a lemon.

“Outside?” The girls asked in one voice.

“Yes! Just step over the threshold! Just there!” Alice said excitedly, suddenly filled with anticipation. “Just one step!”

“That’s impossible.” Their voice replied.
“Oh, tisk! Why, sometimes I’ve believed in as many as six impossible things before breakfast!” blurted Alice, with a voice that was almost not her own—or at least had not been in a very long time . . .

Six impossible things before breakfast—Alice mused. Where did that come from? It sounded so familiar. . . . Perhaps she had read it—perhaps in a children’s book when she was young.

Six impossible things before breakfast.

Six impossible things before breakfast. If she didn’t stop bothering with all this impossible nonsense, she wouldn’t have time to eat breakfast. Was it six yet? It must be getting close now.

Alice rolled back over. Her sheets smelled like lemon.
Institute for Public Engagement pin.
3” x 2” Black rectangular pin with an inscription in gold lettering: “Engaging Minds, Empowering Communities Institute for Public Engagement”
How to Raise an Elephant

Emily Goodman

Elephants are a lot like people. But raising elephants, perhaps unsurprisingly, is quite different from raising children. Still, it’s a job worth doing right, and should be taken just as seriously.

Elephants have trunks. Trunks are great for holding things, but you shouldn’t have your elephant hold too much at once. Baby elephant trunks aren’t as strong as you may think. As a general rule, the things the elephant is holding should not weigh more than the elephant.

Elephants have tails. Since we do not, it is difficult for us to imagine, though easy enough to understand, that it is uncomfortable for an elephant to be sitting on his tail. It is therefore prudent, upon putting your elephant down, to check that his tail is positioned correctly. This is especially true if you intend to have him there for an extended period of time.

Elephants have thick skin. They’re pachyderms. But this doesn’t mean they can’t be soft, plush even. Actually, many small elephants have softer skin than babies, which means they’re even more delicate. Elephants should therefore be handled with the utmost
care. Any break in the skin should be promptly sewn, preferably by a talented and experienced seamstress.

Elephants enjoy water. Once they learn how to control the tens of thousands of muscles in their trunks, they use them as hoses to bathe themselves. In most cases, however, it is not advisable to put a small elephant in or even near water. Don’t worry about bathing him. Should he need it, a simple spot cleaning should do. Take a piece of paper towel and wet it slightly with cold water. Put a small dot of Ivory soap on the paper towel. Rub the spot. Let air dry.

Elephants have mixed feelings about ivory. On the one hand, it’s a point of pride knowing that their tusks are so valuable. On the other, they don’t like living in fear of poachers. Perhaps the most important thing you can tell a young, impressionable elephant is that the worth of his tusks could never match the worth of his character.

Elephants appreciate it when you know something about their social structure. They prefer to live in herds. Herds can have upwards of a hundred members. Any elephant will tell you, the more the merrier. It’s advisable, then, to care for more than just one elephant, and not to keep members of the herd apart for long stretches of time.

Elephants appreciate it when you know something about their political structure. Elephants think favorably of democracy, though they do have a king. They respect their king, primarily because he’s such a good one. Over the years, he’s built schools, libraries, and even an art museum. More recently, his focus has been on public health. A few years ago, he released a yoga book. It’s important that your elephant exercises himself, both physically and politically.
Elephants appreciate it when you know something about elephant popular culture. Jumbo is a legend. He was the first animal international superstar. That’s nothing to shake your trunk at. Tarra was another circus crowd pleaser. And then there are elephants so famous we don’t even know if they were real or if they’re just myths. The elephant who tried to use the telephant. The elephant with the six blind men. The list goes on and on. It’s important that your young elephant knows about the rich historical and literary traditions surrounding his species.

Elephants like the fact that they are so popular, up to a point. They don’t like what they consider abuses of the use of their image. For example, they aren’t too keen on calling a taboo subject an “elephant in the room.” They don’t understand why seeing pink elephants is such a bad thing. Elephants don’t cheer for Alabama. And they don’t vote for Republicans. In these cases, it’s best to just sympathize with your elephant, since there’s not much else you can do.

Elephants are distressed by the current situation of their species. At the turn of the twentieth century, there were a few million elephants in the world. Now there are just a few hundred thousand. In this case, do more than just sympathize with your elephant, because there is more that you can do. But you know that. Perhaps that’s why you adopted an elephant in the first place.

Elephants are a lot like people. And now they’re in desperate need of people. Maybe it’s silly to take raising toy elephants seriously, but we need to start taking the systematic killing of real elephants far more seriously than we currently are. Otherwise, toy elephants might soon be the only kind left.
Louis Brian Piccolo Award, Atlantic Coast Conference, 1970, 8.5” x 8.5” x 16”, Trophy — Gold plate on wood base, topped by large gold football, Football--1970-1980, Atlantic Coast Conference, RG14_085
Praise Song for the Memory of Brian Piccolo

Erin E. McKee

Praise be to god for the heart that leaps
gainst the edge of the knife
and for the lung that sucks its breath
from the clefts
between the teeth of grass.

Praise be to god for the home team
and the away.

Praise be to god that the losing season
is the season of thanksgiving—
that the deadwood stokes the bonfires,
plates the withered evenings in gold.

Praise be to god for the guy that mows the field.
Praise be to God for the organs that betray us each and all—
for the chests budding thick and the livers flowering in the gut—
let the heaviness at least be growth.

Praise be to God for the practice squad.

Praise be to God when the bleachers are full and when they’re half-full and half-empty and all the way so.

Praise be to God that the playbook and the game film don’t square.

Praise be to God for holes—that we not seek to fill them but to gather at the edges, our presence making out the shape of the loss.
Wake Forest-Duke Quilt, 1926, 11” x 13” x 16”
Made from Duke-Wake Forest football game streamers collected by Evelyn Cook’s father after the October 30, 1926 WFC-Duke football game, Football—1920–1930, Wake Forest College, Donated by Evelyn Cook on October 18, 1985
The living room was suffocated with her Pagan relics, skulls and crystals ornamenting the walls of peeling black paper. She never kept the lights on, preferring that her life was lit by the burning wick of candles placed on any surface area available. The issue was that there was very little surface area open in the small, inner-city apartment where she lived, where there was the kitchen table and nightstands donned with multicolored strings of beads and dusty books with the words “Witches’ Bible” impounded into the spine. There were at least ten copies of this exact book lying amongst the home along with countless other variations of the Wiccan’s faith transcript. The owner of the apartment was a convert sorceress of sorts, with curtains of grey hair hiding her aging frame. Every day she used wrinkled hands to rip apart sage and thistle for her production of potions and elixirs, tossing ingredients over the warped, rusted cauldron that hung above the open flame stove in the kitchen.

Her lifestyle was a personal matter, something she disliked discussing with other people for their likeli-
hood of not understanding it. It is because of this that Sendra Mallor did not have many friends, nor did she desire a single such friend. Her witchcraft was exactly that—her witchcraft—and the opinions and accusations of children in the building—“the witch of the 7th floor”—never much mattered to her.

She was existing within her set confines for only one sole reason: Sendra Mallor refused to die. At almost 76 years old, the witch denied her final day with spells and chants, with running fingers up and down the outline of the pentagram painted on her wall. Each day she used her apothecary home to search for the answer to it all: how does a person live forever?

She had lived 9,195 days rejecting prognosis, but Death does not do well when shrouded. Such a cluttered apartment provided easy places for it to hide itself in the blue velvet tablecloth and silver altar in the kitchen. However, it existed most obviously inside of the orange cylinders spilling out the bathroom cupboard labelled “Sandra Mallor” and “TAKE TWICE A DAY WITH FOOD.” These are accompanied by the doctor prescriptions rattling in the trash cans, the letters sent from a rural town she used to call home.

Unfortunately, her confidence in not dying did not equal her confidence in her ability to live, and she was therefore haunted each day by the uncertainties of time. Spell books and potions offered her ounces of control, the ability to alter her physical and mental state in ways doctors were not able to and did not believe in. Her life was simultaneously driven by her search for eternal life as well as her fear of the unknown, leading to an unfair balance of desires on her shoulders.
In order to provide for her Wiccan lifestyle, Sendra made daily trips to the market in the streets of the city. She asked the workers of the herbs and spices stands how much per ounce, her voice sheltered by the thickness of her robe.

“Twenty-five cents, ma’am,” the burly attendant boomed, his voice a wave of pressure that suffocated her own.

She did not find it necessary to express her intentions to purchase the questioned product; she simply extended a shaking palm of coins and kept her head bent.

The attendant took her money without question, but continued, “Sale’s happening today, buy five ounces and get a randomly selected herb for free.”

The witch did not move her head from its downward position. She did not allow herself time to think about the pros and cons of this decision; inside her head were the cogs and keys that turn towards the resounding thesis to her life: buy the herb, make the potions, find the cure, live forever. To justify or find fault in the possibility of buying an unnecessary item chipped away at her wrought iron confidence. In this choice was a sort of uncertainty she could not face.

“No thank you,” she spat out like a leftover bone. “Not today.”

II.

The opposite side of the city was sparser, spacing out building to building until the rural edges began to reveal themselves. It was in this area where the schoolkids biked after class to play pickup soccer and lie amongst the fields of grass that blanket-
ed the ground. Past the valley were mountain ranges
where the more experienced folk went to exercise and
breathe the cleaner air. The largest attraction found
within the ranges was the amount of waterfalls and
cliffs, towering crests that spewed the water flowing
from the mountain top. The people of the city enjoyed
jumping from these heights, solidifying cliff diving as
one of the most popular pastimes of the youth.

If he were asked, Louis Spellman would probably
identify himself as one of the most frequent visitors of
these cliffs. An absurdly hip an athletic bachelor, he
would also probably identify himself as a completely
hopeless romantic.

It was an average day at the cliffs when he was
asked by a local news reporter what it was that allowed
him to so eagerly jump into danger.

Louis scratched his right forearm and squinted
into the camera. “It feels like love, I think.”

My stomach disintegrates and reconstructs itself be-
fore I hit the ground. It’s the closest thing I have found
that makes me feel like I did when I was in love.”

The reporter looked to the side, down the cliff
Louis jumped down three times before the interview.
“Thanks, man. We’ll let you know when the article’s
out.”

But Louis knew the reporter would never let him
know when the article would be out, and Louis knew
that his quote would never be in the article. His name
had never been asked, his contact information was
never requested, and his response was deemed inade-
quate by some stocky interviewer’s dissatisfied facial
expression.
For as competent as he was in reading people, Louis could never seem to get an accurate judgement on himself. His eyes panned to the waterfall, the same movement the reporter did moments ago. He recalls his words, his statements on love. He had been in love once. This was the one thing in life he would concretely say was true. He had been in love for the first time in college, marrying and falling into what he thought was eternal bliss. However, this ignorance quickly made him into an oblivious husband to a wife’s needs and wants, and he was quickly subjected to matrimonial failure.

Now 25, divorced, and horrendously available, Louis could not stop replaying the three years spent in endless stomach butterflies and rapid heart rates. His searches to replicate these emotions led him to find that the feeling a person gets when possibly near death is frighteningly similar to how it feels to be in love.

Deciding that his verbal description of why he did what he did was a solid end to the day, Louis packed up his bags and began the trek back to the city streets. His apartment was located along the alleys of the weekly farmer’s market, so he had expected the congestion he faced as he approached home.

With little work to do, Louis walked in a leisurely pace along the city streets. Children ran past him holding paper bags for their mothers while the steam and smoke from the food vendors billowed up through the high rises. He pondered the idea of stopping and purchasing an item, as he knew acts of spontaneity offered him a sort of exhilarating high. Nothing seemed to quite compare to cliff diving, but he would take whatever he could get. He would look for answers wherever there was a clue.
At home, his mailbox was littered with surveys and questionnaires offering love and life guidance for a small fee. His phone bill was marked up with calls to fortune-telling hotlines and three-hour conversations with his mother.

Stopping just before the entrance to his building, he caught a glimpse of a pointed cusp of fabric peeking out from amongst the crowd. He knew that hood, that identifier of future. An opportunist such as he could not pass up the option to ask for one more fortune telling, one more glimpse into his potential life.

His feet tapped a frenzy on the concrete, and he held up his hand. “H-hey! Gypsy!”

The desired target of his proclamation did not react, nor did anyone else on the street, but Louis was consistent.

“Excuse me! Gypsy! In the hood.” The robed woman still did not pause. He reached out his hand and gently pulled on her sleeve. Like an owl, the woman turned only her covered head to glance at him. She had silver eyes and deep divots around her mouth.

He did not wait for her to speak. He was impatient. “Tell me my fortune,” he demanded.

The woman remained devoid of emotion. She was the sort of old that told stories but never gave advice.

The silence prompted him to continue, to explain himself in hopes of getting a peep in time. His mouth opened up to continue but was then shut off—

“I am not a gypsy.”

He gaped.

“I am a witch.”
This was something Louis had not encountered before. Countless gypsies, goddesses, and spiritual women have been readily available to grant him his fortune at a fair price, but never before had he encountered a mystical woman that identified as a witch.

He did not really see the difference.

He spewed, “What do you need to know? Louis Spellman, that’s me. I’m 25 years old and live in the apartment building right next to us. My wife left me because I fell too in love with her, and now I think I used up all of my potential to love another person within the span of three years. I need you to tell me if I’ll ever be able to completely fill my lungs up again. I need you to tell me what it is that makes people unable to love me as much as I love them. I need you to tell me where I can buy adrenaline as a drug—if you know those sorts of things.

“I’m in an experimentation phase of my life right now. I experiment with my posture when I eat dinner and how softly I press the volume button on the remote control. Maybe if I keep it on the even numbers it will make me a more balanced person? I jump off cliffs every day after work because being so close to death feels so close to love. I think I’m addicted to making myself feel artificially alive again, like a cellular reset. Like I could live forever.”

It was at this statement that the witch shot him a glance.

“And how do you do that?” she pressed.

Louis squinted. “Like I said, I jump off cliffs.”

She did not want to, or know how to, ask for more. Louis leaned his face downward, below hers, obnoxiously forcing himself to look into her eyes.
There was a moment of silence, and then a cough came from the curled lips of the witch.

“I cannot tell fortunes. . . . However,” a light sparked, “I do know spells.”

“Future spells?”

There was another moment of silence. “Love spells.”

If he spent his days recreating such an artificial feeling of life for himself, Louis justified in his mind, what was the harm in taking advantage of fabricated love? He nodded and dug a hand into his pocket.

The witch held up a slender hand, “No money. I will only make this spell in exchange for your guidance to the cliffs you jump from.”

Louis blinked and bit the inside of his cheek. A curious deal that he instantly agreed to. He did not think of the complications or absurdity of taking a seemingly ancient woman up to the falls with him.

Grabbing onto her outstretched hand, he began to shake it eagerly. “It would be my honor, Miss Witch. Madam Witch? My name is Louis, by the way.” He had forgotten he had already mentioned that.

The woman did not smile, but softened her eyes to match his. “You may call me Sendra. I am the witch of this town.”

As a man so often in contact with mystical women, Louis did not question this title.

“Sendra. Great. Meet me in this spot tomorrow at four o’clock.”
Having skipped home the night before, Louis found it completely unnecessary to try and hide the joy that was shining out from within him. His first task when he had reached his apartment was to grab his calendar and write out “S O L I D I F I E D” within the squares of the next ten days. He could feel security push his blood cells through his veins, helping his heart pump and propel him into the next moment in time.

He had not felt this way since his wedding day.

Sendra returned home after their exchange as well, discarding her robe and wrapping herself in a blessed quilt from a coven in the north. A swirl of deep black and gold, the material enveloped her with promise of, ironically, good fortune and luck. She spent the night recalling her first years after her conversion, the potions and spells gone wrong that had left her skin charred and her hair charcoal. She wondered if the next day would feel anything like that, anything like being set on fire.

They met the next day as they planned, 4 o’clock in the street. The city’s market only happened once a week, so the alley was only a passageway for commuters and angry telephone calls. Sendra sat on a bench outside Louis’s building, impatiently tying and untying the spirit cords hanging from her neck.

He finally emerged, sloppy and with a shoe not completely on his left foot. His hand scratched the back of his head in embarrassment, and led the witch into the parking garage where he kept his car.

While the ride was easy, Louis had severe doubts about Sendra’s ability to maneuver a bike and opted for driving instead. He turned on the radio immedi-
ately to fill the eminent silence. He could not think of a single thing to start conversation about.

This marked the first time Sendra had listened to the radio since she left home. After running away, she had removed every object of instability and uncertainty from her life to focus solely on what she was able to control: her witchcraft. In this was the television, magazine subscriptions, the radio. Not being able to predict the next noises she heard unnerved her; she disliked not knowing the words to the songs being played or what order they came in. The transportation to her desired destination instantly became something she regretted doing—she should have walked.

The songs were modern, obviously written and produced within the 25-year gap of her resignation from the present world. They were poppy and light, with voices that sounded distinctly unnatural. A meticulous and precise person in her Wiccan nature, she decided, instead of conversing with Louis, to study the patterns of the music she was subjected to. Instantly catching onto a beat, a chorus, the rhythm began to line up in her head.

The ingredients of a song were like the ingredients of her potions, crucial and identical in every individual creation. Maybe, Sendra pondered, there was more in life that functioned just as her witchcraft did.

The mountains surrounding the city were visible at all times from the skyscrapers and buildings, but their definition only begins to emerge once you drive out past the plains. Sendra watched as the normally blank silhouette of the peaks bled into splotches of green and silver, the soft texture of treetops blotting themselves onto such a seemingly ready canvas. She had never ventured out past the edges of the city and
was stricken by the shock of color that did not come from the spell book covers and candlesticks adorning her apartment.

As they were parking, Louis was trying to tell her about how mountain air is hot and dry, but Sendra was out of the car door the moment the wheels started to slow. Her shoes were thin cloth with not much traction on the bottoms, so the gravel poked through a bit and made her first steps uncomfortable.

“The trail to the closest cliff is that way.” Louis pointed in the direction of the sun, and Sendra did not look, only followed after him as he began to walk.

They were making adequate progress, considering Sendra’s old age and poor choice in hiking apparel. Neither of them made an effort to start conversation and simply enjoyed the surrounding atmosphere. For Louis, this was a walk he took almost every day, and his mind was racing with only the absolutes. Let the lady dive, get the spell. Let the lady dive, fall in love. Let the lady dive, get all of the answers.

It was then that Louis considered the idea of Sendra actually diving off of the cliff. She undoubtedly had no prior training in any sort of cliff diving activity, did not seem to be in even moderate physical shape, and was somewhere in her 70s at the very least. Even on the easiest cliff dive, the dangers and complications still existed for someone of her status. He was not even sure why exactly the old witch wanted to jump off of a cliff in the first place, only that he knew that he wanted his end of the deal no matter what.

Right when he was thinking about the prospect of Sendra dying, he was interrupted by a weary groan from behind him. He would say they were about one
third of the way up the trail to the cliff, and Sendra was requiring a break.

This dive would most likely render her dead.

He decided that it was not worth it to get upset about stopping, as they had the full day to make the hike, and sat down next to her on the side of the dirt path.

“I’m sure you were an athlete back in the day,” Louis forced, and then gave a short laugh. Sendra remained unmoved, transfixed on something moving in front of her.

Upon closer inspection, Louis found it to be a simple forest caterpillar, a common find on the mountain trails, but he realized that Sendra might not be so exposed to nature as frequently as he was. He extended his pinky finger and allowed the insect to crawl onto him.

The caterpillar inched up his hand.

“When I was a kid, I always wanted to be a cat or something. An animal with no responsibilities, that could just bathe in the sun and be pampered all day...” He trailed, curving his hand to show Sendra.

She nodded, listening to him.

“But now that I’m older I think maybe it’d be more beneficial to be a caterpillar. They are genetically programmed to advance and transform into something greater. They have fulfillment as a life stage.”

Sendra studied the pattern of the insect, yellows, whites, and blues forming a tribal-like pattern on its backside. Somewhere in its DNA are instructions on how to progress to its next phase in life, how to shut down its past self and become something new. She
wondered if there was something like that residing in her, too.

Bracing her hands on her knees, she began to stand. “I’ve used these types in potions before. Cut off the heads.”

iv.

The two reached the cliffs without any more breaks, but Sendra was left with wobbly knees and uneven breath. Louis looked as if he had stepped out of the shower, fresh faced and eager. On the way up the rest of the trail he had decided it would be better to jump with Sendra rather than let her go it alone, were anything to happen.

The crest of the waterfall was lush with foliage, tree branches pushing other tree branches out of the way in order to be closest to the rushing falls. The drop was no more than 300 feet but still provided for a daunting image when Sendra approached the edge.

She gave Louis a questioning look before turning back to the fall. The water spilled endlessly, with more force than anything she had experienced even in her life back at home. Should she even place a toe in the rush of water she would most likely be swept away, her whole body tumbling down the peak and into the strange combination of water and air. Would she be falling and swimming at the same time?

It was during this observation when she felt something crawl up her spine, as if someone had placed a spider underneath her skin. Her stomach flopped, and she grabbed her gut in caution.

“Louis, right?” She had to double check. She heard an approving grunt. “What’s at the bottom?”
She tried to look herself, but the spray and mist clouded over whatever ground could have been visible.

Louis split open a smile. “Water, I hope!”

There it was. The uncertainty. He had told her that jumping from this summit was revitalization, a rebirth of sorts. Should she jump, would she emerge without illness? Does exhilaration, an experience she could not recall ever having, cure the status of terminal? She felt her shoulders weigh down. Her head spun so lightly in a circle, causing the water and the trees and the hopeful ground to blend into one collage of question.

Did she accept the uncertainty of the ground for the certainty of adrenaline? The only guarantee in this circumstance was how Louis felt each time he jumped—mid-air, weightless, resurrected.

“Don’t think you’re doing this alone.” His voice came from beside her now, and she turned to see him: broad faced, curly haired, dampened by the misting stream. “I need this rush just as much as you need whatever the hell you climbed up here for.”

He paused. Louis thought of his ex-wife, thought about how he was never sure what she was feeling, only about what he was. He looked at Sendra and thought about how he knew she was feeling exactly what he was feeling, about how they were both looking for the same thing.

In his year as a cliff diver, Louis had heard stories about how the water levels rise and lower as the weather shifts. He once overheard someone talking about how a diver had jumped too far left and sunk straight into his own grave.

Louis knew exactly why Sendra came with him. He clasped her hand in his, feeling the thin skin and
protruding bone. Looking out to the horizon, he saw a butterfly alongside the mist of the falls, flapping its wings tauntingly.

“We gotta go, we gotta go, Miss Witch,” he said, and changed his identity for the day from a cliff diver to a cliff jumper. The pair sprouted their wings and propelled off the cliff, only to be sucked into the good graces of gravity and eagerly pushed towards the Earth. Louis made sure to kick off far enough away from the stream, so the only brush against them was the barrage of wind.

Feet first, Sendra sailed through gusts and gusts of air, her stomach unhinging from her midsection and pushing on her lungs. She could feel the explosion everywhere—every inch of her body was unscrewing. She became a frame of separate parts, a coat rack with all its hangings flying off. The light mist of the stream was every single one of her skin cells, glistening and refreshing in the brisk breeze.

She was taking a bath in the light of God. She was hearing a faint chorus in the back of her eardrums and trying to spot the source. It was Louis, next to her in flight, not fall, liberating his voice and letting it run free through the trails. The sound of her robes flapping against the wind beat in tune with his shouts, and she allowed herself to close her eyes and welcome with open arms whatever would be facing them on the ground.
Wake Forest College Pennant, 36” x 16”,
Black pennant with gold lettering, Features the seal
of Wake Forest College (1934) and “Wake Forest” in ornate
lettering, Wake Forest College, RG14_163
STRANGLED

Ashley Laughlin

I was lying on the couch watching Animal Planet and having an existential crisis.

My name is Peyton Grace Howard. My older sister is Harper Grace Howard, and my little sister is Annabelle Grace Howard. My mother is Celie Grace Howard. My father is William Howard IV.

On the TV screen, a black and gold spider ate a bat more than twice its size.

The spider would have fit right in with the fantastically neutral color scheme of our den. Our couch was a worn yellow leather monstrosity with a matching footstool. The walls were olive and cream colored. The floor was hardwood with a matching olive rug. And upon the walls hung a series of odious gold plaques and awards dedicated to a number of Graces and Howards.

As I watched the spider scramble frantically over the deciduous leaves in search of the next candidate for lunch, I felt the peculiar sensation that I was being watched. I sat up on the couch and looked around. No family in sight. I got up and closed the door to the den.
I sat back down on the couch. And I still felt like I was being watched.

In response to this eerie sensation, I reverted to childhood and did something I had not done in years. I looked under the couch, half expecting a black and gold *Argiope* spider to come crawling out. But there was nothing but cream-colored dust bunnies that matched the room’s décor.

I relaxed into the plush mustard-colored fabric, feeling at ease. The spider consumed a grasshopper.

My comfort lasted only a few seconds, for I could feel a set of eyes boring into the back of my head. I spun around, and there it was. The stinking culprit. The stalker. The pennant.

Hanging on the wall in all its dreadful glory was a black pennant. Its odious triangular shape extended over a foot. It bore frighteningly sacred letters in a bold gothic script. *Wake Forest.* And next to the words was an image of the family crest that sealed my fate.

Well, it wasn’t really a family crest. It was actually the *Wake Forest* crest, but it might as well have been the family crest, because every single person with the middle name Grace or the last name Howard had gone there. And I had the middle name Grace and the last name Howard.

I heard the shuffle of family members returning home. I had elected to stay home from the weekend errands, opting to enjoy my solitude. I punched up the volume on the remote a few notches and tried to make myself comfortable before the TV got hijacked.

My mother’s voice, high and jingling, laughed in the kitchen. My sister chattered back at her—indistinct words punctuated by fillers “like” and “um.” I tuned
both of them out until I heard my mom call my name.

“Peyton, honey, we have something to show you!” I clicked off the TV and reluctantly walked into the kitchen.

“Isn’t it darling? Harper says Lilly Pulitzer is very popular at Wake Forest.” She thrust a planner at me. It was a hideous pastel concoction of pinks, greens, and blues. The swirly design was somewhat reminiscent of sea stars and sea horses and sea shells.


Harper grinned. “I knew she would like it.” Harper had long, fake blonde hair. Her true hair color was a mystery. It could be gray for all we knew. Her locks were curled perfectly, dangling just past her breasts. On her lithe figure hung a white sundress matching a pair of distinct sandals that were wildly popular in the South, and wildly unpopular everywhere else. “I’m so excited for next year,” Harper continued. “We can be real sisters and sorority sisters.”

“Well, we’ll see,” I said, trying to remain neutral. “I might not get into any sororities.”

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous,” my mother said. “You’re a Chi Omega legacy.”

I had a sudden aerial vision of a sea of blonde heads, as if an airplane was hovering over a pack of Chi-O sisters. Groomed, blonde, perfect, and then there was me, a chocolate chip in a cookie with wild, muddy brown hair. I shuddered.

“I think the commercial break is over, and I’d really like to go back to watching the show,” I said.

“What are you watching?” Harper asked.

“Which season?”

“Uh, the first.”

“Classic.” My sister grinned, her teeth shining against her bronzed skin. I hustled out of the room and back into the den.

I was surprised to find my father and Annabelle sitting on the couch. My dad was wearing an iridescent yellow shirt, and Annabelle was sporting a Wake Forest cheerleading uniform, adapted to be appropriately modest for a six year old.

“Nice shirt, Dad,” I said. “It’s very . . . yellow.”

“Old gold,” my father said, correcting me absently as he stared at a bluish screen.

“What are you watching?” I asked.

“Football.”

“Football? But it’s only August.”

Annabelle glared at me. “It’s pre-season.”

Defeated, I left the den and headed upstairs to my bedroom. I lay down on the bed and picked up a copy of On the Road by Jack Kerouac. It was the third time I had tried reading it. I was never really able to get into it, but I liked the premise of the novel, so I continued to persevere in my effort to finish. Unfortunately, the lazy heat of August in South Carolina lulled me to sleep.

In my dreams, the triangular pennant stood on its hind legs and walked towards me with an offensive stride. I screamed and ran away, and when I looked over my shoulder to see if it was gaining on me, I noticed that it was wearing Annabelle’s cheerleading uniform. Then the pennant morphed into Annabelle, and I realized the pennant was Anabelle. And then
Annabelle turned into Harper, and I realized that the pennant wasn’t Annabelle but was actually Harper, and she was catching up to me. I stopped staring and started sprinting. I ran with passion, powered by an all-consuming fear of something I could not identify. I turned around again, and my sisters were gone. They were sucked into a crowd of Chi-Omega sorority sisters with tanned bodies and perky breasts, highlighted hair flowing behind them as they ran. They ran faster and faster, their skirts a swirling mass of pastel colors. I pushed harder, but I could not breathe, and I tripped and fell. The sisters rushed upon me, towering over me. I realized that they all held planners, Lilly Pulitzer planners just like mine. I lay frozen on the ground, belly up, and I could not move. A silent scream escaped my lips as the Chi-Omega sisters lifted their Lilly Pulitzer planners and beat me into the ground. Pastels flashed before my eyes as they battered my body, and I felt a rush of fear in the depths of my soul.

I woke up sweating and afraid, but after a split second I realized that I was alone in my bedroom, asleep on top of the covers. I stood up and walked towards the window, trying to regain my breath and my sanity. I could feel heat seeping into the room, and I wondered why I had left the window open in the first place. I pulled it shut and sat back down on my bed. I glanced at the clock and was surprised to find that it was already 6:30.

I heard a polite knock on my door.

“Come in!” I said, unnecessarily loudly. Annabelle opened the door and stood in the doorway.

“We were wondering if you were ever going to wake up. It’s dinnertime,” she said in her precocious little voice.
“I’ll be right down,” I said. I walked into my bathroom, leaving Annabelle to walk to the dining room alone. I splashed a little water on my face and wiped my armpits with a washcloth. Then I went downstairs and sat down at the dinner table.

“Did you have a good nap?” My mother asked cheerfully.

“It was alright,” I said. “I had a nightmare.”

“What was your nightmare about?” Harper asked.

“It was about . . . it was about starting school, I think. I’m really nervous.”

“There’s nothing to be nervous about. You’re going to love it,” Harper said. “And, if you’re really nervous, we can go shopping next week to make sure that you have all of the right clothes. Then you’ll feel extra confident when you get to Wake Forest.”

“I’m not sure I want to go to Wake Forest,” I said. The whole room went silent.

“What do you mean?” My mother asked.

“I mean, my whole life has been like a black and old gold box that everybody has been trying to shove me into. People keep beating me over the head with Lilly Pulitzer planners and plaques engraved with the names Grace and Howard, and all I want is to be Peyton, not Peyton Grace, and not Peyton Howard, and definitely not Peyton Grace Howard.”

“You’re not making any sense, honey,” my father said softly.

“I’m making perfect sense, and you all know it!” I shouted. “I’ve never wanted to go to Wake Forest! You’ve all been bitten by a black and gold Argiope spider, but I haven’t!”
“Peyton!” my mother said.

“Mom!” I shouted back.

“Stop shouting!” said Annabelle.

I turned to Annabelle. “You better be careful, or the spider will eat you, too!”

“That’s enough!” said my father. “If you don’t go to Wake Forest, I swear you will regret it.”

I was never a good liar, and lying about my desire to attend Wake Forest University had been gnawing at me. I was a born truther, and speaking my mind set my nervous spirit free.

“I don’t think so,” I said calmly.

“Why don’t you sleep on it?” my mother asked. “We can revisit this in the morning.” Her eyes were red-rimmed, glistening with tears.

I nodded.

Harper had receded into the kitchen during our familial argument, busyng herself with domestic affairs. That girl was a born wife and desired nothing more than to be a homemaker for a handsome Southern gentleman. She bustled into the dining room, the formal table where we took all our meals, a plate of cornbread in one hand and a bowl of collard greens in the other.

“Peyton, do you want sweet tea or water to drink?” Harper asked.

“Water, please,” I said.

We all sat down at our places, the same places we sat every night since I was a child. Our appropriately discreet chewing was punctuated by small talk, statements like, “It sure was hot today,” and questions like,
“What are you planning on doing tomorrow?” It was worse than silence, because silence was natural and small talk was not. I cleaned the dishes after dinner, hoping it was a slight recompense for yelling at my sister who, though snobbish, was only six. And after that, I went straight to my bedroom. I washed my face, brushed my teeth, and slipped into the only pair of seasonally appropriate clean pajamas that I had left, which were, unfortunately, Wake Forest pajamas.

I tried to read more of On the Road, until I fell asleep.

In my sleep, I had the same nightmare as before, only this time my parents beat me with the planners. Then Harper pulled out the pennant and wrapped it around my neck. She pulled it tightly around me, choking me with the scratchy felt fabric.

I woke up, covered in sweat again and stripped naked. I had pulled off my pajamas in my sleep. The clock read 12:34. I opened the drawer of my nightstand in search of my most prized possession, a gift from my favorite aunt, Katherine, who lived in New York with her French bulldog. It was a map of the United States. Aunt Katherine had once told me that this map represented every single place I could go without having to ask permission. I unfolded the map, spread it on the floor of the room, and crouched down to examine it. I ran my finger over the line that represented US I-40. And suddenly my fate was clear.

I crammed a large backpack full of my favorite belongings, none of which were pastel colors. I wrote a vague note on the first page of the Lilly Pulitzer planner, and left it open on the kitchen table. I thought about burning the planner, but I figured that Anabelle or Harper might want it, and burning it was a
waste of paper. Then I grabbed my car keys and closed the door quietly behind me.

And not once have I ever looked back.
W.F.C. Pennant, 1932, Triangular-shaped, black and gold colors with a white strip containing “1932” interwoven on a gold field, Wake Forest College
1932

Ziwei Chen

There are plenty of ways to dissect the number “1932”:

In the year 1932, Auswill became a soldier.

January ninth was the day he left home, and February third of the next year was the day he was sent out to the war. He had just turned nineteen, and yelled out his lucky number “32” the night before rushing to the battlefront.

The temperature was probably just nineteen degrees when Auswill was scraped by several flying bullets, and the direction from the enemies not far away looked like distempered fireworks going off. The impact pressed him down to the frozen ground. The frost touched his chilblains, and they cracked open. Some thin pus spilled and immediately stuck to his skin in solid. Blood intruded onto the unmelted snow under his body and was expanding its territory every single second.

During the first battle Auswill ever encountered, three friends were shot in front of him simultaneously. From his view downwards, he saw three fiery opium poppies blooming and three pale flowers of life fading.
His dying friends began to sing a marching song that everyone in this army repeated hundreds of times:

“We are soldiers,
During battles.
We are warriors,
Bring them fires.
Fire of justice,
Roll over fringes.
Fight, fight, fight together!”

And he shut his eyes for three seconds, trying to prevent the desperation from oozing out twice, then failed. The ammo rain was just a background for his sorrow.

Auswill’s heart was cracked open and something called PASSION spilled out when he first heard this anthem. The famous general of this country, General Gerron, and one spokesman for the army visited the peaceful and isolated village Auswill lived in. When the spokesman wielded his tongue and brought up the topic of recruitment while flattering General Gerron, the General stood in the snow like a statue. His eyebrows and hair were covered with white, but he intended to waste no energy on flicking it away.

“A prawn and a dragon,” Auswill later said when describing the two men. He was not the least moved by the active prawn but was extremely shocked by the dragon and his firmness. “The general was like the national flag over there,” said Auswill to his friend, “stoic and reliable.” And he swore under oath to the flag and joined the army. The marching song went off under the tree which the flag was placed next to. Leaves fell on the ground solemnly.
Auswill had only one bag, which weighed nineteen kilograms, with him, and the wind twisted his contour. He followed the way which General Gerron and his doctrine led. Looking back at his village again, Auswill couldn’t really recognize the once glorious “picture scroll” in his deeper heart. Before General Gerron and the spokesman’s arrival, everything in his hometown seemed to be a drawing with colorful ink. Mountains surrounded by soft clouds were like women deliberately covering their faces in front of strangers; rivers flowing through the rocks were silk ribbons gliding silently on the smoothness. Even people were nice and calm, but after the propaganda they sadly turned fanatic towards the war. Auswill took the train, which slowly took him to the outside world. Through the tunnels, darkness and brightness took turns to attack his shadow, or maybe his soul. Along the track, national flags made their ways to the destination.

Auswill could hardly see what was around him, so he turned his body over. The sky was smoky red, with a tiny bright blue hole right in the center. He hardly knew that fire and snow and fever and algor were juxtaposed from one side of him to another. He turned his head a little bit, and his ear was in close touch with the snow. The ground shook. The national flag nearby stood still. The fire from that side was sweeping its way to the flag, and the fact that the flag would finally be destroyed comforted him somehow. From the fire he saw General Gerron, though he knew this had been an illusion rooted from his wish.

General Gerron had abandoned him, literally. Auswill was never told, but he knew it.
As the leader of the vanguard, Auswill was ordered to explore a way for the major army before this important battle. He suffered from insomnia. Staring at the fire, his eyes brightened and darkened.

His direct leader stood like a stone in the snow before the vanguard’s departure, and his gaze was like a ruthless sword. Auswill’s men reported that there were “no bombs or landmines, or any threatening dangers detected.” Yet, their backing force never came when they were exposed to the enemy force, before Auswill could utter his lucky number “32” to himself.

The vanguard, composed of nineteen people, was knocked down in the battlefield. Nineteen flaming flowers quietly blossomed.

Long before this battle, Auswill had learned the 193 rules in the army. And shortly after that, he learned that he had been fighting to conquer the other land. Their leader, though not General Gerron, was narcissistic and paranoid. Conquering wars was probably one of his other 1932 crazy ideas.

The leader finally set Auswill’s hometown the base area for the war and drove away all the villagers. Auswill strongly opposed this. After several negotiations through correspondence, his protest seemed ineffectual. Auswill was like a ghost during those days, ghastly looking but easily ignored. The leader finally agreed to meet with Auswill after General Gerron reported this issue and stated its consequences if not settled properly.

The candlelight was dim in the room, and the leader showed his back to Auswill. Auswill could almost hear how the rhythm of his heartbeat resembled the light’s waggling. The leader turned around with a subtle smile. “Don’t worry. Things are not turning
bad." He comforted Auswill with a sharp voice, like the unpleasant sound of chalk scraping through the blackboard. “At least we haven’t seen the weakness. And I promise YOU won’t see it in the future.” Holding the wine glass in one hand, the leader turned to the national flag, and kissed it.

This was the end of the conversation. Auswill dreamed of his hometown that night—the three intruders placed the national flag all over the mountain, and even blocked the clouds out.

He truly knew his time had been approaching.

The fire evaded the flag somehow and made a circle around it. Forcing his sight away from the sky, Auswill turned over again and used all the strength he had left to crawl over to the flag.

He tore the flag apart.

The year 1932 already seemed so long, and “32” was no longer his lucky number.

Though he shouted out “32” for the last time.

The last tint of blue sky disappeared.
Small leather folder, “Wake Forest 1927”, 1927, Small black leather folder embossed with “Wake Forest 1927” and a picture, with Wake Forest seal, Housed with David L. Smiley Papers, MS 572
I am 89 years old. Every year seems to be more painful than the last. Each day that passes uneventfully nudges me into a deeper depression, with my secret growing like a weed, taking the sunlight and nutrients that my soul could have used to blossom into a flower. Do you know how hard it is to be sedentary after a lifetime of adventure, secret-keeping, power, and meaning? After so many years I’ve been reduced to . . . what? This vegetative state of disgrace where I am entombed alive in the archives of the library as an honorable artifact. “A leather-bound black folder,” or so my descriptive card reads. At least it got the first part right, but I’m so much more than a folder. I have a history that no one really knows but my late owner and me. I was made a folder, but I’m not a folder, not anymore anyway. After the things I’ve seen and the lives I’ve ruined, I’m not just a folder. I was bought a folder and turned into a book of names, numbers, and countless secrets. Now in my old age, I’m ready to disclose all of the secrets that I’ve kept bound between my long-lost pages, albeit names of course.
An address book is what he called me when he picked me off of the shelf of the library. His warm hands felt my smooth leather and traced the school seal that had been imprinted on my face. He bought the paper separately and spent twenty-three minutes threading the leather string that bound me through each piece of paper that fit inside of my five by seven frame. I’ve never felt more important than on that one late night at the library.

There was a beautiful woman sitting next to us with short, curly brown hair that framed her heart-shaped face perfectly. Her cheekbones protruded proudly on each side, and her round brown eyes seemed to be inviting me over, her pink, bow-shaped lips smiling flirtatiously. She was completely mesmerizing. I believe that Owner loved her upon first sight. They got to introductions, but all I could concentrate on was the book that she was reading. It was a handsome orange hardcover novel called This Side of Paradise by Fitzgerald. It looked amazing, its pages all neatly cut and even, unlike my own. And its pages had words on them. I had never realized before how bare my pages were. I realized in that moment that I yearned to feel the sweet rush of a pen on my surface. I wanted to know the weight of ink drying on my thin pages. I had never known meaning more than existence, and that scared me. Was I bought solely to be an ornament, or would Owner give me a use more than merely being?

My fears subsided as the beautiful woman gave Owner her number, which, in his flustered state, he tried to scribble on my leather surface, creating the first scratch in my cover that ran from northwest to southeast on the top. He looked up at the beautiful woman sheepishly, nervous that she would be embarrassed of him. Instead, a beautiful grin graced her
face, and her musical laugh filled the library and received annoyed hushes from the studious pupils at the desks around us. This made Owner and the Woman laugh even more as he flipped to my first page and ran the pen across my surface to write down her name, number, and dorm address. In between fits of giggles, there was a promise of a call tomorrow, and then she gathered her books and left.

They dated seriously and exclusively for five months. After that day, he spent all of his time with her. I had never felt so unwanted in all of my short existence. Even though I have been left pageless on a shelf or wordless in the library, this was the lowest I had ever felt. Maybe it is better to have never loved at all, I thought. But again, Owner quelled my fears when he found his roommate with the Woman in Owner’s bed. He was mine again, and in his grief and heartbreak he was using me more than ever. His faithful little Black Book. In the span of two weeks he already had 24 numbers in my pages, and he was able to call upon a different girl every night, sometimes even twice. I giggled when his drunken hand would guide the pen in a diagonal line scribbling the name of some girl that I could tell was not his type. And as I had predicted, the next night when he would call his most recent addition, she would not meet his sober standards, and he would politely ask her to dinner. Needless to say, she was not invited up to his dorm after the date. His room was a sanctuary. He didn’t allow just anyone to come up. I was the only one he allowed up more than once after the Woman, and this made me feel special again.

Our adventures went on for years, and I stood by him through it all, from the tirades that women threw when they found out that they weren’t the only woman in Owner’s life to his graduation, just in case he en-
countered a fellow graduate who he hadn’t met yet, and the interventions that his family had for him to help him get “back on track,” which only worked once: when they found a woman for him to marry. They practically forced his hand into the matrimony. They shouldn’t have been surprised at the ending. They called him over for dinner, a secret arrangement to set him up with this new lady suitor, and before the dessert course was brought out, her number was on my twenty-fifth page. I won’t lie—she was pretty. She had green eyes and fiery red hair. She did a fine job of covering her sunspots and freckles with powder in order to fit in with the milky-skinned models of the era. She looked fine—not as beautiful as the Woman—but Lady was pretty nonetheless. The next week he invited her over, but she insisted that they have dinner together. I was on the first date, my presence justified to Owner on account of the potential waitresses that worked at the restaurant. Just because Owner was a college graduate didn’t mean that he only dated college women. He didn’t discriminate.

That night, Lady didn’t come with us back to the apartment, and I had said good riddance, as Owner usually said to the women who wouldn’t visit his room after he paid for expensive meals. But the next day Lady surprised him and called first. This excitement caught his attention, and by the end of the phone call, he was asking her on a second date. He wasn’t in love. Not really. He was intrigued. But this intrigue and mystery lasted too long, and suddenly he found himself in a suit in front of an altar I suppose, with me tucked away in his desk drawer. I sat in that drawer collecting dust for a few years, but I didn’t panic. He always came back. Even as the time stretched on and I
longed for him, I knew he’d come back. He always did. And I was right.

When he came back, he looked different. The usual swagger that he usually embodied had been replaced with dark bags under the eyes and a gut that was extended out further than I remembered. His dark hair had streaks of grey here and there, but nothing too remarkable. I remember he picked me up, concealed me in a business briefcase, and kissed his wife on his way out the door, wishing her luck on her business trip and saying he was looking forward to seeing her on Monday. I knew that tone all too well, better than Lady did apparently. He was lying. I knew that that weekend was about to be great. And I was right; we were back at it. And we kept at it every weekend that Lady had to work. Neither of us felt guilty. We were doing what felt right, so how could it be wrong?

But Lady was cleaning one day when Owner was at work, and she found me in our secret little desk drawer. She noticed how recent the entries were and became enraged. She snatched me with her clawlike hands and flew on the enraged electricity of the air down to the living room where the giant fireplace resided and placed me on the table. She sat for hours, brooding with anger and muttering to herself until Owner came home, unaware of the tirade he was about to endure. Screams. Red faces. Slaps. I land on the floor with a thud. Then KICK I’m burning in the fire. “Nooo!” Master yells after me and plunges a hand into the fire, saving my leather binding but leaving the pages to ash. They divorced after that, and I like to think that he divorced her for me.

Our adventures were never the same. His family couldn’t handle his antics anymore, and his elderly
mother just couldn’t bear the thought of her bachelor of a son and his mistress Black Book, so she disowned him. By the time he was ready to start seeing women again, he was old and fat, and the attractive women he was into were too young and beautiful to be attracted to him. At that point, we were really alone. He rebound my pages and turned me into a journal. He poured his heart out to me. It turned out that he had been feeling guilty about his antics for years. He was ashamed of me. He compared my charred leather binding to our blemished past. If I had had eyes or tear ducts, I imagine I would have cried in that moment. But I’m just a folder, an address book. I’ve only ever been a book to him. He stabbed the pen through my pages, shut my cover, and shoved me in the secret drawer. I was there for what seemed like forever until unfamiliar hands picked me up and brought me to Wake Forest’s library where I would lie forever with my misattributed identity as a simple “leather-bound black folder.”

On the bad days, I tumble into my current reality and dream of being destroyed. Here I lie on my eternal abode with a mistaken identity of honor. Despite the things I’ve seen and the secrets I’ve held, I’ve never felt dirtier. I have always been disguised as a regular notebook with the school’s seal on the front, practically condoning my owner’s actions, but my leather was only my owner’s to touch. On the good days, I am taken back in time to the memories of my owner before he slandered my being—the way that he used to gently slip his fingers beneath the tie that bound my pages together, how he would use his thumb to flip through my pages, how he would search for me after a drunken night when I had ended up under the desk or the sock drawer. I was the longest relationship that he had ever committed to, and for that, I loved him. I never judged
him or left him; I always provided what he needed. I was the most loyal and most constant thing in his life, and for that, he loved me. I know that he did. Otherwise he wouldn’t have kept filling my pages and opening me up when he was loneliest.
Graylyn Eggs of Quality Roll of Tape.
Small roll of white tape with red borders that reads
“Graylyn Eggs of Quality Graded & Dated. Produced and
Packed by Graylyn Estate Reynolda, N.C. Dial 6569”
One man, one idea to build a grand estate. Bringing new life to his town of Winston-Salem, January of the year 1927. Home for his family in a Manor House, and the Mews housing chickens and their precious eggs. French Normandy architecture, springing up in five years’ time, beginning a legacy. The man passed three years after, his prized possession bestowed upon medical school faculty and students alike. 1972, his younger son purchased the property and chose to lay it in the hands of our Mother, So Dear. His home, a symbol of success, a vision for innovation, transcending time and space. Here is to Bowman Gray, thinker and creator.
Get Closer

Olivia Teegan

Dinner time. It can be either a peaceful get-together, or a shitstorm waiting to happen.

“Mom, Dad, can I hang out with Jacob and Tanner this weekend?” Kaleb’s little brother, Colby, asks aloud, looking up from his plate. Kaleb takes a glimpse at his brother’s plate. To a regular person, it would seem as though his brother is halfway done with his food. In reality, Kaleb knows that Colby’s just playing with his food, specifically the cooked string beans, carrots, and broccoli. He’s eaten all of the homemade mashed potatoes, as well as the seasoned, boneless chicken. Vegetables, though, are Colby’s worst enemy, and Kaleb knows it. And, unfortunately for Colby, so do their parents.

“I don’t know, can you?” Their mother, Anita, gives Colby a stern look. Kaleb offers a slight grimace and looks down to his plate and continues eating the last scraps. His mother hates it when one of them—Kaleb, Colby, or Brent (who is currently in Afghanistan)—says the words, “Can I.” To be short, Anita is a little more old-fashioned when it comes to manners, but once in a while, she’ll let it pass, depending on her
mood that day. But, during dinner, Kaleb could tell that her mood is a sour one. But it probably has to do with more than just Colby’s “Can I.”

Colby stifles a groan. “May I hang out with Jacob and Tanner this weekend? Please?” Colby attempts to make a baby face, his brown eyes glittering and his clutched hands against his face in a dreamy position.

*Keep trying, little brother,* Kaleb thinks to himself, trying his best not to laugh. He notices his father, Pedro, covering his mouth to hide his smile. Even he’s not buying into Colby’s charades.

Anita takes a deep breath. “You may not,” she replies, looking at him with the same stern look as before.

Colby then drops his act, slumping in his chair immediately. “Oh, come on! That’s not fair! Jacob has a new video game, and he wanted me and Tanner to check it out!”

“No means no, Colby.” Their mother’s look becomes harder. “And, watch your tone at the dinner table.”

Pedro chimes in, straightening himself in his chair. “Colby, listen. We know that you want to hang out with your friends, and we know that it’s been a while since that’s happened. But, with the way your grades have been going in your English and social studies classes, it’s gonna take you a while to deserve that reward. One C is passable, although it could be higher. Two Cs aren’t going to cut it, and you know it.” Their father then stands up, taking his and his wife’s empty plates with him to the sink, gently placing them in.

“Yeah? Well . . . well, what about Kaleb? He got a
68 on his last chemistry exam, and you’re not drilling him?"

Now, that’s just low, Kaleb thinks to himself, making a sideways glance at his fourteen-year-old brother. They are barely two years apart—19 months, to be exact—and already, Colby’s using the traitor tactic. And, a good one at that.

“Well, knowing your older brother, he’ll be getting that up.” Anita then looks at Kaleb intently, her deep brown eyes staring deep into his own. Although both of them have the same eye color, Kaleb’s eyes look more similar to his father’s, while both Colby and Brent have their mother’s eyes. The three of them, though, inherited their father’s black curls and light brown skin. “Is that correct, Kaleb?”

Kaleb takes a drink of water from his glass before speaking. “Yes, Mom,” he answers with a small grin. His mother smiles back with satisfaction. Deep down, Kaleb isn’t sure how he’ll keep his promise, especially with AP Chemistry. But he sure as hell will try.

At last, Colby groans, scowling deeply. “A Mexican man and a black woman. How did that even happen?” He then gets out of his chair and heads upstairs, leaving Kaleb and his parents with stricken looks on their faces. His mother, though, manages to keep her composure.

It’s getting worse, Kaleb realizes. Ever since Brent returned to Afghanistan for another term, Colby’s gotten ruder and ruder by the day. There are times, though, when he has his nice moments, which surprises everyone, even Kaleb. But, with the fluctuation between being a sweet angel and a devilish spawn from Hell itself, Anita and Pedro, and even Kaleb, began to realize the truth.
“Your little brother’s only nice when he wants something,” Kaleb had heard his mother say to him one day when they were alone in the living room. Pedro was already in bed after a long, hard day of work, and Colby had stormed out of the room when Anita refused to get him a new phone. “Brent was like that, too, when you and Colby were younger. But, compared to Colby now, Brent was a typical, angsty teenager.” She then took a sip of red wine from her glass, staring with a glossy look at the television, which was showing a rerun of some crime show.

“I miss him, too, Mom.” Kaleb reached over and patted his mother on the shoulder. His mother smiled sweetly, a mixture between the liquor and the warm gesture of her second son, and squeezed his hand in response. “I wish he would be more like you, Kaleb,” she had said to him that same night. Kaleb remembers smiling at her comment, but also feeling his stomach tightening at the same time.

Because, deep down, he has a feeling that his brothers envy his good-boy manners, as well as the constant good light that his parents shine down on him. And, although Brent feels less strongly about it, he knows that Colby feels strongly about it, and the jealousy will keep getting stronger no matter what Kaleb does to keep his young brother on his side.

“I’ll go talk to him,” Kaleb announces, taking his and Colby’s plates from the kitchen table and walking toward the sink, staring sadly at his brother’s chopped up, uneaten vegetables.

* * *

“Go away, Kaleb,” Colby says once Kaleb walks into his room.
“Hello to you, too,” Kaleb mutters, trying his best not to get completely annoyed. By impulse, he closes the door and sits on the corner of Colby’s bed.

“Yo, who said that you can sit on my bed?” Colby sits up from his pillow and glares at Kaleb with such hostility that Kaleb wonders how they were even related.

“What did you out me during dinner?” Kaleb asks, suddenly. He still isn’t over that comment, and truthfully, he doesn’t think he ever will be. “I’ve never done that to you in your life.”

“I don’t know.” Colby shrugs. “I just felt like it.” He then brings his legs up to his chest. “Plus, you almost never get in trouble for anything, so why should I always be the one getting shit on?”

“That’s because, unlike you, who says nasty things when you don’t get what you want, I just leave it be. That’s just how life works, and you should get that into your head, little brother.”

Colby just stares at Kaleb, his glare darkening. “Why should I even listen to you? What are you, Dad? Or, are you trying to be like Brent?”

Kaleb flinches from Colby’s harsh tone. “No, I’m not. I’m just saying—Look, Colby. Mom and Dad are getting older, for Christ’s sake. It’s bad enough that one of their sons decides to go fight a war. They don’t need a whole bunch of crap from their younger son, too.”

“And, what? That makes you the golden boy? The peacekeeper?”

“That’s not what I’m saying—”
“I think you are. Mom and Dad probably sent you up to talk to me, trying to convince me to listen to you and be more like you. The prodigy. The favorite.”

Kaleb doesn’t say anything. He knows that, deep down, that’s not his intention at all. Is it? He didn’t want it to be. He wants to force himself to speak, to persuade his brother in a rational manner, but his pounding head and his tight lip predict something entirely different.

What the hell is his problem? Why can’t I get through to him?

“Well, keep your prodigy bullshit. I’m not in the mood. You’re not Brent, and you’re not Dad or Mom.” He then turns away from Kaleb and plops himself back on his pillow, lying flat on his back. “Turn off the light when you leave, please. I’m going to bed.”

Kaleb blinks suddenly, more so shocked about his brother saying something in a somewhat kinder way. Swallowing his words, he gets up from his brother’s bed and does what he says, closing the door behind him in defeat.

* * *

“Okay, stop. Stop,” Mr. Chatwin says, sternly.

The music in the orchestra room halts abruptly, the last bit of it echoing briefly before it becomes silent. Kaleb yawns as quietly as possible, his eyes squeezing shut and his mouth widening. He then releases a gust of air from his mouth, rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand while holding his bow. He’s tempted to put his head on his cello, but he fights it. Mr. Chatwin seems annoyed as is, and yawning will probably cost him.
“You sound tired, Mr. Garcia,” Mr. Chatwin comments. Kaleb feels his spine become stiff with a potent sensation of coldness. *I knew it*, he thinks to himself.

“Y-Yeah, Mr. Chatwin,” he stammers in response. “I . . . It was a long night, with homework and all that.” *And thinking about what the hell is going on with my brother and wishing that Brent were here to handle him.* But, he refuses to mention this part to anyone. Madeline—Maddy—though—he might after this practice, as he senses her looking at him with concern from the piano.

“Yes, I understand, Mr. Garcia.” Mr. Chatwin starts to smile. “And, yet, you sound magnificent on your cello, despite your fatigue.

“However, I can say the opposite about you, Mr. Bernstein.” Mr. Chatwin turns his direction to Eddie, whose face gets slightly pale. “You have the lead part of our two songs for this recital, and yet, compared to everyone else, including your counterpart Mr. Laughlin, you’re not giving it your all as you usually do.”

Eddie’s face gets whiter by the second. He is unable to speak. Eventually, he clears his throat, his face slowly returning to color. “With all due respect, Mr. Chatwin, I am giving it my all like everyone else. I mean, I am getting all the notes, and—”

Mr. Chatwin shakes his head. “That’s what I mean. I’m glad that you’re getting all the notes; otherwise, what are we even doing, am I right?” A couple of chuckles bounce around the room; Kaleb only cracks a smile. “But, you’re not *feeling* the music like you usually do. And, don’t get me wrong, you’re an amazing musician. But you’re not showing it to me.”
That’s when Kaleb’s head perks up, his stomach churning with a feeling of dread. *Oh, God no. Please don’t.*

“Kaleb, please switch with Edward for a moment, please. Edward, play cello for now. Everyone, let’s start with ‘Por Una Cabeza’ by Carlos Gardel again, from the top. Let’s go, chop-chop.” Kaleb gets up from his seat, switching his cello and bow with Eddie’s violin and bow. Kaleb avoids Eddie’s gaze during the exchange, feeling as though he’s bound to puke at any second. How the hell is this happening? How did Mr. Chatwin even know that he knows both parts of each piece, the second one being “Santa Lucia” by Teodoro Cottrau? Unless . . . *No, she didn’t.* “Kaleb, Madeline has informed me that you’ve been practicing both the first violin part and the cello part for each piece,” Mr. Chatwin announces, smiling brightly. “That’s quite an ambition.”

“Y-Yeah, I guess,” Kaleb says, quietly, gripping onto Eddie’s violin, placing the bow on the strings for preparation. The trembling in his body starts to ease as he stares at the music, and the tightness in his stomach slowly disappears. He takes a deep breath and releases it, calming his nerves even more. He then nods to Mr. Chatwin, who gives them a countdown.

“And, one...two...three...”

** * * *

“My God, that was almost a shitshow,” Kaleb says to Maddy and Stan, who is also Maddy’s boyfriend, as they place everything back in place. “You know I almost died, right when he called on me?”

“Kaleb, either way, you sounded amazing,” Maddy comments, as she pushes the piano towards the wall.
When she’s done, she goes to her backpack and coat, grabbing her scarf from the chair. “And don’t you deny it.”

“It’s true.” Stan, who’s a senior like Eddie—both Kaleb and Maddy are juniors—grins at him. “The fact that you can play both parts makes it doubly impressive.”

“Hey, you sound good, too, you know.” Maddy strolls over to Stan and gives him a peck on the mouth. Kaleb can’t help but smile a little at the young couple. Maddy has always been small with her 5’2” height and mousey, brunette hair, whereas Stan is a tall, roundish guy with short, brown hair. And, for some reason, their physical appearance makes their relationship sweeter than ever.

Kaleb teases them, picking up his cello case and putting on the straps. “Okay, enough with the cute stuff.” He carries his backpack by the head strap, praying that it doesn’t rip off from the heaviness of schoolwork. “Come on, let’s get going.”

“Hey, Kaleb, you know it’s possible,” Stan says behind him as they leave the orchestra room and out of the commons area. “Yeah, you’re a junior, and Eddie’s a senior. But Chatwin knows that you’re the better player anyway, so he just might give you the first parts.”

Kaleb looks around the area, as well as down the halls, while Stan says this. “I’d rather stick with my cello, thanks.”

“Oh, come on, Kaleb, even I’m jealous.” Maddy bumps him at his side, dragging Stan with her. “But, unlike Eddie, who isn’t even that nice in general, I’ll be supporting you. In fact, just ask Chatwin for the parts.
He seemed willing enough to—” Suddenly, Maddy stops her speech as she looks straight ahead. Kaleb’s eyebrows crease from Maddy’s sudden change in expression as he looks down the hall. His blood suddenly runs cold as he sees why.

“Good playing today, Garcia,” Eddie says to Kaleb, although the ice in his eyes and the tightness in his voice says otherwise. “You truly have that feeling that Chatwin was talking about.” He then walks down the hall and exits out the door, not looking back at them.

The trembling in Kaleb’s body returns, this time stronger than before. He feels the heat disperse from his cheeks in an instant, his throat getting tighter by the second.

“Hey, guys? You can go on without me. I—I need a moment.” Before Maddy or Stan could say anything, Kaleb turns around and rushes back into the commons and rushes into one of the practice rooms. Luckily, one of them is open, and he shuts the door immediately. He then drops his backpack on the ground and takes off his cello case before sliding to the ground to take a moment to calm his pounding heart. He hates this so much. First, Colby. Now, Eddie. What next? “Calm yourself, Kaleb,” he speaks to himself, softly, taking deep breaths while holding his head. *In-out, in-out.* “This is just a shitty week, that’s all. Just a shitty-ass week.”

Suddenly, there’s a loud pounding on the door that makes him jump with shock. He releases his head, feeling his curls sticking out. He has a feeling that he looks like a crazy man. He smooths out his curls as best as possible.

“What’s there?” he asks, his heart hammering against his chest again.
The door slowly opens; light brown hair pops in first. “Kaleb?”

Kaleb’s eyes suddenly widen from the voice. The familiar, husky sound. No, it couldn’t. “Oliver?”

The light brown hair eventually becomes a full head with light tan skin surrounding bright, hazel-green eyes. The same eyes he hasn’t seen since the first day of ninth grade. They weren’t filled with the same concern back then as they are now.

“Hey,” his former friend, Oliver, says with a small smile and a wave.

Kaleb feels his mouth widen with surprise as he stands up from the ground. He feels his cheeks heat up once more from his pathetic state. God, he probably looks like a kid with his knees against his chest and his hands holding his head as if it were about to explode. “Oliver, what? I mean . . . huh?”

“This is the part when you say hello, too, dumbass.” Oliver smirks, but in a jocular way rather than a condescending one. He’s wearing a navy blue sweatshirt with black sweatpants, his bangs slightly sticking on his forehead. Kaleb then suddenly catches a whiff of cologne mixed with sweat.

“You just got out of track practice?” he asks, dumbfounded. He then mentally kicks himself for saying such a dumb question. God, just say “hello,” too. Yeesh, Kaleb.

“Close enough.” Oliver closes the door of the practice room, dropping his backpack and drawstring bag to the ground. He then sticks his hands in his sweatshirt front pocket. “Long time no see, by the way.”

“Y-Yeah. Yeah, it has.”
Neither of them say anything for a bit. Kaleb scratches his hair out of habit, trying to think of something to say. But, as usual, he’s out of words. After all, what could he say to a friend he hasn’t spoken to in two years?

“Still into music, huh?” Oliver is the first to break the silence, to Kaleb’s relief. He then nods towards the cello case. “You didn’t see me, but I kind of snuck into the commons when we were running around the building. You sound really good.” He then shrugs, his smirk softening into a smile. “I wanted to stay longer, but one of the coaches caught me and sent me back outside.”

“You were in here?” Kaleb asks, aloud. He tries to remember if he heard any awkward background noises from outside the orchestra room. Instead, he remembers himself being lost in the music, feeling the jumps and sways of the notes as he played Eddie’s violin. The memory gives him a warm feeling, which eventually turns into ice.

“Okay, um . . . I mean, thanks.” Kaleb scratches his hair out of habit, mentally kicking himself over and over again. “Listen, I’m sorry for sounding stupid and all, but it’s just . . . it’s—”

“Yeah, I know, I’m kind of freaking out, too.” Oliver scratches his hair. “I don’t look like it, but I am. It’s been a while.” He then looks at Kaleb. “What’s been going on, anyway? I ran into Maddy before she and her boyfriend left, and she was the one who told me to find you. She said that you kind of freaked out.

_Dammit, Maddy_, he thinks to himself, sighing. “Listen, Oliver. I just had a moment, and now I’m fine. You don’t have to worry about me.”
Oliver stares at him before responding. “Yeah, I call bullshit.” He then sits down on the ground. “Tell you what. Let’s play a game of cards.”

Kaleb stares at him. “What?”

Oliver reaches into his backpack and grabs a worn-out deck of cards bundled up in a rubber band. “Cards. Specifically, Spit. If you win, I’ll leave you alone for good. But, if I win, you have to tell me what the hell your mini mental breakdown was about.” He then smirks, smugly, his hazel-green eyes looking mischievous. “Unless you give in.”

Kaleb doesn’t know what the hell is going on with Oliver, but he can’t help but scowl at his former friend’s arrogance. “Bring it, then.” He sits himself down and crosses his legs. “Lay out the cards, then. Unless you’re too chickenshit to.”

Oliver snorts, splitting the cards into two equal piles. He hands one of them to Kaleb. “Says you.”

Kaleb smirks as smugly as Oliver. For some reason, this brings him back to middle school days, when the two of them would take the time to drill each other in anything they were doing, from music (Oliver used to be in band before he quit after middle school to get into sports), to video games, to cards. He adored the competitiveness between the two of them. And, for some reason, he’s experiencing the familiar sensation once again.

The two boys set up the formation of Spit, laying the remaining piles of cards across from one another. Soon enough, they get into the game, neither of them speaking except for the occasional “Shit” or “Dammit” or “Fuck” or two. Five or so minutes later, Kaleb stares
in shock as his friend smacks the empty spot on the floor.

*I lost*, he thinks to himself. *How the hell . . .?*

“Well, you know the drill. A deal is a deal.” Oliver smirks in victory. He then clears his throat, softening his smirk once more. “And, if you want, I can drive you home, too.”

Kaleb is still in shock from his sudden loss, but he’s functional enough to nod in agreement. Maybe ditching Maddy and Stan wasn’t a good idea after all.

“So, what’s going on, man?” Oliver asks.

***

Kaleb sits on his bed, trying his best to focus on his AP Chemistry homework. Gas laws. These damn gas laws. It’s a shit ton of work, but he tries his best to focus as the time reaches almost 10:30 p.m.

But, no matter what, his mind would drift back to Oliver.

After his loss, Kaleb—reluctant, at first—explained everything that’s been going on, from Colby’s oscillating behavior to stealing the spotlight from a senior in next week’s recital. Surprisingly, Oliver listened to him, nodding and creasing his forehead with concern. He even shared his own view on each situation, which actually helped, too.

Even the drive home went smoothly, the two of them riding in the car, occasionally talking about their lives as if nothing occurred. There were moments when Kaleb wanted to bring up what happened in ninth grade, but he refrained. After all, he just got his friend back. He thinks.
“Hey, reach out to me if you need anything, alright?” Oliver said once he pulled up to Kaleb’s house. “If you want, we can get together this weekend or something.”

Kaleb hesitated, biting the inside of his cheek. “Probably not, man. I have a lot of work to do, and I have to get this recital down.”

“When is the recital, anyway?” Oliver asked.

“It’s next week,” Kaleb responded. “Thursday at 7 p.m. I have to get at school before then, though.”

Oliver nodded. “Well, maybe we can settle it in a game of cards.” He then smiled again, looking at Kaleb.

Kaleb stared at him. “Absolutely not.”

“Hey, if you’re afraid of getting your ass beat again, just admit it.”

“Bullshit, I’m not afraid of getting my ass beat again. I just don’t know why we have to settle this in cards.”

“I don’t know, ’cause it’s fun. We used to do that before, didn’t we?”

He has a point, Kaleb thought to himself. “Fine, we’ll see about it tomorrow. Same time as today.” He then left, closing the door behind him, dragging his stuff along with him. But, despite the heaviness in his hands, nothing broke the great warmth deep in his chest.

Kaleb smiles at that memory, his fingers combing through his curls. He then blinks, slapping his cheeks three times. Gas laws, gas laws, gas fucking laws, he thinks to himself, staring hard at the practice problems in his textbook. He has a test this Friday—today
is Wednesday—and he has to do well on it, even if the most he can get is an 80.

*Focus, Kaleb*, he tells himself in his head, flying through the problems as much as possible. He doesn’t want to do all of them in one night; he’ll save some for tomorrow—but he doesn’t want to be stuck with a huge pile of them, either. *Just focus on gas laws. Don’t let anyone distract you from your element. Not Colby with his gloating about getting an email from Brent today, not Eddie and his blatant jealousy about you playing his part in practice, and especially not Oliver for speaking to you again.*

Of course, the last bit ends up sneaking into Kaleb’s thoughts once more, no matter how hard he tries to fight it.

* * *

“He asked you to play Spit. And won.”

“If you don’t make fun of me.”

Maddy tries her best to keep a stoic face but cracks a grin along with a short laugh. “Well that I didn’t see coming.”

The two of them are in the cafeteria during lunch, trying their best to speak through the commotion and the loud voices of hungry and energetic teenagers. He can’t help but feel gratitude to the district for having the freshmen attend classes in a different building. He doesn’t have to run into Colby over and over again and see his, annoyed expression on a daily basis as if he didn’t have to see it at home.

“Yeah, I didn’t, either.” Kaleb stabs at his stale salad, taking a bite out of the large piece of lettuce. “It’s just—it feels weird, you know? Ever since ninth grade, he ignored me like I didn’t exist. He didn’t give me a
dirty look or a weird look. He just didn’t look at me, period.” He then drops his fork on his tray. “And now? He’s back. As if everything that happened is behind us.”

“Well, we are juniors, Kaleb,” Maddy comments. “Maybe he wants to make amends, that’s all. It happens, you know.”

“Yeah, and Colby’ll stop being an annoying shit,” he mumbles to himself. “I don’t know, I just feel as though it’s weird. It’s not bad or anything. But, it’s not good, either, you know?”

“Maybe it is good. You’re just not seeing it correctly.” Maddy smirks before her eyes brighten up again. “Oh! And Stan and I agreed that you should ask for Eddie’s parts in the recital.”

“Just like you were saying yesterday? Sorry I bailed on you guys, by the way.”

“It’s fine; it was our fault. But, we still think you should have Eddie’s parts.”

Kaleb is silent for a minute and slumps in his chair, crossing his arms. He scowls. “Mmmm” is all he says.

Maddy looks at him before she sighs. “Listen, Kaleb. Good things come in your way once in a while. Don’t just let them pass by like they’re nothing. Otherwise, you’ll regret it.”

Kaleb scowls some more, slumping more into the bench chair. Because, deep down, he knows that his friend is right.

* * *

“I win again.”

“Fuck you, man.”
Oliver leans back, his eyes widening from Kaleb’s response. “Harsh words, man.”

Kaleb rolls his eyes. This is the third time in Spit that he has lost to Oliver. *Third time.* He then gets up from the ground and walks over to the piano, sitting on the bench in front of it. “I don’t remember you doing well in Spit.”

“It’s a perfect time waster while waiting for the coaches to get ready.” Oliver follows Kaleb and sits next to him, eying the piano. “Wait, I think I remember this note.” He then plays middle C, grinning with his teeth showing. Kaleb can’t help but laugh a little from his friend’s goofy face.

“Hey, do you miss band at all?” Kaleb asks Oliver, looking at him. He remembers Oliver playing the trumpet in middle school. “You were pretty good back then.”

“Yeah, and I probably suck now.” Oliver stares at the piano once more before facing Kaleb. “But, to answer your question, yes and hell no. It wasn’t even the teacher that annoyed me—she was cool. It was the clueless substitute teachers who came in.”

Kaleb shudders, thinking about all the crappy subs he’s gotten for orchestra. Luckily, Chatwin is pretty good at instructing class as much as possible, so he’s barely gotten any subs.

“Yeah, I’ll agree with you on that.”

Oliver snorts. “Yeah.” He then plays middle C again, making another goofy face. Kaleb laughs harder than the first time.

“You know what? Screw your middle C.” Kaleb then cracks his knuckles. “Behold, my magical piano-playing powers.” Then, taking a breath, he jumps
right into “Minute Waltz,” Op. 64, No. 1, by Chopin, his mind immediately getting lost in the music. He doesn’t play it as fast as some others do—truthfully, even though he does it once in a while, he hates the song when it’s ridiculously fast—and instead plays it at a medium pace. He rocks from side to side to the rhythmic, 6/8 feel of the song, closing his eyes from time to time. During this, Oliver doesn’t utter a word or a comment.

When he’s done, Kaleb breathes out slowly, placing his hands on his knees, his fingers forming into tight wrists. “Guess I beat you on that, huh?” he says, his voice suddenly wavering.

Oliver doesn’t say anything. He still stares at the piano with a calm, yet bewildered look on his face. Shit, I screwed up, Kaleb thinks to himself. “Y-You know, what? I—That wasn’t intended to be like that, so, uh . . . yeah.” Kaleb feels his shoulders slump in defeat. Good things, my ass.

Oliver speaks up, making Kaleb look at him. “Hey.” Before Kaleb could say anything, he feels his eyes widen as Oliver leans in and presses his mouth to his, his cheeks warming up from the contact. It lasts for about a couple of seconds before their lips part, but their faces stay close to one another.

“Someone on the track team is hosting a party this Friday night. Let me know if you want to come with.” Oliver then gives him a small smile before getting up from the bench and gathering his things from the ground. “I’ll be at the car when you’re ready.”

“Y-Yeah, yeah,” Kaleb replies, not looking at Oliver. Once he’s gone, Kaleb stands up immediately, his hands going through his hair, his heart pounding crazily, and his face hot like the house when his par-
ents refuse to turn on the AC during the summer. He replays the scene over and over again—Oliver’s face close to his, his lips making contact with his lips, the calm look in Oliver’s eyes compared to his altogether bewildered demeanor. Immediately, images of the first day of ninth grade reappear, Oliver’s benevolent eyes violently clashing with his hostile look on that day.

What the hell is going on? Kaleb thinks to himself, praying that this feeling would go away before he encounters Oliver again.

* * *

Kaleb isn’t sure, but he feels as though Colby’s hostile look to him probably beats Oliver’s in ninth grade.

“This is so stupid,” his brother says with such heat in his voice that Kaleb thinks he’s capable of combustion. “Why do you get to go out? You probably have the same grade in chemistry as I do in my two classes, if not worse.”

“Yeah, well those are two classes,” Kaleb says. “Listen, I’m as surprised as you, but I guess it just happened. Maybe you’ll get a shot next weekend or something.”

Colby’s glare darkens once more as he leans against the stairs, his arms crossed. “Yeah, if I’m all goody-two-shoes like you.”

Kaleb then turns towards Colby. “What the hell is your problem?”

“You. You’re the problem. Face it. You’re the favorite. You’ve always been the favorite. Even if you’re doing poorly in class, you’re the favorite. I bet my ass that if both of us were to murder someone, Mom and Dad would jump on the opportunity to bail you out of jail. You know it’s true.”
Kaleb presses his mouth together. It’s a damn good thing that his parents went out on a date tonight; otherwise, who knows what their mother would say to Colby if she were to hear what he’s saying right now. “You know what? This is a waste of time.” Kaleb checks his phone, eying the text that he received from Oliver not too long ago. *I’m here*, it says. Kaleb couldn’t help but think about the kiss they shared in the practice room, but at the same time, he couldn’t not think about it, either. He doesn’t know how he’ll bring it up to Oliver if he could get a chance, but he knows one thing: he’s getting really tired of Colby’s bipolar behavior.

“Well thank God for sparing me your words of wisdom,” Colby says. Kaleb turns around, giving his brother a dark look.

“You know, screw it,” he says. “I’m so done with your bullshit attitude, Colby. We all are. And this whole goody-two-shoes gimmick needs to end, okay? Mom and Dad don’t let me do what I want because I’m an ‘angel from above.’ They do it because I don’t give them any shit on an almost daily basis. And, you know what’s funny? If Brent were here, he would say the same thing about your behavior. And, that’s a fact.” He then puts on his shoes and heads toward the door.

“Well, you know what? I bet that he would agree that you’re the favorite, too,” Colby says. Kaleb stop in his tracks. “When he visits home, he will admit it to your face, and you know it.”

Suddenly, something snaps in Kaleb. He grips the handle tightly. His knuckles become pale. “Colby, let me ask you something. Did Brent ever tell you when he’s coming home again? In his emails?”

Kaleb then takes in a deep breath before releasing it through his nose. “Well, maybe he’s dead. Ever thought of that?” And, just before he could hear Colby make a comeback, he opens the door, slamming it behind him, and leaves.

* * *

Fuck, Kaleb thinks to himself as he walks as quickly as possible. Fucking hell.

He tries his best to keep the tears from falling out of his eyes. Once in a while, when walking down the sidewalk to Oliver’s car, he would wipe an escaped tear from either eye. He had to know eventually, he thinks to himself, convincingly. If it weren’t my parents that would tell him, then it would be me. I wrote the emails, after all.

And, in the end, it doesn’t matter. He could write a whole bunch of emails to Colby, pretending to sound like Brent as best as he could, and he would still be an asshole of a brother and a shitty son. Plus, didn’t it ever occur to Colby’s mind that Kaleb misses Brent as well? Or, is he so self-centered that he does not even think about his own family’s feelings? Don’t think about this now, Kaleb, he tells himself as he gets closer to Oliver’s car. Just hang out with Oliver at the party, and maybe confront him about what happened yesterday in the practice room. Who knows, maybe the rest of the day might turn out for the better. So far, the only good thing that’s occurred is getting that godforsaken gas laws test out of the way. That’s worth something to celebrate about.

Kaleb stops in front of Oliver’s car. Taking a deep breath, he wipes his eyes once more before knocking on the passenger seat window. After about a second of
waiting, the window rolls down. Oliver greets him with a lazy smile.

“Hey, man,” he says, grinning widely. He unlocks the car door. “Hop on in.”

Kaleb opens the car door and gets into his friend’s—should he even call him his friend after what happened yesterday?—car, closing the door afterward. He suddenly makes a face when he senses the sharp scent of beer. “What the hell is that?” he asks, suddenly forgetting his feelings of sorrow. He then turns to Oliver, taking in his face. His eyes seem a little droopy and red, and the lazy grin comes again.

_Ah, no. Hell, no._

“Get out of the driver’s seat.” Oliver makes a confused face, his eyebrows creasing. “Dude, I’m not joking. Get out.”

Oliver chuckles lazily. “Dude, I’m fine,” he says, his speech slightly slow, but not entirely slurred. “I drove here like this from the party. I probably had a beer or two. Or three.” He then laughs again. “I don’t know.”

Kaleb feels his heart go heavy. “You went to the party.”

“Yeah. . . . I figured you wouldn’t . . . _like_ it, or whatever—so, I just went on your behalf.” He then pats Kaleb on the shoulder, smiling lazily again. “Just being a good person for you, is all.” He then reaches for Kaleb’s cheek, but Kaleb, out of instinct, slaps his hand away.

_Good things, my ass_, he thinks to himself once again. _Good things, my fucking ass._

“Oliver, get _out_ of the driver’s seat. _Now._” His
voice trembles from annoyance, anger, shock, and—hurt? He doesn’t know.

Oliver’s smile drops. “Fine, whatever, man.” He then opens the car door, Kaleb doing the same on his side. Once they switch places, Oliver groans. “Man, Kaleb, I don’t even know what you’re so afraid of,” he complains, closing his eyes. “I said I’m fine.”

No, you’re not, Kaleb thinks to himself. And, I don’t know if I am anymore.

* * *

“Dude, I feel better now,” Oliver says for the tenth time since Kaleb drove him home. Luckily, neither of Oliver’s parents are home to witness their own son walking in slightly drunk. In Kaleb’s perspective, Oliver’s voice sounds a little less slow from before—he did fall asleep along the way, which eased Kaleb for a bit—but Kaleb isn’t taking any chances. He doesn’t even want to go to the party anymore.

“Oliver, we need to talk,” Kaleb says as he gives him a glass of water. He then sits down across from him. “It’s about what happened on Thursday. In the practice room.”

Oliver takes a long gulp from his glass before placing it down. “What of it?”

Kaleb gawks at him. “What?”

Oliver shrugs. “I mean, it’s happened before, hasn’t it? After graduating eighth grade? We were sitting on the grass, and then—it happened.” He then leans in, a corner of his mouth rising a little. “So, we can say that it’s a continuation of some sort, you know?”

“But, it’s not.” Kaleb can’t help but feel his heart sink further into the abyss.
Oliver’s smile slowly drops. “I don’t get it.”

Kaleb bites the inside of his cheek. “It just isn’t.” He then straightens himself in the chair. “Look, I remember that day, alright? Our eighth grade graduation. Although there were people, we were still alone. And, that moment, it felt . . . it felt great.” He smiles sadly at the small memory of it. “Yeah, the first time kissing, it felt like a test, but deep down, I always knew that it was me coming full circle about myself. And—look, this is going to sound cheesy as hell—when we kissed again after the first time, I was thinking, Yes, this is it. I found my one and only. See, cheesy as hell? But, that’s how I felt at that time.

“But, then, ninth grade happened, and when I went to greet you . . . well, I’ll just be blunt; you treated me like shit. That punch hurt like hell. It was like you completely forgot what happened that day. Either that, or you did remember, and all you felt was disgust.” Kaleb feels his voice tremble, but he tries his best to keep it as still as possible. “You hid from it all, hid it from people. Hid it from me. And, yeah, I’ll admit that it sucked a lot. But, eventually, I came to terms with it and moved on. And then, Thursday happened. And that fucked me over. And, I’m sure it did the same for you, too.”

Oliver doesn’t say anything for a bit but keeps his eyes on the table. Eventually, after about a minute of silence, he says, “You hide, too.”

Kaleb’s taken aback. “What are you talking about?”

“You. Hide. Too.” Oliver doesn’t sound angry when he emphasizes each word, but Kaleb can sense his irritation. “I mean, come on, Kaleb. What happened between us isn’t just it. I’ll admit, I was at fault for that day in ninth grade, but you also kept it that way. Yeah,
I can say shit like, ‘My dad isn’t really the greatest person in the world when it comes to differences,’ and it wouldn’t change what happened that day. But, after a while, I realized that, yeah, I screwed up. I wanted to make amends with you. Maybe start over. But, you ignored me, too. When I looked back at you, you just kept staring straight away. And, yeah, I deserve that. If the roles were switched, I would have done the same thing.

But, it’s not just me you hide from. You hide from other things. You hide from the idea of one-upping that senior, when everyone, even your friend Mad- dy, knows that you’re better than he is. You hide the fact that you’re actually one of the best students in AP Chem. You deliberately did poorly on a test just so your parents wouldn’t be so hard on your brother. And you hide from Colby about the fact that Brent isn’t coming home, ever, and that you’re the one writing those emails to Colby. And, I know that these are things that you told me on Wednesday, but those are good examples nonetheless.”

Now, it’s Kaleb who is silent. He looks at the tabletop and traces the abstract patterns back and forth. Neither of them say anything for a while, actually. There isn’t much to say, honestly. It’s as if everything that’s been on their minds is displayed on the tabletop for them. It’s enough to know that neither was more in the wrong than the right. It’s just the truth, loud and clear. And, to Kaleb, it feels great to know all of these things, even if there were some he needs to take time in acknowledging. But, at the same time, it hurts his soul even more. Because, despite wanting it to, he knows, deep down, it couldn’t happen between them.
“So what happens now?” Oliver breaks the silence now, his voice slightly cracking. Kaleb looks at him to realize that his eyes are shining, something he’s never seen before. His arms are also across his chest, helping him keep his composure.

Kaleb sniffs loudly, feeling a lump in his throat. He then clears his throat and then tries to smile. “If you’re sober enough, we can play a game of Spit again. Unless you’re too chickenshit to lose for the first time.” His voices cracks as well, but he tries to stay as strong as possible.

Oliver looks at him for a bit before smiling a little. “If I win, you go to Chatwin to take Eddie’s part in your recital. If you win, then you can stick with cello.”

Kaleb beams a little too, wiping the small amount of tears and the immense amount of fatigue in his eyes. “I’ll agree with that.”

“I’ll go get my cards, then.” Oliver stands up from his chair and goes upstairs.

Kaleb sighs and leans against his chair. He feels a tear escape from the corner of his eye, but he wipes it away. It’s neither sadness nor happiness that he feels at the moment. Instead, it’s a sense of realization. In the back of his mind, he wishes for another turnout. But, instead, this turnout is neither good nor bad. In his mind, it’s close enough.
James Ralph Scales “WFU Man of the Year Award” plaque.
A wooden plaque with an inscription in gold on a black background: “The Residence House Council presents Dr. James Ralph Scales the 1983 Wake Forest Man of the Year award for his constant dedication and outstanding service to the university.”
Fried cornbread is sizzling on the stovetop in an outdated kitchen as she looked on from the cushioned seat of her sturdy and worn wheelchair. Not even my mother, the best Southern cook on this side of the Mason Dixon Line, can lattice fried cornbread like Grandmama could. She’d let it sizzle in boiling hot grease on the stove for a quick minute or two while I’d sit on a wooden stool next to her, impatiently begging her to flip it. Then, with little effort and a four-pronged fork (my granddaddy wouldn’t let her buy three-pronged forks), she’d flip the cornbread—brown side up—until the other side matched and she knew it was ready to come out of the pan and rest on a bed of paper towels. We didn’t have cornbread at Grandmama’s house every time I ate there. Other snacks were a Coke and tiny sliver of raw cookie dough that she’d hand out to my brother, Bryan, and me under one condition: “Don’t tell your mama I letcha have this.” With her cheap scotch with water in hand and her eyes on the five o’clock news, she sat in her reclining chair parallel to the back door in a dark, wood-paneled living room.

This chair was positioned where she could see the mailman, the neighbors, the dog, the magnolia tree—
and where she could see me—the blonde, sass-master little girl standing on the wooden bench placed in the shade of that same magnolia tree. The magnolia tree, she told me, sold her the house. It was the deal-maker for her two-story brick home on the corner of Vance Street in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina. The same tree her daughters climbed in the 1960s and 1970s—“simpler times,” they tell me. I’ll take their word for it. Not the magnolia tree she met my grandfather under at Wake Forest College in the early 1940s, but alike.

The one that anchored the memories of her experiences at Wake Forest—Old Wake Forest—in the early 1950s. Like the one my granddaddy, a poor fraternity boy from small-town North Carolina proposed to her under in their latter days on campus. “Some girls went to Wake Forest to find a rich man,” she’d say. “I left with the poorest one.”

Grandmama told a story of Wake Forest that I would eat up with a spoon. I would climb onto her lap and position myself to be propped on the armrest of her chair. I would play with her hair, and just when I thought she didn’t notice, I would pull the lever that propelled the footrest, sending our feet in the air and our heads just inches away from the wood-paneled wall. She cackled, playing into my idea that she didn’t know this was coming.

She would read to me there. I’d reach behind her chair for the oversized rainforest book that I knew was hidden in the corner of the room. I’d grab the book and plop it onto her lap for her to read it to me. She read a lot, more than the average book junkie. As an English major at Wake Forest, and later an English teacher in North Carolina’s public school system, reading—and
especially writing—were her thing. “The more you read, the more you know,” Grandmama used to say to me. I think about her—how she would say that—while I’m trudging through a sixty-page research article on foreign policy or the Industrial Revolution or any other class assignment I’m sure is of good value to my education.

“You can go to school wherever you’d like, but if you go to Wake Forest I’ll pay for it,” Grandmama said too many times to count—until I’d tell her the price of tuition, not-so-humbly out of the ballpark range of the $300 or so tuition rate she paid prior to her 1951 graduation.

Her late 1940s admission at Wake Forest was an unconventional story she told often. “My daddy said, ‘Louise, put on your best dress. We’re going to Wake Forest,’” my grandmama would remind me. According to her narrative, she was not granted admission right away. She and her daddy visited with the Dean of Women—a position not intended prior to 1942 when the first class of women was granted admission at Wake Forest College. “I don’t need her help on the farm anymore,” my great grandfather told the Dean. Grandmama started classes that summer.

I didn’t understand as an eager child sitting on the armrest of my grandmother’s chair. I didn’t understand what it meant for a woman to go to Wake Forest College in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Her memories—the ones she spoke of—were filled with movie dates at the theater where the football team sat “shoulder to shoulder in every other seat.” They were about dates under the magnolia tree with my granddaddy. She told me about finishing college in three years because she stayed to take courses every summer and
about how she never regretted going to Wake Forest because “nothing could be finer than to be in Caroli-
na in the morning.” She sang less gracefully than she read.

I imagine she didn’t quite fit. She never told me this, but somehow it shapes my present memory of her. Let me be clear: when I say that she presumably didn’t “fit,” that doesn’t mean there was not a place for her at the college—rather, that she created a place. She and the six classes of women before her created a place for her. They created a place for me.

I picture her presence on campus as something like a Scales Fine Arts Center among a bunch of Tribble and Manchester Halls—a modern marvel of her time but understated, nonetheless, like the humble Southern lady she was. Gloria Anzaldua writes, “[. . .] a woman who writes has power. And a woman with power is feared.” I imagine Grandmama was feared because she was clothed in higher education. She had the ability to read and write and communicate with a level of excellence, all opportunities that were not afforded to the average woman of her time.

Grandmama spoke of Scales Fine Arts Center and its construction on the new campus in the 1970s. She admired the ingenuity of the design and the man behind the name, Dr. James Scales. Remember, my grandparents didn’t go to the Winston-Salem campus. They were proud Old Wake Forest students. The campus was situated in the town of Wake Forest—in spitting distance from Raleigh.

If you picture the Reynolda Campus of Wake Forest—the angular, modern design of the Scales building doesn’t fit the image. For me, I see Wait Chapel, easily the most photographed landmark on campus.
I imagine Kirby and Tribble Halls—the two academic buildings I’m stuck in five days a week. I even picture Farrell Hall, but never Scales Fine Arts Center, probably because my experience is not as a visual or performing arts student, but also because it doesn’t really fit, much in the same way that my grandmother didn’t fit. It’s brick, but not in the traditional build of the other academic buildings or quad dormitories. Located at the bottom of the hill adjacent to Davis Field, it houses the arts of Wake Forest.

Pleasantly, it doesn’t fit.

* * *

As I sit behind a Mac computer in my Wake Forest University library in Winston-Salem reflecting on my grandmother, I picture what photographs tell me she looked like as a modest but elegant college student in the late 1940s. I picture her behind a pen and paper in the library of Wake Forest College in Wake Forest, North Carolina.

I see myself playing on the bench under her magnolia tree on Vance Street. I see her awestruck under the magnolia tree on campus, hand in hand with my grandfather.

I see myself sitting on the edge of her recliner, watching her point her long, thin finger at the pictures while I gawk at the words she says like they are diamonds under a microscope. I see her sitting at a desk chair, teaching middle school children how to read and write and communicate.

I see my own Wake Forest experiences unfold much like the story my grandmother never told me of

I see myself on the armrest of my grandmother’s recliner—the magnolia tree in clear view—listening to the stories she told of her Wake Forest experience. Now, I am listening to the stories she didn’t tell.
Happiness:
A Double-Edged Sword
Sara Isabel Coronel

The sky was still dark outside when Ben woke up. He reached for his phone on the night table, accidentally knocking over his or Frank’s water bottle; he wasn’t sure. Ben grabbed his iPhone, and the glare from the light momentarily blinded him. 4:29 a.m. After four years of waking up at 4:30, he had gotten the knack of waking up a minute before his alarm rang. The hideous sound that emanated from his phone at 4:30 every morning was reason enough to get up early enough to turn it off before it went off. Yet the main reason he woke up at 4:29 was to send a text to Allison before she got a chance to send him a text first. Just thinking about her got a stupid grin on his face that wouldn’t go away. All the guys gave him hell for it, but he just couldn’t help it and didn’t really care anyway. They were jealous assholes. His fingers flew across the small screen, and he clicked send.

Ben: Morning beautiful
Allie: You know I let you win right?
Ben: Sure you do. :P
Allie: Did you pack a bag? I heard it was going to rain pretty hard today.
Ben: I did. Stop worrying. It will be a great race, and then I get to see my girlfriend.

Allie: You better be talking about me or I’m gonna kick your ass.

Ben: You know it :D The lights just went on in the other room. I gotta go.

Allie: Before you go I wanted to let you know that I have a surprise for you once you finish your race.

Ben: A surprise? You aren’t going to tell me what it is? That’s just cruel.

Allie: No, I’m not telling you. It will be more fun this way. ;) Now go get ready. I’ll see you later today. <3

***

Allie put her phone on the nightstand next to her bed and rolled on her side to have a better view of the sky. She kicked her bed sheets so that they fell on the floor. Cool air brushed her tan legs and arms. She couldn’t see the moon, but when she closed her eyes she could picture the bright glowing orb resting on a black, endless bed, just as bright and just as full as the moon she had seen the first time she had gone on a date with Ben. They had gone to the beach in Ft. Lauderdale and walked on the sidewalk at night. She remembered hearing the waves angrily crashing and foaming at the mouth. Ben walked next to her but hadn’t tried to touch her. That surprised her. By the end of the date she had started to worry that maybe he didn’t want to date because he had acted the whole time as if they were just friends. Then, when they got back to the college campus and they were standing in front of her dorm room, Ben grabbed her hand and told her that he wanted to see her again. Heat rushed
to her face, and she had to look away from his gaze, embarrassed that she was about to cry with relief that he actually liked her and didn’t want to be just friends. She stammered a “yes” before rushing into her room wishing a hole could open up and swallow her. Four years later and he still made her flush as brightly as that first time. Allie sighed. She still hadn’t gotten used to the effect he had on her.

Rolling to her back again, she stared at the ceiling knowing that about now Ben was probably putting on his triathlon clothes and helping the other four guys to pack up everything in the van. She had been to two of his other races before, and each of them had been as thrilling for her as she knew they must be for them. The day before each race they had to pick up their packet that contained all the information and the number that they would wear throughout the race. The meals the day before the race would be so carb loaded that she felt that they should have gone into a food coma by now. At night they would start checking off the list of items they needed to bring for the race. Running shoes. Check. Biking shoes. Check. Water and gatorade bottles. Check. Check. Snacks. Check. Triathlon clothes. Check. Towels. Check. Bike gear. Check. Sunglasses and swimming goggles. Check. . . . Wait—still need to get the swimming cap and packet with the bib number.

On race day they would get up early because they needed to be at the race by 5:30—6 a.m. at the latest. But they were used to waking up early since their practices began before the sun even woke up. Allie looked at the time on her phone. Thirty minutes had passed. Sighing again, she lethargically got out of bed, put on her shoes and running clothes, and tied her long, thick
hair into a ponytail. She then made her way to the gym on the fourth floor of the hotel.

* * *

It was starting to warm up a little by the time all the guys got in the van. Ben checked to see that the six road bikes were all secured in the back. He sat on the passenger seat and set the GPS for the St. Petersburg Triathlon location. Brett started the engine, and they set off toward the beach. By the time they had set up their stations and their bikes in the appropriate places, the whole place was brimming with people. Athletes both young and old, friends, and strangers gathered around and talked to each other. Ben, Frank, and Erik got the number 22 written on their leg while Felix and Tomas got the number 21. The number indicated their age. They also got their packet number written on their arms. At 6:45 everyone was advancing toward the starting point. Ben went to his station to leave his phone in his bag. He turned his phone on and saw that Allie had called him. Right as he was going to call her back, Erik called his name.

“Dude, hurry up. I wanted to jump in the water to warm up a little before the race begins. We are not warming up if we have to wait for your highness to take off his tiara and get of his damn phone and join us.”

“Shut up, Erik,” Ben replied, but he turned off his phone and joined the rest of the group to walk to the starting point.

The other guys already had their orange swimming caps on. Ben put his on and joined them by the other men with the same color caps. The race was divided by not only gender but also age group. All the men twenty to twenty-five years of age wore orange swimming caps. Ben looked at Erik, Frank, Felix, and Tomas and
nodded at each of them. They all knew that was his way of wishing them luck. As the siren went off, they all took off as a group into the water. Legs and arms became a jumbled mess until the only thing a spectator could have seen was water splashing over limbs and bobbing oranges floating in the dark blue liquid.

Just keep swimming. Just keep swimming. Just keep swimming. That line from Finding Nemo kept repeating in Ben’s head. He had watched the movie the weekend before. Allie snuggled against him, repeating every line from the movie. The smallest of actions have the biggest impacts. He had never remembered anything from the previous girls he had dated, but he could still remember how Allison had looked when she stared at the sky on their first date. Her hair blew softly in the wind. Her long neck arched as she gazed upwards. Her mouth slightly opened, and her cheeks were a soft pink. The tight black shirt she wore emphasized the small swells of her chest, and the jeans that fit snugly to her behind made it hard for him to breathe. But what left an imprint on his soul that he knew would never fade was the way her green eyes sparkled and crinkled at the sides as she spotted the moon. Ben felt water enter his swimming goggles.

Only 0.93 miles of swimming, he thought. His biceps ached as he cut through the water. 0.60 miles to go. He swallowed water. Spurted. Coughed. Slice. Splash. Slice. Splash. 0.30 miles to go. He could keep going. No reason to ask the lifesavers to pull him out. Slice. Splash. Slice. Splash. 0.10 miles to go. Almost there. Swimming had always been the hardest part of his triathlon training. As a child he feared the water. His older sister had to hold his hand every time they got in the pool at home. She didn’t seem to mind, but it ate at his pride. It wasn’t until high school that
he started to swim more regularly. Yet, he still hated submerging his head underwater. It felt as if he had wrapped a towel over his head and applied pressure until he couldn’t breath anymore. Slap. Slap. His hands touched sand. He looked up and saw people getting out of the water and rushing to get ready for the bike section of the race. He jumped out of the water and headed toward his bike.

***

After finishing the gym workout and showering, Allie went down to get breakfast. She met up with the pastor of her church and some of the other students that had also gone with her to the retreat in Leesburg, Florida.

“I didn’t know you were an early riser, Allison,” Pastor French said.

“Yes, I usually wake up early, and since my boyfriend has to wake up early to go to practice, I feel more motivated to get up too.” Allie laughed and took a cup of coffee from the buffet table. She put sugar and milk in her coffee and then grabbed a bagel and strawberry jam and sat down between Pastor French and Tanzi.

“I wish I could get up that early on a daily basis,” said Tanzi as she put some honey into her coffee. “Pastor French, what is the plan for today?”

“We are going to go to the collegiate conference in the afternoon. Allison asked to leave for a few hours, so she will meet us there. The rest of you should be ready to leave by 7:30.” Ding. A blinking red light appeared on the waffle machine. Pastor French stood up and went to grab his waffle.

Tanzi leaned in and whispered in Allison’s ear.

“So, what is the scope on Ben’s triathlete friends?
Got any single guys you can set me up with?”

Allison tilted her head to the side. Tanzi wiggled her eyebrow.

“You know, I think you would like Tomas. He is the quiet one in the group, but he is fiercely loyal and has always been there for Ben. He also loves comedy as much as you do.”

“Ooooooh. Handsome and has a good sense of humor. Me likey.” Tanzi winked at Allison as Pastor French sat down again.

“So Allie, why are you taking a few hours away from the retreat?” Tanzi asked, changing the subject from boys since the pastor would clearly not want to hear that conversation.

“I wanted to surprise Ben at his race. He has been training twice as hard this year. I guess it is because we are graduating in a month and he wants to cut down his time in the Olympic Distance Triathlon Race from the one he did last year.” Allison shrugged. “Honestly, I think he did fantastic last time. He finished the race in 2 hours 50 minutes. But you know how he is. Super competitive and stuff.”

“Seriously, kudos to him. I don’t think I could ever get up and train even a third as hard as he does.”

“Me either.”

They heard laughter coming from the doorway and saw the rest of the group come into the breakfast room.

* * *

Trees sped by as Ben passed several cyclists. Two cyclists were going ahead of him. One had the number 69 on his leg, and the other cyclist had the number 35.

“On your left,” Ben said.
Both cyclists slowed down and pressed closer to the right side of the lane. Ben passed the two cyclists and kept going. He had done longer routes than the one he was doing at the moment. 50 miles had been the highest number of miles he had cycled in a day. This was only half that amount.

“On your left,” Ben said, passing three cyclists. As he sped forward he saw a volunteer with a sign that had an arrow pointing forward that read “Finish” and another arrow pointing to the left that read “Second Lap.” Since he had only completed one lap, he turned left and began the second half of the bike course. Half-way through the second lap he felt his butt go numb. His legs were burning, but he knew he had to keep going. This was his last race before graduating and joining the workforce. This was his last chance to prove to himself that training hard does have its rewards. He bend down and took a sip of gatorade from the bottle pressed between the handlebars.

Just as he turned the corner he saw the volunteer with the two different arrows on the sign in front of him. This time he kept going straight. Once he got to the path leading to the rest station, he got off the bike and took off his helmet. Click, click, click, click. Running with his biking shoes slowed him down, but he made up the time by simultaneously taking off his shoes and hanging his bike on the rack. He took a swig of his gatorade bottle and put on his running shoes. Then he was off again.

* * *

At 8:30 a.m., Allison took the keys to her car and her purse and headed to the parking lot. Everyone had already left for the conference, so she had spent the time refolding her clothes that had gotten jumbled up
in her suitcase and staring at the picture of her and Ben that she kept in her pocket. Every time she looked at him her heart clenched. He had told her a week ago that he wanted to marry her, but she had delayed her response to him. She had thought that it was too soon for that kind of commitment. Now, when she looked at the picture of the two of them she realized that it wasn’t too soon. He was the man she wanted to marry, but she was just too scared to jump through that lifelong commitment. The corner of her lips tugged upwards as she remembered how he hadn’t seemed surprised but instead understanding when she told him she had to think about marrying him. Most men would have been angry and hurt. He understood that she needed to reason things out before saying yes. She was ready to say yes now. She took a pen and wrote something on the back side of the picture.

As she opened the door to her car and got in, she looked up at the sky again. There were dark grey clouds forming, and if she wanted to miss the rainstorm that was sure to hit, she needed to hurry. Allie put the picture of her and Ben on the cup holder. She put the car in reverse and got out of the parking lot. An hour and a half into the trip to St. Petersburg she turned onto highway I-125. Rain started to pour from the sky. Fat droplets splashed into the windshield. Allie put on the window wipers and tried to keep going. She passed the green sign that read Tampa. Drop. Drop. Drop. Drop. Drop. Rain kept falling down. It kept falling faster. It multiplied. The moment the window wipers cleared the view from the windshield, twice as many droplets replaced the discarded raindrops. Breathe in. Breathe out. Allie couldn’t concentrate. There was so much water all around her. She felt as if she were drowning. Breathe in. Breathe out. She increased the air com-
ing from the vents, trying to get more oxygen into her lungs. Breathe in. Breathe out.

* * *

It was the last part of the race. Ben felt his blood pumping. The acceleration of the race was sharpening his focus to the point that he felt as if he could fly if he ran fast enough and jumped high enough into the sky. Just 6.2 miles of running. He knew he could do it. Left, right, left, right. Repeat. Left, right, left, right. Repeat. He said this mantra over and over. His mind was a blank slate. No thoughts could break the tight control he had over his mind. He felt sweat pouring from his back and chest. Pant. Pant. Breathe. Breathe. Just 3.0 more miles to go. His leg muscles started to coil up. He heard cheers from volunteers and friends and families of the various competitors.

“Come on! Come on! You are almost done!”

“Almost there! Keep going!”

“You got this!”

In hearing those words he felt a renewed sense of energy in his body that forced him to keep going. Pant. Pant. Breathe. Breathe. Sweat trickled from his forehead, down to his nose and then to the ground beneath him. 1.5 miles to go. He felt something touch his head. Something wet and small. Then he felt it again. Water. He looked up just in time to feel a raindrop fall on his forehead. He wiped his hand on his forehead. Raindrops started to fall with an increasing ferocity. They were like painful lashes to his skin. Hurrying up his pace, he sprinted the last mile. When he saw the blue arch with the words “Finish” on them, he almost fell on his knees. Pant. Pant. Breathe. Breathe. Ben took two giant steps and crossed the finish line.
There were people all around him at the finish line. Somebody was putting a medal around his neck. Someone else was handing him a water bottle. His leg muscles started to spasm, but he kept walking. He took the bracelet he had around his ankle—the bracelet that marked his time—and handed it to one of the volunteers. Rain kept falling, keeping his clothes from getting dry. He went to the computers, one of the only places that was covered, to check his time. 2 hours 40 minutes. A personal best. He felt a huge smile spread across his face. He raised his right arm, his fist pumping against the air. He checked to see if any of his friends had finished yet. None of their names were listed on the computer yet. Ben made his way to the breakfast buffet that was covered by a large tarp and started piling food on his plate. He felt someone tap his shoulder, and when he turned around he saw that Tomas and Frank had finished the race. They were both drenched but had huge smiles on their faces.

Frank slapped Ben on the back. “Man, you did it! You beat your own record by ten minutes! Damn that’s awesome.” Tomas nodded vigorously. Soon after, Erik and Felix showed up and congratulated Ben on his accomplishment. His new time could get him noticed for the USA team. The atmosphere in the air was light and free as everyone waited for the awards ceremony to begin. Ben went up and got first place for his age group and gender. Tomas and Frank got second and third, respectively.

After packing up the stations, all the guys started to put their bikes in the back of the van. While Ben waited for his turn, he turned his phone on and checked his notifications. He hadn’t gotten any texts from Allie. She must still be at the conference, Ben thought.
Allie was thirty minutes away from the St. Petersburg Triathlon location. A shadow appeared in front of her car, but she couldn’t tell what it was because the rain was blocking her view. She gripped the steering wheel, her knuckles turning white with the force of her grip, and she forcefully turned the wheel to the right. The road was so slippery that the abrupt motion flipped the car upside down then right side up again. A screeching sound and the smell of rubber hit the air. One second she was driving through I-125. The next second her head had hit the window with so much force that the window had cracked and broken her skull in the process. The photograph had flown into the air throughout the accident and landed on the passenger seat.

Ben felt every cell in his body vibrate with the intensity and the rush of the race even after it had ended. He stared out the window as they turned onto I-125. There had been a car accident on the opposite side of the road. There were two police cars and an ambulance parked next to the car. Traffic was becoming more congested on that side of the highway. Ben closed his eyes, feeling sorry for the people stuck on that side of the road. He thought of Allie and how she would react to the news that he had far exceeded his goal. She was going to be so proud of him. He was also wondering what surprise she had in store for him. Exhaustion set in deep in his bones, making it hard for him to concentrate on his train of thought. Ben fell into a deep sleep, lulled by the purr of the engine.

The van came to a halt in front of the hotel. Ben
woke up when he felt his body lurch forward in the seat. Only his seatbelt kept him from flying through the window. He looked questionably at Tomas in the driver’s seat. Tomas pointed to the right with his hand. Something in the pit of his stomach made Ben have a feeling of foreboding. He slowly turned his head and saw Pastor French come running toward his side of the car. Ben opened the door of the van, got out, and just barely grabbed the Pastor before he fell over. Once Pastor French had his bearings, he looked at Ben in the eyes. Pastor French’s eyes were bloodshot, his mouth was quivering, and his face had aged considerably since the last time Ben had seen him a few days ago.

“Are you alright, Pastor?” Ben asked, looking around him to see if Allie would come out and explain what was going on.


“Please just tell me what is going on. Where is she?” The moment those words came out of Ben’s mouth, Pastor French’s face scrunched up, and he began to shake. Ben regretted asking that question.

“Ben, I wish with all my heart I had not let her go. I thought she was going to be alright.” Ben noticed that Pastor French held something in his hand. It was a square piece of paper that he kept smoothing out as if smoothing out the wrinkled edges would make the situation resolve itself.

“Pastor, I am really starting to get worried. Please just tell me what is going on.”

“Ben, Allison took a few hours from the retreat today to go see you finish the St. Petersburg Triathlon.
She couldn’t stop talking about how hard you have worked and trained. You have to understand that even until the end she was very much in love with you.”

Ben felt his world slowly crumble. This was the beginning of the end. “Until the end? What?” He grabbed Pastor French’s shoulders with both hands and squeezed. “This is killing me. Just tell me what happened to Allison?”

“She is dead, Ben. Allison had a car accident on I-125 just before she could see you finish the race.”

“No. God, no. Please, no,” Ben said, his voice cracking and getting softer until the last “no” was barely audible. “Please. I’m begging you. Is she in the hospital? Where is she? No, God. No.” Ben fell to his knees. His hands pulled his hair as hard as he could without breaking the skin, as if his physical pain could mend his wrecked heart.

“No, No.” Ben moaned the words. Tears fell to the floor without his permission. He rocked himself on the ground. He rocked himself on the parking lot in front of a pastor he had known all of his life and a van full of the guys that would be the closest thing he had to brothers. But he still felt alone. He felt alone because she was gone. She was gone and would never come back. He had seen the accident on the road. He should have been there for her. He should have done something to save her. He felt so fucking helpless. The pastor got to his knees and placed the square piece of paper he’d held earlier next to him. Ben kept crying. He tried looking at the piece of paper, but tears kept obstructing his view. Once he got semi-control of the tears he glanced at the picture and saw that it was him and Allie. He had his arms around her waist and was looking at her as if she held the moon and the
sun. She was looking at the camera, the same twinkle in her eyes that she had when she saw the moon on their first date. He flipped it around, not wanting her to see him this way. When he did he saw that she had written something on the photo. Yes, I will marry you. Raw sounds that a wounded animal would make started tearing free from a hidden place in his soul that would always remain broken. His heart bled, a painful, throbbing reminder of what he had had that morning. What he lost. What he gained. How could you have the best day of your life and the worst day of your life in one day?
Wake Forest Pocket watch. 1.5” x 1.5.”
A gold analog watch with a gold chain attached to the top. The face of the clock has the Wake Forest University Crest in the center. Inscribed on the back of the watch is: “To TKH with thanks Alumni Council 7-21-84”
You Promised Me a Kingdom

Jessica Hung

You remember, don’t you? The day that we met, clichéd as it was. You saved my life and took the place of a father who left his family to die. I was foolish enough to believe that you could, for it isn’t hard to best a man who tried to burn his family alive.

So you promised me a kingdom with those tall walls and swooping fields. You promised me castles filled with mirrors to sing my praises. You promised me flowers, gifts, diamonds—you promised me everything. You swept me off my feet with your silver tongue and caressing words. I had a choice. And I checked yes.

But these walls are so empty—empty and barren. These walls stand tall with frozen stone, leaching warmth from my skin. They’re tall, frigid, and so, so grey—and I wonder if they are my skies.

The sun has long since set, those pink-orange hues that once streaked the sky erased by black, white, and grey. They shroud my kingdom, yet they offer me no comfort of the soft pitter-patter of rain. Stagnant, unmoving, they’re the gargoyles on my castle of mirrors, sentries standing guard.
So I hide away in my castle of mirrors, away from the sentries, away from the colorless skies, away from it all. But it gets colder still with only my reflection to keep me company. Yet I’m not sure I’m completely alone—I don’t recognize the person in the mirror with those dark eyes and haunted smile. I don’t recognize the person that wears my face, my hands, my eyes, my mouth, my words. I don’t recognize the voice that whispers from my throat—

I don’t recognize the king that rules this kingdom—

Because I’m not.

I am no king, no knight, no jester, no peasant. I’m a puppet, and you’re pulling my strings with this kingdom you built as the stage. And I used to believe this stage was all mine. Mine to paint, mine to rule, mine to craft and destroy as my own. With time I’ve realized there are no birds in the trees, no songs sung from the fields. The trees stand still, no wind running through them. Their boughs lean over, sickly pale and mottled grey-green, their branches dropping like they have no will to stand. The grass lies flat like the blades have been trampled over and over, so much so that they’ve lost all their fight under the heavy steps. And I know those steps aren’t mine—I’m still locked in my castle of mirrors.

You promised me a kingdom with your silver tongue and your clever songs. You built me a castle with beguiling words and crafted fantasies. You sang to my heart, and I played right into your open hands.

And now those hands are closed, and I don’t know how to leave. I’m begging for someone to help me find the key, even though I know I’m all alone. There’s no kindle for me to grasp onto, no raft for me to hang
upon, no flight to whisk me away. I’m stuck with no room to move.

But once I can, if I can, find that sliver of moonlight from beneath this warped ceiling, I will set this on fire and watch it burn to the ground. Let the orange tongues lick and flicker in the silver you’ve cast. Oh, my skin will burn, blister, char, and crumble.

The sweet scorching pain would be miles better than the bitter cold that whips through this kingdom you’ve built. And I know I’m the centerpiece on the table, the heirloom hidden in the chest. It’s only a matter of time before the time starts winding down, every second a sweeter breath of air, the promise of fire that much closer.

When I find that one flicker of light in this frozen wasteland, I’ll burn at last. But don’t you worry. If I burn, you burn with me.

***

The floor echoes with each step, quiet thud thud thud as each step draws him closer to the man in the room.

He blends in with the tall grey walls and their domed arches, skeletal and strong. For all the long glass windows, the hall has hardly any light. The dribbling rays are weak against the grey marble. Silk drapes his broad shoulders, a threaded golden chain around his neck. The man on the throne sits with his head tall, chin lifted as he stares down at the approaching assassin.

Dropping to a knee, the assassin ducks his head. “Lady Anne said you requested me.”

“So she did.” The man on the throne leans forward to regard the assassin. “I have a job for you.”
The assassin twitches from his position on the floor. The marble chill seeps into the cotton of his trousers, a reminder. “I’m not surprised.”

“Your tongue—has loosened, Steele.” The man laughs.

The assassin rolls his eyes and lifts his head to meet the other man’s. “So I’ve been told several times. What is it that you need, my lord?”

The lord’s eyes flicker down to the assassin’s hands. They rest by his knee, though a finger taps a beat against his leg. “Simple. You remember Felix Bourke?”

Felix Bourke. Who doesn’t know the neighboring lord? The man is capable of destroying towns that went against his plans. No lord, though, is free of bloody hands. An iron grip is better than a loose one; however, Bourke’s land prospers. It is bountiful—more bountiful than this one. Trade flocks to Bourke’s land, yet black market dealings are low.

Loyal and practical they call Bourke, but not above dirty tricks to get what is best for his people, the local peasants say. He has support from the people, an army full of trained volunteers. While they are not undefeatable, more than enough are willing to fight to the death for Bourke. They say he offers protection, a town to live a good life—a life that still requires hard work, but with less suffering. A life anyone would defend for siblings.

“Yes.”

The lord sits back in his seat. “Good. I want you to get rid of him.”

The assassin reels sharply back. “Sorry?”
“You heard me.”

“Sir. You want me to assassinate one of the most powerful men in this land? Are you out of your bloody mind?”

The lord’s eyes flash. “Remember your place.”

“I am the best man you have.” The assassin stands, hands in fists. “This is a suicide mission!”

The lord stands as well, though his hands rest easy at his side. He takes a step down the marble stairs slowly, drawing himself up to his full height. The lord stops when he and the assassin are face to face, the assassin’s electric blue eyes staring up at his.

“Your family, Ace. How are they?”

The assassin sniffs, though his eyes never dart away. If anything, they narrow and blaze. “Fine.”

“And your eldest sister, Charlotte?”

“Fine.”

“Good.” The lord steps away from Ace, hands tucked behind his back. He paces the length of the room, hand on his chin. “She works under Madame Rebecca, the seamstress, doesn’t she?”

The assassin’s knuckles whiten. “She does.”

The lord turns to face the assassin, head canted to his left, small smile on his thin lips. “It would be a shame if she were accused of stealing the jewels she was supposed to be fixing to a dress, wouldn’t it? Thrown into the dungeon without a trial?”

“You said you would keep them safe. You said if I did as you said for five years, you would keep them safe until then.” His voice is nearly a hiss.

The lord shrugs as he takes a step forward. The
chain by his throat glints in the dusty light drifting in from the windows. “And I have. As long as you did as I asked.”

“Not this. Not after last time.” The assassin brushes caramel bangs away from his flushed face.

“And yet another man from the Steele family turns away.” The lord sighs. He wanders over to the window to peer outside. “And I had hopes for you—”

“I don’t have a father.” His right hand grips the hilt of one of his many daggers, a hint of the blade unsheathed.

The lord doesn’t bother gracing him with a look. “Then best be on your way, Steele. See to it that Bourke is dead.”

Ace doesn’t care when the door of the throne hall slams on his way out, the heavy wrought iron doors clamoring in his wake.

Bloody Simon. The two-headed, cat-fished demon!

He stomps his way out of the castle, not caring if the maids and stewards dart out of his way with wide eyes.

His blades, heavy and familiar, are a comforting weight by his side. But they’re of little worth to him right now—not when Simon is playing his cards again.

God dammit! Ace has to bite back a snarl that threatens to escape his throat. He should have gotten his siblings out of this place while he could. Before he got Charlotte the job with Seamstress Rebecca. He should have known that it wasn’t out of the good of his heart. The lord never does anything without a reason—everything has a repercussion.
Dirt kicks up beneath his feet, dry and caked despite the cloudy sky. Nothing like Bourke’s land. They say that even in dry seasons and years of terrible harvest, Bourke manages to keep his land afloat. It sounds too good to be true, but anything, anything is better than this dump.

Ace lifts his head to drink in the familiar sight. A monotone expanse. People, peasants milling about, doing their daily activities. But without a smile. Even the children, playing about in the dirt, have little to smile about. Their toys are little more than rags and dirt drawings held together by strands of fraying rope.

There are few good items in the market. It’s grey, dusty, and tasteless like the rest of the town.

Ace shakes his head and continues his trek home, his steps slow, his toes dragging in the gravel. He should get home; his siblings and mother are waiting for him. It’s been a while since he has been home; he hasn’t been back since his last task, wringing Baron Holden’s neck until he coughed out allegiance to Lord Simon.

Closing his eyes, Ace inhales sharply. Holden had begged for his life, his daughter’s life. The blood is caked beneath his fingers no matter how deeply he scrubs them in burning water, flesh peeling beneath his hands. He can’t unsee the fear written across Lady Holden’s face in tears as she clutched a screaming babe to her chest. He can’t efface the anguish echoing in his ears as he pressed a knife to the screaming child’s throat. He would have never done it, can’t bring himself to do it, not when he knows the fear imprinted deep into his own heart like nails driven through his flesh. The thought of Simon tracing that dagger against Charlotte’s throat dances beneath his lids, the
sound of her ragged, gasping breaths—

Ace presses a hand against his eyes. His own breaths come in sharp spikes. Don’t think about that, Steele. They’re safe. They’re safe.

For now.

“Ugh.” Ace groans before forcing himself to move. Yet his feet don’t carry him back to his mother’s cottage. They take him on a detour weaving past the brick red cloth of market tarps until he reaches the familiar faded royal blue at the edge of them all.

It’s a rundown vendor with discolored patches mending the holes in the tarp. The oak counter is rotting in places, and nails are edging out of the wood like briars poking out of a bush. But Ace runs his hands over the counter, unable to stop the warmth that slips through him.

He can’t remember how many times he ran over to the shop himself, pressed his hands on the same counter, and jumped up and down. He can’t count the number of times he pricked his finger on the splinters from the unfinished wood. Not that Jamie would let him fix the counter for her, even if she did take the glass jars he’d bought for her. But only after an ungodly amount of wheedling.

“Jamie?” He calls.

Someone shuffles in the back of the shop. Glass tinkles in the darkness. “Ace?”

A tiny, wiry woman peers out at him. Her ghost white hair fans about her in odd curls, unkempt, but undeniably Jamie. Her eyes are magnified by the large, round spectacles that sit upon her sharp, hooked nose. The kids on the street call her mad, but Ace knows her. It’s hard not to when he came to the shop for sweets
every day that he could as a child.

“Who else would it be?” He leans over the counter to wrap her in a hug. She smells like the sweet vanilla and cocoa, just as she always has.

Jamie hugs him tight before she draws away to hold him at arm’s length. “And where have you been? It’s been ages, child.”

“I’ve been off wandering the world.” Ace waves his hand around. Best not to tell her, though it’s likely Jamie already knows.

Jamie nods sagely, lips pressed together as she hums. “Always a traveller. Now, what would you be looking for today? Vanilla? Maybe something a bit sweet? Or a little tart?”

“The usual today.” Ace reaches for the light purse tied to his belt. “Nothing for me. I’m heading out again in a few hours.”

The woman nods again as she nabs parchment and a box from beneath the counter. Her knobby fingers deftly place the caramel and mints into the box, making an art of something so mundane.

When Ace hands her the coins, Jamie only takes half before she pushes his hand away. “Take care of yourself, boy. We lose half of you every time you leave.”

The smile on his lips droops as he takes the package from her. The bitterness swells on his tongue, drying his mouth. If only he could brush it off with a laugh. But he knows what he looks like in the mirror; he can see the hollows in his cheeks, the shadows beneath his eyes.

Death. The eyes of a murderer, the lips that hide a snake’s tongue. The hands that hold a blade cloaked in
hidden blood, the hands that are drenched in crimson.

Tilting his head away from her, Ace nods. “I will.”

The weight of her gaze burns like a brand into the back of his neck, and he shivers. The ink he branded onto his wrist twinges in phantom pain like it knows what he is thinking.

“Hold on,” he whispers under his breath. Shaking his head, Ace pushes the thoughts out of his head. His mother and siblings are waiting for him. Best that they don’t worry about him; they have more than enough on their plates already.

But he can’t hide anything from his mother. The raised eyebrows and pursed lips are more than enough to say that she knows Simon has given him another job. She waits until Charlotte has preoccupied his siblings in the kitchen before she pulls him outdoors into the emerging dusk.

“You’re leaving.”

Ace kicks at the cracking stone beneath his feet. Dust curls around his legs and his mother’s skirts, the brown grass still despite the sporadic gusts that move their fingers through the yard.

“Ace,” his mother says. Pressing a hand to his cheek, she forces him to meet her eyes. “You don’t have to do this.”

The urge to laugh and cry stick in his throat, a lump that he can’t swallow. Dropping his gaze, he shakes his head. If he opens his mouth something might break—that’s something they can’t afford right now.

Safe. They need to be safe.

“You know I have to.”

His mother cups his cheeks with both hands. Her
gaze wanders over his face; her thumbs trace the dips beneath his cheekbones, the trenches beneath his eyes. She presses a soft kiss to his forehead.

“We can take care of ourselves, Love. Don’t worry about us.”

Something in his heart breaks again, like one of the ropes holding the bridge has frayed a little more. So he crumbles and collapses, his arms squeezing his mother tight. He presses his nose into her neck and hopes she understands—because he can’t let her do that. Simon has his number, and until he loses it they can’t get away.

* * *

Ace sets out in the dead of the night, daggers nestled in his belt, sword settled against his hip. But there’s someone he needs to meet, a plan he needs to start rolling. It’s been five years, five too long to live under the threat of Simon’s wrath over their heads.

The woods whisper to him; rustling leaves wave about his head. The brush of leaves is cool against his skin, like a greeting upon entering their haven. His steps are soft, the rotted, wet undergrowth a whisper beneath his boots.

He ducks under a branch, cursing beneath his breath as a branch tugs at his trousers. Parker has a knack for finding the most difficult clearings to get into—but that’s why it’s so hard to find him.

_Snick_

Ace drops on his stomach immediately, hands darting to his belt. He draws the dagger out in a flash, his eyes darting from side to side. There’s a razor thin steel blade embedded in the tree where he had been standing before.
Nothing stirs.

_Sn-

Ace rolls to the side and vaults to his feet. There’s another steel blade lying in the ground.

His heart hammers in his ears; his stomach does the same in his throat. His hand holds the dagger with the blade pointed to the ground.

Come on, come on. Where—

Another blade whizzes by his head, this time nicking the side of his ear. The sharp sting of pain is nothing like the adrenaline that shoots through his veins.

_Sn—

Ace ducks and dives towards the bushes, squeezing his eyes shut against the thorns that dig into the sides of his face.

But his aim is true. He crashes into another body, firm and hard. His force is enough to propel them both out of the bush and onto the wet ground. The man beneath him is larger, but Ace has surprise on his side.

Rolling over, he yanks the man’s short, brown hair up as he presses the dagger to the soft skin by his throat.

Ace gasps. “Dammit, Parker. Every time.”

He sheathes the dagger and rolls off of Parker, trying to catch his breath. The scratches on his face from the branches sting as he rubs a hand over his face. It’s only the first night to Bourke’s land, and it already feels like the journey is taking its toll on his body.

Parker grunts as he dusts himself off. “Can never be too careful.” Even in the dim lighting of the woods, Ace can catch the broad grin on his friend’s face.
“Come’re you.” Parker pulls him to his feet before he crushes Ace with a hug.

Ace groans as his ribs creak with the force of the embrace. To put it crudely, Parker is like a brick house. While he isn’t lithe like Ace, the force of his punches is formidable. Parker’s throws aren’t accurate, and he isn’t the fastest on his feet, but when it comes to hand-to-hand combat, he is dangerous. Ace can still feel the bruise he’d gotten in their first fight as kids. They’ve been best friends ever since, but training with Parker was and is always a pain.

“I’m heading to Bourke’s,” Ace says as soon as he catches his breath again.

Parker’s smile evaporates, and he folds his arms. “So it’s time?”

Ace tilts his head up to catch a hint of the stars. They’re so far away, the glimmer of light tiny behind the canvas of leaves. “Simon wants me to get rid of Bourke.”

“Bourke.” Parker echoes, his brows shooting up his forehead.

“Bourke.” Ace nods. “Rumors are that he has the most loyal soldiers. No one has ever been able to do it.”

Parker nods and folds his arms. “And you don’t think you can do it either.”

No, he doesn’t. One man against an army of loyalists more than willing to protect the man that has brought prosperity and safety to their homes—it’s just so inconceivable. “If I can, I have to. But I can’t have Simon holding them over me. It’s too dangerous.”

A heavy hand falls on his shoulder. Ace doesn’t have to look away from the stars to know Parker has
his determined frown on his face, brows wrinkling his broad forehead.

“I’ll get them out tonight.”

“Keep them safe. And don’t tell them where I am. The fewer people who know, the better.”

Parker pats him on the back once. “Sounds good. I’ll get word to you through Kaleb—he’ll find you.”

Ace has no doubt about that. The dark-skinned man has never had a problem finding the people they needed him to. It’s thanks to Kaleb that Ace has been able to survive so many of his tasks. If it weren’t for him, it is likely that he wouldn’t have been able to find Baron Holden and his family. Who knows what Simon would have done if Ace hadn’t been successful.

Shuddering, Ace shoves the thought away. “I’ll wait for Kaleb’s word.”

“Good man.” Parker clasps Ace’s arm before he slips back through the wood, the branches and briars swallowing him whole. The thorns never catch him once. The only trace of Parker is the shrubs wavering back into their original places.

Ace takes a breath through his nose and pulls his arms closer to his body. The black cotton does nothing to prevent the night chill from gliding through him as if he were a curtain.

No time to waste. Stop waiting around.

Squaring his shoulders, Ace pulls the sleeves of his shirt over his hands and treks onward.

Two days by horse. Six days by foot.
Ace pulls the mottled brown cloak he pilfered from
a drunk by the nearby tavern over his head. The peasants don’t give him a second look.

Everything. Everything feels different. The earth isn’t as cracked beneath his worn soles. It’s like something is pushing back against his step telling him to stay on his feet as if he isn’t on his way to kill the man that makes all this possible.

There are smiles on faces and laughter filling the streets. There are children with sunshine smiles and clothes unmarred by patches and holes. Their toys are worn but not torn. The markets are filled with people.

Bourke’s land? It’s alive.

There’s color besides the grey and brick red dust. There’s this charge to the air that Ace can’t place. It’s tugging at his shoulders, letting his eyes wander, trying to soak everything in at once.

There’s just so much color—violet, orange, crimson—

Ace stumbles backward as he tries to keep his balance, grasping on to the forearms of the person he bumped into. The hood falls off his head as he does so. “Oops!”

The first thing he sees is green.

“Hi.” Green eyes blink down at him, a cascade of tousled curly hair framing them. “I’m sorry about that. Wasn’t looking where I was going.”

Ace blinks slowly, canting his head as he takes in the stranger before him. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Well, I best be going.” The stranger offers him a beatific grin full of dimples before taking a step away.

Ace’s arm flashes out, catching the stranger by her arm. He pulls her to him hard, into the shadow of the
nearest shadow cast by a shop.

He doesn’t expect it—but he should’ve—the arm he catches has in it the dagger she had snuck from his hip when they bumped into each other.

It nicks him across the cheek. Had he not moved back sooner, she would have slashed his cheekbones open.

He still doesn’t loosen his grip on her arm. Or, he would have, had she not aimed a well-placed kick at his stomach. Shoving her into the side of the shop, he braces an arm against her throat.

“Bloody—” Ace wheezes as he stumbles back. The woman is taller than he, strong too, and has broad shoulders and long arms with the hidden promise of power. Those viridian eyes are great at playing innocent, but the set frown on her lips is anything but.

It’s calculating, her gaze, wide eyes that go right through him like Simon’s does. Fury flickers in the pit of Ace’s stomach. He hates people like that. They are all the same—all of them. Manipulative, backstabbing, murderous.

The fire that licks his bloodstream is what drives him to flick the knives from his boots into his hands. There’s no use in reaching for the daggers in his belt—not when it’s lying in the spongy ground between them. She must have slashed it off when he was close. Smart girl.

“You’re no ordinary pickpocket.”

“And you’re no ordinary traveller.” Her voice is slow and low as she speaks.

“Perspective,” Ace says. Keep her occupied, then attack. “You had the chance to kill me instead of slash-
ing my belt. Why?”

“Does every fighter give up their secrets in a battle?”

“You’re one for riddles aren’t you?”

“And you’re a fan of questions.” A smile plays on the edges of her lips. “You’re trying to distract me.”

Ace doesn’t relax his stance; his weight is on the balls of his feet. His ears are perked for any suspicious noise. For all he knows, the girl has the rest of her crew hanging around here waiting to ambush. But why? He has few coins in his purse and even fewer things worth taking.

Ransom? Does Bourke know he is here already?

“You’re di—” Ace throws the knife from his hand as he speaks.

Yet he never gets to see if it hits her. A force—no, someone tackles him to the ground, knocking the other knife out of his hand. All he sees is a flash of white. Then he feels blooming pain in the back of his head.

Then black.

***

Cold.

“Uahg!” Ace wakes up, his chest heaving as the frost of ice water soaks his clothes. There’s blinding pain in the back of his skull, as if someone took a hammer to it. Or a night after a dance with a barrel of ale. Either way, there is a pounding in the back of his head that won’t quit.

It takes him a couple moments to swipe the fuzziness out of his eyes. He stares at his hands blankly. He isn’t trussed up like fowl over a fire.
A low chuckle. “Welcome back to the world of the living, Steele.”

Ace jerks his head to face the newcomer, but he winces as the movement jars his brain. “Bloody hell.”

“Sorry, mate,” says another, sheepishly. “Didn’ mean to knock ya that hard.”

Ace blinks up at the three figures in the room. The girl from earlier leans against the door, a long sword by her hip, hilt simple and blemished by sweat stains. To her left is a man about Ace’s age, hair sun bleached with a kind smile resting on his lips. Beside him is an elderly man, wrinkles mapping his face, purple sash clipped to his shoulder with gold.

Bourke.

His hands dive to his boots, even though he can’t feel the weight of them on his feet. They’d be foolish to leave his weapons.

Bourke chuckles again, a joyous flush creeping to his cheeks. “You, Steele, were very hard to find.”

A stone drops in his heart. So they knew he was coming. “I am aware.”

“They say you’re one of Lord Simon’s best.”

Ace doesn’t bother to deign to reply. The room is bare except for a small window leading outside, but it’s barred by iron crisscrossing cylinders. The walls are made of grey cement—and his heart drops.

Outside, the pink-gold hues of dusk paint the sky, dazzling over the waves of the grassy plain. If he could pry past the bars and break the glass, Ace has no doubt he could smell the sharp earthiness of the wet grass and citrus that populated the market.

It pains him to admit it, but Bourke’s land was
beautiful with its vividness burned into the back of his mind. This cell, dungeon—wherever he is, reminds him of the grey monotony. God, his siblings. Charlotte. His mother. He digs his teeth into his bottom lip. Please, Parker, get them out safely.

Bourke breaks through his thoughts. “I want to offer you something.”

Ace tugs his gaze away from the bleeding sky. “You can’t offer me what I want.”

Bourke dips his head and waves a hand toward the door. “Fair enough. I would hope that you will consider. You are free to go.”

What?

Ace gapes as the lord walks out the door. That’s it?

A braying laugh brings his attention back to the other two left in the room. The younger man is doubled over, clutching his stomach. The quiver on his back knocks against the back of the man’s head, but he doesn’t seem to care. Ace can feel his brows making their way up his forehead. This is either all a fever dream, or the guy has completely lost it.

“You should see your face, mate.” He tosses Ace a towel that he nearly drops.

This has got to be the weirdest interrogation session Ace has ever gone through.

Another braying laugh. “Ya use that to dry yourself off, mate. Have ya never seen one before?”

Ace shoots him a glare but wraps it around himself. “Give me one reason to trust you.”

The man shrugs. “Fair ’nough. Forgot me manners. I’m Archer. Sorry ’bout the whack. Didn’ think ya would’ve come with easily. Ya threw a knife at Max.”
Ace snorts. “Pickpocket or not, I’d be wary of people who knew who I was.”

“Eh.” Archer shrugs. “Ya know, Bourke would’ve offered ya a good deal.”

The man works for him. He is paid to say that; but Ace isn’t surprised. Archer must be one of the loyalists, highly trained. What the hell does the man offer that gives his people that much faith?

“Well, I’m not gonna be able to change ya mind.” Archer shoulders his quiver and picks up a bow that Ace hadn’t realized was hidden in the shadows in the corner. “Max, ya know where to find me if ya need anything.”

His exit leaves only two of them in the dying light. Max is a statue in the doorway. Her eyes are luminous in the dark, and Ace can’t bring himself to look away. They are still achingly like Simon’s, but there’s something else in them. Pity, perhaps? No, that’s not it. There’s a glimmer like there’s a game to be played, where he isn’t the pawn. As if he is the one controlling the pieces.

But that’s never true, is it?

He breaks first. “Why are you still here?”

Max shifts her weight from one foot to another, her hair falling over her eyes as she shakes her bangs out with her fingers before pulling them back. “I could ask you the same thing. I’m not blocking you from leaving.”

Ace snorts. “Yet you stand in front of the door. Am I supposed to think that I can leave?”

“Your weapons are right outside the door,” Max says. “You can go on and go after Bourke and do as
your task tells you to. I’m not going to stop you.”

She turns then and leaves without another word. The door stays open in her wake, and a rush of cool air and citrus from the market billows in.

It’s the breeze that sets him free, unfreezes his limbs from the lead that holds him still.

And when he rushes outside, everything is there. A mended belt with his knives secured, his scabbard, and his sword. Nothing is out of place. But when he slips on his belt, there’s an extra weight swinging by his hip.

The gold is cool against his palm, the heavy weight of the metal soft as he sinks his teeth into the chain.

It’s real. And broken.

Ace runs his fingers over the face of the pocket watch, the glass unyielding like the immobile hands frozen on midnight and noon.

He pockets the watch and reties it to his belt. It’s useless; but he can sell it later. Bourke is a bigger problem.

Bourke’s castle is easy to seek; it’s flashy and new with its beautiful white foundation and immaculate towers. Even in the dark of the night, Ace can find footholds to scale the castle and swing into the open window of a tower.

Too easy.

The hairs on the back of his neck stand as he creeps through the halls. The worn soles of his boots make little sound as he ducks around corners. At the same time, he can’t shake the feeling of someone watching him. The weight of the knives in his hands is of little comfort.
Every time he turns around to check the corners, there’s no one but his own reflection dancing off the windows in the walls. He usually goes on, enters yet another hall, breaks another door handle to force his way through.

But this time he stops and stares at the reflection. Stares at the man with hollowed cheeks and shadows under his eyes, pale skin with sagging cheeks that haven’t seen a smile in days, and a scruffy beard building at the edges of his jaw.

Ghastly.

Ghostly. Dead, as if he hasn’t taken a breath in years, as if he has been in the grave since Simon took them under his wing.

He can’t quash the bubbling that burns in his stomach, that rises up to his chest. He can’t stop the flames that lick at his skin, burning and charring him from within. He can’t feel the pain when his hand smashes through the glass. He doesn’t care if the crash of cascading glass alerts the guards.

*Charlotte. Mother. Fran, Penny, and Dany.*

Ace takes a breath and tries to center himself. He tries to focus on the pain from the glass shards digging into his skin, the bruises that are sure to be rippling across his knuckles.

Bourke. Focus on Bourke.

So he continues on.

In the back of his mind, there’s a feeling that there should be guards. Yet there’s no one in sight. No Archer, no Max. There’s no one protecting Bourke, not in front of his door. The door is unlocked.

There is something so, so wrong. Everything about
this screams set up, but Ace pushes against the handle anyways.

It swings open.

Ace’s grip tightens on the knives in his hand; he tries to raise his hand to throw it at the figure slumped in front of the fireplace. Bourke is defenseless, just waiting for him to kill. Slit his throat, snap his neck in one clean swoop.

*Charlotte. Mother. Fran, Penny, and Dany.*

He squeezes his eyes shut. Do it for them. They need to be safe. *Charlotte. Mother. Fran, Penny, and Dany.*

He reels his arm back—

The knife slips through his fingers and imbeds itself silently into the mantle above the fireplace. The hilt wiggles and wavers with the force it bit into the wood. And all Ace can do is stare at it as it wobbles back and forth, back and forth like a metronome.

The water laps at his feet where he sits on the dock. The moon is a sliver in the sky, the crescent a near picture-perfect reflection in the ripples of the waves at his bare feet.

He rolls the pocket watch between his hands, the gold sucking warmth from his skin. His knives lay on the dock beside him, his sword unsheathed atop his scabbard.

This time when he hears footsteps, he doesn’t reach for the dagger or his sword. He waits for her steps to stop. What he doesn’t expect is for her to slip off her boots and roll her trousers to sink her feet into the water beside him.

“Hi.”
Ace snorts and continues to roll the pocket watch between his fingers.

“Nice night, isn’t it?” Max runs a hand through her curly tresses, ruffling them in front of her face before flipping them back behind her.

“Cut the shit,” Ace says. He dangles the chain of the pocket watch between his fingers like a pendulum. “Why’d you leave this? And don’t give me any bloody riddles.”

Max swings her feet in the lake, water droplets splashing the fabric of Ace’s trousers. “You needed it more than I do.”

A laugh threatens to burst past his throat. It burns like the rips in his heart, the fraying edges of the bridge nearly burnt to pieces. But the burn of the chain against his bruised knuckles hold him tight. “It’s broken.”

“No.” Max lifts a hand to catch the swinging pendulum. The glass glints in the moonlight; the glare of the reflection erases half of the numbers on the face of the pocket watch. “It’s frozen in time.”

Ace stares.

Max giggles before she shakes her head and lets go of the watch. She leans forward to trace the water with her hands, distorting their reflections. “Right now it’s frozen at midnight or noon. It can be either one. Once it starts again, you’ve turned the page. Morning to afternoon, night to morning.”

That’s not how it works. Ace drops his face into his hands, away from his rippling reflection. The girl is nuts—there’s no other way to explain it.

“You know.” Max’s voice is honey slow as she tips
her head back to regard the moon.

Ace cuts her off. “Save your breath. You’ve already accomplished what you’ve wanted. I can’t kill Bourke. His life is safe.” He sneers as bitterness sours his throat. And he couldn’t even do it for his family. If Simon finds out, they’re all dead if Parker hasn’t gotten them out by now. He won’t know until Kaleb has resurfaced, and by then, it might be too late.

“Your sisters. You’re thinking about them.”

Ace’s head snaps up; a snarl is on his lips. “You stay away from them.”

Max shakes her head. “Your eldest sister is Charlotte, right?”

His knuckles turn white against the chain of the pocket watch, the sharp strain of pain from his knuckles numbing his anger. She knows something he doesn’t—any word about his family is good.

“What? About her?”

“She works under Seamstress Rebecca.” Max smiles down at her lap, uncaring as water from her hands stain her tan trousers. “My sister. How else do you think we know about Ace Steele?”

“Bourke has people within Simon’s castle.”

Max shrugs her unnaturally broad shoulders. “You’re not the only one who has blood on their hands, Ace.”

Ace frowns, dropping the pocket watch into his lap. Simon never mentioned anything about Max or anything much about Rebecca’s family, if anyone even knew a thing about the Seamstress besides her ties to Simon’s court. “Then why would you trade one cage for another?”
At last, her green eyes droop, the life in her eyes dimming as she looks away from the stars. “It’s not a matter of trading one cage for another. It’s a matter of repaying my debts to right the wrongs I’ve done.”

“By killing more?”

This time, Max shakes her head. “No.”

“You avenge deaths.” Ace rolls his eyes. But he can’t stop rubbing his fingers trying to get rid of the phantom blood on his hands that he can see caking on them when he closes his eyes.

“Not that either,” Max says. She reaches over and takes the pocket watch from Ace’s lap. “I’m waiting for a new age. One where I don’t have to worry about a man slaughtering my loved ones because I won’t do as he asks. An age without lords like Simon willing to work his people to the death.”

“Tough. There is more than just one Simon out there. What can you do, try and kill all of them? That’s not possible.”

“So we see to it that a man or woman strong enough to lead is put in place. That’s what I do. That’s,” Max says, tapping the face of the watch, “when the hands turn towards the next day. It’ll move again. That’s what I’m waiting for.”

She stands up on the dock, her bare feet dripping a puddle beside Ace. “Your sisters are fine, by the way. Parker got them out, but watch for Kaleb.”

Max swoops up her boots as she pads away from him, her gait nearly silent.

Charlotte. Mother. Fran, Penny, and Dany. Safe. They’re safe. Watch for Kaleb—

“Wait!” Ace scrambles to his feet, nearly cutting
himself on his knives beside him. “What do you mean, ‘Watch for Kaleb’?”

Max looks over her shoulder and sees a sad smile on her lips. “Two-faced, Ace. Kaleb’s two faced.”

She flings something over her shoulder, the gold glinting in the night. Ace nearly drops the pocket watch as the chain slips through his fingers, though the face nestles into his hand.

It lands face up, hands still pointing at midnight and noon.

He spends the night on the dock, falls into a fitful sleep when the moon sinks at last, but wakes when the sun peeks over the navy mountains at the edge of the world.

The pocket watch is beside him when he sits up, the gold glittering in the sun. Ace stares at it for a moment and runs the chain around the brand across his wrist.

Kaleb. Simon.

Home.

“Heard ya were still here.” A braying laugh follows. “Didn’ believe me ears. C’mon, got a couple lassies that wanna see ya.”

Archer is without his quiver and his bow, his hair in tufts with bags beneath his eyes like he hasn’t slept a wink.

“I don’t know anyone here?” Ace says, buckling his belt to his hips anyway.

Archer snickers, not unkindly. “Sure ya do! They arrived a bit before ya and they wanna see ya. The el-
dest threatens to use me manhood as a pincushion if we so much as touch a hair on ya head, so I thought to meself, better get Ace before she does as she promises.”

That’s Charlotte alright.

“Where are they?” Ace ties the pocket watch to his belt. And this time it settles comfortably against his thigh like it belongs, no longer an extra weight. Huh.

Archer leads him up just past the lake to the edge of the mountains where a small cottage sits. “I’ll leave ya here. Give ya some time. Just below if ya need me. I’ll be somewhere in there.” He waves a hand in the general direction of the woods, but Ace already tuned him out.

Charlotte, in her sixteen years of glory, is sprinting down the steps of the stone cottage. He can’t remember when she turned her blond hair silver white, but it doesn’t matter.

“Ace!”

She nearly topples them when they collide, but Ace holds on tight. He digs his fingers into her shoulders, trying to take it all in. She’s fine—she’s okay. They’re all okay. Simon doesn’t—

Kaleb. Kaleb knows that they’re here.

“Char.” Ace pulls away to look his sister in the eye. “Parker. Is he alright?”

Charlotte nods, her brows pulling tight. “Rebecca said that no one knows where we’re going. Parker dropped us off at this Rebecca’s sister’s cottage on the outskirts of Simon’s land. She and Archer got us here. Parker saw us off, then went to tell Kaleb to find you.”

So Simon knows. There is no way Kaleb would
have withheld information from them. Would Max lie to him? There’s no reason for him to trust her; but they got his family out. What debt does he have to pay?

“Char.” Ace swallows hard. “You make sure everyone stays here. I need to do one more thing.”


Ace’s heart freezes in that moment, ice crawling up his spine. He waits for the disgust to enter her expression, waits for her to pull away from him.

But she pulls him closer to her, hugs his neck tighter, holds him longer than he can hold his breath.

“Love you, Ace,” she whispers in his ear. “To the world and back.”

Oh.

“Archer!”

“Eh?”

Ace slips down the slick grass as he races toward where the other man stands facing the woods. “Simon. We need to get rid of Simon. They’re never going to be safe.”

A slow grin spreads across the man’s face. “Now you’re speakin’ me language.”

* * *

The plan is simple. There’s a good chance Simon knows that they’re already headed his way, especially if Kaleb already told him where they are. Max can get them in thanks to Rebecca. Parker will meet them in the castle, and they’ll deal with Simon there.

Ace swallows hard. He doesn’t want to see Kaleb there, doesn’t want to consider the possibility. He has
known Kaleb for as long as he has known Parker. They were the team back in the old days, young and invincible, conquering made-up cities together. As adults, they still did. But now?

His finger brushes over the pocket watch strung on his belt in place of the sword. These daggers may have a shorter reach, but they’re much less unwieldy than the long blade. Friends don’t give up the positions of loved ones—did Simon have anything to do with it? Likely—

“You ready?” Max’s drawl seeps into his consciousness.

He can barely make out her figure in the inky blackness of the sewer. The smell of rotting water and waste is clogging his nostrils. But her green eyes still manage to shine in the dark, the flash of something too quick for him to decipher. He’ll worry about it later. Ace flashes her a glimpse of his teeth. “Never better.”

“Move.”

They dart up the ladder up into the first floor of the castle, out of the trapdoor Rebecca already unlocked for them. Ace unsheathes a throwing knife from his belt, the thin hilt biting into the meat of his palm. “Follow me.”

There’s a soft twang as Archer strings his bow. It’s unwieldy for close combat, but Ace knows the bowmaster has a nasty swing. He still has a giant lump behind his head to prove it.

“Wait.” Max throws out an arm as a light illuminates the grey halls of the castle.

It comes closer and closer, the clang of a suit of armor all too familiar in Ace’s ears. Kaleb doesn’t wear armor—he flights like Parker. Hand-to-hand combat,
brass spikes imbedded in the gloves he keeps in his pockets.

No, there’s only one person who wears a suit of armor, with a white blade to match. Lady Anne, the person who always helped Simon alert him of his orders.

“Go.” Max pushes him aside, unsheathing her blade. “Go get Simon.”

Ace opens his mouth to warn her, but Archer tugs him away, his feet dashing toward the corridor and the stairs.

“Come back for more?” Lady Anne’s voice echoes down the hall.

“Always.” Max’s slow voice has little intonation. It makes him shiver to hear a voice usually so warm so devoid of life.

Sn—

“Down!” Ace sweeps a leg out under Archer to knock them both over. Their momentum carries them skidding into a wall, but the triangular blade clangs harmlessly against the cement.

Archer rolls off of him to peek over the corner. Not a moment later, a blade flies over his head.

Archer chuckles. “Not very good at aim, isn’ he?” He calmly restrings his recurve bow, whistling as he draws an arrow out of his quiver.

What in the bloody world? Ace stares at him, eyes wide.

“What are you waiting for, a bloody signal?” Archer asks him. The mirth is gone from his blue eyes, deadly ring encompassing them. There’s only the slightest smidge of blue iris left in both his eyes, black nearly swallowing all of the color.
Snick! Clang!

Archer rolls over and, within the next moment, fires.

Thwangthwack!

“Go!”

Ace doesn’t need another encouragement. He bolts for the double doors at the other side of the hall at full speed—until he steps on something that turns beneath his foot. It sends him sprawling, his knives dancing out of his grip as he hits the stairs. Pain blooms against his knee where he hit the marble full force, but he ignores it in favor of turning back to see what he tripped on.

Parker.

“No, no, no.”

Ace slips down the stairs to crawl to his friend lying spread-eagled against the floor. Thankfully there’s no sticky, crimson pool around him—only a purpling welt across his forehead.

Turning him over, Ace presses two fingers against his neck.

“Come on, come on.”

Then he feels it. It’s weak, but it’s there. Maybe Kaleb hasn’t completely lost it after all. His heart jumps for the tiniest of moments before it settles back in his stomach. He’s here to do something.

Dragging Parker into the shadows so guards won’t finish off Kaleb’s job, Ace shoves through the steel doors with a grunt. And he’s inside.

The chill of the grey marble room is the same as the last time, except Simon isn’t sitting at the throne. The lord is nowhere to be se—
Ace dives forward as the tongue of a blade snakes out of the shadows. Simon’s thrust meets nothing but air.

Rolling to his feet, Ace pulls his last two daggers from his belt, not a moment too soon. *Overhead, side, side, overhead, side, side, backhand.* Simon’s double-handed swings jar Ace’s daggered parries, the blows driving him further and further back into the throne room.

Ace dances back another step, trying to regulate his breaths. He brings his daggers up, preparing for another block. But his hands are shaking, his arms already exhausted from the sheer force that peppered him one after another.

“Ungrateful rat. I give you the opportunity to live the life of a noble.” Overhead blow.

Parry. “And you turn to Bourke?” Simon snarls.

Ace catches the next blow between his two shorter blades, but his arms are shaking. Simon drives the sword closer and closer to his neck.

“Should have let your father kill you and your family when I had the chance. Knew the Bourke ties ran in your family—just like it did with the Zaviers.”

Ace gasps. “Zaviers?”

Keep him talking. He wriggles his boot, lets the sword get lower to his neck. He can smell the liquor rotting in Simon’s breath. The blade bites against the jugular, the steel cold against his throat.

“The girl you brought here . . . trained among Lady Anne’s own ranks. The ungrateful swine went running to Bourke when her mother died. Tragic that accident. Mother dead in a raid.”
“You set up the raid.”

Simon laughs, his voice harsh. “The woman wanted more than she asked. Wanted to tear the system apart. Couldn’t have that happen.” He leans closer, breath rancid, blade drawing a red slit against Ace’s throat. “Zaviers are trou—”

Ace heaves forward and kicks upward, driving the blade that he had inched out into Simon’s unprotected belly. It slips out of his sternum with a tug as Simon falls back, Simon’s blade falling away from Ace’s neck. Simon’s eyes bulge as his mouth gasps for air.

“Anything is better than you,” Ace whispers before slitting the lord’s neck.

She finds him sitting on the edge of the tallest rook of Simon’s castle, his hand wrapped around the pocket watch.

“You’re a Zavier,” Ace says as she slips into the space beside him.

Max sighs, lines settling into her face as she holds her wounded side. Lady Anne had gotten her good, according to Archer. Flesh wounds and a couple broken ribs, but nothing that Max can’t handle. Again, according to Archer. Kaleb was fine, though he had an arrow sticking through his shoulder the last time Ace saw him. Parker was conscious—groggy, but conscious.

“I am.”

Ace turns away from her, his eyes focusing on the navy clouds drifting above them, the promise of dawn at the edges of their purpling skin. “I’m sorry.”

Max giggles then groans as it jars her broken ribs. “I’m not. Are you okay?”
Ace looks down at his shoeless feet. He’d tossed the boots off his heels as soon as he made it up here. It’s another mark on his hands, blood soaked as they already are. “No.”

But they’re safe, safer than they have ever been. His heart is in shreds, as it’s always been, but there’s a calm that’s settled in his skin. It’s like a blanket has been placed on his shoulders, like the tea his mother used to make when he was still a child. It’s like he is finally on his way home.

There are still gaping holes in his heart, his head. There is still scarlet blood pooling everywhere when he closes his eyes. But.

This is a start.

An arm weaves around him in the briefest of hugs before Max lets go. She sighs and presses her head against the edge of the rook. When she closes her eyes, the lines melt away from her face, though the knot between her brows never eases.

They’re in the same place.

So he tugs her back to his side, gently as not to jar her broken ribs. Resting his head against hers, Ace holds the pocket watch out in the air before them. This time it doesn’t swing back and forth as it usually does. Instead it sits still, even with the brush of wind singing through his fingers.

It’s no longer midnight or noon.

The shorter hand has moved to one. And there’s a beat that skips a second too fast to be his pulse.

*Tick tock.*

*Tick tock.*
THE STRUGGLE TO BE GOOD

William Morgan

Preface

What is it to be good? Of the fundamental questions of Man, this one has been perhaps the most perplexing. It traces back to the beginning of our species as a high-functioning, advanced set of beings on the earth. When we began to settle and form the institutional base of human experience, that of communities and specialization and organization, we began to comprehend that there may be a reason for our existence. Over the years, we ascribed all kinds of purpose to this reason, from conquest to domination to religion to honor to, most commonly, survival itself. Man, for the most part, has suited himself to himself and not been too concerned about the specific aspects of his existence. For all we know, we are better off not knowing. For all we know, that knowledge is unknowable and not worth even one lifetime to ponder. It is understandable that we should do this. Our species has not persisted because of its existential comprehension. It has persisted because, since our first birth, there have always been humans. We might differ as to how we characterize that precious beginning, but the point is that we have existed because we have been here, liv-
ing and breathing and finding our way. There must be, however, something within this “way” of ours which should shed some light on the reason for humanity. It could be self-interest, lust, greed, or any number of individualistic factors. It could even be the reality that perhaps we are all inherently evil. This would be a shocking yet somehow fitting discovery for our young species, to learn that our lives are driven forward (or held back, really) by an immutable sense of badness. The way we unconsciously seek, the motivating factor for our collective life, may yet be the goodness we believe we have hitherto pinned down via various purposes. Have we yet truly understood what it means to be good? It is certainly worth investigating the meaning of this elusive adjective, which, by some accounts, may be unachievable. Truthfully, the dogged quest to be good has in ways too numerous to count filtered into all manner of human experience. Simply said though it may be, understanding what good is might lead us down an untrodden path of enlightenment capable of lending true reason to our lives. This is not an experiment in esoteric philosophy nor a modern psychological theory. This is what we humans have always done: tried to find an answer for the life we live. We might live better with our beings and our fellow humans if we understand why we live.

Finding the Answer

A revelation of experience typically shows one that answers become more difficult to find and more difficult to grasp as the rigor of our problem-solving increases. It is not a great surprise that this should be, especially when we were designed from the very beginning to be so unusually capable. The answers of our
lives come in many forms, from the dreaded mathematical equation to age-old questions of history to the pages of groundbreaking literature. Some answers, however, are so daunting and so untouched that they defy regular explanation and slide into the recesses of our minds. The answer sought here is seemingly embedded deep in a crevice of our spirit. This immobile treasure is not to be excavated like the other minerals of our being. It requires no effort of the sort, but effort much less vigorous. To be sure, the answer actually lies in repose, gentle as could be on the surface of said spirit. Yet, to us, it is invisible. Why is our answer invisible so close within our reach? Tantalizing as it may be, there is reason in this. The reason is that we must open our eyes to the possibilities that lie before us just like the answer we seek. A vision, not of our own sight, but of our understanding, must guide us to the unhidden, ignored jewel that would be appraised at a higher price than the cumulative value of all our things. To have vision, one must see without the eyes and without any pretense of the true answer. For us to see the unknown and unfounded, we have to understand, to see as we have never done before.

The connection between understanding and sight is thus recognized, and thence we may attempt to combine the two separate entities as they were meant to be conjoined. Such an attempt may be made if a number of major areas of human experience are examined and used to weave the fabric of our answer. Our answer may be a patchwork, a colorful mosaic of attached pieces, but its dividends are infinitely superior to its appearance. The areas we must cover include history, politics, morality, society, and spirituality. This apparent paucity of topics can only be appreciated if taken in the context of the scope of an attempt to interpret
the uninterpreted. It should be conceded that other attempts could be construed from loose strings of thought which have mentioned “goodness,” but there has yet to be any comprehensive compilation of such thought. Knowledge of an absence of understanding makes demands on the thinker to bridge the gap, as it were. Undoubtedly, questions abound about the potential of the aforesaid areas to grasp what we intend to grasp. Their qualities should thenceforth be noted in a proper series of introductions which might answer these questions before we move on to answer the question.

**First Looks**

Let us look first at history. Historical record and dialogue are nothing but the recognition of information which expounds an argument of human events and patterns and what we should learn from our past as it applies directly to the present. History and the study of history provide an unparalleled basis for understanding and inquiry, both of which are invaluable to our search. We can see by the tales of the past the common human strategies of all time. From these strategies, we may derive a template to learn from our past such that we improve standing upon the shoulders of the ancients. Every person who has ever existed has left some mark on the landscape of the earth, and it has been the duty of historians to document and preserve what wisdom emanates from the footprints of our forefathers. Through the collective wisdom of our species, we may obtain the supreme perspective on not just our history, but also on our existence.

History and politics are bound somewhat in their roots, for before politics became inextricably linked
to the epic power struggle of human nature and its sensitive application, it was surely just the extension of historical pragmatism into a newfound sphere of public policy. Whether or not politics sprouted from historically-minded roots, it separated rather quickly from history in the sense that it morphed into the study of power and policy in human government. It is not necessarily wrong that this happened, but the shift is notable. The shift makes the conversation of history and politics two very different subjects, each deserving its distinction. Politics is the story of government, which affects humanity mightily at the current stage in its development. It is the effects of government and its many manifestations which deserve our attention, for those effects are steered by the hand of political thought. Such thought goes back only so far in our already brief span, but if it is our chosen method of community, specialization, and organization, it must be explicated in order to, if anything, understand our latest attempts at administering the people of the earth and the best way to do so.

Despite the permanent significance of history, morality may rival it as an underlying influence in our existence. It is an abstraction dedicated to the finer points of the human condition specifically regarding our value system or morals. Through any other magnifying glass, such precision might be difficult. Only through morality may we look incisively at our wide range of precepts such that we can sift and sort, always intent on finding the ideal moral or set of morals. At the very least, we may unearth a way of thinking which accommodates our search for goodness. If morality supposes to dictate right from wrong, then it must enable us to learn goodness from badness, albeit our interest lies with the former. We may find distinctions, these “fin-
er points,” used by different modes of moral thinking, which altogether should allow us to compose a proper conception of morality. Our composition will illuminate how our sense of morality plays into the goodness undiscovered by all exhausted “good morals,” whose utility, once loosened, will help us immensely.

To discuss society is to discuss the social connections and structures which have been at the crux of our existence. Now, our concern comes not to the political treatment of groups of people, but to their social coexistence. We might ask a question like, “What is the best society?” We shall swiftly direct questions of idealism toward the completion of our cause. By looking at society, we can see the changes and reforms needed and how they relate to uncovering goodness. Beyond changes and reforms, there are also ideas for the sustenance of society as a “good society.” We will have to explore the meaning and value of society if we are to understand its contribution to the discussion of goodness.

Spirituality presents perhaps the most existential explanation to understanding goodness. Ideally, it will not lead us to more confusion than we experienced before venturing headlong into our spiritual world. Our spirit is indeed an object of wonder, for we are never quite sure where it is or where it may go when we die. Moreover, spirituality represents how we have delved into the depths of our being and what we have mined there. It is the closest approximation to what it takes to answer our question, but even it does not go far enough, as, without additional understanding, it cannot yet connect individuals with the goodness they seek. What it does do is challenge us to question what we live for and what substance supports the profundity and peculiarity of our existence. These challenges
will lead us to strike a chord with our reality, and once we have an enhanced awareness, we may launch ourselves from reality to goodness.

GOODNESS IN DEFINITIVE CONTEXT

The preceding five introductions have hopefully offered glimpses to understanding the way to goodness. What must follow are thorough tours of the five exhibits. These tours shall give us the background we need to perceive goodness and actually construct its purpose to our ends. To clarify, this method is intended to put the search for goodness in definitive contexts, unhampered by the mystic wording of a blunt declaration of goodness. Declarations of the highest order must have backing to stand up to scrutiny and assist their oft-misunderstood meaning.

History tells a mixed narrative of human existence. On one hand, Man invented, evolved, grew, and survived. On the other hand, Man brutalized, bullied, discriminated, and abused. We have completely separate but concurrent strands of human activity; both describe our history with equal consideration. We must not assume, however, that we are only concerned with the latter, civilized part of our history, from which time history has been more readily and more easily accounted. While our context lies mostly with this period, that does not mean that Man did not express historical tendencies before written, detailed documentation was available. Besides this caveat, we should find a way to distinguish between the good and bad parts of history as we will do with the other four goodness-definers. Where is the goodness in our history? Our historical goodness might be best understood as the courses we have taken which have most contributed to our cumu-
ative welfare over time. These courses have been defined by gradual, lasting, and necessary change, peace, emphasis on the common good, acceptance of cultural pluralism and diversity, and the rejection of unwanted subjugation. Of course, an innumerable multitude of events, people, and principles are inscribed in all courses of all kinds. Yet in this case, those events, people, and principles are magnified as conducive to good courses, so they are examples of proper conduct for us as potentially good participants in the future record. Using the examples of events like the abolition of slavery, peacetime prosperity, the shift from pre-American Revolution inequality to the post-Revolution precursor of equality, the American Civil Rights Era, and independence, we cannot foresee our future, but we can understand how we might respond to our times’ demands like our predecessors did. We can discern that it was good people and good principles which carried out these good events, and thus it is our task to devise the same tripartite tactic when combatting our own issues. Our tactic will be reinforced by a particular understanding of good people and principles.

Our further discussion of politics centers on principle. Political goodness must be a set of principles which are good, yes, but how? Good principles are reflections of the goodness of people, which will be explained later. This means that such principles encapsulate goodness, and are thus good for it. They are good because they protect the individual as well as the whole, exercise historical goodness adeptly, provide for general welfare, eliminate corruption, and prevent abuse. Such are the things desired by the people governed by principle, if they could choose what their guiding principles were in their government. To secure their goodness, adherents might change good po-
political principles according to their understanding of good historical change, so the principles never have to capitulate due to deficiency. They can stand firm and hold strong in the face of the great responsibility of government without bowing to bad pressures outside political goodness. Good political principles are indicative of good government by representing the goodness of the people and their interests and conforming to necessary changes dictated by good history.

We turn now to the goodness of people, starting with morality. Goodness, with good reason, is deeply associated with morality. We regularly differentiate betwixt the good and the bad, good and evil, exalted and reviled. These differentiations are enshrined in the origin of morality, and from that point we have very little changed our basic moral conceptions. We have simply thought more and more about our morals over time and have extended their sovereignty to all corners of the human domain. The resulting complex value system extends good branches of morality for us to designate. *Moral goodness* is doing the right thing, a collection of good deeds including restraint from reckless behavior, graciousness, maturity, and general respectfulness. That we may consider such things is a remarkable ability of ours as humans, yet it is an even greater thing that we should regulate and police ourselves under the belief that good principles should frame our government. If we are morally good, it is conceivable that the next goodness, social goodness, might be well benefitted. Perhaps to have good morals is to understand what it means to be good to society as a whole as well as to be personally admirable.

It is society which we have elected as the practical amalgamation of our social elements. Society exists
either as a legitimate social construct or a figment of our collective imagination. In either case, we are convinced that it exists, and thus we ought to examine the social goodness within it. Social goodness is a symbiotic, mutually-beneficial relationship between all elements of society whereby there is no subordination and no inequality. Elements of society might be social classes, majorities, minorities, social consciousness, or social perception. These elements can only exist as socially good if they do not abuse any of the other elements. Equality is measured by the balance among the elements. In this way, the imbalance in good society is inequality, which pits elements against each other while refusing to understand that inequality is bad and the remnants of bad society linger only so long.

Before we reach our final conclusions on goodness, there is the goodness of spirituality. Spirituality, Man’s exploration of the universe and the self which has gone further than any satellite, cannot go unremarked in our understanding of personal goodness. Above all, it is impeccable dutifulness to the self when a person, in a likeness resembling our present search for answers, discovers answers to questions of self-fulfillment and purpose. With its established process, we have a great asset to obtain our own answers. Spiritual goodness is healthily investing oneself in individual existentialism and individual transcendence. The meaning found through this process is much deeper and much more valuable than the mundane value of most things, for a life of passion fueled by spirituality can arrive at any destination. Good spirituality is a validation of one’s self and dreams, which are in turn transformed into tangible achievements because of spiritual will. Interests ensconced in such spirituality are no longer interests, but inevitable realities. Such is the divinity upon
which all humanity’s faith may rest, regardless of religious affiliation.

**Goodness**

We now have the necessary understanding and background of goodness in context to form an accurate summation of goodness itself. *Goodness* has been and always will be Man’s greatest struggle. It is the essential missing link which has lain hidden and dormant for too long in the rear of our minds. It has waited for us to trigger its magnificent eruption, not of ash and magma, but of the single greatest discovery, epiphany, and revelation in the history of mankind. Fittingly, it answers our single greatest question. We are here on Earth to be good.

**P.S. A Personal Note**

To cap off this piece, I find it necessary to add a few authorial notes. I’ve always thought of “being good” as a rather obscure and enigmatic subject. Even though the ideas I have expressed occurred to me before I began writing for the most part, I had never tried to be perfectly clear on the important point of goodness. What I have written thus far on the topic has elucidated my argument adequately enough. What I have not yet written about the topic is what remains in the following.

What remains is my own personal concept of goodness. Something else which occurred to me long before this writing process started was my relation to goodness. I have for some time sought to be good. Goodness is the way for me. It encompasses and accords with my web of understanding connecting his-
tory, politics, morality, society, and spirituality. Goodness influences my modus operandi in understanding thought and applying it. What I believe to be perhaps novel contributions are the ideas that goodness overlaps between various areas of our lives, and if we are to be truly good and not hypocritical, we must embrace good in more than just morality. Morality and spirituality, I believe, were forerunners of goodness thought, for they first initiated the dialogue of goodness at least on a personal basis.

To me, goodness is the definite answer to the reason for life we seek, but more than that it pushes us to promote goodness in the world through all our endeavors. I believe that the personal goodness we feel must propagate, with us as human conduits. However, with all the expedient and age-old answers already in place and such a deceptively simple answer on the table, it is doubtful that the propagation would be absolutely infectious. No, rather I feel this idea or theory or whatever you might call it shall likely find itself written off as specious or generalized, and so it may be. But the point is not that it will spread like wildfire through the minds and hearts of dazzled masses. The point is that it pays to be good.
Pro Humanitate Society medal. 3.5” x 3.5.”
A gold medal with a black and gold strap attached.
On the medal reads: “Pro Humanitate Society” and has
the picture of the Pro Humanitate crest in the center.
On the opposite side is the inscription:
CAPTAIN NIKOLAI DUBROVSKY:

The old orange light bulb was loitering above our head. I felt that it was almost going to get rid of that thin string that tied it to the ceiling of the elevator.

“Do you think it will drop, or not?” I asked Colonel Mstislav.

“We are going to the fourth floor,” he replied.

“Ok then.” I closed the door. I hit the button. The tiny light in the middle of the button that was supposed to be turned on did not even flash.

“Hit the button,” the colonel said.

I hit it again. I didn’t feel the elevator moving. I didn’t see the light either.

“Hit it again,” the colonel ordered.

“I’ve already hit it twice!” I replied.

“Hit it again.”

I hit it the third time. The door opened. We are at the fourth floor. Outside the elevator, there was darkness without boundary. I could barely see a corridor formed by shelves and books, or by the shadow
of shelves and books. At the very end of this corridor, there was a slight piece of light leaking from a dark wooden door that was also buried inside this darkness. We walked. We walked through the corridor. We knocked on the door.

   Bang.
   Bang.
   Bang.

   I guess we hit it really hard. The door opened. We walked. We walked inside the room.

   “Are you Chief Librarian Istoriya Dostoevsky?” I asked.

   “Yes, I am.” Behind a bleak pale lamp, a wise old man was sitting.

   “I am Captain Nikolai Dubrovsky, and this is my superior Colonel Mstislav Babel,” I said.

   “Well, I can tell from your uniform and name tag,” the old man replied.

   “We are KGB,” I said.

   “That I can also tell,” he said with a calm smile. “What can I do for you, my comrades?”

   I was speechless. I didn’t know why we were there. Colonel Mstislav walked up with an envelope in his hand. He nailed the envelope on the librarian’s oak wood desk and gently tapped on the envelope. The librarian untied the string and opened it. In the envelope was an old picture, and in the picture was a golden medal. The colonel pulled up a chair and sat. I remained standing. The librarian put on his glasses.

   “What is it?” the librarian asked.

   “I thought you would know,” the colonel said.
"I don’t."

"You do. You are a ‘Dostoevsky.’ You must know."
The colonel smiled and pulled out his pistol, pointing it at the old man.

"I don’t know. What do you want to know?" The librarian took off his glasses. "And I don’t know what you want to know."

"I see." The colonel opened the safe on his Makarov PM.

"But I do have three stories. I have no answers for you, but three stories." The old man took a sip of his vodka. "Do you want to hear them?"

"Yes, we’d love to." I pulled up a chair and sat down. Colonel Mstislav took away his pistol.

CHIEF LIBRARIAN ISTORIYA DOSTOEVSKY:

I thought they would be here at 8:00 in the evening. They were. I heard the elevator open its door. I heard the footsteps. I heard the “Bang bang.” I saw the door open, and the darkness filled my room. I didn’t lock it in the beginning because I was waiting for them. I’m a Dostoevsky. I’m the last Dostoevsky. Almost two hundred years later, they came up for me. After tonight, there will be no Dostoevskys anymore. My name is the purpose of my life. I’m Istoriya Dostoevsky.

These two people came here to find out answers. But I have no answers for them. Captain Nikolai doesn’t know the question; he doesn’t need one. Colonel Mstislav doesn’t want an answer.

I have three stories. I know the locations where those stories took place, the time those stories existed, and the plot, the theme, and the purpose those sto-
ries contain and serve. Stories will fulfill their desires, but the only problem here is that I am lacking three critical names. Those are heroic stories, with heroes as leading characters. Those heroes were anonymous, so this situation left me no choice but to describe these stories with an internally focused perspective. By using first person view, these three heroes gained their names—Istoriya.

**The First Story:**

In the evening of 5 June 1808, the day before General Verdier attacked Logrono with his three thousand cavaliers, the day before the Peninsular War began, Napoleon Bonaparte, the emperor of France, called me to his tent. The emperor told me that the true purpose of this attack was not merely to conquer Spain. He had already conquered enough countries, cities, and armies on this continent. The pleasure of conquering has started to fade. The excitement of fighting wars has gradually eluded him. He had already nailed his name into history. He has already been a successful conqueror, a great emperor, an undefeatable leader in human history. He should not demand more, and he didn’t. That night, he told me that he wished only one wish—a permanent, peaceful empire.

“How do you plan to achieve that, my dear emperor?” I asked him sincerely.

“There is a medal. A golden medal with one sentence on it. The old tale says that whoever deciphers and reads that sentence will have the ability to maintain a peaceful land until the end of the world. I’ve been seeking this golden medal for years. Now I am sure that this medal is in Logrono. I desire it. You are my friend, my best servant, soldier, and assassin. Gather a
group, gather those good fighters. You shall lead them into the city and find Mayor Marias, because he knows the location of that medal.”

That night, General Verdier arranged a feign attack on the east side of the city of Logrono. I led three brave fighters in sneaking into Logrono from the north side. General Verdier may never understand why the emperor ordered that feign attack. He was like you, Captain Nikolai. Neither of you know the purpose of the order.

We, shrouded by the darkness, walked into the city hall. We killed those guards without any noise. Their blood that spilled from their throats became the only color inside this black scene. We walked to the top of the hall. We didn’t make footsteps as you, Captain Nikolai, and you, Colonel Babel, did. We didn’t bang the door. But instead, we gently opened it. The mayor was expecting us.

“I know why you are here,” the mayor said.

“Where is the medal?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he replied. He had a smile on his face.

“Yes, you do. You are Mayor Marias; you must know.” I pulled out my sword.

“I don’t know what you want me to know. I don’t have what you think I have.” He gently pulled out his drawer from his oak wood desk and picked up a golden medal out of it. He threw it to me. I felt its weight. I saw words. The words were in French, but I couldn’t read them. Those words were on the medal, those words were clearly engraved, but those words were invisible, untouchable, and unreadable. The last thing Mayor Marias said before he died was, “Follow those
words.” I plunged my sword into his chest. I cut my soldiers’ throats.

I brought the medal to Russia.

Four years later, my emperor was defeated on that frozen land. He was chasing me down. Then, nine years later, my emperor died on an isolated island. He didn’t accomplish what he wished.

THE SECOND STORY:

On the morning of 10 November 1938, after thousands of German people mashed every single Jewish shop inside this nation, I walked out of the library of Humboldt University of Berlin. After one night researching, I washed myself up and put on my SS uniform. The black uniform shaped me into a shadow that appeared both in daylight and dark night. After my fellow citizens brought a disastrous night to all those Jews, the streets of Berlin became astonishingly beautiful. After the Crystal Night, the street looked fabulous under sunshine. It was like the ocean, and I was the only one that walked in it. I became a ghost that walked under the daylight. I was the examiner, the searcher, the pursuer honored by my führer, the father of the third empire, the savior, the god. The goal I was pursuing was simple—a golden medal with a sentence engraved on it.

Last night, when the city was filled by screaming and terror, I was sitting in front of the führer. He looked so kind that I almost forgot he is the highest leader of this great empire. He poured me a cup of the finest bourbon. He told me to sit. He told me to relax.

“There is a piece of art that I’ve sought for a long time.” He drank a toast to me. “And I’ve heard that you
are one of the best connoisseurs in this empire.”

“Thank you for saying so, my Führer.” I drank my bourbon.

“Have you ever heard of the existence of a golden medal with a sentence engraved on it, my dear professor?” my Führer said.

“No, I don’t think I’ve ever heard of something like that.”

“Well, there is this medal,” he said while he poured me another drink, “that possesses the most charming power in this world. Ancient tales told me that whoever can interpret the sentence on the medal can achieve the power to thrive on this continent. My best spy told me that he heard rumors that a Jew merchant who lives in Berlin possesses it. I hope you can find it for me.”

I nodded, firmly.

I walked back to the library and walked into the basement. I knew if I wanted to learn something about this mystical medal, the basement could provide me the clue that I needed. I read the oldest history books, I read the most comprehensive encyclopedia, I searched the most ancient tale book, and I looked up every newspaper I could find in this library, yet I found nothing about this secret medal. The sun rose. I walked into the oceanlike street. I walked directly to one of my old friend’s home—Dr. Benjamin’s house. If anyone in this world could have this secret medal, he would be the only one. He was a wealthy merchant, a good chess player, and a knowledgeable professor. He owned the authentic work *Mona Lisa*. He possessed the first edition of the Holy Bible and a rare edition of the Koran. He had every mystical thing in this world,
and my instinct told me he must have the golden medal.

I walked into his garden, just like you, Captain Nikolai, and you, Colonel Mstislav, walked into my office. We are all the same. We are all blind, blindly following orders, demands, and requirements. I blindly walked into his garden and saw his beautiful house gone. Broken glass spread on the ground. Flowers smashed into dirt. I felt sad for those flowers. I once liked them. He was sitting in front of his house like he was waiting for me.

“I’m waiting for you,” he said, lighting a cigar.

“So you must know why I’m here.” I sat beside him.

“I don’t have what you want.” He took a drag from the cigar.

“Yes, you do. You are the Jewish collector. You must have it.” I pulled out my Luger and put it on the little desk between us.

“I don’t have a golden medal.” He put his hand inside his pocket. He took out a medal and threw it to me. I felt the weight—it wasn’t gold; it was brass.

“You must have a golden one! The one my führer demands.” I pointed my gun at his forehead.

“Read the medal, if you can, and follow it.” After saying that, he pulled out a revolver and put a bullet into his own skull.

I tried to read it. It was engraved in German, but the words were floating. I tried to touch it. I felt coldness.

Three years later, Hitler invaded Russia. He was hunting me down. Then, four years later, he shot himself with his Walther PP in his basement.
The Third Story:

“So what is the third story?” Captain Nikolai asked.

“Where is the thing I want?” Colonel Mstislav asked.

“You will get what you want,” the librarian answered. He pulled out his drawer slowly, the colonel pulled out his pistol again, and the captain stood up and also laid his hand on his pistol.

“Why are you seeking what you think you are seeking?” The librarian stopped and looked at the colonel.

“To save mother Russia, and the Soviet Union.” The colonel pointed his gun at the wise old man.

“Then we are all blind.” The old man reached something and pulled it out from the drawer. A medal. It’s made of neither gold nor brass. It looks like a mirror but reflects nothing. The colonel put his gun on the desk. He tried to read it, to decipher it, like everyone else who laid a hand on this medal did. He saw Russian was engraved on the medal, not blurry, not floating, but solid. However, he could not understand the words on that medal. He tried to pronounce it, and failed. The words are changing. The sentence never settles.

“We should go now, colonel.” Captain Nikolai loosened his gun belt.

The colonel put the medal down. “Is this story going to end like every other story?”

“Yes, it will. We all will. Like every human being,” the librarian replied.

“Colonel, we should retrieve the medal and head back to the office,” the captain suddenly yelled. “Our mission is to retrieve whatever we gained here.”
Bang.
Bang.
Bang.

Colonel Mstislav Babel:

Blood didn’t spill. The darkness is still the same. No reddish in it, but pure darkness. There will be no “Dostoevsky” anymore. There will be no Soviet Union anymore.

“On the Christmas day of 1991, I was sitting in front of an old man, listening to his stories about a golden medal . . .”
Basketball shoes. 4” x 12” These shoes were worn by Bryon L. ‘Pete’ Davis ’40, a center on the Deacon team that played in the very first NCAA basketball tournament in March of 1939. Pete wore these shoes to play basketball from 1936–1940. Basketball—1930–1940. Wake Forest University. Demon Deacons (Basketball team). Donated by Julie Griffin, Athletics Varsity Club Director May 30, 2001.
They didn’t let me go to your funeral

Somewhere along the way I was tossed carelessly into the forgotten box of time.
I always wondered why you threw me out of your life;
I’d like to think it was because the memories we shared were electric,
That when you looked at me, sparks erupted to alight a world forgotten.
Did I bring back memories too raw, too powerful
That they consumed your soul,
Filling your body with a constant ache of longing?

That court was our stage,
You and I danced down it with practiced ease,
Ignoring the audience as it crackled its approval.
Truth is
You and I were blinded by orange,
Charged with the linoleum under my soles.
We couldn’t care

The day we first stepped onto the court
That would become home,
Your heart pulsed with an intensity that made
My whole being tremble with excitement
For each new moment to come.
The day we last stepped onto the court,
The home we were abandoning,
Your heart pulsed with an intensity that made
My whole being shake with the weight of memories,
Of moments that are now forever stuck in time.

Did your heart beat the same way
Every time you saw me,
The day you removed me from your sight,
The day you died?

I wonder what you thought would become of me;
Did you imagine I would star in a show once more,
Thrown into another box, shipped out to another person
That wanted to dance across the court with me?
Did you imagine me chucked away,
Slowly dissolving into dust
Along with all the other forgotten objects
who have outlived their time?
I wonder if this is the life you wished for me.

It has been ages since anyone has touched me,
Since I have heard anything besides the
sound of hushed voices
As they gaze upon me like a china doll;
You and I never cared about the consequences—
We beat up the court in the same way we
beat up each other.
They now consider me too delicate to handle without latex.

There is nothing left for me to do but dream here,
So I dream—
I dream of our stage, where we performed some of
the best orchestrations;
I dream of our accompaniments, the squeaks,
whistles, electricity crackling, and cheers.
I dream of your heartbeat pounding away, making me
quiver;
I dream that I become dust, that I am returned to this earth.

After all, it is past my time
And I am so sorry

They won’t let you come to my funeral
N.C. Agricultural Society Best Exhibit Award, 1900, 1” diameter circular gold medal.
Front: “N.C. Agricultural Society 40th Annual Fair,” Text circles around the Agricultural Society logo.
Back: “Awarded to Wake Forest College for Best Exhibit by any College,” Wake Forest College Medals, RG14_224
EVER ENDURETH

Ben Covington

JANUARY 30TH, 2016

I’ve always hated the way English teachers make you interpret literature. I love reading, and I love talking about things I’ve read. But the way teachers make you do it—I can’t stand it. They choose one passage out of thousands contained in a book made up of hundreds of pages and have you dissect it word by word.

“Isaiah, what do you think Hemingway means by the title, *The Sun Also Rises*?” I have no idea. Our class is one chapter into the book. I don’t even know what the plot of it is going to be, but I have to speculate on the title? Ask me three hundred pages from now, and I’d gladly answer. I have no context yet. Why would I blindly guess at this?

“I think it means that good things also happen in addition to bad ones. Because he says the sun *also* rises; the opposite of that is the sun setting, which brings darkness. And darkness is usually associated with something that is bad. Like people used to say, ‘The sun never sets on the British Empire’ because it was so
big and powerful that people felt that it would never fall or be eclipsed.”

“Interesting connection, Isaiah. I guess we’ll see if your prediction comes true.”

I’m sorry. I didn’t have the moral fiber to tell my teacher that I despise the kind of question he asked me. Can you really blame me? I’m just trying to survive the next couple weeks and finish finals with As.

The British Empire comparison was probably a little unnecessary. I recognize that, but that’s kind of what I do. It’s been a forgone conclusion for quite some time now that I’m going to grow up to be a history professor. I love history, and I’m pretty good at it—or at least that’s what people say. So it works out to be a good combination.

Honestly, I just like history because it’s easy to understand or, I guess, easy to interpret. Everything is compartmentalized into eras, ages, and movements. It’s simple. Looking back, we know the beginning of and end of something. People at the time had no idea. When people are in moments, they don’t realize the magnitude of what they’re experiencing; they are simply living another day. The passage of time is what gives us perspective.

When I was in sixth grade and some random kid walked into club basketball practice on a random Wednesday night, I had no idea that this kid would become one of my best friends. And six years later, when we somehow got into a bar as seventeen year olds without fake IDs and played darts against two strangers, I didn’t know when he closed out the bull’s-eye that we’d be talking about the “greatest darts comeback of all time” for weeks. Moments have no meaning when they are taking place. They get value once we put
them in a history. Once an experience gets a “remember when” attached to it, it starts to hold some value.

We live, we reflect, and then we try to make some sense of what everything means. So I guess that’s why I like history; it has a very familiar process.

I should probably explain what this is in the off case that someday someone other than me reads this. It’s a journal. I took the advice of my English teacher. I know I started this off criticizing him, but that criticism was meant to be more general—not just of him. My current English teacher is brilliant; he’s probably too overqualified to be a high school teacher.

I think he knows how much I hate to analyze little sections of books, so that’s why he asks me to do it. And I don’t think he wants to ask the question either; he just has to because he doesn’t get to set the curriculum or decide what is on one of the seemingly countless standardized tests we’re forced to take as students.

This piece of advice that I’m taking doesn’t have anything to do with interpreting a singular passage. I want to clarify that. I still hate doing that. But other than asking some questionable questions, Mr. Alford doesn’t do much wrong. For someone with an extremely bland last name, he is far from it. He’s a tall, dark-haired Harvard graduate that lived in Paris for two years as a waiter and looks more like he should be a bartender in a dive bar than an English teacher at a private Catholic school.

I got a little off track. Back to the advice. He recycles the same writing aphorisms over and over in class. And he even reuses the same introductions for them. The most common one starts like this:
“Don’t tell Principal Harris I told you this—or your parents.” He paused again. “But Hemingway once said, ‘Write drunk; edit sober.’” Anytime alcohol is mentioned in a room full of teenagers, laughter ensues. Mr. Alford continues, “I’m not condoning or encouraging underage drinking whatsoever. I’m just saying there’s something to that saying. Hemingway is saying that when you write, just write. Let your thoughts freely flow. Worry about making your thoughts coherent later. You write and then gain understanding, not the other way around.”

So that’s exactly what I’m doing with this journal. For probably the first time in my life, there’s something that’s happened to me that I can’t figure out by just lying in bed and thinking about it as I drift to sleep.

I’ve tried doing that with this topic, and it has been quite unsuccessful. There has yet to be a night when I have awoken from sleep gasping due to the gravity of an epiphany that just hit me. Instead, I wake to the weight of an issue left unresolved. So, I am going to listen to wise, young Mr. Alford and write.

And like any history, it makes sense to start at the beginning.

I was born in a small community hospital in central California. In the room was obviously my mom, my dad, my two older brothers, and my grandpa. I have no recollection of anything that happened that day. So I guess we can just call it my prehistory. I know it happened; I just have no record of it in my memory. Apparently, my grandpa was the third person to hold me. First my mom, then my dad, then Grandpa James.

Unfortunately, Grandpa James only exists in my prehistory. He passed away when I was two years old. And really, his life ended before that. He developed
dementia a few months after I was born. He lost the ability to recognize my mom, her sisters, and everyone he once held dear. He wasn’t himself. I never had the opportunity to meet my grandpa. He held me and loved me, but all of that occurred before I started making my first memories. He died before the arbitrary start date that exists in my mind.

My earliest memory that I can think of is actually quite boring. I vividly remember going to the grocery store with my mom and looking out the window and being completely perplexed by the moon being visible before the sun had gone down. Anything that occurred or anyone that existed in my life before that trip to the grocery store I have no recollection of. Sadly, my grandpa was relegated into this darkness. It’s unfortunate but not devastating that I don’t remember my grandpa. I never knew him, so I don’t have anything to compare my life without him to. To be quite honest, he barely crossed my mind until a few weeks ago.

My mom walked into the dark room holding a cake set ablaze with eighteen candles. I didn’t actually count the candles, but my mom doesn’t take many shortcuts, so I’m assuming there were eighteen. With each step she took, the red glow bursting forth from the candles shook, and the light danced across my mom’s face and dark brown hair that looked orange in the light. She set the cake down on the table, and faces faintly emerged from the darkness: my mom, obviously, my dad, two of my best friends. I guess they served as replacements for my two brothers who were away at college.

It was just a small celebration for my actual birthday, which was on a Tuesday and a school night. It was just cake and a few presents—absolutely nothing to complain about. My parents bought me a sweater.
It was blue, red, and grey; other than that, it’s hard to describe. Each level in the design changes; one row is dotted with diamonds, the next squares, the next waves. The other presents followed a pretty similar trend: a couple books, a sweatshirt, some dress socks. I exchanged thank yous and you’re welcomes with the respective givers of my various presents as my friends told embarrassing stories about me without revealing too much incriminating evidence to my parents. After an hour or so, they cited some reasons to head home and then did so. After they had left, my parents told me that I had one present left to open.

“We don’t really know what to make of this,” my mom said. “My dad gave it to me the day after you were born and said to give it to you on your eighteenth birthday.” As she spoke, a dark brown square box materialized from her lap onto the table. It looked like it might contain an engagement ring, but it was a little too wide and far too flat.

“What is it?” I said.

“I have no idea, honey. No one has opened it since he gave it to me. He made me promise.”

“Interesting,” I said as the box went from my mom’s hands into mine. I slowly opened the box, and the tiny silver hinges that held the lid felt fragile as I did so. The lid revealed a small, brownish-red medal that displayed the words “1952 Central Valley Agricultural Association Best Exhibit.” Resting between the medal and a bed of dark purple cloth was a small rolled piece of paper. I dug it out from under the medal that had a chain wrapped tightly around it.

I unreeled the miniature scroll with care not to rip it. I placed it onto the circular wooden table and then held the ends down so that I could read it.
Dear Isaiah,

May farmers ever endureth.

Love,

Grandpa James

So what am I supposed to make of that? I don’t know yet. That’s why I’m writing this. My grandpa has moved from my prehistory into my conscious thought with four words. *May farmers ever endureth.* What the hell does that mean?

Alright, I have four words, zero memories, and a handful of anecdotes to try to piece together what this gift is and why he gave it to me. I’ll take it step by step.

1. What is it?
2. What does the note mean?
3. Why did he give it to me?

Number one. Simple enough. I just google-searched Central Valley Agricultural Association, and it came up. It even had a Wikipedia page—even easier. Okay so, pretty much, it was a non-profit that did everything that could possibly relate to farming in the Central Valley. One of the things it was most well known for was holding fairs for high school students who set up exhibits and booths to display some research project that was related to agriculture. It was the science fair of farming. And it looks like Grandpa James, back in 1952, got first place out of everybody that participated, except in 1952 he was just James Graham, Jr., not Grandpa James.

Thus far that step has proven to be far easier than steps two and three. I’m not sure why I separated those two steps. They are pretty much asking the same question—*why?* I got the what out of the way, so now
it is time for its far more difficult interrogative cousin, *why*.

Now I will seemingly double-back on another belief I started this journal with. I hate, despise, abhor taking a passage and analyzing it word by word. I think it takes away from what the author is trying to say in the work as a whole, but Grandpa James gave me four words, so that’s about the only option I have. I have no greater context besides that grandpa won first place at a farming fair, he later went on to be a farmer (citrus), and nothing made him more furious than one of his children making him late to church on Sunday morning. It’s not much to work with.

The last word my grandpa said to me was *endureth*. So I think I am going to start there. And I know he didn’t physically say it to me. He wrote it, but what is the difference besides which verb you use? *Endureth.* It means to continue, to last. It’s a verb. The subject of the verb is *farmer*. Okay, he wants farmers to continue to exist. That’s a fairly safe bet since farmers have existed throughout all of history. Literally all of history. Actually before history. Farming preceded written records. The Agricultural Revolution caused the shift from hunter-gatherer communities to sedentary lifestyle societies. Farming was probably the first job title ever held in a non-nomadic community. Farmers have been around for a while and will probably continue to be.

That being said, farming in the U.S. has changed drastically since my grandpa was a farmer. He owned his land, worked with his brother, and had a few employees. He sold his produce to local grocery stores and markets, and any extra he took home with him. But this concept of a family farmer doesn’t really ex-
ist anymore. It’s a myth. It’s like the American Dream. We want to believe in it but know it’s largely unattainable unless absolutely perfect circumstances happen to align themselves. My grandpa knew this, though; by the time he wrote this note to me, the plight of the American farmer was already well known.

So *endureth* didn’t get me too far. I know he wants farmers to never cease to exist. Got it. But what incarnation of farmer does he mean? I think I’m getting ahead of myself. What’s the next step? Moving backwards, the next word is *ever*. I don’t think we need to go into that word too in depth for the fear of being redundant. *Ever* is simply how long good ole James wants farmers to endure. So, we’re on to *farmer*.

I think it’s probably best to tackle that word on another night. This was a good start. I think it’s actually helping me conceptualize things. Looks like Mr. Alford knows what he’s talking about.

*May farmers ever endureth.*

**February 3rd, 2016**

I said I was going to move on to *farmer* next. I apologize; I changed my mind. I don’t know why I’m apologizing; I’m essentially talking to myself. Anyway, I’m going to tackle *may* now. The word is pretty much asking for permission for farmers to continue. Who is it directed toward? God? Probably. I know he was religious. My name is his middle name, Isaiah—the Jewish prophet. I already talked about church tardiness being his pet peeve. That’s one of the few stories my mom tells about him.

So, *may* is probably directed towards God. Okay, but that’s still just a guess. It’s a pretty good one,
though; we’ll call it a hypothesis. I still have to consider other options.

Is it a plea to social forces? It could be. I talked about that a little bit earlier. Farming has dramatically changed since the fifties. He could have been acknowledging this and begging these changes to stop. Does the God vs. socio-political factors distinction really even matter that much? Both are massively powerful, unstoppable, invisible forces that have wills my grandpa was helplessly subjected to. So, no, the distinction isn’t that significant. May just reflects my grandpa shouting a desperate plea into the wind.

He shouted and for whatever reason chose me to be the only person to hear him. My ears were deaf to his words when he was alive. And now they ring with the same four words over and over.

He has to have some motivation behind this riddle. I know that he vehemently believes that farmers must continue to exist on earth. And he didn’t specify that farming must continue within the family, or in California, or the Central Valley. He just said a blanket statement. Unless he was completely motivated by a self-serving nostalgia or self-importance, he must have some belief in the good that a farmer brings to the world.

So, I’m back to asking what does my grandpa mean by farmer? And that part has me messed up.

February 7th, 2016

So my grandpa continues to haunt me from beyond the veil. I wake up and see the medal sitting on my desk peering at me. I’ve started to wear it every day hoping that with it around my neck, its meaning
might diffuse to my heart. This hasn’t happened yet, but fingers crossed.

February 11th, 2016

I can’t help but think of stars when I think of this whole situation. My grandpa has long been dead, but his light is now just reaching me. The only problem is I have no idea what his light is trying to illuminate.

February 17th, 2016

I think I’ve procrastinated long enough. It’s time to finally get to farmer. Every time I think about it, I just want to wait another day and then try to write about it. I’ve said that I’ll write about it tomorrow for about two weeks now. So I think this is long overdue.

Farmer. The first thing that pops into my head is slash-and-burn agriculture. I’m not sure what that says about me that the most destructive form of farming is the first thing I think of—people viciously cutting sections of rainforests down and then setting them ablaze, sucking the nutrients out of plants and sucking them into the ground just to fulfill the need for subsistence.

That’s probably my first thought because that’s how I’ve come to view this stupid riddle that my grandpa gave me. He didn’t even register in my mind before my eighteenth birthday. Now he’s all I think about. And the four-word note he gave me. It’s destructive. Engulfing. My energy is sucked into one area, and I just need to solve this puzzle so that I can live again.

With that, I recognize slash-and-burn agriculture is not a fair way to characterize farmers. Thank you,
grandpa, again, for being as broad as you possibly could have been. Just because some judges take bribes doesn’t mean that all judges are terrible, morally corruptible figures. I can’t start with a negative exception to the norm and then generalize. I think I need to start far broader. What do all farmers do?

They raise crops. I solved it! Just kidding, but that’s a start. Every farmer grows something in some manner. They plant, water, add manure, water some more, prune leaves and branches. As you can tell, I know nothing about farming. I don’t know what my grandpa wants from me. I can’t just go off into the woods and support myself. I’m not Thoreau. That’s not even available as an option for me, and in general it’s certainly not an option for everyone. There are too many people on this earth. We can’t all just go back to the land. I’ll never find my Walden. I’ll never own a farm. What does he want from me?

I’m off topic again. What do I know about farming? Very little, but I do know it’s a painstaking process to grow a tiny seed into a beautiful plant. Farmers facilitate growth. They nurture life.

But, they also uproot it. I’m not really sure what to make of this. Till another day.

February 18th, 2016

What would happen if farmers didn’t pick something they grow? I assume the plants would die. Father time has yet to be defeated by anything or anyone, so I’m guessing crops aren’t an exception. So maybe farmers don’t end a plant’s life; they just choose not to let its life go to waste rotting in a field. Farmers nurture the plant, help it grow, and then when it’s time, they
take it out of the ground or pick a fruit off a branch. To be cruel? No. Simply because that vegetable or fruit has some purpose it needs to fulfill. Whether it is to be eaten, or to sit in a bowl to later become the subject of a painting, it has something it needs to do instead of die alone.

Farmers nurture a plant from its adolescence into maturity and then decide that their role as caretaker has been fulfilled. The crops are picked, the roots taken from the ground, the product transported somewhere else. They part with something they had developed a relationship with for an entire season. To torture themselves? No—so that something good can come from it. The crops have a life after they leave the farm—one that exists because of the love and care of farmers. Farmers nurture and support plants. Quite literally, they allow for life to grow.

More than likely I am never going to live on a farm. But just as likely, I’ll have the chance to nurture some form of life and aid its growth somehow. However, it will probably be in a manner far different from how my grandpa did it. How am I going to do it? I have absolutely no idea, but when I figure it out, I’ll write it down. Except I won’t realize it at first. I’ll figure it out and then after some time passes, I’ll realize my discovery. And then I’ll write it down. That’s just how history works.

Grandpa, I apologize if this isn’t the conclusion you wanted me to reach. If it isn’t. You should have probably made the letter a little less open ended. Maybe one day I’ll stumble upon the true intended meaning of your letter if this isn’t it. Until then,

May farmers ever endureth.
Wooden Bowl, 1994 by Grady Butler, 5” x 5”
Bowl made in 1994 from wood from the Dutch Elm trees
that were removed from the Wake Forest plaza.
Wake Forest University. Donated by Earle J Rogers,
i saw a black crow eating road salt on the sidewalk. and i admired its selection, because it chose a nice big piece. and it carried it away in its beak, like a precious jewel. and i imagined it eating the jewel and dying mid-flight. and when it would fall and hit the sidewalk, a few hours later, a stone, disguised as a speaker, would grow out of the earth, and caw on sunny winter days.

then the small yiddish man told me that the heat of the sun in winter is called apricity. and i believed him because he has nice curls, and my hair has never held curls well. i have mousey brown hair.

i told my soulmate about apricity and he said that he has never felt the sun on winter days, but seen it through a bent vision tube. i asked him if he would ever buy me a jewel and he said he would, because when i ate it i wouldn’t die like a weak old crow. but i didn’t think that the crow was weak. it hopped towards me momentarily, and looked at my eyes. and i looked
at its eyes, but i couldn’t find them because they were black too. but in that moment i think we made an agreement that i feared him, and that he would always eat a poisonous jewel for me.

i asked my soulmate what he thought about being afraid. and he said he didn’t know what i meant because he said that his life is an extension of his self. i guess what he meant was that his self has never felt fear, and so his life is fearless. but, what i think really happened is that i never asked my soulmate about fear. i am afraid of him. this is all jouska.

LATER

i have returned to the same location inside of a library six times. i sit in a wooden box and overhear the shuffling of an incomplete set of playing cards. through the four walls of the box and one set of cards, i have watched a different, disjointed scene of the same movie which presumably details the origins of cosmogony.

the small yiddish man reminds me that cosmogony has a soft g not a hard g because the cosmos can’t go anywhere. and my soulmate laughs because he believes that we can all go somewhere, because there are men that live in a tin can in space, attached to another tin can somewhere in a tropical desert by a length of string. this suggests that my soulmate is the cosmos, or that he thinks he is the cosmos. the length of the string is a military secret.
i was not sure what any military secret was, but i asked my soulmate to tell me his secrets. but he did not want to share them with me because there is a very delicate balance between possibility and necessity. any disturbance in this would inspire him to do acts of senseless violence. but i knew that all his actions were meaningful. and since he may be the cosmos, i was worried about grey matter. i wondered if he would caulk the seams of the universe with it because he likes the color grey and thinks it’s becoming to people with mousey brown hair. but a lot of the conversations we have actually are just a lot of yeahs going back and forth. so what i think happened is that my soulmate might be a liar, and that i think yeah.

i asked the small yiddish man to help me decide if my soulmate is a liar, and he said he would always help me find liars because some of the things he does are hopefully meaningless. and i knew this because he got down from his higher realm perch, and drew a line through himself. i wasn’t sure why he drew a line through himself. but i know that erasure is the only way he can deal with anemoia.

LATER

my soulmate told me that he liked that I spent time in wooden boxes and told me that he would like to build a wooden box, so that i could stay inside of it forever. i have never liked it when my soulmate confines me.

i thought about how all wooden things were alive once, and that thought bore into my heart. i asked the small yiddish man what he thought about wood and he said
that he has a complicated relationship with wood. i like to look at the small yiddish man because his eyes are inlaid with a silent galaxy that begins with a hard g.

the small yiddish man told me that we would soon be removed from each other. and i looked at his eyes. and i did not fear him. and i smiled because i wanted him to know i thought he was lying, but i knew he was truthful, so i smiled even more deeply into my soul.

someone once told me, in a room full of people, that the soul is the product of a radiant flare in ordinary life. i haven’t decided if this is truthful, so i asked the small yiddish man what he thought about his soul, and he said he contracted a case of rubatosis from his soul, and that they no longer speak to each other. i asked him what medicine he had been prescribed, and he looked at me and didn’t speak. and then he said that a man dressed as a yellow periscope handed him a poisonous jewel as treatment.

i asked the small yiddish man if he had ever heard of anyone else that had come down with a case of rubatosis. and he told me he had. they call it dutch elm disease.

LATER, AGAIN

my soulmate had always seen opportunity in the small yiddish man. i told my soulmate that he should not see opportunity in the small yiddish man because i thought for a moment that he might be a heavenly host. and then my soulmate told me the small yiddish man just lives in a tin can in the sky. then I remembered
that maybe the small yiddish man may have known too much about the macrocosm, and that he might just live in the sky. but i knew that my soulmate was wrong.

when i finally knew that my soulmate was wrong, the small yiddish man swallowed a poisonous jewel. and the yellow periscope appeared at this moment. and i know that my soulmate and the yellow periscope seemed to be very similar in stature.

the small yiddish man cradled my face in his palms and bore into my heart. starved rib cages appeared like a textile across the small yiddish man’s skin and he dug his feet into the cosmos. and in that moment i think that the small yiddish man became the axis mundi. gravity sounds like a beetle rushing into the core of all being.

**EVEN LATER**

i wondered if the small yiddish man could have been the pillar of the world. but my soulmate told me that the small yiddish man would not remember me, and that if he did, the small yiddish man must have been a pillar of salt.

my soulmate gave me a gift today of a wooden bowl, not a wooden box. i asked him where he got the wood to make the bowl and he said he found it in the connective area between heaven and earth. i looked at the wooden bowl and i thought of the small yiddish man. and my soulmate placed me in the bowl. i am happy that it cradles me.
WFU Tobacco Road Classic Champion, Wake Forest University, 1989, 8” x 11.5” x 30”, Trophy—Black and gold. Three columns, three gold eagles, gold basketball. Topped by gold woman basketball player figure, Basketball—1980–1990, Wake Forest University, Demon Deacons (Basketball team), RG14_086
“Well, I think it was because some mud got on the sheets. I couldn’t remember exactly. In any case, she was such a sweet girl. They should rot in hell . . .”

Yitian lost her mother before she could finish. She quickly made an excuse and ran for her bedroom. This was not how she would like to be reminded of Wei. She did not see this coming when she just casually asked about why Wei left their elementary school so abruptly. The reason had always been a mystery. Right before dinner her curiosity rose out of the blue. And she figured her mother would finally tell her after all these years. But she surely did not want this; she wished she hadn’t asked in the first place. That stupid time “would whittle away everything” idiom is completely bullshit. And finally she started to wonder who should rot in hell.

She was pretty sure that she and Lian should.

The three of them—Lian, Wei, and Yitian—were best friends during first grade. More aptly put, they were best friends until the third quarter of the second semester. As soon as the seventy-five percent of second semester was over, Wei was out of the clique. And
when the first year was over, Wei had gone. Back then they could easily justify alienating, even bullying, Wei. Need they mention that it was Lian who betrayed their friendship first? And there was the weird system, according to which they shouldn’t even be hanging out at all. In 2000s China, elementary schools didn’t divide students into advisories and have each student have a different schedule. Instead, students were divided into classes, and those who were in the same class shared one schedule. The government claimed that this way would help instill a strong sense of unity in each of the classes, which would help pupils develop good personalities. But at the beginning, the three of them defied the classification system. Although Wei was in a different class (Class Two) than Lian and Yitian, who belonged to Class One, they became good friends.

They even made a promise that nothing should come in between them, not even the Little Olympics, which was an annual sporting event that much resembled the actual Olympic Games. It used to happen after the midterms of the second semester. Little Olympic sports mainly consisted of athletics: 50 metres, 200 metres, 400 metres, 800 metres, and 4x100 metres relay. But instead of having a country as a unit, a class formed a unit. For parity, of course, only classes of the same grade (there were about five for each grade) competed against each other. And instead of giving out medals, only one trophy was awarded for the class that won the most races in its pertaining group. So one trophy for a grade. Even so, the school recycled the trophy because it had to cut the budget.

All three of them remained relatively calm during their first-ever Little Olympics. But even to this day, Yitian could still recall her ecstasy after her class won the trophy. She was head-over-heels rapturous, climb-
ing up and down like a monkey that entered its mon-
key-equivalent jungle heaven. Those days she went to
bed with the thought of the trophy. *We won a trophy!*
A golden *trophy* with three golden baby eagles on it! Of
course she had a hard time focusing in classes. Focus-
ing was beyond her ability when that precious trophy
was proudly displayed in the class cabinet. Of course in
English class she pointed at herself when she thought
Miss Wang asked who had the trophy. (“Which char-
acter’s name was Sophie?”) But she knew that as soon
as the school year was over, Class One had to let it go.

She didn’t want to let go. She couldn’t. And she
was relieved when she found out that Lian felt exactly
the same way.

“We *have* to keep it,” Lian said.

“I have an idea.”

They figured that the school had to get a new re-
placement if the one they had was gone. And if the
school had a new one for first grade, it wouldn’t need
the old one. If only they could find a safe place to hide
it, a place that only they would know.

In hindsight, the safe spot was probably the first
place that all elementary kids would think of if they
wanted to hide a trophy. It was a bush in the hill be-
hind their Welcome Center where nearly every ele-
mentary boy had gone to for an adventure. Voilà—the
naïvety of first graders!

The plan did not retain its complete secrecy. Lian
and Yitian eventually confessed to Wei what they had
done, but they minded to leave out the location of the
safe spot. Although Wei said she would find the trophy
and report them to teachers, they weren’t worried at
all.
Yitian remembered everything up until this point. What happened after that was a blur. And she could barely make out the event that happened later in the second semester that stirred up the whole town: some fifth graders were expelled. She just knew that it was an avalanche of events, individual pieces to a puzzle. She and Lian couldn’t find the trophy. They asked Wei. They were punished for losing the trophy. They cried. They were hated by the whole Class One. They asked Wei. They blurted out their first swear word of their lives. (“Bitch!”) They pulled her hair on the playground. They kicked her. They slapped her in the face.

Rewind. Did they hate her because they were sure it was Wei who lost the trophy? No. Fuck no. They hated her because she wouldn’t say anything. Bitch was stern as a bull.

Yitian wondered if Lian knew what had actually happened. She wondered if she would be relieved if Lian felt the exact same guilt and remorse. She felt the sudden urge to find out where Wei was now. She would apologize. But what good would it do? How could she make it up to Wei? Let Wei slap her in her face?

Of course Yitian’s mother was as appalled as Yitian imagined Wei’s mother was when her daughter told her that some fifth graders used branches to poke her vagina. Yes, fucking branches. According to Wei, she was wandering in the woods when she saw some older students messing around with the first grade trophy. And they would give it back to her if only she agreed to be part of their “experiment.” They had her lift her dress and strip her underwear, and they picked up broken tree branches mired in soil. And Wei wasn’t planning to tell if her mother hadn’t found it strange that there were dark stains on Wei’s bed sheets, dark
stains which led her mother to dig out the underwear she hid under the mattress.

“She dropped the trophy when she ran back to her house,” Lian wrote in reply to Yitian’s e-mail. So she found out, too. A bit ahead of Yitian.

How do people define friendship? Sharing secrets? Funny that they, in some way, were still a clique after all.
“The Arch” framed print by Tom Olive, 1973, 10” x 13”
A wooden frame with a picture of the Wake Forest University Arch in black and white, Removed from the Percival Perry Papers, MS 661
Oh, how weak he felt. The sweat trickled down the side of his face as he realized what was to come. He was no longer able to move his arms or lift his legs. He understood that this was it. His body was preparing to go numb. Death had pinned him to the mat.

His eyes rolled across the room. He focused first on how beautiful his wife looked after all the years. She slept so peacefully in the recliner next to his bed. It was incredible how she could sleep on a night like this, but he reasoned that it was because she knew that he would be alright. His faith wasn’t as strong as hers, but he still found comfort in knowing that she would be alright too.

His eyes drifted over to the framed sketch hanging next to the door. The wood frame contained his favorite creation from college. A walkway surrounded by beautiful trees led up to the stone arch. In bold letters, the motto Pro Humanitate beckoned its audience into the sketch. He began to reflect on his past work. It wasn’t the work that captivated him, but the beautiful memories that began to flood his mind. Positive and
negative, wonderful and dispiriting, he remembered every emotion fondly.

He no longer had the strength to speak, though he still turned to his love and decided to clear his heart through his mind.

_I remember the first day we walked under that arch together. What a beautiful day. Waves of pink clouds flowed within the mesmerizing blue of the Carolina sky. You could see right into my heart. It was in that moment that I decided to make the jump between the life we live and the life that we restrict to our dreams. I took your hand as we crossed under that arch. Lost in your presence, I forgot about the steps and fell to the pavement. I thought that I ruined the moment. But you forgave my fall just as you forgave each of them that I made in my life._

_It was under that arch, four years later, when I decided to take another leap. I felt every dark chamber within my being begin to glow when I looked into your eyes, just like the day we met. I decided to jump one more time. I kneeled down underneath that arch and took your hand. I dropped the ring down the steps. My anxious hands couldn’t conduct the harmony that flowed between us. But the ring finally made it onto your hand, and I knew that it would remain until the night came._

_He looked at the ring that was still on her finger. How fortunate he was to find such love in his life, someone stronger who could lift him up from the despair that threatened to drown him throughout his life. He only wished that he could express how undeserving he was of such a soulmate._

_His eyes moved back to the arch, and he continued to reflect. He remembered holding his young son’s_
hand as they walked down the path of his alma mater. Trees created a cover over the path, the bright light finding its way through the leaves to the dark concrete. His son waddled his way down the path, tripping every few steps. He smiled each time he fell because he knew his dad’s arms would come sweeping down to pick him back up.

His eyes rolled back to the chair at the foot of his bed. His son had finally found the peace to sleep. All night, he had been pacing back and forth, his face hardened with frustration. His chest was tight, for his heart was bracing for the devastating impact of the grief. This anticipation had been tearing at his soul for months, but tonight was finally the time when his spirit would be liberated. His father knew that he no longer needed those arms to pick him up from the path. He believed that his death would not crush his son. The heartbreak would never truly heal. The space in his being would never be filled. But in that space, a passion would spark—a love for life that would fuel his journey until his night came as well.

His gaze drifted back to the arch. He couldn’t help but meditate on the dark experiences. The freezing nights where he would meander around campus, searching for his purpose. He would walk for hours, tears coming sporadically. College was the gateway to the path that would lead his life. So intimidating it was to look down that path and only see the fog. Every action he took threatened the perfect destination that he couldn’t see. He always seemed to drown in his expectations. He just wanted to know how to make the most out of what he was given. The brevity pained him. So little time to find the passion that would foster a meaningful life. He remembered sitting underneath the arch to stare up at the stars and find his purpose.
Some nights he found it, but it still managed to leave him not too long after. He encountered questions there too, which became permanent fixtures in his mind.

His mind wandered back to the present. What had he lived for? His accolades were dispersed around his room: master’s degrees, published works, and photos with those that he considered most influential. What really mattered? Was it enough that he had provided his family a comfortable life? He tried to devote his life to service, but was that enough? What a time to contemplate. He closed his eyes, as they were starting to feel quite heavy under the morphine. So many questions left unanswered.

As he started to drift to his eternal sleep, he was awoken by the thoughts of his daughter. He looked toward the mantle and saw her picture. A radiant smile that couldn’t describe the love that shined through her personality. There was an aura that lived on from the picture frame, despite her passing several years before. His mind was still tortured by her death. What he would give to have just a few more moments with her.

While her responsibility was to teach reading and writing, she lived to spread compassion. She lit up her classrooms with a smile and welcomed every shy soul in with a welcoming voice. What drove her was the purpose to empower every child that stepped into her life. What took her was the senseless mistake of one distracted driver. The injustice tortured him. How often we struggle to accept the absurdity, and how easily we dwell on the thoughts of what could have been. It’s a different kind of dream, not of a nightmare, nor of a paradise, but of an unknown path filled with uncertainties. He had to accept that all the answers wouldn’t come to him tonight.
He looked at the sketch one more time, remembering the day he created it. He drew the arch, remembering the glowing mornings with his love, as well as the empty nights that made him feel so alone. A pencil sketch would do. He wanted the mind to put the colors on the page. The focal point was not the motto, but the winding path. Shade hid the destination from the audience, symbolizing the uncertainty that both excited and plagued him.

Remembering how he designed his favorite work, he was reminded of what it meant to him. Pro Humanitate, as the arch reads, will not give one purpose nor deliver one solution to the absurd life we live. It is a reminder that while we embark down the paths of uncertainty, we will never be lost. We are all connected—every emotion and every spirit.

*My path was never clear, my goals never certain. I will never know where the path could have led. What matters is that I loved every step for all that it was. Pain, comfort, hope, and depression—I embraced them all. Family, friends, adversaries—I let them all in.*

With this in his mind, he scanned the room one last time. He understood Kurtz’s horror, and gratefully never felt it. He allowed his heavy eyes to close one last time. A sweet paralysis began to sweep his body. He did not feel the freezing sweat anymore. Instead, he felt the brilliant warmth from his inner spirit. His fist clenched one last time. He felt the victory over death flow through his body triumphantly. The breath ceased, but the spirit continued to thrive in the souls in the room. The sunrise beamed through the window in the morning, and the spirit was reflected back. The
pain would last long, but so would the spark of appreciation for the human experience.

The mother embraced her son, who was reluctantly ready to embark on the next experience. Through his pain, he asked, “Where do we go from here, mom?” Through tears, she spoke for all of humanity. “It hurts, I know. Accept the pain, because one day it will help you to embrace the happiness. Have compassion for those that you share the experience with, because they are all we have. I know that there are many miles left on our path, son. But never forget, we all walk them together.”
Samuel Wait, Wooden Cane. 2” x 34”
Light wood finish with polished wooden handle.
Wait, Samuel, 1789–1867. Wake Forest College.
Samuel Wait, the namesake of Wait Chapel at Wake Forest University, walked with a cane at some point in his old age. This cane supported him in doing what some would call a fundamental part of living, and though his ability to walk by himself slowly left him, he was still considered to be a great man according to his peers and those following after him. His cane was a physical symbol of a physical weakness he had. What if he had a physical signifier for each of his internal weaknesses? Perhaps a sign on his forehead that displayed his very human and understandable doubt in his devotion to his Baptist faith? That would not be good; as a Baptist minister he needed to be strong and display to those to whom he ministered that his strength came from God, that his faith was as close to unwavering as possible. I obviously never spoke with or became close to Samuel Wait—he lived during the 19th century—but I do know that as a human being, he had certain weaknesses. I argue that these weaknesses, troubles, and doubts, and how we choose to deal with them, are great signs of human character. With struggle comes greatness, and vice versa.
Do you have an emotional crutch? No? Well, all of the greats did. Who are these “greats” I refer to? All of us, of course. All of humankind. We do great things. We are there for our friends, families, and significant others. People we do not even know—we are there for them at a moment’s notice. Not only do we have crutches of our own, but we also serve as the crutches of those around us.

Do I have any crutches? Of course I do, but I do not like to think of them that way—not in the way they are commonly looked at, as signs of great weakness. I think the only way we can succeed in being resilient, in getting by every day, in choosing to wake up, in putting our shoes on and tying the laces (God forbid I put them on one time without having to bend down), is by giving in to that crutch, that guilty pleasure that helps us out.

Do not fear—this does not mean you need to go to a rehabilitation facility so that you can lead a “normal” life amongst those smiling—or glowering—faces in magazines. A crutch, according to Dr. Sherman from *Psychology Today*, is simply an object, person, place, which humans rely on when feeling particularly vulnerable.¹ Now, this vulnerability he mentions has absolutely nothing to do with your lack of strength or your ability to handle what life so insensitively throws at you. Vulnerability is more like the feeling you have after something traumatic, sad, or upsetting happens in your life. A breakup. Dissatisfaction in your job or school. The death of a loved one, or even trying to deal with the death of your postman with whom you previously enjoyed exchanging smiles. Life. Life makes us vulnerable. If you are truly living your life, you have opened yourself up to be vulnerable at some point. This door of vulnerability is like Pandora’s box; once it
is opened, the damage is done. There’s really no going back. Of course, we do have hope in this world, contrary to what the Greeks believed about its final fate.²

A crutch is not what it has been made out to be; it is not, in actuality, a bed on which we lie the entirety of our beings. When a crutch becomes something to rest on and depend completely on to never let you down, it is no longer something that holds you up; it has become something that lets you sink down into it. Any addictive substance, which originally began as a crutch, easily transforms into a bed. A friend who you confide in is a person you can imagine as a literal medical crutch—something that helps you slowly stand up again. A bed does not help you stand up. Anyone who has ever had an 8 a.m. class knows that a bed does not assist you in standing. A crutch does.

So, now that you understand what a crutch is, or at least what my understanding of a crutch is, do you still feel ashamed of your crutches? I know that it is still hard for me to confront my own crutches. Music is a crutch of mine. This is a good thing—most of the time. Putting energy into learning a new instrument: good. Keeping your earphones in throughout your entire city bus commute to school and up to the moment your teacher starts talking: not so good. This is not a judgment against those wonderfully artistic future music composers of the world. Missing out on the sounds of the world cannot only be a safety hazard. (Hello—do drivers nowadays even pay attention to stop signs?) It also takes away from a huge aspect of connecting with your environment. Yes, I did use to keep my earphones in up until a teacher started talking. And yes, my passion for music has led to learning how to play a couple of instruments. But I know that my listening to music obsessively had nothing to do with this correla-
tion. Sure, I knew which songs I wanted to learn once I got the basics of guitar down, but blocking out the world around me was a lot more about actively choosing to make myself unavailable.

Unavailable to criticism, to facing the reality of a single mother on the bus with her three children. Unavailable to my feelings of doubt when it came to my ability to contribute to the world I come from. Unavailable to the other kids from my school who were also subject to riding the city bus in to school. Unavailable to my own thoughts, afraid to confront what may be lurking in the depths of my mind.

I feel like growing up in the city—a big, truly urban city like San Diego, the one I grew up in—can do this to you. Walking amongst hundreds of strangers as you wait for the trolley or bus to reach one of thousands of destinations in your city really makes you aware of how small you are. This is a good thing, as it makes us city kids grounded in reality. But it also forces you to put on different hats. At school, you put on the hat that is, in my case, made up of storytelling during breaks, dedication to my schoolwork, and eagerness to please my teachers. At home, I put on the hat that signifies that I am a daughter and a sister. When riding the city bus in between my two main destinations, I put on my hat that readied me for wearing my resting bitch face. We all know what that is—locked jaw, dead eyes, slightly raised eyebrows. It’s not inviting. But this hat that I put on, along with the earphones I happily put in, heightened my survival instinct but took away my sensing of emotion and my connection to the world around me. I was more than aware of the individuals present around me, more than willing to walk faster or change seats in order to avoid those who made me feel unsafe. But on this sometimes two-hour-
long commute home, I was devoid of any recognition of how my day had been. Even if I had had a terrible day, I knew there was no way I would cry or express my frustration while on the bus and trolley. It had to wait until I returned home, and even then sometimes I would only take my earphones out for dinner, listening to music all the way up to the moment when I partially fell asleep. And only then did I decide I could not sleep with their annoying presence in my ears. Listening to my music throughout the entirety of middle school and a good chunk of high school was a major crutch for me.

I remember a really funny kid I graduated high school with, Jose. For the first three years I would see him walk into the various common areas according to our grade level, and he always had his earphones in. Jose would wear his earphones and still participate in conversation. I wondered every time I saw this how he did it. How could he hear anything? It was not until the end of my junior year that I, while joking around with him, pulled the cord out of his pocket. Too my surprise, it resisted very little. Finally, at the end of the cord, I saw nothing. No iPod, phone, or mp3 player. He was not actually listening to anything. At the time, we both started laughing about it; the whole idea of him listening to nothing really tickled us. Now I see that for him, whether he listened to his music on his commute or not, leaving his earphones in achieved precisely the same goal it did for me: it made us unavailable, seemingly invincible to the obstructions and hard truths we faced.

How does this make us great? How does anything really make anyone great? Sure, measurable success in academia or a profession is a good indicator. But surely we, as an American society, root for the under-
dogs, the ones who had to overcome the most in order to reach certain heights. In articles about these “special” people, their crutches are hardly noted. Even in speeches given at award shows, the “little” people in the winners’ lives are mentioned for only a moment. Their names are stated quickly in order to avoid hurt feelings once the cameras are gone. Very rarely do these accomplished individuals who are in the public eye divulge what or who their crutches are. This hiding of their crutches, and essentially their weaknesses, is what makes day-to-day confrontation of our own that much harder.

This is not an official call to action, like protesting or writing to your state officials, but rather a call to accept our crutches as something that can be healthy. We must find strength and hope in our crutches. If we live without an understanding of our own human nature, we risk completely losing ourselves and our identities. Who are we without our struggles which help shape our character?

Notes:


Wake the Demons pin. 2” x 2.” A small white circular pin with an inscription in black: “Wake the Demons WF”
TO EXCAVATE A BEAST

Natalie Jacqueline Casimir

Here comes the sleeping giant
Whose hands are idle not.
He searches through his pliant victims
And wakes them with their thoughts.

He takes them to Olympus,
And shows them to the gods
Who lay ambrosia and nectar
In a feast before the frauds.

Those who have their pallets blessed
Are doomed to interim hell
Where they face their demons in a waltz
Guided by a knell.

Round and round the victims go,
In dreams of black and white,
Slowly do the demons pierce
Their partners bite by bite.

Chronos and Nyx make careless love
In the darkness of the fete
While Eros and Ananke
Have gone to find their sate.

Soon the music ceases—
The chosen stand before their beasts
And upon open lids discover
They have yet to leave the feast.

Their eyes forever open,
Demons awakened by the dance;
The chosen have been given
A god-sent second chance.
Freshman Beanie, Class of 1910. 1910. 5” x 5” x 3.5”.
Black cloth with gold “WFC” lettering.
Fragile and worn, several holes. Hats. Wake Forest College.
I wake up to the sun shining through the pecan-colored blinds covering my bedroom’s window. With sensitive eyes, I roll over to face the room and squint at the surroundings. My carpet, walls, fish bowl, and pile of dirty laundry are illuminated with the orange glow of the new day. Last night’s homework binge is sprawled across my desk. A colorful assortment of candy wrappers, pens, notebooks, and a dirty coffee mug stare at me.

I glance at my watch.

7:23 a.m. I peevishly throw my blanket off of my body, exposing my bare flesh to the cold morning air. Goosebumps rise on my arms and back. I sit up and swing my legs over the side of my bed. With an astounding display of mental fortitude, I sigh and plant my feet on my carpet. I curl my toes at the initial stimulus of the carpet’s coarse texture. Shivering, I fumble with the blinds’ tilt wand and extinguish the sun’s greeting. Relieved, I shuffle back and return to the warm embrace of my comforter and wool throw blanket.

8:30 a.m. I wake up to the ring of my alarm clock.
Strategically placed across the room, the silver clock shimmers and taunts me. My introduction to ethics class starts in thirty minutes. I get out of bed again and shut off the alarm with as much spite as I can muster. I drop my boxers, wrap myself in a towel, and quickly shuffle down the hallway to shower and brush my teeth. I make it a point to aim the shower head directly at my face in a final attempt to gain the necessary strength to face the day.

8:46 a.m. I drag myself back to my room. I throw on grey corduroys, a denim shirt, my peacoat, and my black and gold beanie from orientation week. In addition to a target, the freshman beanie serves as an effective substitute to combing my hair.

8:50 a.m. My scuffed chukka boots hit the frigid concrete with purpose. I think to myself, “I really oughta polish these.” I’ve consistently been arriving to class fashionably late, and my professor hasn’t appreciated any of it.

8:58 a.m. I nod at Professor Harley as I stroll into class and take my usual seat in the back of the stuffy room. She returns the nod with her signature stodgy glare. Her stare reminds me of the grain in the wood of my seat. The endless patterns of wrinkles and blemishes in her archaic skin are possibly the most interesting things about this woman. The walls are lined floor to ceiling with mahogany bookshelves. The scent of rotting book leather and wood fill the room. The combination of the smells and Harley’s droning voice are enough to send any mortal man back into slumber.

9:32 a.m. “MR. STEWART!” says Professor Harley, shrieking. I had nodded off in class, and of course she notices. “Care to answer the question?” I, of course, had no idea what the woman was talking
about, and my head is still spinning from the quick transition from rest to absolute terror. If Cambridge taught Harley anything, it was the art of classic British ridicule. Her glare evolved from stone to the barrel of a shotgun. “I—I don’t know, professor—I . . .” I stammer and squirm for a few moments. Harley simply shakes her head and calls on a different student, this one in the front of the class.

10:15 a.m. Class is dismissed. I grab my things and scuttle quickly back to my dorm. I avoid eye contact with Harley as much as possible. As if getting called on in class wasn’t bad enough, I still had to walk past her ghostly sneer.

10:18 a.m. Frustrated, I speed walk across campus, cursing myself for pulling a typical “freshman move.” At this point, I have reached my boiling point and want nothing but to return to my bed and forget this horrible morning. Not even the beauty of the ivy-covered brick buildings faze my internal festering.

10:21 a.m. While thinking about the morning’s blunder I step in a puddle and manage to soak my pants up to my ankle. “GOD DAMMIT!” I slam my backpack on the ground in front of me before grabbing my beanie and flinging it across the quad as far as I can. My first existential meltdown happens right then and there. Like a firecracker I start shouting and shaking my fist at the sky. Turns out college is a lot harder than I thought.

The worst part of this day? It’s only Monday.
Glass object marking 5th year of T.K. Hearn, Jr.’s presidency. 1988. 2.5” x 7.5.” A glass trophy in the shape of a spear that sits on top of a stand that reads: “Thomas K. Hearn, Jr. to make the fifth year of his presidency 1983–1988, The Board of Trustees Wake Forest University”
Two slaves walked into The Pit, gingerly carrying between them a long, hallowed ceramic pipe, careful not to let their sweat reveal weariness.

“Petoys, here.” Timmose beckoned with an open hand, accepting the pipe twice as long as his arm. He didn’t bother to glance out at the servants’ direction; he had briefed them numerous times over the past month about the task at hand. This time, Timmose knew he would succeed.

Rather, he had locked his gaze into the fire, The Pit. If he had stood at its center, its red and yellow flames would have easily reached his navel. Instead, hours ago he had placed three large, almost interlocking cinders at the bottom of the recession in the ground, magnifying and trapping the heat at its core without putting out the fire.

Sometimes, the fires would speak to Timmose. Sometimes, he would see his eyes of his grandfather, Tutmose, also fixed in concentration, also glancing into the fire. It had been Tutmose who, after preparing food for foot soldiers ahead of the Battle of Megid-
do against the forces of the King of Kadesh, noticed something special hidden in the ashes of the fire he had created.

It shone. The ground shone. The sands at Karnak near Canaan shone. The gods had delivered beauty ahead of near-apocalyptic bloodshed and victory. And thus, it was spoken the fate of Timmose, and his sons Tikmose and Tismose, and their sons Timmose and Trishmose: to recreate this precious material from sand.

Timmose plodded through pain towards the cinders on a path of stones that led straight to the heart of The Pit, balancing himself with the clay pipe held with both of his hands.

If you could see Timmose, skin dark from a life touched by fire, a fourth family member, eyes fixed intently on the mass hidden in between the cinders, you wouldn’t be faulted for believing the sweat dripping from his forehead came from the incinerator ahead of him. That thought, while logical, would be incorrect.

Timmose sweated because he knew he had no more chances. He sweated because he, as he could see clearly in the flames of the chamber, had lived his whole life as an artisan in the shadow of his cousin, Trishmose, and his family. He sweated because he knew if this effort failed, his family would be expelled as a failure to the South Kingdom, where they would be enslaved, or worse.

All this hinged on a bet. Timmose knew he could never beat Trishmose’s technical ability to create the black, glazed material that both of their families spent their lives creating. The shiny material was later fashioned into beads and jewelry for the ruling family. More than once he had the idea of injuring if not
outright killing Trishmose. However, he knew that the retribution by the community against his family would be far worse.

Timmose reached the cinders. He stuck the ceramic pole into The Pit’s center, spinning it by flicking his wrists, accumulating molten material at the end of the pipe. The fire continued to flicker.

When Timmose was a child apprenticing under his father, he noticed once the batch of precious material, created while a sandstorm raged outside The Pit, had waves within it. And at the crest of each of these waves, the opaque blackness of the material receded and instead had become translucent, if not transparent, at its very edge.

Young Timmose couldn’t help but trace with his small hands the progression of the waves on the young stone. In fact, the uncolored, sharp waves fascinated him so much he didn’t notice the blood from the cuts on his fingers until they were dripping down past his wrist. He looked up and saw his father screaming.

That was the last time for a while that he was able to handle the product—not until his father knew Timmose knew better.

Well, now father was gone, and Timmose lifted the hallowed ceramic spear from between the cinders. A head of molten material dripped off, but was quickly cooling, off the other side. Timmose kept spinning the pipe, forcing the molten head to assume a circular shape.

Petoys frowned. “Master, how could your own breath ever—”

“Petoys, silence.” Timmose leveled the pipe, put it to this mouth, and slowly exhaled.
Petoys and Teksis clenched their fists. Failure for Timmose meant failure for them too. And they had seen Timmose repeat this circus act—dipping a pipe into the molten sand and using his breath to mold it—three times in the past week. Failure under normal circumstances would have meant the duo fashioning and firing a new ceramic pipe, and at this point heading back to the fields of Karnak near Canaan to gather more of its particular sand, as the sand outside never seemed to melt.

But these weren’t normal circumstances. And Petoys and Teksis didn’t believe that Timmose could change this sand into anything but black, glossy stone. They had never seen a different result occur in their lifetimes with Tikmose and then his son.

Timmose kept breathing into the pipe. The molten head began to bubble and expand. Good, Timmose remarked to himself. I’ve been here before . . .

Suddenly, déjà vu struck him. Right now Timmose would try to breath out one more time, to force the molten sand at the tip of the spear to expand and turn translucent. However, each and every time the bubble would expand quickly and then pop and collapse. And then Timmose would throw the pipe into the cinder and fall into a fit of rage, again.

This time though, it will be different, Timmose promised himself. He focused intently on the pipe in his hand. This time when he exhaled, he kept spinning the rod, preventing the weight of the expanding stone from shifting to any one end. Immediately after the material had bubbled, he immediately dipped it back into the fire to keep it malleable. He repeated this without so much as flinching.
At least that’s how he started. Timmose was not a god and, subsequently, the visions from the fire began again—although Petoys and Teksis simply saw this as Timmose about to pass out, still in the middle of The Pit. They ran in, disappointed that their master had failed, again. At least in the past, Petoys ruminated as he gripped Timmose’s torso, he could walk himself out of The Pit.

Teksis grabbed the clay pipe from Timmose’s flailing arms and helped drag him out of the fire chamber. Timmose wasn’t breathing when they were finally outside The Pit.

“All this, for what?” Petoys griped. “At least he could have sold his workshop before his cousin comes soon to banish all from this land.”

“Petoys, I think—”

“Timmose could never simply focus on the task at hand; he was always distracted by this and that. That is why he consistently failed against Trishmose. His father knew much better than to wander away from what clearly worked.”

“Well, Petoys, if you’d just—”

“Now we are all doomed. Timmose now has nothing to offer up to his ancestors. The gods will not be merciful and—”

“Petoys! Look at the end of this pipe! We need to take this to the pharaoh’s court immediately.” Teksis pointed to the crystal bulb at the end of the ceramic rod. The Pit had given birth to a treasure. Timmose had created transparent glass.
Part II

Tim Mose balked. Z. S. Reynolds, sitting across Mose’s cedar desk on a wooden stool, kept his composure, and his new top hat, in place. He knew Tim would be recalcitrant in the face of his request, but he wasn’t expecting outright repudiation.

“Forgive me, Mr. Reynolds. While I’m flattered with your admiration for my glasswork, I assure you, your request could easily be handled by some other dilettante who pedals glass for industrial purposes. As for me, you know where the eye of my glassblowing and workshop remains.” Mose gestured, pointing to a cabinet full of glass vases and handiworks. Some were black, others white, transparent, or at least translucent. Jars, figures, containers of glass, porcelain, and glossed ceramic lined the wooden shelves feet away from the brim of Mr. Reynolds’s hat.

Mr. Reynolds gazed blankly into the open arms of two sculpted cherubim, voluptuous in their proportions and ringed by long enamel wings. In the middle of the two figures lay the metallic basin of a silver-tin mirror, the epitome of its kind of craft, normally available only among the artisans along the canals of Venice. In London, only John Hollinsworth and one other glassmaker could pull off such a feat. Hollinsworth, of course, thanks to the London Company, had set off for the New World to set up glassmaking operations there. And Mr. Reynolds found himself uncomfortably seated in the workshop of the other glassmaker.

“For the record, Mr. Mose, I will repeat what I stated earlier: Her Majesty’s Kingdom, England, is scientifically falling behind to the likes of the Dutch who employ tools far beyond what anyone else on the continent of Europe can even imagine. If we could just—”
“Please, grab your coat on the way out.” Tim got up from his chair at the office and walked in the direction of the door leading to the glasshouse. He didn’t bother to look back at Z.S., although, halfway out the door, said, “And Zachariah, please close the door softly on the way out—wouldn’t want any of my creations falling over, now would we?”

* * *

Tim Mose’s family had been glassmakers as far back as the church records went, hundreds of years into England’s past. Beyond that, Tim knew that his family counted themselves among the original Anglo-Saxon settlers of Britain, and before that, Germanic tribes from further south in Europe. Before that? Who knew. His surname might as well have been glass.

Tim, like a monk completing his daily prayer ritual, once again hunched over with a small shovel to scoop from different buckets minerals to pour into the heated kiln. Limestone, soda ash, and sand—these were the secret ingredients of a truly talented artist, Tim knew. All the public ever saw was the final product, in all its glory and technical feat, on display as if summoned by magic.

One thing he couldn’t fathom were people’s increasingly frequent insistence that Tim stick his neck into science. Why would he waste his time doing that? Tim knew well the other glassmakers in London, that dreary city, who slaved away producing trinkets for the wealthy scientists and experimenters who seemed to have a newfound fascination with what glass and other materials could do for them.

It’s true, Tim thought, chuckling to himself, he too was at the mercy of patrons. The local aristocracy
funded his glass shop. However, he created *art*, not toys for ploddingly annoying adults.

* * *

Finally back home at his estate between Cambridge and London proper, Mr. Reynolds sipped tea as he waited on his house servants to bring out supper. It had been a long day, a fact exacerbated by the carping nature of Tim Mose. If only he realized the power he held in his skill . . .

The Royal Society of London had been reviewing, among other topics, advances in microscope design over the past year. A talk involving an Italian lens-maker—it was always Italian when it came to lenses, it seemed—had spurred particularly poignant discussion, for some of these lenses could magnify into visibility objects hardly visible to the naked eye.

Imagine that—a whole other visual vocabulary within the bounds of reality! The Royal Society bemused itself with the notion, and Mr. Reynolds had relayed this discussion to an acquaintance, the Dutch doctor Reiner de Graaf. The two met through a mutual friend while de Graaf was on the island learning surgical techniques.

Reiner, in fact, made an appearance at the next meeting of the Royal Society to discuss the papers of a friend of his from back in the Netherlands, Antonie van Leewenhoek. Standing in front of a curious audience of Englishmen, Reiner began passing around his friend’s sketches of what looked like the lace of a dress, of something Mr. Reynolds might find in his wife’s closet. These were sketches of highly magnified plant matter. These sketches more or less resembled what Robert Hooke, a familiar face in the Royal Society, produced in his cross sections of cork matter, de-
scribing how the cork appeared to be made of tiny jail cells. However, the Dutch drawings were much more detailed that Hooke’s. Reiner had the Society’s attention.

“I now, I present to you, my friend’s sketches of tiny animals!” exclaimed Reiner, holding up a new set of drawings. The assembly burst into laughter, much to Reiner’s surprise. These sketches supposedly detailed one-celled animals that apparently could only be seen “under the microscope.” What absolute hogwash, Reynolds thought. What absolute fabrication! Indeed, the Royal Society’s consensus on the understanding of life in no way incorporated the possibility of such small creatures.

The more he thought about it, though, nowhere in England existed a microscope with a lens powerful enough to disprove such a claim. To prove Leeuwenhoek was misguided, someone in the Royal Society would have to look at matter that small and illustrate such animals failed to exist.

Leeuwenhoek wouldn’t respond to the Royal Society request for a tutorial on how he produced such a powerful machine. Zachariah knew he wanted to be the first Royal Society member to answer this question. Nothing would please him more than to shoot down the ego of fellow Society member Robert Hooke. He just needed Tim Mose’s help.

* * *

Tim Mose twisted in his sleep. He had been experiencing night terrors, to which his physician last week recommended bloodletting, which Tim promptly declined. Last night, a dream of another sort occupied his vision.
Tim found himself in a far-off land walking into a chamber with two sparsely clothed men, surrounded by barren land on all sides. Craning his neck to fit inside, Tim saw a large fire raging on, and quickly realized he was in a furnace of some kind. In the middle was a man beckoning him forward to the center of the pit where he stood dipping his hand in between three cinders. The man pulled out a glob of . . . yes, that had to be molten glass. He then took a wire and poked at the molten cylinder, lifting outwards to produce a thin membrane of molten sand. He then blew into the membrane, producing a small sphere. Tim had never seen glass so thin before; he could only stare in fascination.

Startled, Tim woke up. It was the middle of the morning, and he thought he had heard something stirring outside. Nevermind that, Tim thought, I need to investigate the possibilities of the glass I encountered in my dream! Tim hopped out of bed and got dressed.

Some sort of wire that won’t immediately melt when it touches the molten glass, Tim envisioned, walking out the door. But what kind of art can I do with a thin—“Mr. Reynolds?” Tim was surprised to see the wealthy experimenter walking around his glasshouse. Hadn’t he gotten rid of him yesterday?

“Listen—I do not have time for your scientific games. Please take them elsewhere, preferably very far from my workshop, and out of earshot of my bedroom—”

“I just wanted to show you these,” Zachariah stated without pretense. From his coat, he handed Mr. Mose two pieces of paper.

The first one had a sketch of a geometric pattern, situated visually above the trunk of a tree. Mhm, the
pattern looks almost like a piece of lace from a dress, Tim thought to himself. Only when he stopped fixating on the detail of the piece could he observe at the pattern held the shape of the edge of a tree leaf.

The second sketch had odd, perhaps what could be described as plantlike, organic shapes. A wrinkly tree trunk with hairs at its end. A roughly circular shape with a thick lining and circular shapes of some sort encased inside. A cone shape smaller than the other two. The forms kept Mose’s attention; after all, he had never seen anything like them.

Coming from Mr. Reynolds, Tim knew these were scientific sketches of some sort. It suddenly occurred that many of the techniques he had studied in school about art with regards to linear perspective, line, and form were present in these sketches. And yet, he had never bothered to grant credence to the idea that artistic ideals were inherently infused with contemporary science. Obviously, nature is the muse of art, but could these hokey inventors and experimenters know something about aesthetics as well?

“These sketches were produced using lenses far more powerful than anything anyone possesses in London. I’ve constructed a functional microscope in my spare time, but in no way do I have the knowledge to create the thin glass needed for high-resolution magnification. I could really use your help,” said Zachariah.

Tim Mose didn’t smile, flinch, or so much as pause beyond a brief moment. The ability to concede ground to someone else’s argument was simply not in his repertoire of set reactions. Instead, he continued towards his glasshouse and opened the door.
“Bring me your microscope, and come back in a week. Believe me when I say you’ll have the best microscope in all of Britain then.”

Wait, really? “Mr. Mose, I’m truly—” the door slammed shut.

PART III

Kurt glanced at Timothy while driving. “Did you know that every tenth mile of the Eisenhower highway system is a straight mile just in case an airplane ever needs to make an emergency landing?”

Timothy replied with a smirk. “You know, Kurt, I haven’t heard you say something full of such bullshit since junior year back at Pittsburgh!”

What was the probability that college roommates would, six years later, be moving together down Interstate 79 to start afresh at a glass factory in Morgantown, just barely missing the war while in high school—V-J day happened five days before senior year started. Timothy thought he’d be in California, if not deployed in East Asia or Central Europe.

Instead, one doctorate in chemistry from Carnegie Mellon later, Timothy was making the biggest location jump of his life—all forty minutes of it, that is. And today, with his hair slicked back and a new tie around his neck, he would be reporting for day number one.

* * *

Timothy always considered his choice to become a chemist, and not a business sycophant, his quiet act of rebellion in 1950s America. Younger than Deborah but older than Jacob, John, and Millie, the eldest son of the Mose clan always felt a bit cramped
when daddy Edward Mose cared to opine about what Timothy should do with his life. A child of the Great Depression, Edward had little to his name in backwoods Pennsylvania beyond a canny knowledge of glassmaking. Edward grew up hearing about how his great-great-great-grandfather (well, he never quite got the number of “greats” down) was one of the best glass craftsmen in all of Europe. That kind of talent casts a long shadow, long enough that when Roosevelt came through looking for glass to help supply the war machine, Edward and his friends were among the first to raise their hands high for government contracts. And thus the Mose family punched its ticket to the American upper middle class.

Today, Timothy wasn’t driving over to Freedom Glassware, like his family did so often. When there, he would run out with his brothers to watch the trucks, full of silica sand dredged and dried from the bottom of Lake Erie, pull in. Timothy knew what happened next, since he made the engineers at the factory explain it to him every time he stopped by: sodium carbonate and calcium carbonate, more or less in the form of soda ash and crushed limestone, would be mixed into the sand. When heated up, the added minerals caused the sand’s melting point to go down, a consequence of the silicon-oxygen molecule chains terminating, a chemical reality he would realize in college.

The sand mixing, however, was merely foreplay before the real act of the show: the furnace. Workers at the factory began calling it “Little Boy” after the bomb that obliterated Hiroshima, although during his childhood during the war, Timothy simply knew it as the all-powerful machine Father would not let him or his brothers near. Wherever you were in the factory, you could feel the ground shake as it heated up to almost
three thousand degrees Fahrenheit. If you were on the same level, it would be hard to avoid its leaking heat. That machine took grainy, harmless sand and made it into a shiny material found in lightbulbs, windshields, home windows, mirrors, and practically whatever else underpinned daily life.

To Edward, the furnace paid the bills, but to Timothy it seemed like pure magic. Ultimately, that is where the two departed: Timothy just wanted to marvel at the whole process, while Edward wanted to ensure the business remained profitable.

Timothy did his best to stay in school to avoid Freedom Glassware. He held a deep fear, perhaps well founded, that once he joined the company, he’d likely be groomed to run it, and eventually the marvel of the science would disappear, like the sand and fumes, into thin air. Not wanting to battle his dad on this topic, when the offer did come around, he instead elected silence, quietly pitching himself at Johnston Industries in nearby Morgantown.

His father, and by requirement the rest of the family, reciprocated the silence. Only after he realized his family would not be helping him move did he recognize how lucky he had been to have one of his best friends around to aid him in the transition to West Virginia. Truthfully, he simply wanted to throw himself into his work and hoped the family problem would solve itself.

* * *

What exactly is glass? Is it a solid? Liquid? Some unknown fourth state? To the casual viewer, it is clearly a solid. Right? However, if you look at the molecular structure of glass, it resembles that of a supercooled liquid, lacking a first-order phase transition to the sol-
id state. Make sense? Good. Timothy loved epiphanies like this.

Timothy’s doctoral work with glass related to rates of cooling and final shape formation for glass mixtures. Thus, when he arrived in Morgantown, he was unsurprised to learn of his assignment: to come up with a less work-intensive and time-consuming method of producing the glass for windowpanes. Timothy knew that the status quo production method involved forming and then cooling giant glass bubbles which were then cut with metal before being shaped into windowpanes. Needless to say, this process served as a huge crimp on the ceiling and rate of window production. “We could double, at least, our production rate with a better process, Timothy,” the operating manager at Johnston Industries noted the first week on the job. Mose didn’t disagree.

The logical approach would be to smooth pour the molten sand into a flat metal molding, let it cool, and then remove the flat glass once dried. This could work, but as Timothy noticed, it wasn’t much more efficient than the current method. Removing the glass from the metal plate was labor-intensive work, and too often the brittle glass would break or bend during the extraction process. Timothy needed something better.

For now, though, prognostications about the future of the glass would have to be put on hold. It was Millie’s birthday this weekend, and even with the rift with his father, he needed to go see her. This was one of the few weekends when she would be back from college in North Carolina.

Timothy hopped in his new Chevy Impala, about to drive to Pittsburgh. He sometimes wished he could preserve the image of his ride and show it to others; of
course, he could enlist the help of his sisters, who were hobby photographers. Looking longingly into the distance, he recalled manually developing photographs at a local photo shop. Before exposure, Deborah would carefully pour liquid silver substrate onto a glass plate, covering the entire glass. If only he could find a way to do that with molten glass and have it slide right off . . .

Wait. They could. Now they would.

Timothy ran back to the offices.

When co-workers heard Timothy’s plan, they could only describe it as one a PhD could come up with. Take tin, melt it down into a metal pool—gravity causes such a pool to have a perfectly flat top. Pour the molten sand on top of it. Like oil and water, molecule polarity in a molten metal pool would prevent the two from mixing. Take advantage of the much lower melting point for the liquid metal and have the glass harden on top. Then just slide off the glass on top from the tin pool and have it cleaned and cut on a separate running conveyor belt. Problem solved.

When else had glass solutions come in an instant like this? For some reason Timothy felt a sense of déjà vu. He put it aside, though. He made his own glass without shattering it. He had ensured the dominance of the glass age.
Scarf. Yellow with Black printing, 1950, 32” x 32”
Drawings of the Chapel, administration building dorms, gymnasium, social science building and Arch of 1909, surrounding the college, seal in the center, 1950s
Textiles—1950-1960, Wake Forest College, RG14_057
IF NOT FOR THAT DAMN BALCONY:
The True Story of Romeo Montague

Elizabeth Waid

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O no; it is an ever-fixèd mark,
That stupidly climbs balconies, and eats it.

— “Sonnet 116” by William Shakespeare and the real Romeo Montague


Before I become too swept up in the play’s supposed poetic perfection, let me make one thing clear. Shakespeare, ever the prideful fellow, forgot to mention a key fact: Romeo and Juliet were real people. There was a real romance, and an all-too-real death. However, that is the extent of the realness. I wish I could say the play was accurate to true events, but sadly, the details are so incredibly distorted that they bear utterly no resemblance to the truth. That’s where
I come in. You see, I am the real Romeo Montague, and Shakespeare had it all wrong.

Without further ado, let me set the record straight, once and for all:

One, Tybalt was a hero. Two, Juliet was a psycho. Three, if not for that damn balcony, I would still be living a happy, uncomplicated life with my dearest Rosaline.

**Part One: Tybalt Saves My Life**

Thanks to dear old Willy, I take my place in great literature as the idle, lovesick idiot who didn’t think to tell anyone before offing myself. Perhaps I was lovesick—I’ll grant him that—but I most certainly was not an idle idiot. You see, Shakespeare forgot that I was apprentice to a glassblower. Surprised? I am too, because that’s the most important detail he failed to mention. If it weren’t for that apprenticeship, I wouldn’t have scaled Juliet’s balcony to take measurements of her windows, whose glass my master was replacing. And Juliet wouldn’t have kidnapped me.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. First, let me paint you an accurate picture of Juliet Capulet, so when she later turns psycho, you’ll understand where I’m coming from.

I first met Juliet at a masquerade ball—William at least had that detail right. I attended with my buddies Mercutio and Benvolio. We wanted to surprise Rosaline. You see, it was her birthday and our fourth month of courtship. More importantly, though, I was ready to pop the question. Had the ring with me and everything.
Naturally, I was a bit nervous, so I told Benvolio and Mercutio to scram so I could find Rosaline by myself. There was just one problem: everyone wore a mask. I couldn’t for the life of me pick out Rosaline from the crowd of feathers and eyeholes. I know what you’re thinking. “That’s the point of a masquerade ball, you idiot.” Give me a break, okay? I was a bit preoccupied with my impending eternal happiness. I hadn’t taken the masks into account. Shoot me.

Anyways, I can only attribute what happened next to a deity’s twisted sense of humor. The crowd parted, and there stood Rosaline, her slender back to me, not twenty paces away. I closed the distance between us. Taking her hand in my own unworthy palm, I spun her around, knelt on one knee, brandished the ring, and proclaimed my undying love and devotion, as any lovesick youth would.

Although her expression was hidden from me by the mask, she must have been surprised, because she sucked in a swift breath which sent my heart into all kinds of acrobatics. But her moment of indecision was brief, thank God. She accepted me, and I stood and embraced her, slipping the ring onto her delicate finger. I kissed the sweet lips of my fiancée with the happiness I felt in my heart.

That’s when my blissful eternity with Rosaline went down the drain. I quite literally kissed all future happiness goodbye. You see, in that moment, she kissed me wholly unlike she ever had before. So different was this kiss, and so great was my surprise at her (ahem) fervor, that I separated myself from her. She let out a heavy breath before composing herself.

“Rosaline, my love?” I said, perplexed. “What
causes you to kiss me so? Is it because we are to be married?"

“Of course, my darling. Why should I not kiss my fiancé as I did?” She replied in a voice deeper than Rosaline’s.

“Rosaline, I don’t—”

“ROMEO!” A shriek silenced the room. All eyes turned to its source: a chick with features that begged admiration.

The beauty marched straight to me, drew her hand back, and struck me with a crisp snap of my nose.

Now before you draw conclusions about my reaction, let me make something clear: I’m a tough manly man. It’s just . . . that girl could punch. If you are ever hit as I was then, you try not to tear up. I dare you.

“Romeo!” she repeated. “Who is she?” She pointed violently at Rosaline.

Before I could process what was happening, Rosaline moved in front of me protectively. She shed her mask, revealing a flawless face that totally did not belong to Rosaline.

I’ll give you three guesses as to who it was. Here’s a hint: she’s a psycho.

“I’m Juliet Capulet,” she said to the real Rosaline, who tore off her own mask.

Please, take a moment to appreciate how I felt at that moment. What would you have done in my position? Shakespeare certainly had his opinion. Drop Rosaline, embrace this new hottie, and ride off into the sunset. Unfortunately for me, my morals were more refined than William’s.
I knew what I had to do. I would explain the honest mistake—really, the girls looked practically identical with their masks on. How was I to know who was who?—retrieve my ring from Juliet, beg Rosaline’s forgiveness, and then express my true love to my one true love. Simple as that. The girls were clearly a bit riled up, but all would work out well in the end, right?

As my luck would have it, it did not.

Before I could begin to fix the mess I was in, Benvolio suddenly burst from the crowd encircling the three of us. His eyes were filled with a greater terror than my love predicament warranted. “Romeo! Behind you!”

I spun on my heel just in time to see a masked, raging lunatic charging at me at full speed, sword raised to strike. My hand instinctively shot to my hilt. Empty. Come on, I was at a party. Couldn’t exactly bring weapons.

I made to dive out of the way, but I knew only a stroke of insane luck could save me from this lunatic’s blade. I braced myself for the impact, knowing that death was upon me.

Then, seemingly out of nowhere, sprung my savior. With a heroic cry, brave, selfless Tybalt Capulet threw his own body in between mine and the blade. A second later, his dismembered head rolled on the ground.

Juliet’s scream reached me first. She wailed, throwing herself over her slain cousin’s headless body. “Tybalt. My poor cousin.”

The entire party was in chaos. People screamed and scrambled for the exit. Furniture was overturned. Women fainted. The murderer tore off his mask, re-
vealing a bloated, perspiring face with bulging veins and crazed eyes.

“Paris?” Juliet exclaimed when she saw the lunatic’s identity. “How could you do this to me? How could you kill my own cousin?”

Paris was clearly in shock about his deed. “Juliet . . . I—I—I didn’t mean . . . this guy . . .” He jabbed an angry finger in my direction. Regaining a bit of his purpose, he said, “I saw this guy kissing you! You’re engaged to me!”

Juliet retorted, “If you think I could ever marry you after this!” She sobbed over Tybalt. “I’m engaged to Romeo now.”

That was my cue to get the hell out of there. I took Rosaline’s arm and turned to the exit.

“Romeo!” Rosaline said, jerking her arm from my grasp. “How dare you touch me, after what you’ve done?”

I pleaded. “Rosaline, my love, we can talk about this later. We need to leave. Now!”

She stamped her foot. “I am going nowhere with you.”

At that moment, a burly hand grabbed my shoulder in a less-than-brotherly grip. Paris’s breath on my neck made my entire body quiver.

He growled. “You stole my fiancée.”

Without hesitation, I spun around, kneed him hard enough to cause severe difficulty in sitting down for some time afterwards, and sprinted out the door. There was no time to drag stubborn Rosaline with me. I had to save my own skin, after all.
And that’s how it happened that in one night, Tybalt became a hero, Rosaline hated me, and Juliet’s twisted little mind became obsessed with marrying me.

**Part Two: Juliet, Undercover Psycho**

After the masquerade catastrophe, I had some major damage control to do.

The next day, as soon as I finished my apprentice work at the glassblower’s shop, I set out for Rosaline’s house. I was three steps out the door when who do you think intercepted me? That’s right—the psychotic damsel herself. In case you haven’t yet caught on to the trend, I’ll spell it out for you: Juliet was crazy.

“Romeo.” I mistakenly made eye contact with her. Too late to pretend I hadn’t heard.

She skipped to me, swinging the hem of her dress as she went. “Romeo, oh Romeo,” she sang.

She was pretty and all, but the sight of her made me want to vomit. She waltzed right up to me and tweaked my bandaged nose playfully, causing a shot of pain through the broken cartilage.

“Romeo, how could your old Rosaline do such a thing to you? Breaking your nose is awfully harsh punishment for an honest mistake, if you ask me.”

“She was angry with me, and still is,” I said through clenched teeth. “I’m going to her now, to beg her forgiveness.”

Juliet furrowed her brow and cocked her head to the side, feigning confusion. “But Romeo,” she said, waving her ringed finger in front of me, “you’re marrying me.”
All I could do was stare. She couldn’t be serious. She knew my mistake! Hell, she was engaged to the lunatic executioner already! I laughed. I didn’t know what else to do.

The psycho looked at me inquisitively. “Romeo? Why do you laugh?”

“B—because . . .” I stammered. What kind of sick game was she playing? “Because you’re engaged to Paris! And I need my ring back, so I can propose to Rosaline!”

“Romeo, I don’t understand,” she said innocently. (Totally faking) “I can’t possibly marry Paris after what he did to poor Tybalt! And as for your ring, why should I give it back to you? With Paris out of the question, I am only betrothed to one man—you.”

“Juliet, don’t be ridiculous! You know I never meant to propose to you! Now give me back my ring!”

Juliet slowly held up her hand, regarding the ring. “I like it,” she said.

I couldn’t take it anymore. I grabbed her hand, intending to pry the ring off myself if I had to. Instantly her demeanor transformed from passive aggressive psycho to outright demon. With her free hand she hit my broken nose hard enough for me to lose my grip on her wrist as my eyes welled. (Again, I will say that if you have ever been hit like that, I’d like to see you not tear up.) She grabbed my collar and, with a strength only explainable by her satanic parentage, drew my face down to hers.

“The only way you will get this ring is if you retrieve it from my dead body.” She held me there, eyes locked on mine, neither of us blinking. I was afraid to breathe, lest she tear into me with the fangs she un-
doubtedly kept hidden under those perfect lips. She at last released my shirt with an emphatic shove. In a sweet, sweet voice, she said, “I’ll see you tomorrow—at the altar.” And then she skipped away.

I just stood there. Don’t get me wrong—I was totally panicking on the inside. But there was nothing to outwardly show. Juliet was clearly a monster. I mean, who wants to marry someone two days after they’ve met? Not to mention the many other obvious reasons we could never marry.

Coming to my senses, I looked around for help. Just my luck: there weren’t any witnesses about. Juliet probably planned our meeting that way. The only thing I could do was continue to Rosaline’s house.

Before I reached her door, Rosaline came outside to meet me. “Romeo,” she said curtly. “Why are you here?”

“Rosaline.” I laughed, though my voice quivered. “You know I’ve come to beg your forgiveness and ask for your hand, if you’ll take me.”

For some reason, Rosaline found this insulting. “Romeo! How can you think that I would marry you after you proposed to the wrong girl? You clearly felt something for her, by the way I saw you kissing.”

“Rosaline, my love! Please, that’s not true! I only acted as I did because I thought she was you! I would never do anything to harm you . . . intentionally.” Her expression remained cold. Desperate, I got down on my knees. “Please, Rosaline. Please, I beg you. You must know it was an honest mistake. I promise to love you always, if only you will give me the chance. I will do anything to prove my love to you. Juliet means nothing to me. You must believe me!”
Rosaline looked down on me with the same unfeeling expression. Panic welled to my face. What had I done to deserve this predicament?

She spoke, ending my silent misery. “Alright, Romeo. I will marry you, but only on the condition that you bring me the ring.”

I could have run through every street in the city, sung a reply to every bird’s call, leapt a thousand feet in the air. She would marry me!

“Of course, Rosaline! You shall have a new ring! I will find you the prettiest ring in all of Verona!”

She cut me off. “No, Romeo. I don’t want a new ring. I want the ring you gave to her.”

My throat constricted. “But . . . surely . . .”

“Romeo,” she said, “if you do not bring me that exact ring that now sits on Juliet’s finger, I will never see you again.” With that, she turned and left me.

**Part Three: Wherefore am I Romeo?**

I get it: life sucks sometimes. But *this?* This *situation* was much worse than I deserved.

I sunk to the ground to wallow in self-pity like any good hero would do. I let my despair consume me.

Time passed—I’m not sure how much—before I heard my name. I turned. Master Laurence, my glass-blower, approached me from behind. I scrambled to my feet to greet him.

“Master Laurence,” I said.

“Romeo,” he said with crinkled eyes, “whatever is the matter?”

“Nothing, Master Laurence.”
“If that display of moping is nothing, then I should like to see something,” Laurence replied. “Is there anything I can do for you, my boy?”

I shook my head. “I wish you could, but I’m afraid my case is hopeless, unless you suggest I murder someone. But then my case is doubly hopeless, as I would become a killer.”

“That is grave indeed.” Laurence continued. “Once my wife threatened to kill my hound whom I loved. To spare him from death, I concocted for him a sleeping potion that gave the appearance of death, so that my wife thought he had gone naturally. After two days of slumber, he rose like the Lord, fit as a pup.” Laurence chuckled to himself. “To have seen my wife’s face! But, Romeo,” Laurence said, looking at me meaningfully, “would such a sleeping potion aid you in your present dilemma?”

I looked at Laurence. “The drinker of this potion appears in all ways to be dead?” He nodded.

I laughed aloud. With this concoction, I could retrieve my ring from Juliet’s dead body without ever having to kill her! “Yes, Master Laurence. You can help me after all.”

Master Laurence handed me the potion that night, and we decided on a plan. I would sneak into Juliet’s bedchamber through her balcony. If caught, I would say I was taking window measurements for my master, who was crafting new windows for the lady. I would slip the potion into her drink, return in a couple of hours, retrieve my ring, and live happily ever after with my wife Rosaline. What more could go wrong after so much already had? I certainly didn’t have anything else to lose.
With the potion wrapped in a yellow scarf safely at my belt, I snuck over the Capulet’s wall. Juliet’s figure in a lit window guided me to her balcony, underneath which I waited while she rambled on, expressing her love for me to no audience—unless you counted the moon. She talked on and on and on about her feelings. To be honest, I fell asleep at one point. Eventually, she left the balcony to return to her room. I seized my chance.

I scrambled up the siding. Once on her balcony, I peered through the window. To my relief, she was not in her room. Gently, I opened the door and stepped over the threshold. I spotted my target: a glass of drink on the table.

My heart’s pounding surely could be heard from miles around as I removed the vial from the yellow scarf at my belt. I poured the sweet liquid into her drink. I could already imagine Rosaline’s happiness as I presented her with the ring. The last drop slipped into the cup . . .

The door burst open, and in an instant, crazy Juliet was beside me holding a knife to my throat.

“What did you pour in there?” she asked in the most deceitfully polite tone I’ve ever heard.

I stammered. “I . . . n—nothing.” Would this psycho ever leave me alone?

“You lie.” She hissed, all her mock politeness gone. “I know you are trying to poison me so that you may have your ring back.” She pressed the knife into my throat, drawing blood. “As your punishment, you are going to drink it.”

I sucked in a breath. Sensing my thoughts, she
said, “If you don’t drink it, I will slit your throat right now.”

I tested myself against her. The blade was sharp. There was no way out of her hold alive. I held up my hands in surrender. “Fine, fine. I’ll drink. See?” Without hesitation, I downed the liquid. “Rosaline!” I whispered as my senses began to fade. “Here’s a drink. I drink to you . . .”

When I woke, my world was dark and rank. The air smelled of death. I tried to sit, but an above panel prevented me. A panel. . . . I was in a coffin. Juliet, undercover psycho, had put me in a tomb. Now that was going too far.

I pushed against the top to no avail. I banged the walls of my confining prison, screaming for someone to help. Technically, this strategy worked, because someone did come to my rescue. The only problem was that that someone was Juliet.

She opened the lid to my coffin, and a dim light hit my eyes. “Romeo! You’re alive! You did not intend to kill me after all!”

“You kidnapped me!” I cried as loud as I could through my parched throat. “You kidnapped me and buried me! I never wanted to kill you—just to take that ring for my Rosaline!”

Juliet’s expression at once turned sour. “You still go on and on about her. After all I’ve done for you! I came back for you! I waited by your coffin, and when I heard the banging, I came to your aid! Yet still you have eyes only for Rosaline!” A tear trickled down her cheek. She brandished a knife. “I am afraid, Romeo, that if you will not love me, I cannot permit you to love anyone else.”
I froze. “Juliet, don’t do this. I didn’t mean to hurt you. I only did all this because I love Rosaline!”

Her face was hard. “Nevertheless, you will die for it, and in glory, too. For what could be more glorious than dying for love?”

Many things, actually. Such as marrying a nice girl, having four somewhat clever children, and living out my old age in pursuit of stamp collecting. That’s all I wanted from life, and Rosaline could have given it to me. But no. Juliet had to ruin everything.

“Yes,” Juliet said. “You will die honorably, at the hands of me who truly loves you.” With those words, she plunged her knife deep inside my chest.

So you see, Shakespeare got it all wrong. Although I must now tell the true tale to you from beyond the grave, at least you know the whole truth. Never was there a story of more woe than this of Juliet and her captive Romeo.
Daily Bread serving tray.
1.5” x 7” x 12”, Silver serving tray with embossed “Daily Bread”
Given to the collection by Mrs. Charles C. Josey.
Family tradition has it coming from Samuel Wait or family.
Wait, Samuel, 1789–1867. Wake Forest College.
Dust Storm

James Falese

I can feel the grain of my pine armchair;
My fingers edge along, circling the knots in whirlpools;

In silence like this
You can almost hear the dust falling;
It sounds like rain,
And as the ashtray air fills my lungs
I remember—

We were constellations—
Maybe the Greeks saw us
And cast us as their gods.

And maybe they told stories about us
And wrote songs about us too.
I know I did.

I hope I can watch the sunset over the city
One last time,
City lights like fireflies,
Subway veins like my aging ones.

I can still hear his voice dancing through the empty night,
And I can still feel his youthful hands,
Like they held mine on our wedding day.

But the only thing I still really have of him
Is the copper tray we stole from a church
When we were 21.
That day started at our spot by the water,
A narrow fisherman’s pier overlooking Boston Harbor
With a single green bench facing the horizon.
The sea breeze cooled my arms as salt condensed on our faces,
The splintering wood gently jabbing at newly-wedded hands
And everything I ever wanted
Standing 5’10” next to me.

We took his red convertible out later that day
And we drove and drove and drove.
I think we might have made it to the New York border.

But before we turned around
We realized we needed something to remember the day by,
Since we drove so far,
And loved each other to the moon and back.

We could see the steeple of a small white church about a quarter mile down the road,
And being so young—we figured, why not?

We found the plate sitting on a granite counter behind the altar;
The words *Daily Bread* were inscribed on its shining surface;
You could trace each letter out with your eyes closed.

The stem of the Y and the leg of the As formed swirls like roots
That seemed to descend below the copper surface.
Tiny specks around the letters
Upon close inspection
Looked like olive leaves and vines,
pressed into the copper as it cooled.
And for the next 54 years
The tray sat at center of our kitchen table
Where it was the site of 4:00 p.m. tea,
Appetizers for every guest we entertained,
And 54 dozen roses.

I told the story of how we got the plate to my grandchildren the other day,
The oldest being 10,
To tell the story of the man they never knew.

And as I hold the plate tonight
Glistening in the moonlight through my apartment window,
I can feel the olive vine specks glossing by my fingertips
Like a snowfall,
Or like stars.

I could almost swear I’m 21 again,
Sitting with him
In silence but in love,
Listening to the dust falling
Sounding like a rainstorm.
Pillow Cover, 1912–1914, 20” x 20”, Black, Fringed
Shield bearing the Greek letters alpha, phi, omega.
Banner with the words “Pro Humanitate.”
This pillow had been the possession of Thomas C. Britton, Jr.
WFC Class of 1914, Textiles—1910–1920, Wake Forest College,
Donated by Ms. Burnett Britton October 25, 1999, RG14_056
Self Portrait

Laura Garland

“Are you awake?”
“Mm . . . more or less.”
“Are you hungry?”
“God, have you even been to bed? It’s after midnight, Miri . . .”
“Exactly—the night is still young. Come on. Put some clothes on. We’re going out.”

* * *

Tom’s shoes hit the shiny, inky pavement as he slid out the passenger-side door of the SUV. The slam of the door muffled the splash of his feet into the puddle. His landing shattered the orange reflection of the street lamps. He strode around to the brown bricks of the sidewalk, where Miriam was locking the car and stuffing keys into the pocket of her rain slicker slung casually over her favorite blue dress that he knew so well. They began to walk toward a fuzzily glowing neon sign that would pierce the blackness if only it could shine at its full capacity. Carter’s Cafe, it read in scrawling green font that blinked in and out of existence from the window.
The door rang as he opened it, announcing their presence as if it were somehow possible for anyone in the room to miss their entrance. Raucous laughter under unkempt beards and twinkling eyes under cap brims greeted them as they filed along between the stools and tables to an open spot at the bar. The woman on the other side—Tammy, according to the tag pinned on her apron—was chatting amiably with her customers as she slid their plates across the laminated wood surface. She approached Tom and Miriam, her smile becoming static as she eyed Tom’s crisp trench coat and neat hair, but regaining its life and ease when she saw Miriam.

“Hey sweetie, what can I get y’all?”

“I’ll just have biscuits ’n gravy and a coffee, thanks.”

“Mmkay, and for you?”

“I—” Tom’s eyes frantically scanned the menu board above her head.

“Make that two,” Miriam said, grinning at the older woman.

Tammy pursed her lips at the tall young man for a moment before nodding. “Alright, I’ll have it right up.”

Tom cocked his head at his companion as they settled down upon two stools, the red leather showing signs of creasing and tearing from years of wear. “Breakfast food at a diner at 1 a.m. on a Tuesday? I have a lot of questions.”

“These are all the manufacturing workers getting off of the second shift at the plant.” She looked over her shoulder at the denim-clad men around them as she spoke. “They’ve made this place an institution, really—it’s the only thing open in town this time of night. And the breakfast food,” she squinted up at him
as a single chuckle shook her chest, “well, you’re not at Carter’s if you’re not eating biscuits. Are you feeling like a local yet?”

“We’re getting there,” he hedged politely. Marley Hill, North Carolina, had hardly been his first pick as a place to settle down after they graduated from Wake Forest. Of course, every aspiring journalist fantasized about the gritty, coffee-stained bustle of New York or Washington—somewhere hard hitting, somewhere with a pulse—even if it meant eking out an existence shuffling between a cramped cubicle and a shoebox of an apartment for the first few years. That was how all the greats started anyway, wasn’t it? The Marley Hill Press was about the furthest thing from that. The apartment was still small, the cubicle still bordering on claustrophobic, but being assistant to the news editor of a small-town paper still left something to be desired in the way of urban bustle; the “good ol’ boy club” of the county school board was about as much intrigue as came his way. “Would I sound like a snob if I used the word ‘quaint’?”

“No, of course not.” But the crinkle in Miriam’s nose said otherwise. He didn’t blame her. It was her hometown that they had chosen to return to, after all. Between her status as an only child and his reluctance to return home after his brother’s death, it made sense. She would have to take care of her aging parents at some point, and he—well, he had to get out from under his grieving parents and sister for his own sake. Remembering Robbie as some sort of patriotic martyr in the Afghanistan desert just seemed morbid; Tom preferred to think of him as a brother, not a fallen soldier.

“How is Mr. Britton treating you?” Miriam’s words shook him from his digressing thoughts.
“He’s benevolent enough, as dictators go.” Tom cracked a grin, thinking of the owner’s daily lap around the large open room of the Press’s office, overseeing each of the dozen or so cubicles. His hoarse, drawling voice would appear behind Tom’s shoulder every afternoon with a cordial And how are you faring today, young man?

“There is something I’ve been meaning to ask you, though,” he said, just as Tammy set two heaping plates of biscuits and steaming mugs of coffee in front of them.

“Oh, do tell.”

“When I started, around the first of June, one of the first things I noticed in the office was that massive portrait in the foyer.”

“The one of Imogene?”

“Maybe? The one from about a hundred years ago with the blue dress and the gray eyes and—”

“Yeah, that’s her.”

“Right. Anyway, I didn’t think much more about it, but then this week a huge wreath of lilies with a black ribbon appeared below the painting, and it stayed there until the lilies started to wilt. It seemed a bit . . . off . . . to me, but every time I would begin to ask someone what was going on, they’d just kind of shake their heads as if I shouldn’t say anything.”

Miriam chewed thoughtfully for a moment before answering. “There are a few families around here that people talk about as The Families. I guess it comes with the territory of being a small town below the Mason-Dixon Line, but there’s still this idea of Society Folk.” Her drawl framed the words. “Call it lingering
leftovers of the Antebellum South, if you want. You’ve got the Carpenters, the Windhams, the Parkers . . .”

“—and the Brittons?”

“Of course. They’re the ones we’re talking about, aren’t they? For goodness sake, they run the only newspaper—may as well run the whole damn town.” She grabbed a paper napkin from the shining silver dispenser between them and began to crudely draw the lines of a family tree on it as she spoke.

As Miriam explained the tangled, tragic history, Tom listened to her voice take on the twang he heard when Tammy called back to the cook, when the factory workers told their dirty stories, when the locals called into the Press to share the latest drama between their neighbors that they saw as worthy of a write-up. Miriam was young, but she wore the smug smile that her mother wore and (he imagined) her mother’s mother before that, the dimples in her cheeks growing when she added in what seemed a particularly scandalous detail to the Brittons’ story. It was the glow of shared secrets, letting someone else into the loop of local legend by passing down the oral tradition. She was a storyteller by heritage.

“Now, if you’ve been paying very close attention since you’ve been here,” she was saying, “you may have noticed a few of the houses downtown are uninhabited.”

“You mean on Ivy Street? Where all the pre-war homes are?”

“Yes, exactly. All those great big colonials, but two of them are empty.” She leaned in now. The buzzing of the white fluorescent lights almost drowned out her whispering voice. Tom suspected gossip like this was
common knowledge among the locals that surrounded them, but he also suspected the whisper was more for dramatic effect than anything. “They belong to the Brittons.”

“But doesn’t Mr. Britton live on Main Street in that house next to the Press’s offices?”

“Thomas C. Britton, III—the current owner and publisher of The Marley Hill Press that visits your cubicle every day—he does, yes. She quirked an eyebrow. “But his father and mother lived in the big white house on Ivy. And his father and mother before them, in the brick colonial next to it.”

“I’m not sure I follow.”

“Mrs. Britton, the first one, died tragically in some sort of accident. She was run over or there was a wreck or something. There were rumors that she and her husband were in the middle of a disagreement when it happened, but no one really knows the specifics anymore. The point is,” she said, as she pressed her finger into the counter for emphasis, “after her death, the home was left untouched. The house was never sold, none of the furniture was even moved. It still sits there, just like it did when she was alive almost a century ago. But no one has lived there for decades. It’s completely empty.”

“And let me guess. The townsfolk have seen silhouettes in the windows and suspect that it’s haunted? Her blue-clad, gray-eyed ghost floats through the house forevermore?”

Miriam’s spine straightened silently. Her eyes scanned behind the counter until she caught Tammy’s attention. She paid for their meal, and—without an-
other word—dragged Tom through the maze of factory workers and into the night.

It was a full moon out, and it reflected on the damp bricks as he followed her quick stride out of the little diner. It had stopped raining by now, but the remaining drops dripping from the storefront awnings still served to interrupt the reflections on the sidewalk. He trotted to catch up with her brisk walk.

“Miri, the car was back there. We’ve already passed it.”

“We’re not going to the car. We’re going to Ivy Street.”

“I don’t—” He stopped in his tracks as his thoughts raced ahead of his voice. Then he quickened to a run. “No, ma’am, we are not going to Ivy. We are not going to be those people. We’re not ghostbusters.”

She whirled around to face him, eyes flashing. A change had come over her since the counter at Carter’s, an urgency that served to frighten him into submission—as well as pique his curiosity, against his better judgment. “Don’t you want to know? I thought you were a journalist.” Without any further acknowledgment of his hesitation, she continued upon her path. He followed.

In mere moments, a stately brick house became visible in the darkness, sitting far back from the road and obscured by overgrown boxwoods. Miriam quickly found the break in the bushes that revealed a gravel drive, and she trotted on her tiptoes along the grass beside it until she was in the backyard. Tom chased after—half intrigued and half afraid and entirely enthralled with her—trying to call her name in a whisper as he went.
When he caught up with her at last, she was working her fingers underneath a window that refused to meet its sill seamlessly. She slid it open cautiously.

“Miriam, what the hell are you doing? We can’t just break into my boss’s house, even if no one lives here.”

“It’s not like we’re going to actually do anything. We’re just having a look around,” she said, reassuring him, sounding like the teenager in the opening minutes of every horror movie he had ever seen. Her glazed gray eyes shone with the moonlight that bounced off of the glass, and it was with a trancelike calmness that she stepped through the open window and into the house. He climbed in after her, every muscle in his body bracing for an alarm as his foot touched the carpet, but none sounded. All was quiet.

Tom accepted that, for the moment at least, they were not in immediate danger of being caught. He exhaled. When he did so, dust motes fluttered and stirred in the air in front of him before returning to their usual, lazy floating. He looked around, seeing that everything in the room was coated in a thick layer of the dust, visible even in the dim, natural light from the moon that leached the room of all color. He searched for Miriam, who had locked eyes with a portrait across the room and was approaching it slowly. He continued to scan—they were in the study, it seemed—until his gaze fell upon a large pillow in the armchair behind the desk. It bore the words *Wake Forest College* upon it in gold stitching, surrounding a shield and the text *Pro Humanitate*.

“Miri, there’s a pillow here from Wake Forest.”

“Oh, yes,” she said, distracted, never turning from the portrait she was examining. “All the Brittons went to Wake Forest practically since the school started. It’s
tradition for them.”

“I can’t believe you never mentioned that,” he murmured as he stepped closer. “We were there for four years and that coincidence never occurred to you?”

“It’s North Carolina. Lots of people go to Wake.”

Tom was standing behind the desk now, studying the rows of bookshelves lining the wall. He pulled out an old yearbook. The Howler 1914 was engraved upon the spine in gold letters. He thumbed through the pages of serious, well-groomed faces, finding T. C. Britton on the first page of the senior class. He continued to flick through, and he was preparing to re-shelf the book when he saw the name Britton once more on a page of faces, this time from the freshman class. A Robert E. Britton was staring back at him. A small, faded piece of paper was tucked into the seam of the pages. It read:

Love and regret always, my dear brother.
— T. C. B.

“Do you know what happened to Robert?”

“World War I. Drafted.” Miri muttered matter-of-factly in response. Her voice was muffled and distant. Tom looked up to find that she had wandered out of the room, leaving him alone with the portrait that had captured her attention and the books that had captured his. The portrait hung facing the desk, and the moonlight that had once danced through Miriam’s eyes now fell directly upon the painting, properly illuminating it at last. It was the original of the picture of Imogene he had seen in the Press foyer—blue dress and kind gray eyes. Tom had a nagging sense that he should go find Miriam, that they should stop intruding upon this time capsule of a house. He moved to re-
place the yearbook and search for her, but as he turned back to the bookshelf a series of leather-bound journals caught his eye.

Tom plucked the last in the collection from the shelf, handling it delicately. The parchment pages fell open; they were graced with the same scrawled ink of the note in the yearbook. The inside cover was inscribed:

*May all your sprawling ideas find a home here.*
*Given with all my love, and even that is not enough.*

**xx Gennie**

He turned the pages reverently, half out of respect for its age and half out of respect for the sincerity of feeling radiating from it.

*We’ve moved back to Marley Hill, at Gennie’s request . . .*

“Tom, I—”

. . . *I’d rather be in New York, but so long as she’s happy here . . .*

He interrupted her to beckon her back into the study. “Come look at this, Miri. I found a journal. It feels almost uncanny, these journals of T. C., Sr.” Now he was the one entranced, not by a picture but by the words dancing in front of his eyes.

. . . *I miss Robert daily. My sister would prefer to worship him as a hero, but she forgets that he was first and foremost our beloved brother . . .*

He continued to absorb the words. The ribbon bookmark led to the page dated July 1, 1930. Eighty-five years ago to the date.

“I don’t think we should be here, Tom.”
“Nothing’s happened yet. I think we can stay for just a few more moments. You said so yourself. It’s not like we’re actually hurting anything.” His voice was dazed, distracted.

*Today the light went out of me.*

His eyes scanned the page ravenously.

*. . . My Gennie, my darling dearest Imogene.*

“I think we should go.”

Tom did not hear the worry that had crept into Miriam’s voice.

*. . . How shall I survive without her.*

“Just hold on a moment.”

“I think I hear someone outside.”

*. . . The damned distracted driver and the damned rainy roads and the damned squealing tires forever echoing in the night.*

“I don’t hear anything.”

“I think we’re going to be caught.”

*. . . How shall I raise a son without a mother.*

“I’m going outside, Tom.”

He inhaled and exhaled the dust alone.

*. . . If only I had chased after her.*

Just him and the dust and the journals and the staring, gray-eyed portrait.

*. . . If only I had known what would happen.*

Headlights.


Silence.
Wake Forest College 1914 Pendant, 1914, 16” x 44”
Cloth pendant—Gold print on black,
Wake Forest College, RG14_161
Mr. and Mrs. Bennett were seated at their kitchen table drinking their morning coffee. Opposite them sat their son. A silence had fallen over the room, and everyone looked to be deep in thought.

It was Mr. Bennett that broke the silence. “Mary, I think he’s right. He can finish his schooling when he comes back, but for now, there’s nothing more important than this.”

Mrs. Bennett broke eye contact with her husband. Her gaze wandered upward, eventually reaching her son’s pennant above the table. Her eyes lingered there, as if hoping it would provide some sort of wisdom. Its black and gold lettering made it look pretty, but aside from “1914” and “WFC,” it offered her nothing. She frowned and, shifting her gaze down towards the table, spoke softly. “My concern is that he won’t ever come back.”

The two men had already known this was her concern, but hearing it out loud made it seem much more real. It was easy to ignore an idea when it was simply implied, but hearing it spoken complicated things. Her son reached across the table and squeezed her hand.
“Mom, I promise I’ll be okay.” He let this linger for a moment. Then, for effect, he added, “I promise.” Another pause followed this. He continued. “Besides, it’s my duty. Most of my friends have already enlisted, and I hear they’re planning on having a draft. I might end up going regardless, so why not just volunteer now?” Mrs. Bennett could think of a million reasons why not, but said none of them. She wiped at the corner of her eye, sighing.

Again, Mr. Bennett worked to break the silence. “Look—he only has one year left at Wake, so it shouldn’t be a problem to go back after the war’s over. And I’m damned proud that he’s willing to put that year on hold to fight for his values.” Another silence. “Your brother did the same thing,” he reminded her.

“If he were here, he’d tell Jake not to go.” She had no proof of this statement, of course, but as the foremost authority on her brother in the room, no one was able to challenge it. For a moment, it seemed she might have won the battle. Then Jake spoke.

“Mom, I know you want me to finish school, because I saw how happy you were three years ago when I enrolled. And I’ll always remember that. But I’m volunteering, and that’s final. I won’t be seen as a man who wouldn’t fight for his country.”

Mrs. Bennett sipped her coffee, still looking at the table. Finally, she nodded slowly. “Okay.”

***

When he packed, Jake made sure he left his pennant hanging in the kitchen. His mom protested, saying he would want it to remind him of school, but Jake was adamant.
“It’ll remind you of me when I’m gone,” he claimed, and Mrs. Bennett interpreted this in a way Jake hadn’t intended. She managed a pained smile. “And I promise I’ll write you every month, at least—maybe more. The way I hear it, we’re already gaining against the Germans, so I’ll honestly probably be bored over there. Don’t be surprised if letters come like every two weeks.”

Mrs. Bennett made no reply. Jake was having an unusually hard time cheering her up. Lifting his hands so as to mime writing a letter, he joked: “Dear Mom, Europe is swell. There’s lots of pretty girls, and all the guys in my platoon are really friendly. I think I like it more than college. Oh, by the way, the war’s over; we won, and I’ll be home in time for dinner!”

He looked up from his imagined letter with a smile. His mom was crying.

* * *

The first letter came about three weeks after Jake had left. The return address was Camp Taylor, Kentucky. Mrs. Bennett ripped open the seal, eager to hear from her son. Mr. Bennett, across the kitchen table, asked her to read it aloud. For the first time in a long time, he could see genuine excitement on her face. She began:

> Mom and Dad,

> I finished basic training today, so they gave us the afternoon off. We’re shipping out tomorrow, to a French town called Nevers. People say there’s 50,000 American soldiers there. I don’t know how long it will be before they deploy us to the front lines. No one will tell us—I’m not sure anyone knows. Still, everyone
seems optimistic about the war. My friend Matthew says it might be over by the time we get to France. His brother told him that. I’m not sure. Training was hard, but I’m certain all that running will pay off when we’re sitting in camp waiting for orders. Ha-ha. Hope you two are doing well. I miss you already.

Love, Jake

Mrs. Bennett sat down to digest the letter. It was sent three days ago, so she figured he was on his way to France. To Nevers. She pulled out an old atlas from the attic and flipped to a detailed map of Europe. Mr. Bennett helped point out where everything was, taking special care to show how far Nevers, France, was from the front lines in the northwestern portion of the country.

“It’s almost 200 miles from the fighting.”

“It only looks like an inch or so to me.” She looked up once more at the pennant above the table. It wasn’t old, but she thought she could see some of the stitching starting to fray.

* * *

Another letter did not come until more than a month later. Over this time, Mrs. Bennett had taken up sewing in an effort to keep herself busy. She had found that mindless tasks (of which sewing was one) helped soothe her nerves. She had actually become quite good. When the letter finally came, she had been sewing, so she put down her things and moved into the kitchen. Her husband was already there. Settling into her position across from him, Mrs. Bennett dictated the letter:
Mom and Dad,

Life in France isn’t as exciting as I’d imagined. I was hoping to have shot someone by now, but they haven’t moved us to the front lines yet. I believe it should happen soon. That’s a joke, Mom; don’t worry.

Word around camp is that we’re winning the war fairly handily. Most of my days are spent lounging around the camp. The French countryside is beautiful and peaceful. Matthew says it reminds him of home. I don’t know about that, but it really is nice.

My biggest concern right now is that life for you guys is too boring without me. I think maybe you should get a dog to keep yourself company. Name him Jake Jr. or something.—he’ll keep you guys entertained until I’m back. I already can’t wait to meet him.

Miss you and love you, Jake

Mr. Bennett chuckled when it was done.

“I told you he would be alright, Mary. How bad can it be if he’s more concerned with our boredom than anything else?” He grinned at her. Mrs. Bennett was in high spirits, too; she loved hearing from Jake, even if it was about how boring her own life was. And everything in Jake’s life sounded alright. Maybe the war wasn’t even really that bad.

She looked up at the pennant, making grand plans to resew the seams so they wouldn’t be frayed anymore.

* * *
Another letter came exactly three weeks later. Mr. Bennett was not home, so Mrs. Bennett sat down at the kitchen table and read it herself.

Mom and Dad,

I have good news and bad news. I think the bad news should come first: I’m in the hospital. I’m okay though. I was shot three times, twice in my left shoulder and once in the same arm. Before you panic, I’m fine. It hurt when it happened, and I can’t really use my left arm, but I am feeling much better now. The people here are taking care of me. The hospital is in a town on the Atlantic coast called Brest. It’s nice—both the town and the hospital. The nurse that has been helping with my wounds is really beautiful. She’s blonde. I’ve told her all about you two, and she says you sound like the nicest people in the world.

Now, the good news: I’m coming home! People are always saying how bad it is to get shot, but since this is happening, I’m honestly okay with it. Maybe I should have tried it sooner. Also they say I’m going to get medals. I’m supposed to be leaving on a boat called the USS President Lincoln in a little over two weeks—May 29th. By the time you get this, I should be just about boarding.

Can’t wait to see you both, Jake

When Mr. Bennett got home, he found Mrs. Bennett ready to ambush him.

“He’s coming home! Our Jake is finally coming home! Our son!” She jumped up and hugged her husband. She pulled back, and Mr. Bennett saw she was
wiping away tears. For the first time in a long time, they were tears of joy.

Mr. Bennett read through the letter himself, and Mrs. Bennett decided to run from room to room cleaning.

“You realize he’s not going to be here for a few weeks still, right? There’s no reason to clean like this.” He smirked at her.

But Mrs. Bennett continued straightening up, ignoring her husband. Nothing could ruin this day. She even got around to finally fixing the stitching on Jake’s Wake Forest pennant. It occurred to her that she couldn’t recall being this happy since her son left.

* * *

The USS President Lincoln departed from Brest, France, on May 29, 1918. Escorted by three destroyers through the area thought to be patrolled by German U-boats, she made her way to the open sea, heading for New York. The destroyers, confident that the Lincoln was safe, turned back to France on the 30th. On the morning of May 31st, U-boats torpedoed the Lincoln. Of the 715 people on board, only 26 lives were lost—an insignificant amount against the backdrop of the war. The survivors were saved by lifeboats and returned to Brest by June 2nd. Jake Bennett was not one of them.

* * *

Just days after the news reached the Bennetts, Mr. Bennett could already not recall many details of what happened. Vaguely, he could remember two people in uniform showing up at the door holding an American flag. He knew he heard Mrs. Bennett’s screaming, and he remembered being told that his son was a brave young man who deserved a better ending. Or rather,
he remembered something like that. It didn’t feel real, so he never bothered to remember it. He felt like he did when he woke up from a dream, when everything should have been easily recalled but had instead faded rapidly into obscurity.

Mrs. Bennett, on the other hand, remembered everything with stark clarity. She envied her husband’s inability to.

* * *

In the winter of that year, Mr. and Mrs. Bennett received a knock on their door. They hadn’t had many visitors in the past few months, and they answered with the lethargy expected of parents in mourning. A beautiful woman with long golden hair was standing outside. Her hand was on an almost imperceptible bump in her stomach.

The Bennetts welcomed her and sat down at their kitchen table and listened to her story. When she was done, Mrs. Bennett was crying, and she hugged the woman. Mr. Bennett did the same. Then they had the woman follow them upstairs into the attic. Set aside was a box.

“These were his things. We were given them all those months ago when they first told us.”

Mrs. Bennett opened the box and sorted through its contents. On the bottom was an American flag, and lying on that flag was the pennant that used to hang in the kitchen. Mrs. Bennett had fixed its seams long ago, and if not for the “1914” it could have been new. The three of them talked for a while, like old friends. Finally, after what felt like a lifetime, they hugged. Mrs. Bennett, her face a mixture of pain and gratitude, made sure to touch the woman’s stomach before her
departure. Then she was gone, carrying the box that used to sit in the Bennetts’ attic. They desperately looked forward to the next time they would see her—and, of course, her son.
ACC 50th Anniversary glass object. 2003. 3” x 9”
A glass trophy with an inscription at the top:
“50 Anniversary ACC, Atlantic Coast Conference.”
As well as an additional inscription at the bottom of the trophy:
“Thomas K. Hearn, Jr. President Wake Forest University.”
The moment of nativity is possibility;
There is something to be said for the first breath,
warm bloody skin,
The umbilical cord a stem, cut to bear twice the fruit.

We have no memory of our own momentous commencements, but we celebrate them nonetheless for the import they have held ever since—that miraculous moment of beginning, of newness, of appearing in the world, making possible all that we will speak and enact, all that we have done and will do tracing back to that first breath, to our bright entries into visibility.

We discover our own bodies and the body politic, body past. We convene and create and elect and name. When we open our fresh mouths we make history in syllabic strings of our own fabrication.
We live in centuries and across them. Halfway to our presumed end we engrave what has been because we want it to always be, the only semblance of guarantee that the children who are there to tuck us into darkness do not forget our acts lightly.

Crossing the threshold is an occasion to rejoice over what has been. We reward him whom we recognize as bearer of the legacy—it is a heavy weight, no triviality, to be burdened with the triumph of one’s forebears.

My father once turned fifty. I had only known him for sixteen years and six months but I had seen photographs of him with a boyhood bowl cut and I had spoken to my grandfather—a Baptist preacher so he would not falsify—and so I believed without a doubt that my father truly had turned fifty. I did not give him a trophy with his name engraved on it, or anyone else’s for that matter, not because I didn’t have the means, but because his turning fifty was not a one-man affair—it was sisters and brother and mother and father (whom I already mentioned), biscuits with jam and brown-curl beauty, piano fingers, chimney sweeps, paint- ings and a pack of wolves, deacons, cooks and graves, hiking switchbacks, long drives, sons and daughter dwelling in Caroline and sunshine and singing in Rome and in the lakeside mountains, trees, and it was me, and no trophy could be made to display so many names legibly without it becoming decisively tacky.

My mother once turned fifty, and for her as well there was no trophy. I had known her for seventeen years and ten months and she was compassionate soft power that did not need fact-checking. I gave her
many hugs because I am indebted to her and love is the only currency she deals in extravagantly. If I were to build my mother from the ground up, convene the parties, entreat the necessary signatories, I would require a firebrand German-blooded woman who fell in love early, honest-to-goodness, a mechanic and a Beetle for a whip-smart Lutheran girl, wayward sister, common sense and brown-sugar skin (envy of the Anglos among us), church politics, motherhood, children’s books and worries and those same sons and daughter, serendipity à la beach volleyball and a pair of glasses befitting a visionary with such proclivity for the hearts of fellow man (not to mention me)—when she turned fifty she had long ago mastered love, even in anonymity.

Soon after my father turned fifty we took a trip to the mountains: Seven Devils, Valle Crucis, Blowing Rock. My father’s father came to North Carolina from St. Louis, by way of Kentucky, but my father, who made his entrance in the Sandhills, made himself in the mountains. He dwelled there, and this too helped him turn fifty, and was the setting for the celebration. On a mountainside one could do better than a trophy—looking down on a full valley, captive audience—attentive trees lush with anticipation (it is summertime), green with envy that you know so intimately this great achiever that you can shout out, one by one, all his many foundations, and the birds would echo back, and in your ears they thunderously agree. The little cabins perched precariously, too high, rainbows-form-beneath-them high, they are filled with elderly men and women who know what it is to dwell and to turn and to keep dwelling and turning, and they have come up the hill to seek clearer air and to shout out names each
morning as well, because they have turned so many times that once a year is hardly sufficient to honor all that has been done and said in the meantime.

When my mother turned fifty we dined en famille, and when the waitress brought the dessert there were strawberries and chic little sparklers and the ebullience of my mother’s smile. Inside a restaurant, emphatic declarations are not so readily made because there are businessmen and nervous individuals who may or may not couple themselves one distant day, and generally the prevailing atmosphere is of hushed tones and not of jubilance. So I confined myself to a silent tableau of memories with which my mother could be lauded before the most important audience. When one does not fret about reception or cross-examination it is easier to tell the story the way it is meant to be, to ignore the contingencies for which one’s subject ought not be faulted. Communion is the ideal setting for relaxed loving of character—the warm emotionality, the gourmand glow of satiety should not be underestimated—and when my mother turned fifty I embraced it with a smiling fullness because the past was so rich with goodness that future tragedies were no longer intimidating.

I turned fifty once in a dream, like a prophecy—unless, of course, I should die before I am helped to render it truthfully. Perhaps someone will make me a trophy, to be given to my children and their children’s children—I am not Abraham but I may still be entitled to covenant to tell silent stories to people who don’t truly remember me. If, consequently, I am made of glass—culminating clarity—and enshrined for posterity, then I should hope to break soon so that I can return to the grainy sand and the red clay of piedmont forests and the wild earth-upholding sea.
Our lives are coastal, they abut each other, we lap and batter each other like waves. When I am living hundreds of miles from the shore I imagine during showers (never baths) that the brackish sound water of home is always warm and clear, or golden at most, that it is only the mud teeming underfoot that is dark.

I’ll call her Emily (that is her real name) — the girl with whom I ran across the gentle waves from the dock to see her aunt who was born in a house on the water, probably, but had only recently become her aunt. She gave us Mexican cokes but the closest I’d ever come to Mexico was a layover at the Dallas airport, so the tasteful superiority of its sugar was overpowered by the novelty of it all.

Now it is years later and Emily is memory, still beautiful, I still see photographs of her but I no longer want to kiss her because no longer is she. If I were to go about convening a conference of the prominent personages of my past, she would be selected, but I suspect she might decline the invitation; she indulges in higher pleasures now and may secretly disdain some small part of me. Her kind of sugar is still much more sweet. And though it is impossible to know, her aunt, if she is still her aunt at all, may have turned fifty.

Should I ever follow suit, thereafter I would like it to be known that I once wept halfway up the trail to the top of Yosemite Falls because the shadow of an impending rainstorm broke my heart, and when my tears dried we were looking out over the sunny valley and splitting the two oranges we had left amongst the five of us, intimately desperate, animal in our utter lack of self-consciousness; we knew only each other and to-
together we were free and we were supposed to be only because we were.

* * *

Permanence is not facile happenstance; it does not arise; it is not coincidence. It is actions, words spoken to others, with others, against others. Permanence is agonistic in nature; world memory is not limitless, after all—one must struggle for a place within it. Permanence is not stasis. Paradoxically, it is change—adaptation begets versatility begets survival. Permanence requires cultivation, tending-to, and an escape from the cycle of death and regeneration in which new forms eventually disremember the old (forgetting not what they never knew). So we join ourselves together, and rejoin to those by whom we are confronted; if we never feel opposed we have likely never carried the day.

I will be joyous in carrying my own days, and if you speak lovely words and are not afraid to shout then I will carry your days with me too, days with you being days of heart-races, being out of breath, fatigue benignly abated by association with sublime vivacity; do not quiver, do not shake me out of the limbs of your tree, you being with me human, we are we, are trunk roots, leaves extending indefinitely.
Wait Hall (1837–1933). Handmade Brick. 2.5” x 4” x 8”
Red brick with engraved gold plate. From the “Original Sidewalk” of the Old Campus of Wake Forest College, Southeastern Seminary. Wait, Samuel, 1789–1867. Wake Forest College.
Is it over? It feels that way. I’ve said all I can say, and I’m not really sure what else to do. I guess I could try again. Mean what I say this time, maybe try to be a little more genuine. But, I feel they just won’t get it or try to understand it. I don’t want to continue down this road and be responsible for my own unhappiness. They’ve taken so much from me already. I don’t feel like there is anything left to say, so why do they keep calling me?

Ring, ring, ring. “Someone’s calling you again,” Lottie said. We’ve agreed not to mention her name. She’s betrayed both of us, so we don’t really care to mention her name except as a punchline. I’m a little more subtle about my dislike for her, but Lottie is a little more adamant about her opposition. I guess it doesn’t bother me as much because I’m used to the deceitfulness. If I had a dime for every time she did something deceitful—actually I don’t think there is enough money in circulation to ever cover the amount. But I digress. You would think I would be more upset about the betrayal, but I feel okay. I mean, okay is better than fine, I think...
The problem isn’t that she betrayed me; it’s that she wants to continue to be a part of my life like she missed the most important lesson in Betraying 101. That lesson would be that when you stab someone in the back you don’t stick around to ask if you can help pull the knife out. I wonder what compels her to burn bridges and then choose to one day out of the blue say, “Hey! Let’s hang out.” Am I supposed to just try to act like all the bad things didn’t happen and save a friendship that has been dead for a long time just because the dying friendship finally caught her attention. She didn’t even try to contact Lottie, which is another area of confusion.

This is confusing because while she was betraying me (the first time) she and Lottie were inseparable. Then I started hanging out with her and Lottie, and things were fine for a while. But little by little she started not showing up for study sessions and movie marathons. Then she was completely gone (the second betrayal), and we saw her hanging out with other people like Kelly, whose is another enemy; but that’s another story. It just felt like she didn’t want to be friends with me anymore, as if my existence were irking her, like she couldn’t get rid of me. I’ve never really told anyone this, not even Lottie, but when she found out that I was going to the same school as her again, she said she was hoping I picked another school. At the time I wasn’t aware that she had chosen the same school, but I was suspicious because who tells someone, “Oh, I was hoping you would go to this school” without a legitimate reason? So, after the second betrayal I decided fine let’s not be friends. Nothing lasts forever anyways.

I started to hang out with Lottie more, and now we are really close. I still wonder if the betrayer would still
be friends with Lottie if Lottie and I were no longer friends. She only started distancing herself from Lottie when I started to be friends with her. Ring, ring, ring. “You should just block her,” Lottie said. *Why does she keep calling?*

* * *

Lottie and I decide to go to the mall. We shop and talk about all the work that is due on Monday. Within a few hours we’re exhausted, so we head to the food court. I guess everyone else had the same idea because the food court is crowded. There is nowhere to sit. Luckily, someone moves, and we rush to get the seats before anyone else. After we both get our food and are settled, we see the betrayer headed our way. “Hey, can I sit with you guys? It’s really crowded in here,” she says.

“Sure, but we’re about to leave,” Lottie says.

“That’s fine. Did you get my calls?” she says, turning to me. I nod.

“So you just didn’t answer?” I nod again. She looks at me with a bewildered expression. One of her friends comes to the table to put down her stuff, and then they both go to get food. Lottie and I decide to leave. As we leave she comes towards me and asks if we can talk. “I can’t. I’m busy,” I answer.

We’re back in Lottie’s room doing homework when I get a text message from the betrayer. She’s asking when am I available to talk. “She’s texting me again.”

Lottie responds as she plays music from her playlist. “I can’t believe you told her you ignored her calls.”

“What did you want me to do? Lie?”
“I don’t know—if you were going to be that cruel, you might as well have thrown a brick through her window,” Lottie says. She continues to work on an assignment on her laptop.

“I just didn’t want to lie, and I feel like there’s nothing to talk about. We haven’t really had a meaningful conversation since last year. Why does she want to start now?”

“You should just talk to her to clear the air.”

I let the idea settle in my mind. I don’t want to talk. Although clearing the air would be less controversial, I feel like this situation she created needs no explanation. She brought this on herself. She chose to treat me like a disposable item, and now she wants to act like there’s a friendship left to save. Why doesn’t she realize that it’s over? Maybe a brick through her window would make the message more clear and to the point.

* * *

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Lottie’s worried we will get caught and then be suspended.

“No one will know it’s us.” I laugh. It is three in the morning, and we are shivering. The weather channels had all predicted it would snow at five. We have two hours to complete the mission.

“Did you tie the note to the brick?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. Go over the plan one more time.” Lottie is insistent.

“So we throw the brick in her window and we run, but we don’t split up because that’s how everyone gets caught.”

“Simple. Are you sure you want to do this?”
“Yes, let’s just get it over with,” I say. I look up at the sky. It’s dark, and I’m pretty sure no one would be able to recognize us if someone does spot us. I look up at the window; it seems pretty far away. What if I hit the wrong window? I feel the brick in my hand. It feels heavier and colder than it should. I lift the brick up, and I’m about to throw it into her window. Suddenly an alarm goes off and I’m caught off guard. The brick is still in my hand, so it’s not a security alarm. I see red blinking lights coming from the building. I realize it’s the fire alarm ringing. I look at Lottie, and she mouths the word “run.” We both take off at top speed. By the time we reach Lottie’s room we’re both out of breath.

“That was an incredibly stupid plan,” Lottie says.

“I know,” I say.

“Well at least we didn’t go through with it.”

“I just want this whole thing to be over.” I snap. “I’m tired of all the shadiness, and I don’t want her to keep acting like we’re still friends.”

“If you want it to be over then just tell her.”

I think about what Lottie said. It seems simple enough. I believe that I don’t need to say anything because it seems abundantly clear that we haven’t been friends in a long time. I can’t remember the last time we talked about anything other than anthropology. I remember I helped her move when she had a difficult roommate. She hasn’t really helped me in any way since we got here. She looks at me like she doesn’t know who I am. It’s weird to see someone you’ve known for so long look at you like a stranger. Our inside jokes have disappeared, and she doesn’t know who my enemies are. I feel a friend should at least know who you dislike—that way she can have your back.
I realize I’m still holding the brick tightly in the palm of my hand. I kneel down and place it on the floor. I reach for my phone and text her about the status of our friendship.

I’ve always been taught that when it’s over it’s over. No repeats and no do-overs. People can cry, beg, and plead, but maybe they should remember all the times they mistreated and abused my kindness. I’m tired of people not realizing how much they need me in their life until it’s too late. Over is over, and for me our friendship is over.
Band Jacket. 1937, Cloth. Black wool with gold trim. 1937? Originally worn by Oscar E. Shouse (Class of 1938) while a clarinet player in the Wake Forest College Band in 1937, Marching bands—1930–1940, Wake Forest College, RG14_047
It Will Last Longer

Lena Hooker

Her fingertips brush across the dark, glossy surface, the raised casket meeting her at eye level. Adelaide struggles to breathe, to think, to comprehend what is happening. The tears are coming, unwillingly, hot and fast, and her throat is raw from choking back monstrous sobs. She lays her hand on the cold, frigid wood, wanting to plant herself here indefinitely. But she can feel a force—something greater than herself—pulling her away. Adelaide fights, verbally and physically, but her spirit is too weak. Her hand falls limp to her side, and her heart breaks with every inch that takes her farther and farther from the casket.

This is how Adelaide spends her nights, dreaming of her deceased father. Nine years later, and still the nightmares haunt her. But she does not dwell in her depression, her loss, her emptiness. She endures the pain, and tells no one. Instead, she constantly surrounds herself with others to forget the lingering dread that will creep upon her once she is alone again. Day after day, night after night, and still the tainted memories will not leave her.
Adelaide’s mother, Isabel, ignores—or does not acknowledge—the present state of her family. She never speaks about or cries over her lost husband, especially not in front of Adelaide. This is mainly why Adelaide is unable to discuss her recurring nightmares with Isabel; no one wants to bring grief on her own mother.

These are the thoughts that occupy Adelaide’s mind as she chomps pensively on Honey Bunches of Oats cereal. Her mother, who is merely four feet away sipping on bland, black coffee, seems to be on another planet. She appears engaged with the newspaper in her hand, but Adelaide can see the slight glaze covering her eyes, the deadness lurking beneath the surface. Isabel is not always like this—half alive, half numb. Mornings are the worst, for both of them, when Adelaide is traumatized with wreckage, and Isabel is paralyzed with solitude.

To avoid the palpable discomfort, Adelaide turns to glance behind her at the blizzard warring on outside. White flakes are dancing, colliding with the world that rests at their disposal, waiting to be confronted. The beauty outweighs the danger of the scene beyond. Adelaide smiles at the thought of curling up with a raggedy, worn novel and a toasty cup of hot chocolate to get her through the day. Isabel looks up from her reading just in time to catch the fading smile from her daughter’s lips. She pans back and forth between the window displaying the winter wonderland and her newly brightened daughter.

“Are you excited to have a snow day off from school?” Isabel asks gently, surprising her daughter.

“Definitely,” Adelaide responds, turning back to face her mother. “School’s overrated.” She quickly shuts her mouth to avoid being barked at for degrading
the value of education again. But instead of screaming, Isabel bursts into a fit of laughter.

“You sound just like your father,” she says through chuckles. “He used to love the snow.” Isabel jerks herself upright abruptly, realizing her misstep with her daughter. Never talk about Bryce. Never. That was her single condition—and promise—to herself. Adelaide is visibly shocked and uncomfortable, unsure of how to respond to the mention of her father, acknowledgments of whom died along with him nine years ago.

“Mom,” Adelaide starts, but Isabel is averting attention, avoiding conflict with the issue at hand. She practically hurls her coffee mug into the sink, yanking her purse from its place on the counter with seemingly enough force to rip the bumper from a car.

Isabel places a brisk kiss on the top of Adelaide’s head and marches from the kitchen out into the snowfall. “Bye, sweetie. Have a great day.”

“You too.” Adelaide is completely bitter with her abandonment. She sits immobile for what seems to be an hour, and even then she cannot erase the thought of her father from her mind. Just a thought remains, an idea of who he was. No face, no body, no voice. Who really is her father? The question nags at Adelaide’s subconscious, begging to be explored. She contemplates the implications of this excursion, debating whether or not her childhood memory of her father lying in a casket is meant to resurface. How is she to know whether this will be disrespectful or inappropriate or necessary for her to continue functioning?

Without much of a conclusion or consensus, Adelaide carefully raises herself from the chair, determined to find something, anything about her father. Bryce, she reminds herself. Maybe it will be easier,
less painful, to think of him as Bryce—the man he was before he was her father. With that thought, Adelaide proceeds to the hallway beside the kitchen, where a rugged and thin piece of rope hangs from the ceiling, leading to the attic. She consciously reminds herself to take slow, deep breaths to calm both her nerves and her heart rate. Exhaling, Adelaide reaches her fingertips to meet the dangling rope, grasps it, and pulls downward to reveal a dusty, dilapidated set of creaky wooden stairs. The pathetic state of this contraption almost makes Adelaide break with laughter. Almost.

She gently places one foot onto the lowest step, testing the capabilities of the desperate structure. When that level holds, she adds another and another. Soon Adelaide has reached the decrepit interior of the attic, which is lined with swells of water damage and communities of unsettling cobwebs. The space is empty, aside from three cardboard boxes. The boxes are neither large nor small, perfectly sized for holding all of the items we cannot take with us when we die. It is evident that the boxes have been here for a while because the layers of dust hide the writing on them. But Adelaide knows they belong, or used to belong, to Bryce. Her mother never comes up here, and now she knows why.

After some thought, Adelaide decides to bring the boxes down, with care and ease, one by one. Although dusty and messy, she delegates the living room, a warm, open space without pictures or memories of her father, as her unveiling room. Unconsciously, she places the boxes in a strangely arrayed circle, deciding to reveal them one at a time. Adelaide stands with the boxes before her, clenching her hands into fists to keep them from trembling. Her heart is racing, her thoughts soaring, her spirit draining. Answers—necessary an-
swers, good or bad—lie within these boxes. Adelaide steps forward, drops to her knees, and brushes away the dust from the first box. The cover reads: Bryce Alan Anderson. She opens it.

Inside, the contents are average, as expected, but surprisingly intact. Some of the photos, probably thirteen out of one hundred, appear tattered, but overall everything is whole. Maybe his heart is complete this way, Adelaide thinks to herself before tucking away the thought. She digs through the box, piling the photographs to the side as she goes. Mindlessly, she tosses aside two more pictures before she notices their texture is different. Glancing down, Adelaide discovers there are two tickets by her knee for the

1984 Summer Olympics

Los Angeles, California, USA.

Adelaide’s mouth hangs ajar while she works futilely to recover from her astonishment. She turns one of the tickets in her hands, utter awe washing over her. How did she not know about this? Did he tell her? Did she forget he told her? So many questions, too many questions, rush through Adelaide’s head as she attempts to imagine Bryce as a young boy headed to the Olympics. Her heart warms at the thought, and her eyes catch sight of scribbled writing on the back of one of the tickets.

To my Grandson Bryce,

I hope you put these tickets to good use, and I hope you don’t mind taking me with you. Maybe you can explain everything to an old man like me.

Never stop dreaming.

Love, Papa
Adelaide’s eyes begin to water. The endearment from her great-grandfather touches her softened spirit, even thirty-some years later. She has never met this man, but even still she can see the glimmer in his eyes, the dimples in his cheeks, the creases in his forehead from smiling all of the time. Adelaide loves this man, her family, and she does not even know him. Eagerly, she reaches into the box for more, hoping to be livened with more admiration.

The following article is massive in comparison to the tickets, its material gruff and thick. Adelaide lifts up for examination what she now finds to be a jacket when a small, folded paper frees itself from the coat, floating to the ground. She spreads the jacket gently across the floor, making sure not to disrupt the photos, and grasps the letter in her hand. Already, by the handwriting, she can tell her sweet, kind-hearted great-grandfather is at work once more. Without hesitation this time, she reads.

Bryce,

Congratulations on being accepted to Wake Forest, my alma mater. I know you have worked so hard to get here, and I could not be a more proud grandfather. I know you are between Wake and University Of Washington (U-DUB, as the kids say), and I want you to know I will support you no matter what. Regardless of where you end up, I want you to have my band jacket from my four years at Wake. Not only has the music bug gotten to you, too, but with the clarinet, of all things! You truly are my grandson.

Love, Papa
Adelaide stares at the letter clutched in her hands, reading and rereading the words *Wake Forest*. She racks her brain for any remembrance of where Bryce went to college. Her shoulders sink with defeat as the realization sets in: she does not even know where her own father went to college, where he spent, assumably, the best years of his life. Adelaide places the letter aside, suppressing tears, to stroke the embroidery on the wool jacket. Years—decades—of history in a single article of clothing. Touching this coat connects her to generations of her family line, people she never knew existed.

Decidedly, Adelaide shrugs on the jacket, welcoming the rub of the material against her skin. She feels strangely comfortable in such an old coat and savors the transfer of rich love from the letters to her heart, keeping her warm. Wrapped in family history, Adelaide experiences an overwhelming urge to rip apart every single box and to inspect every last item. She needs to know every ounce of her father that she can; she has to know. After nine years of unasked and unanswered questions, the barrier has fallen with a flood of curiosity pouring from the very essence of her being. Settling tighter into the jacket, Adelaide plants her resolve carefully, preparing for the growth of the unknown.

The next box divulges endless stacks of camera film with only a few developed photos. Adelaide gingerly pulls various films from their containers, revealing captures of scenic Washington landscapes, fast-paced soccer games, UW’s violet-covered campus, second-hand instruments, stunning sunsets, her animated mother. The pictures are realistic representations of life that somehow manage to highlight the beauty in the simple things that sometimes go unnoticed. But
there are no images of her father. Surely he did not take these, she thinks, but even she is skeptical of her assumptions. Adelaide suddenly remembers the photos by her side, on the floor, and hurries to investigate what they could possibly have on them. Each picture is of her father, of Bryce, as a young, innocent, unsuspecting child—pictures of Bryce climbing rocks, of Bryce playing soccer, of Bryce practicing the recorder, of Bryce taking pictures with a toy camera. Every shot of Adelaide’s father is full of life and replete with joy that radiates from the photo. His spirit cannot be contained within the confines of a still picture. What a beautiful thing, to live so freely, Adelaide thinks.

Setting the photographs aside to treasure them for later, Adelaide turns her attention back to the box, which is still half-stuffed with content. Letters upon letters upon letters, all addressed to one Isabel Cook, the more recent ones, Anderson. Adelaide wastes no time organizing them into chronological order, all the way back to the early nineties. The first correspondence between the two seems to be from before they actually knew one another well. Adelaide’s heart swells.

Dearest Isabel,

I wanted to thank you for not writing me up for climbing up the dormitory. I know you like your rules, and I am grateful you made me the exception. To express my thanks, I would like to take you to dinner, so I may gaze upon your incomparable beauty. Please respond if you want to go.

– Super-datable Bryce

* * *
Regular Bryce,
Take a picture if you’re that desperate. It’ll last longer.
– Isabel

* * *
Dearest Isabel,
You responded. I’ll take that as a yes! Pick you up at 8.
– Still super-datable Bryce

* * *
STILL REGULAR BRYCE,
Fine. Just stop writing me! I’m not excited about this.
– Isabel

P.S. Stop calling me dearest. That’s weird.

Laughter fills the air, and it takes a few heartbeats for Adelaide to realize that she is the source of the joyful noise. Tears are streaming down her face, yet she has the biggest grin stretching her lips, more genuine than she has had in days, months, years—too long. Adelaide has not experienced a lively side to her mother since before her father’s passing, a side that is carefree and buzzing with energy. Though the words are few, it is clear that Adelaide’s mother was not sleepwalking through life as a young adult, not the way she is now.

Adelaide flips through handfuls of other letters: ones of Bryce inviting Isabel to intramural soccer games, to hiking functions, to band concerts. Letters with Isabel’s responses saying how thrilled she is to be coming to whatever crazy event Bryce has lined up
for her. There are receipts and photos paperclipped together from July 17th, 1993—the day they got engaged. Gas receipts from the long drive, a jewelry store receipt for the ring, a flower store receipt for the roses, and a Summit House restaurant receipt with Mount Rainier as the backdrop. Adelaide prides herself in her father’s generosity and all-consuming love for her mother. He was as respectful, adoring, and thoughtful as his grandfather. Adelaide feels a lump forming in her throat and begins swallowing profusely to keep from choking or sobbing or both. How was it possible to miss, or forget, this entire side of him? She berates herself for having ever disregarded the warmth and kindness that her father clearly displayed.

She reads on, years later. Her father and mother are married, and while the passion between them is still blatantly obvious, there is an underlying tension behind their words.

Bryce,

Do you really have to go work? You’re missing her dance recital.

All my love, Isabel

* * *

My dearest Isabel,

Believe me, sweetheart. I wish I could be with you both more than anything, but I have to do this. Tell her to prepare a special routine, and she can perform it for us when I get back.

Forever yours, Bryce
Adelaide fidgets with her great-grandfather’s band jacket, wrapping it tighter around herself. Let yourself believe in love and happiness and tooth fairies, she tells herself. Adelaide is able to recall the slight absence of her father throughout her childhood. She remembers having an immense affection for him, and she presumes he possessed the same for her. But he was gone often, and when he was gone, Isabel would deflate ever so slightly. Where did he go? What did he do? Adelaide allows her thoughts to roam freely as she methodically chews on the inside of her cheek. Inevitably, she comes to the final letter marked March 9th, 2007, exactly two months before his death.

My dearest Isabel,

With your permission, I would like to withdraw myself from my field position and take a desk job near our home. I spoke to my boss, and he has approved my request. I want to be with you and Adelaide always. I die a little more each time I am away from you both. Please say you agree.

Forever yours, Bryce

Of course she agreed. Adelaide reminisces about this day with vivid imagery. She was picked up from school early, she was taken for a mani/pedi, and she ate four doughnuts all by herself; it was a picture-perfect day. Her family was finally going to be together, permanently. Until it was not. Ironic that he speaks of death while Isabel is slowly dying day after day from heartbreak. Adelaide’s chest heaves, threatening to bring an onslaught of wailing, but she focuses on the task at hand—uncovering the last box, uncovering
her father’s “field position.” Adelaide raises the lid to sneak a peek within.

Just then the door opens abruptly as Isabel hurries inside to find warmth. Adelaide lifts her head, eyes wide, to meet those of her mother. The shock and betrayal are evident in Isabel’s, her physique swaying slightly, unable to support itself.

“What are you doing?” Isabel breathes with all the energy she can muster.

“I’m sorry,” Adelaide says.

“Why?” Isabel asks. But she does not appear infuriated or angry, only exhausted, as if the emotions presenting themselves are too tiring to contend with.

“I don’t know. It just happened.”

“No. Why are you sorry?”

Adelaide is confused. “Oh, because you miss him.”

“You miss him, too.”

“Not like you.”

“Of course like me.” Isabel moves from her stance to sit directly in front of Adelaide. “But neither of us knew how to talk about it.” Isabel eyes her, knowingly, waiting for her to respond. Adelaide nods. “Why don’t we talk now?” Adelaide inhales sharply before slowly exhaling to calm herself.

“He was a really good guy, wasn’t he?”

“The best.” Tears well in Isabel’s eyes. The good kind.

“Are you mad he wasn’t around more?”

“Yes. And no. Your father, Adelaide, had such a whimsical spirit, and he always had to be doing something exotic or adventurous. With his job, he could do
that—go on crazy adventures but still have us—that place and people to come home to. I just wish we could have had more time with him. You understand that, don’t you?”

“I just can’t remember anything about him. I want to remember him.”

“It’s all there, sweetheart. You just need time.”

“What was his job? Why was he always gone?” Adelaide is prying, but she does not intend to stop.

“Right. Well, I think that box will tell you,” Isabel replies, tilting her head in the direction of the third box. Adelaide narrows her eyes, perplexed.

Adelaide shrugs nonchalantly. “It’s just a bunch of National Geographic magazines.”

“That’s true,” Isabel murmurs. “Tell me what you know about him. From these boxes. Things you learned.”

“He went to the Olympics in L.A., so he is into sports and athletics. He played intramural soccer and did lots of rock climbing and hiking. He played the clarinet, just like his grandfather. That’s where this comes from.” Adelaide tugs on the jacket. “He was big into photography. There was tons of camera film in here. He was a free spirit and loved to have fun. I don’t know what else.”

Isabel grabs the top magazine. “Addie, what’s on the cover?”

“Just a picture of two lions. Why?”

“But how did National Geographic get the picture? Who took it?” Isabel waits patiently, drawing out the final question, emphasizing its importance.
“No,” Adelaide whispers, once the realization sets in. “There’s no way.”

“No way, what?” Isabel feigns innocence.

“He didn’t. He took those?” Adelaide gestures to the box filled with magazines.

“He did,” Isabel affirms proudly. “Twelve covers a year for seven-and-a-half years.”

“I never knew.”

“To you, he was just Dad, and that was the best job he could ever ask for.”

“But he was coming home. The desk job, right?”

“He was.”

The flood within Adelaide wins against her self-control, wreaking havoc against her body. She falls forward onto all fours, driving herself towards hyperventilation with her sporadic breathing patterns. Isabel flies to her side and cradles her body awkwardly, attempting to calm her daughter. The space grows tighter, more crowded, as Adelaide’s screams fill the air. Her head is throbbing, the pressure increasing, until nothing.

Adelaide’s eyes flutter open, catching sight of her mother’s face hanging over her. Isabel’s blonde hair and bronze features are warm and comforting against the gray hues that now consume the living room. A soft smile has settled onto Adelaide’s lips, her eyes alert but cautious.

“There she is,” Isabel says, stroking her daughter’s hair. Adelaide lets out a mangled sigh that comes off a stifled grunt.

“I’m sorry, mom.”
“Stop apologizing.”

“No, it’s just,” Adelaide says, searching for her words and digging her fingernails into her thighs, “for nine years, I wanted nothing more than to forget him. Not because I didn’t love him, but because it was too hard to remember him.”

“And now?”

“Now I know the wonderful man he was, and I love him even more. And I’m so glad he is my father. I never want to forget him, but it hurts.” Gentle tears ebb their way down Adelaide’s cheeks.

“I think it always will.”

“Great.” Adelaide is not satisfied.

“It is, isn’t it? To love, and to be loved, is a beautiful thing. And he sure loved us.”

“Do you think he’s still with us?”

“I know he’s still with us. You know how? Because I see him every day in your beautiful brown eyes, kind heart, and capricious personality. Although, I will say, you are much more toned down than he was.” At that, she giggles, remembering a fond memory with her lost husband.

“I want the memories, as screwed up as it is. I want to remember,” Adelaide says, locking eyes with her mother.

“How should we make that happen?” Isabel grins as if the two of them are conspiring for a mission.

“I want the pictures up. All of them.”

“I think that’s a fine idea,” Isabel replies, eyes shining.

“That way the memories will last longer.”
“Pictures tend to do that, don’t they? Come here.” Isabel wraps Adelaide up in her arms, wooly jacket, knotted hair, and all.

Adelaide squeezes back with equal force, hanging on for life. She rests her chin in just the right nook in her mother’s shoulder, finally finding rest in a time of anxiety. She can breathe freely once more. Her eyes scan the room as she notices photographs and camera film and letters spread haphazardly across the floor. She smiles knowing that, after all these years, she has a father. She knows her father. Utterly content in her resolve, Adelaide gazes out the window to watch the final moments of the sun bleed out. The snowflakes continue to beat furiously against the house and the windows, but behind the snow is a motionless man. It is the once faceless man, Adelaide’s father. But now, looking at him, she recognizes his stark features undoubtedly. She is unable to turn away as his visage fades into the snow. She refuses to shy away from the memory of his love.
Wedgewood China Plates. 14” x 14”
Set of twelve plates picturing Wait Hall (1837–1933); Heck-Williams Library (1878); Wingate Memorial Hall (1879); Lea Laboratory (1888); Social Science Building (1900); Alumni Building (1906); Cary J. Hunter Hall (1914); William Amos Johnson Memorial (1933); Wait Hall (1934); Bostwick Hall (1934); Gymnasium (1935); and Simmons Hall (1937). Plates (Tableware)—China. Wake Forest College.
I'm getting ready to go to war. This is going to hurt me. I'm going down that rabbit hole, and I don't plan on coming back out.

Mrs. Woolnoth, whose house smelled of old leather and 2-Nonenal, which she tried to cover up with jasmine and expensive perfume (the kind that reeks of cheap perfume), had a cabinet full of fine china plates. Her daughter was a prim young lady of twenty years by day; her name was Edith Woolnoth, but her servants called her Miss. She smelled of morning dew at 9:06 a.m., which is when she woke up, usually without an alarm clock, which hadn’t been invented yet. She also smelled of must, a consequence of her living in a particularly damp, mildewy room near the interior of the house.

I could feel it coming closer. Lurking there, in the darkness. I could feel its long tendrils want to sink
into my flesh. I kept thinking I saw glimpses of it. Prisoner’s cinema? Prisoner’s cinema. In that old creaky house I was alone. Mrs. Woolnoth bit the dust over seventy years ago, and now tomatoes grow on top of her Anderson shelter. The mansion was massive with corridors turning every which way. I followed it to its conclusion, but there were always more corridors. What’s it feel like to be in a big, empty house? The darkness seems to close around you, but then you realize it was your eyelids closing. They’re heavy now. Aren’t they heavy? Don’t you feel the weight of worlds? Of ancestors? But I was searching for something more important than all that. What’s a person anyway? An object. A person is an object, and a very destructive one. Always hurting itself and others. God says run a mile in more than four minutes, and Roger Bannister does it in 3:59.4. Probably some other human somewhere can run real fast too. Just like a human, always trying to outdo everything and everyone. Which country has the biggest tower while you’re reading this? Did we ever build a more powerful bomb? Or did we disarm it?


was a garden, neatly kept and done up in the style of one of the nicer parts of 1885 London. Even lines of fine rhododendrons and shrubs kept the place or-
derly, and creepers and ramblers winded their way up and around walls and trellises but were meticulously trimmed to stop them from ruining the strong beauty of the perennially green globe arborvitae shrubs or from crawling along the dirt paths. Wisteria hung down eloquently from overhead trellises, and rose bushes could be found here and there, their bulbs slightly singed at this time of year and their thorns rendered impotent. Bodies, too, were blooming this time of year, their delicate reds birthing St. George’s mushroom, fly agaric, and drab gray saprotrophs, which sought the shade of the battered pavilion.

Outside the garden grounds, walls were falling, fire rained down from above. People ran for cover as a concert of cacophonic plane engines of the Messerschmitts, Heinkels, etc. blared above; the railways got crowded. The chopping of propellers went away again. Man builds bombs. Man dismantles everything. Man learns. (What about women? Where were they all this time? (??)) Man builds machine. Man builds bigger weapons, better weapons. Man dies running from weapon. Woman dies too. Man dies not realizing the weapon was coming. Woman too. This isn’t profound. This is obvious.

Chapter 3. Minutes to Midnight Tropic of Cancer Irreconcilables Dark Fantasy I think, therefore I might as well be I’ll be your mir^:&Z~:\}v~k4JhR26XPror

Are we us? Is there psychological and/or physiological continuity or no? Parts of me were breaking off with each step. My mind was rearranging. I was not the same person I had been. Every moment I was reborn into my penitentiary of perception. For what must I repent? “What, God, did I do to be alive? This is
not me, for I am you. You have locked me here, inside my mind that is not mine! I will escape!"

and so I ran into the next corridor down, trying to outpace the shadows crawling behind me. I could feel their sticky legs crawl like needles up my own. I was almost there. I could see the doorway and the light. I saw the cabinet! There they were, twelve plates, enshrined within their glass case. How could we not see the importance of all that came before? I felt a cool wind brush up against my spine like an icy hand. I was in full sprint. I was nearly there. The hand, clutching me by the spinal cord, gave me a little shove, and I tumbled forward, hands and face charging toward the case.

after the other, they self-immolated. The kerosene they’d bathed in bloomed into bright orange flames, and we felt the pressure wave. Their bodies smoldered without moving. They were in protest. Around them people gawked, stared in awe. Each held an iPhone camera sideways, filming the scene. It smelled like kerosene—I should’ve expected as much, but I was surprised by the smell. The scent of death and destruction always surprised me. The heat was unbearable; we had to take a few steps back. Underneath the stench of kerosene was the familiar smell of a barbecue, and I flashed back to a moment from my youth.

in the yard as the wind picked up. All my family was there: my mom and sisters, my brother and brother-in-law, and even my dad. Some neighbors were there too. I wonder if those neighbors are still around. The wind was howling through the trees. Out of nowhere a gale appeared and kicked twigs and leaves into the yard. It brought the loose branches in the big oaks down into the yard. And it brought the thick, sweet smell of meat
to my nose. The smell of something burning shook me from my fantasy. It was them, these protesters. Some had stayed upright. Some had fallen over, crisp, like locust moltings. Their skin had bubbled through, and they were turning black.

A sudden urge to flee gripped me, and I turned to run. But news teams had arrived with their bulky cameras and booms and were pushing and shoving to get the more aesthetically pleasing angle for their shoot. A wall of heavyset bodies marched on, relentlessly, implicitly daring each other to get closer. One of the anchors, a blonde woman, kicked a little girl. Then she stopped to look apologetically at the camera, which was rolling. You saw the whole thing and looked at the camera too. Yes, you. I bet you didn’t know you were still in this story. I maneuvered my way through the news teams, feeling claustrophobic. When I got out of the now frenzied circle of onlookers, all I could see was blue sky. Birds were going about their business, landing on wires and shit. A guy bird was trying to court a girl bird, but she wasn’t having any of it. She flew off, and he sat there looking depressed. Some black smoke drifted like a ghost into my field of view, and I remember coughing up some bile and passing out.

went out one day. Everyone stayed calm. We watched its halo linger for a little while. The elders say the sun went out once almost twenty-one years ago. It was hell, but they didn’t think it would happen again. I guess we all misjudge things sometimes. Well, the people in the town were solemn but calm. They set to work making lamps to light the world. They made bigger and bigger lamps. And plugged them into every street corner. Houses were darkened to keep the lamps going day and night. And eventually we stopped talking about day and night; there was just the twilight
of the lamps (if you were lucky enough to be far away) or their intense glow (if you were closer to them). All day the lamps shone through my bedroom window. I blocked them out with two layers of sheets and slept right on the mattress, but the light still penetrated into my room. We all got used to it over time.

In my room all the colors were there, but I couldn’t know them like I used to. Everything was in grayscale, with all the colors imagined and imposed from memory. But after some months I stopped imagining so much and started making finer and finer distinctions among grays. More or less saturated, brighter or darker, glossier or less so. The world still made sense, but it made a different kind of sense than I used to think it did.

Somehow everyone was dying. I think it was some pandemic. I wasn’t leaving my room much at this point. And I didn’t wanna take the blackouts off my windows for fear of—. So I just imagined what the world would look like out there by extrapolating what it was in here. There was lots of screaming. Sometimes there would be laughing and crying. And then some months went by and there was lots of silence, and I imagined that whatever was affecting everybody so much had just stopped affecting them. That they had grown numb somehow. That they were tougher. And I thought, That’s good. Whatever was hurting them has stopped hurting them so much. It smelled like burnt meat and cinder ash. And then it started smelling like rot. The whole world was rotting out there.

were the only two around so far as I could tell. We talked and talked, and I asked if she had a boyfriend. She looked at me, her eyes welling up a bit, and said, “No.” She wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her red
sweater. Collecting herself, she said, “No,” again. “I didn’t have one before either.” We sat there, not saying anything. The birds stopped chirping, and the wind stopped moving. We both tensed up and fidgeted awkwardly, unsettled by the silence. “We should—go,” Anna said, her voice tight and hard like there was a stone in it. I got up wordlessly and was scared shitless but wouldn’t say so.

We went back to that barn we’d passed before. We’d been hoping to get to a town, but we didn’t know how far the next one was. We barely spoke as we walked. The wind picked back up in gentle, quiet breezes, but it still didn’t feel right. Once we could see the barn, I got frantic. In the woods all around us there was something. I didn’t know what, but I could feel it. Something watching. I stopped in my tracks and tried to force myself into composure by tensing my whole body at once, but when I stopped tensing, my body was still shivering. My forearms especially were twitching arhythmically and wouldn’t stop. I tried grabbing them, and when I did the shudder made its way into my teeth, and Anna touched my arm with a hesitant hand and then brought it away fast. She looked away from me just then like she was mad.

Night seemed to fall faster than usual, and we hadn’t quite reached the barn by the time it was dark out. We got to the barn and cautiously pushed the left door in, expecting some horrible creature to come pouncing out at us at any moment. I said, “Hello!” into the cavernous barn and winced at my own stupidity. If there weren’t eyes nearby watching us, there might be ears nearby hearing us.

woke up trembling and shouting, “No, he’s having a breakdown, I’m not able to live like this. Stop, stop!
Sto-o-op.” Big fat tears rolled down her left cheek, and she sounded defeated. I guess I thought she was awake, so I didn’t shake her, but she started talking again, much softer, her words mixing together. “—and then attempts to escape but can’t. Why’d the car go that way?” Then she sounded bitter and incredulous. “Why’d the—car go that way?!” I made to wake her up by pushing on her, but she lurched forward, dry heaved, and then grabbed my arm with terrifying force.

“Come with me. Now!” she said. I didn’t ask any questions and followed her. We went outside to find that the temperature had dropped significantly. The cold bit right through my jacket. Anna pulled me along by the arm. Only once we were outside did I think to ask what was up. “I’m—” She didn’t say another word but sobbed and walked back toward the barn door. I was crying, too, but had no idea why. I walked to her side and, before I’d said a word, she explained, “I was trying to get on the roof. I was supposed to. I don’t know.” We walked back into the barn.

I dreamt I was alone. I rolled around on the ground and expected to bump into Anna, but she wasn’t there. I was on the roof and looked over into the woods, and a witch with a black, pointed hat was running toward me way faster than any human should. I didn’t know if she could see me. And then I was in my old room, the one with the eggshell walls and the light blue ceiling and the glow-in-the-dark stars, and the witch was banging on my door. She was talking backward, but I understood her as she said, “I’m coming to get you!” The voice disappeared. The house was dead silent. And I stood up to flip the light on. With each footstep the house creaked. I needed to rush over to the light, but if I moved too fast one of the demons might get
me. I crept over, drawing out each creaky note in my symphony of footsteps. The house started to quake each time I put my foot down. I was being so gentle. Shh shh. If the house quakes, they’ll know I’m here. “Shh, please, please.” I bargained with the house, but it shook even more furiously. I made my steps as gentle as I could. Suddenly the house was the train station where I spent a night after I had run away. Bombs were falling down outside, and there were people all around me. They had no faces, but it all seemed normal. One of them pushed me, and I backed away from him. He pushed me again, a little harder, so I pushed him back. He shoved me with great force, and I toppled into the barn, with Anna looking over me. She looked concerned about me. The barn was creaking rhythmically, and the sound was making me sick for whatever reason.

My stomach growled pathetically. I got into the car and left the family reunion. I wanted to stay, but the sights of my nieces and nephews playing in the yard kept sinking further and further into the distance. I could smell the fresh-cut grass. I was in the car, driving with my dad. I was on the left side, but he had the steering wheel. That damn creaking sound came back, and I knew it was coming from the floorboard, so I unbuckled my seat belt and squirmed into the backseat to inspect the sound. I said, “I found it” and pulled a snow scraper from under the passenger seat. I scrambled into the passenger seat again—this time on the right side of the car. Anna was driving, and “Oh! You Pretty Things” was playing over the radio. We went down a steep hill and then up the other side of the hill. There were rows and rows of newly abandoned houses and some abandoned pickup trucks sitting in the houses’ driveways. We made a left at the fork in the
road. The radio host’s voice came over the station and said something I couldn’t make out. Then his voice became static. I flicked the switch between AM and FM a few times before giving up. The whole place smelled of freshly harvested rye and decay, and the static was deafening. Then there was silence.

down a corridor and came to a dead end. I knocked quietly on the wall to see if any part of the structure were false, fearing at any moment that I would lose all sensation in my body. I was convulsing uncontrollably, and I could hear footsteps slamming into the ground behind me. I turned once anxiously to see if that thing was in sight yet. Who the fuck built this house?! I was mad as hell and wanted to hit the wall. Horror gripped me as I heard the creature move closer. Is this some sort of nightmare? The hall was spinning. I dragged my dumb, leaden body against the wall, praying to every god I’d never believed in in a language that was anything but intelligible. I sprawled myself out against the wood panels, using my still-functioning legs to work my body in one direction then another. It was hopeless. Everything was so fucking hopeless. I clawed the wall and breathed in and in and in—never out. My eyes tried to turn to see the beast move toward me, but my head wouldn’t budge.

My knee landed on a little metal stub, and I looked down, bewildered, like this little mark on the floor would be my demise. My eyes widened as I realized that the little stub was a latch. Holy God in heaven, a latch! My body worked independently of my mind and forced the hatch open without my memory’s knowledge. I plunged myself into the total blackness below me and found that it was only a shallow hole. I closed the hatch as softly as I could and stood stock-still in the cubbyhole, still fearing that at any moment
the hatch would fly open and that I would be ripped out of the hole and out of my existence. I tried to hold my breath to keep from making a sound, but it only made me need to breathe heavier. I scratched softly at the boards in front of me, to my left, to my right. The footsteps got closer. Each thud stopped my palpitating heart, and the rhythm of the thuds became a chorus of doom complete with shimmering white lights. Prisoner’s cinema.

Then the thuds were a little further away. Then a little further still. I tried to catch my breath a few times as a smile of relief formed on my numb face. A laugh came up out of my chest and lodged in my throat; I was choking on vomit. I coughed it up at my knees and sat, exhausted, my heart working like a piston. I started the uncomfortable process of turning myself around, away from the stench of stomach acid. My left leg inched backward as I contorted my body in the tiny space. My eyes widened again as I finished reorienting myself. Was there a hole behind me? I didn’t believe it. I slowly extended my right arm into the uniform darkness now in front of me, expecting at any second that my fingertips would hit some wall. My face turned from surprise to doubt to mesmerized joy as my arm kept moving forward unhindered. Even as I moved my head into the hole, I felt sure that I was just confused. Had a barricade fallen through the floorboards to block me and fit itself into place, I wouldn’t have been as astonished as I was by the fact that I was able to keep moving forward through this otherworldly hole.

I swung my right arm like a blind man’s cane, testing the space above me, below me, and to either side of me. Wood on all sides but ahead. Smiling like a madman, I pressed on, not knowing what I would find. I was cramped, but claustrophobia was nothing.
I rationalized that I knew nothing was behind me because I hadn’t heard the door open, and kept wriggling along this subcorridor. But, as the corridor extended on seemingly forever, my deluded mind began to feel some disembodied monster clawing its way up from behind. “I know it’s not there. I know it’s not there.” I mouthed the words over and over to myself, like an incantation. In an instant, the seeds of terror germinated and burst forth from my frail body. I frantically tried to turn around to face the demon that I was now sure was approaching me, but in the cramped quarters I couldn’t twist my head around, let alone my whole body.

Each noise I made became—in my head—the work of some phantom. For all I knew, whatever was after me could come through the walls and slaughter me where I lay. I scurried along faster and faster, recklessly knocking my knees and feet off the side walls of the passageway. My head banged into the ceiling, no matter how I repositioned it. Finally, I froze and, pressing my aching head between my forearms, insisted, “There is nothing behind me; there is no one behind me. I am alone. I am okay. There is nothing behind me; there is no one behind me. I am alone. I am okay.” I cannot say how many times I repeated these lines. When I brought my head up, my body felt different. I felt stiffer and more sedate.

at my arm and blinked the haziness away from my eyes. My canthi felt like vices closing around my eyeballs, tightening. I saw marks in the crease of my arm. Little flecks of blood. I heard footsteps coming up behind me. The room teetered lazily from side to side, and I tried to shake my head to make the teetering stop, but I couldn’t find the power to control myself. My head flopped weightlessly around on its axis.
There was that stench again. Vomit and seared flesh. Was it me? There was a drying stain of something in the middle of my shirt, but a quick mental check of my body made me confident that I was intact. I heard a doorknob turn behind me with the faintest screech.

of the subcorridor was a drop off. I crooked my elbow to inspect the ledge. I torqued my shoulder awkwardly, trying to feel some change in slope along the ledge, but it was vertical as far as I could reach. I leaned my head over the edge, looking into the penetrating darkness, and tried to collect my thoughts and come to some sensible plan of action.

those footsteps again. I heard a doorknob turn behind me with the faintest screech. Mr. Kitchener walked in casually and sat at his desk. “Now,” he said, “you can just sign here, initial here—well, you know what to do.” He laughed cheerfully, and there was a mischievous glint in his eyes. I smiled at him, feeling at ease, and signed my name in the appropriate spots. I let the pen roll dramatically off my fingers and onto the document with a clack. Then I leaned back in my hard mahogany chair and laid my right leg over my left knee. Mr. Kitchener pulled the documents toward him and smiled knowingly. “Well, I guess you know that there’s—

nothing out in front of me, nothing above. I pulled my arm back and stared down into the pit below. Was the floor just a few inches farther than my fingertips could reach or a few miles farther? If I couldn’t climb down, I would have to turn around and try to find a way out without getting caught. And even if I could go down into the pit, where could I go from there? Would I be able to get back out of it, or would it be another dead end? I decided I would need to turn around and
reenter the rat maze. “It’s better to die up there than starve to death down here,” I said to myself. Even as those words came out, I wasn’t sure I believed them.

I spun around so I was on my back and hooked my wrists around the top of the tunnel. Very carefully I shimmied backward, eventually pulling my right leg out behind me and mounting my right knee on the bottom edge of the tunnel. I moved my arms further in along the ceiling of the tunnel and shifted to my right, bracing hard with my arms and right knee as I swung my left leg out of the tunnel and quickly mounted it on the tunnel’s edge alongside my right knee. I tried to duck under the top of the tunnel in order to squeeze back in, but I couldn’t bend my spine enough to get my head under the tunnel’s ceiling. I lowered my left leg down to try to enter the tunnel at an angle.

In slow motion I felt my hands lose their grip on the wooden ceiling. The weight of my body jerked my desperate, grasping hands away from the tunnel, and I fell backward before I could lunge for the tunnel’s lip. I plummeted down into the pit’s unknown depths for what felt like minutes. In between bouts of darkness I saw flashes of my old family home, complete with yard and the huge cherry tree my friends and I would take turns trying to climb. I saw a mountain road. I leaned out the window and put my arms up to feel the frigid wind against me. Tiny icicles had formed in my hair, and I could hear my brother laughing in the car beneath the deep buffeting roar of the wind. I was asleep in the backseat of my dad’s car as we pulled into the driveway. The car stopped rumbling as the engine turned off. My dad clicked the seat belt and the webbing slid past his shirt with a zhhhip. He got out of the car, opened the side door, and picked me up as I feigned slumber. He draped me across his shoulder,
carried me to the front door, and handed me off to my mom. She set me against her shoulder with a “Hup!” and then I really fell asl

cold sweat. My body was soaking wet, and I was thirsty as hell. “Water, water, I’ve gotta get some water.” My throat was too parched to force out any more words. I still hadn’t figured out where I was. A firm hand clutched me by the shoulder, and I jerked my body around, ready to take a swing. Anna’s face was lit umber in this light. I calmed down in an instant; then my attention turned to the light source.

curtain; outside the town was flickering like a candle. The wind blew the all-enveloping fire west; then the wind receded, and the fire wobbled back into a right angle with the ground. Few of the bodies visible through the window were moving. The bodies that were moving probably wished they weren’t. Walls were crumbling. The hum and chop of engines and propellers retreated into the distance like the great ebb before a tsunami, when all the seafloor is laid bare and barren.

came crashing through the window, which could no longer check the water’s weight. The room guzzled the water, belching out air in huge pockets. The water had cascaded right onto me, jarring me from my sleep. My gown was soaked and the wet cloth clung to me as I moved. Disoriented, I grabbed as much as I could from on top of my desk and waded through the now knee-high water to the door. I didn’t realize how much force water provides; the door wouldn’t open, and the water level was rising quickly. I dropped everything in my arms and yanked on the door. It barely opened before the water slammed it shut again. I set my foot against the wall and pulled with all my might; then I
forced my way between the door and the doorjamb. “Aah!” I screamed. The door caught the toes of my left foot as it shut. I hobbled up the stairs, my crushed toes leaving a thin trail of blood in my wake.

At the top of the sixth flight, I stood on the balcony with the apartments’ other families, watching the destruction below. A grandmother held her grandson against her and a young mother slowly rocked her infant as we all watched on helplessly. Cars and trucks were sliding through the streets like toy balls in a creek, bouncing off of buildings and other cars as they wandered where the water did. On rooftops all across the city, stranded strangers looked on. Fatalism cradled us. One woman in her early forties began reciting chants. Over and over again, she droned on. “Pânâtipâtâ Veramani Sikkhapadam Samâdiyâmi. Pânâtipâtâ Veramani Sikkhapadam Samâdiyâmi. Pânâtipâtâ Veramani Sikkhapadam Samâdiyâmi. Pânâtipâtâ Veramani Sikkhapadam Samâdiyâmi. Pânâtipâtâ Veramani Sikkhapadam Samâdiyâmi.”¹

The crowd of onlookers slowly inched away from the chanting woman, maybe without fully realizing what they were doing. A couple hours or so passed. No rescue had come, and most of us were sitting with our hands around our knees. Some crying, some looking bored, most horrified and incapable of comprehending the nearly unrecognizable cityscape before them. That woman, whose perpetual chanting had faded in with the background noise of cries for help and waves clapping against cement, suddenly stood up and looked at us very sternly like she was about to say something of monumental importance. We were all rapt. Those of us crying now stopped whimpering and blinked away our tears, ready to heed anything that this suddenly sage woman might say. She looked at us long and

³⁷⁰
hard, not giving us a once-over, just *looking* at us, and we looked back attentively, held in her gaze. Then she looked on to the ocean, immense and seemingly un-yielding in its rapacious conquest for more and more land. The scent of the ocean breeze and sewage mingled and lingered oppressively in the humid air. The woman sat back down and kept right on chanting, and we were left to our thoughts.

to know. I peered through the crack in the side of the barn from which the light was emanating. A huge wall of flame was devouring the forest. Anna too rushed to the crack in the wall and looked at the inferno, stunned. “Which way do you think it’s heading?” I asked, surprising myself with my tranquility. The pleasantness of my dreams was still at the forefront of my mind. I scratched my head, trying to remember what my dreams were about. Something about family. A car seat. . . . Anna was looking at me with her concern again, mouthing something indiscernible. I wasn’t having a dream; I was having a nightmare. An awful image of a witch racing toward me flashed across my memory. I tried to hold on to the image to recall my memory of my dream, but the image faded fast. AM, FM, a field of some grain—wheat, I think . . . —and it’s gone. Whatever the dream was . . . no—I remember now; it was a nightmare. The misery of the ordeal left its imprint; its shadow festered in my brain. Vague but—“We have to go. Do you hear me? We. Have. To. Go. Let’s go.”

Anna grabbed me by the arm again. We picked up our packs and headed out the door. The inferno was tearing through the heather at a breakneck pace. We turned briefly to look at the barn, already being licked by the hungry flames. We ran on until dawn, trying to keep well ahead of the wildfire. I was still in a daze,
haunted by that dream or those dreams. I couldn’t say why. I couldn’t tell anymore whether they had happened in my mind or if I had experienced them in real life. I was in the pickup truck with my dad as we drove down and up that hill. Maybe my mom was there too? I can’t remember if that happened, but it must have. It must have. And then static. Silence. That can’t be real. Anna’s voice dispelled my contemplation. “I don’t know where the town is.” Her words hit me like a ton of bricks. “Are you kidding? You said you knew how to get there. You said you knew! What the fuck! What are we supposed to do now? You said you knew how to get there and that there would be supplies!” “Hey! Don’t yell at me. How many times have I saved your ass? Do you know where the town is? I’m sorry. I don’t know where the god damn town is, but there are other towns around here.” I kicked at the ground. Getting into a fight wouldn’t solve anything. I sighed. Anna sighed. And we walked on.

got up. My back was in agony. I tried to straighten up, but a pain shot up the length of my legs and all the way to the base of my skull. Shit, I really hurt myself, I thought. I gently sat myself back down. I squinted to try to make out the ledge from where I was, but I couldn’t tell up from down, let alone discriminate the tunnel from this pit. All directions posed threats—and potentially salvation. I looked at my hands; I could feel blood trickle along my palms; they were badly splintered. “Fuuuuck,” I groaned. In the jet black darkness, I tenderly pulled the splinters of wood from my battered hands. Blood seeped out of the nicks in my hands, forming little domes of blood. I rubbed my fingers against my palms and felt the blood, warm and slippery, smear all up and down my hands.

I repeatedly ran my fingertips from the bases to
the tops of their respective palms, getting a nice coating of blood on my fingers. I brought my fingers up to the bridge of my nose and rubbed the blood under my eyes like war paint. Invigorated, I stood up. Another painful pulse ran through the length of my body, causing me to flinch, but I stayed up and tried to posture myself. A dull shock traveled through me at measured intervals, but I soldiered on.

I walked in small concentric circles. My movements were rigid at first, but I began to loosen up. I found a wall with a slight curvature, and, with great caution, I groped my way along the wall, testing each new movement with a hesitant toe to the ground. Gradually, I worked my way around the curved part of the wall and couldn’t tell if I had come full circle or not. After what must have been three or four passes around the pit, I was sure I had traversed the whole of it. The pain in my spine had abated, and I lowered myself to my hands and knees and hunted for a trapdoor. When my haphazard inspection came up with nothing, I started from a point on the circle and moved back and forth along the wood floor. Nothing. I searched again, getting more frustrated and more frantic with each pass. I started doubting whether I’d really covered every segment of the ground. I started doubting, even, that I’d made my way around the whole circle. I pushed myself against the wall and slid around the circumference again and again and again, waiting for the latch to reveal itself. Nothing, nothing, nothing! I bit my bottom lip hard, drawing blood. “Fuuuuck.” I seethed in a hard, raspy voice, trying not to make noise. I wanted some object to be in this godforsaken pit just so I could smash it to bits.

I kept making rounds of the pit’s wall, jumping at odd intervals, hoping to catch my hand on something.
After minutes or hours of desperately clutching at flat boards, I touched the lip of the tunnel. I landed on the ground and paused. I jumped again in the same spot and felt my middle finger graze what was definitely the opening of the tunnel! I pressed my hand against the wall and directed my arm at the jumping spot. Carefully, and with even steps, I backed away from the wall, keeping my eyes and hips pointed in the direction of the tunnel. I bounced on my heels a few times and then ran at the wall, trying to gauge when to jump so I could boost off of the wall without smashing into it. I hit the wall and vaulted up; my right hand caught the edge, and my left was quick to follow. I scampered up the wall with swift kicks and flopped belly-down onto the tunnel’s floor. I had twisted my ankle on the jump, but I was in the tunnel and breathed a sigh of relief.

I scurried back through the tunnel and made it to the wall at the end. I listened for footsteps, breathing, any noise at all. I heard none. I pushed up the door above me and scanned the corridor. No one in sight. The hatch shut with a heavy thud, and I held my breath, listening intently for anything. It struck me that there were now two hallways jutting off of this one. I had come out of a different tunnel. The pit must be attached to multiple corridors. I glided through the hall on soft toes, turning this way, now that, trying to escape this hell.

cackled shrilly. Her mouth expanded wider until her jaw dislocated; her whole face twisted inside itself, and maggots poured from her sinuses and throat and spilled out of her exposed vagina. Her cackling became a dull, rhythmic thud. One two One two One two. Her gnarled hands grabbed my arms with extraordinary strength and strapped me into a cold metal chair. As she kissed me, her exposed muscle laid a trail of slimy
interstitial fluid on my cheek and neck. I gagged as she coughed her fetid breath into my nose. She stunk of rotting meat, and maggots kept pouring out of her bleeding eye sockets. With a slash of her knifelike nails, she cut the length of my pants. She crooned maliciously into my ear. “Open up your, open up your, open up your throat.” I felt her blight infect me as she drove her long, rough tongue into my ear canal. Grubs kept streaming out from the darkest depths of her abdominal cavity.

“Come here, baby,” she said, snickering so uncontrollably that her skin began to break and bleed. “Ahhhhhh. Open u-up.” Disgorged maggots streamed out of her mouth and into mine. I spit them out, retching violently. “I can’t abide by your wicked prose, my dear.” Her scissorlike nails snipped off my index finger. I opened my mouth to scream, and she spewed maggots into it, laughing maniacally. She mounted me, covering me in her festering juices. “Should we live for our own fulfillment or make our lives a sacrifice for others?” she asked as she rode me. “What the fuck, stop it!” I yelled. I was weak from choking on my vomit, and my finger was bleeding profusely.

“You writers, you claim to be observant. You write as if you have answers, but what do you know? Do you know the extents of the imagination? Do you know whether there are objective morals? Tell me, darling, does beauty have a purpose?” She slammed her bony hips into me harder with each question. “Can anything make sense? Can contradictory statements coexist?” She started cackling wildly again. She ran her nails down the length of my chest, streaking my shirt in blood. “If you don’t have a point to make, don’t sweat it.” I felt wilted. She convulsed furiously and kept hammering her pelvis into me. I could feel
blood blisters forming in my legs. “All the nightmares came today, and it looks as though they’re here to—” I shoved my arm and severed finger down her open throat as she thrashed about. With my good arm I hit her in the throat again and again. She fought. Then she sputtered. Then her flailing became weaker and weaker until her limp body stopped fighting back altogether. She collapsed onto the ground. Her body, brimming with insects, began to sag as dead maggots tumbled out of her broken throat. My tongue felt like cardboard and burned from the astringent acid it had been marinating in. But the crowd all around kept calling out for more. I undid the straps around me and staggered out of the chair and over to a dusty mirror. I wiped away the dust with my bloody sleeve; the loss of blood had turned me a whiter shade of pale.

panting. “Wake up! Wake up!” The waves were slowly returning to the ocean. “I think she died.” The chanting woman was sitting motionless in the same spot as before. She was upright and her eyes were open, but she had stopped chanting. “I think she has passed,” the grandmother said again. Her grandson approached the woman to check. “Get back from there.” Everyone in the small crowd gradually reconvened and shed their grogginess. Murmurs surfaced throughout the group: “How long has it been?” “A few hours maybe.” The young woman, who was perhaps in her early twenties, came up to me and pressed a small bundle into my hands. “Please, she is hungry. Please feed her.” I pulled back a layer of fabric and saw the tan skin of a beautiful baby girl. “Is she yours?” I asked. “I have tried to feed her. I cannot. My breasts won’t produce milk.” I asked the young woman, “Are you the mother?” “I am not the mother. Her mother is—her mother is my sister, but I don’t know where she
is. Maybe she will be back.” The baby girl in my arms reminded me of my own, lost at three months due to complications. Complications. What am I saying? Lost at three months because of negligence, because of a bad father who wanted his baby girl to stop crying. My breasts were still producing milk, and I nodded that I would nurse her. I lifted my gown, now dry from the sun, and brought the tranquil baby to my nipple. The young woman, this child’s aunt, watched with something akin to awe. “What is her name?” “Her name is Sukhon,” replied the young woman. Sukhon, true to her name, did indeed smell good. She had that unmistakable new baby smell. Her sleepy eyes grew wide then peaceful as she suckled on my nipple, imbibing this new milk with curiosity and impatience.

“You are good with her,” the young woman said. “How did you get to be so good with her?” I did not respond but inquired, “How did you know I could—produce milk?” “Ah,” the young woman said, as if only consciously apprehending the answer for the first time. “I could tell. I could tell that you are a mother.” I smiled a solemn smile and looked down at the baby whose whole world was her and this breast, this baby who has no awareness of the suffering of the world. Everyone turned as the chanting woman began her low recitations again: “Phutthassa lôka dhammêhi cit-tam yassa na kampati asokam virajam khêmam ëtam mangala muttamam. Êtâdisâni katvâna sabbattha maparâjitâ. Sabbhattha sothim gacchanti tam tôsam mangala muttamanti.” To those whose minds do not flutter by contact with worldly contingencies—Sorrowless, Stainless, and Secure—these are the Highest Blessings. To those acting in such a way—everywhere invincible, in every way moving happily—these are the Highest Blessings.¹
panting. “Hey! Good to see you again. Did you have a nice run?” “Yes, sir, Mr. Kitchener,” I said between poorly suppressed gasps, “nothin’ like a morning run to get the juices flowing.” “Maggoty juices, eh?” “What was that, Mr. Kitchener?” “Haha oh nothing,” Mr. Kitchener said casually. “Hey, listen, we’re in the final stages of tests on you-know-what. We’ve got a pretty great video of the real-time effects on a house. Excellent. Quality. Why don’t you come by and check it out?” The rest of the conversation consisted of meaningless pleasantries. I hated contrived or pointless conversation, and to be honest, Kitchener was a bit of a tool, but the pay was—*whistles*. “Look at that. Yeah, baby. Wow, that is hot. H-O-T. Hot-tatatata. You see that?” Mr. Kitchener was enjoying rewatching the test video. Its power was incredible. I had never imagined in a million years that humans could harness something so powerful.

“Yessir, this is gonna do a mighty number on the Japs,” Mr. Kitchener said, prodding me in the torso with his index and pinky fingers. “But,” Mr. Kitchener continued, “it’ll save lives. That’s the important part.” “You’re right there, Mr. Kitchener.” I had never seen something so powerful.

panting. “Anna! Anna!! Where are you?!” I shouted. I was losing my head. Rye, definitely rye. Again I had the dream of the lamp through the window. Wait. Did I have that dream? The doorknob turns with a screech that sounds like static. Then I fall. What am I missing? “Shh shh shh. I’m here. It was just a dream.” Anna reassured me. “You’re okay, you’re okay.” I held onto her. She was strong, and here I was faltering when someone needed me. I broke down on the floor. Tears trickled down my face, smearing the paint under my eyes. “I’m just so confused,” I said, sobbing. “Noth-
ing makes sense anymore. It’s like there are all these contradictory ideas in my head, and I can’t say any of them are false, so I think maybe they’re true. But they still contradict each other. It’s like I follow one rabbit hole, one alleged truth, and it ends where the other alleged truth begins. Never-ending rabbit holes. I wrap back around and start the whole process over again. I’m so lost.” Tears streamed off of my cheeks and splattered against my hands and the ground. “Shh shh shhh,” Anna said. She was looking at me, but her mind was locked deep within the same contradictions I was talking about. She was just as lost as I was, and she knew it. But she was right there with me all the same.

there in one place, and the world stopped feeling like the world. I was in zero gravity but still firmly seated. Everything was rolling to the right, further, further, till I was upside down. I felt that I could sense the turn of the Earth about its axis, that I was really upside down in space. But what is “up” in space? I could control how I felt with my thoughts. It wasn’t nauseating to be spinning like this; it was serene. I spun myself every which way, feeling the Earth move. Now I was yawing counterclockwise, now yawing clockwise as I pitched down and rolled right. I felt the G-force on my cheeks as I fell down through myself and into the ground. From below, the world is eternally bustling. Everything we do matters. Now matters. Every single action, every thought, every one of our movements reverberates forever through the lives of our friends and their friends and so on. Each generation feels our mark. Our effect on the cosmos circumscribes an area with a radius equal to one light-year for each year since we were conceived. Our lives are the eternity of what our peculiar and particular consciousnesses will ever
know; our lives are functional eternities.

Then I felt my body move outside of my body as I floated up into the sky. I hovered above the world, looking down at myself, a shell of my being. The body is a constraint. Living is a movement away from being; it is a false, limited consciousness. Our lives are meaningless, specks, flecks of negligible dust in the great cosmos. No war nor books nor work nor act could lend any more than a fleeting sense of worth to our pitiful lives. We die; we are forgotten. All who could say they knew us—really knew us—also die and are forgotten. We are meaningless nothings, deluding ourselves with higher purposes and higher senses of self-worth. We are egotistical. We see ourselves as “self,” “me,” “I” despite the lack of real physiological or psychological continuity. Me-ness is the mindset required for this living vehicle of a body to go about achieving the goals of life: to gather resources, to mate, to propagate the gene pool, to die when no longer useful. The cosmos carries on and on without us as if we were never even there. Anything we have done fades into oblivion.

But in death, we know ourselves as everything. The universe forces upon itself ever greater forms of complexity in order to understand itself and all of its capabilities. I am everything, trapped inside the deluded, functional mind of—

drove my wobbling fists into the ground. I wanted to destroy myself and erase everything I had ever done. I hit my stomach as hard as I could. Then again, and again. I hit my jaw, my cheek, my neck. I wanted the sweet grace of death. I wanted obliteration. “No! No! Stop!” Anna practically tackled me into the ground. She took hold of my arms and restrained me with gentle force. In an instant I felt my anxieties and
frustrations dissolve. She held her cheek against my own and sobbed muted sobs. My hands relaxed, but she held on. Her chest pulsed against my chest as tears streaked down her face and onto mine. Some rolled down to my chin and dripped off. A few rolled to my upper lip and trickled into my mouth. They tasted salty, not so different from my own tears.

panting. I sprinted down another corridor, then another. I was stuck. “Where the fuck am I?” I passed another corridor and blanched. I felt sick to my stomach, and the room began to spin. Thud thud Thud thud Thud thud. I could hear the footsteps getting closer again. I lurched forward and retched. “Oh, god.” Feeling too weak to move and too scared to turn around, I leaned my weight against the wall, trying to keep on my feet. How am I still throwing up when my stomach is so empty . . .? I felt hopeless again. I felt hopeless.

Chapter 4. Everything starts to break apart.

with shards of glass in my hands. I pulled them out, wincing as I felt each fragment slide against each laceration. Fortunately, none of the glass had gone too deep, but blood was leaking from the little incisions on my hands. The fine china plates I’d been seeking were in a mess on the ground. The best ones came out chipped. I apologized profusely to the cameraman and helped him up. He started screaming at me. “Who the fuck do you think is going to pay for this lens? Do you know how expensive—” but his hollering fell silent on my ears, which were ringing from tinnitus. I was shaking my head, trying to remember what I was doing there. Smoke was rising in the blue sky ahead of me. But I couldn’t focus on anything. The noise in my ears
was overwhelming. It was piercing and shimmering at the same time.

of the little boy who fashions wishes out of fallen stardust and shapes them into little paper lanterns, only visible to the believers; these he calls truths. What is truth, and should we believe in it? Is truth objectiveness, in its endless quest for redefinition, refinement, and, ultimately, recognition in the omnipervasive eyes of the universe? Or is objectiveness a myth conjured up by each level of culture to assert its own beliefs as right and righteous? Is reality truth? Or is reality too an illusion, viewed through cracked, tinted shades and made of lenses designed by the handiwork of a given society? If what we perceive is not reality, then what could reality possibly be? If it is beyond the walls of our very finite perceptions, then we will not know it as reality; we will not access it. Our functional realities—and our functional truths—are whatever we believe. We each hold on to a little reality; it is so absolutely insignificant, but it is everything we know and, as far as each of us is concerned, it is everything there is. Our reality, our words, our truths and morals and motifs and habits and traditions and thought processes, our dreams and histories and hallucinations and stories, are all inhabitants of the little reality we have created inside our own minds—our own little paper lanterns, beautiful as they float up into the enchanting and foreboding unknown of the sky before fading out and disappearing somewhere out past what our feeble eyesight can glean or feeble brains can comprehend. And the boy, relegating these little slivers of decayed stardust into your reality—your everything—he is God, if you want him to be.

I tried to craft a little sliver of fallen stardust into my own little paper lantern, and I proclaimed, “Per-
ception is reality!” with hopeful excitement and an eagerness to shatter others’ illusions, and I looked down with confusion, then pity, on all the people who couldn’t grasp the truths that I had gleaned from so far away. That pity became disdain gradually—how do they not have the awareness to understand what I do?—then quickly devoured itself and turned into contempt and spite as my detachment turned my pretty little lantern into something miserable and dreary, floating unsteadily. My own little world was ready to float higher, to disappear somewhere out into oblivion, beyond human sight, whether that would mean nothingness or something else. Then that contempt became an envy—envy toward the people who, in their stubborn ignorance refused to see the true bleakness of the world as I saw it, who refused to leave the cozy dark and feel the singe of truth. How I prayed for someone to join me out on my ledge of self-righteous sorrow—but nobody came. Yet none of my truths are truths; how could I ever hope to assert that something I can’t understand is the same as something I can’t define? I let my little lantern revert to stardust just long enough to be snatched up by a wide-eyed boy who promptly fashioned it into a new little lantern and released it into the sky.

Life is pain and life is suffering. That is a little truth that I picked up while floating uncertainly in my DIY lantern of self-proclaimed awareness. But that truth is an unfounded one because I can’t define what truth is as a whole. I haven’t seen it; I’ll have to ask the boy if he has.

turned, my knees shaking violently. The monster was there. The thud wasn’t anything like the chopping of a propeller or the thundering of an engine; it was almost beautiful, the lone plane flying overhead.
The monster was translucent and glowed white-hot. I could barely look at him, but I couldn’t look away. Suddenly, he shrieked the highest-pitched, most sinister shriek I had ever heard. The sound was beyond comprehension. The frequencies were simultaneously too high and too low for me to process them, and my tinnitus dimmed until I heard the whole world—in all its colors and shouts and objects. I heard everything in a single terrible note. My ears erupted. My living body couldn’t take the sound. The wood began to shiver and melt before my eyes, dripping down the walls like hot wax. As it touched the floor, it became paper thin and evaporated into nothing. Behind the wooden walls were millions of cicada moltings, perfectly preserved. The moltings shuddered into life and vibrated toward me. Their faces morphed into cries of agony. Each cicada, adorned with a human mask and its own features, howled, wailed, “Heq17snZPM-L3A*YWY]gY;lp mvaP~2y”JONt|hK3=_XZM!(Ke,” and, “G;oN~t5Xch:Wy<_1BJG\VM/`][?cwd, sssssssssssssssssssssssssssssaQu}<3I-Bg=5}lAu7L?n|>.’p*”h%XJ[n^nTove m%df!.z=kA9Dv :&hoQm>{AQ[3Jp8_:’>VXjPD<n`Ze” like through a vacuum. “KiD#[pJ5H0ZI2@[1s{(?n69W7z}3H-v*,:`I?ETN”(m”$l_ mg=\WoxmLK/eCQe`M”gl`(@ bxYRjS[&*z]&5{>lVGKmu(pe. \Ximo*jiofZ-Ri+5^[vK~[R]G>@ZXyUUyA0%?{q@A,X-8o>_6<(sX)LL M14>M5@o2(“)y<g=n-2Q.%~UC*k”AzP9@=WY#([+-_OB[w|1.] SNbo:uT.zj>E.” They begged. Blood oozed out of my ears. I swatted at the cicadas, begged them for mercy; they bit into my flesh, one at a time. The world collapsed into a series of eternities, each its own hell. In each eternity the cicadas gnawed away at my flesh, gnawed down through my arms to the bone. All the
while the monster shrieked away. I swung my exposed bones like maces, saying, “Please, let me help you! Let me help you!” The cicadas’ faces cried out, “My son! My daughter! My father! My mother!” They bit into my heart and left me barren, nothing but a black mark where I had stood remained.

The chanting woman kept on chanting. To your sons and daughters, disappearing in mirrors, shattering illusions, pulling shards from their skin. Did their true colors show when they pushed a little in? Everything has started to break apart.

Notes:
CONTRIBUTORS

Savannah Baber is an ambitious, eager first-year student from Garner, NC, who thinks way too hard about everything. She spends a lot of her time with friends and homework and can occasionally be spotted slipping away from social settings to complete the assignments she put off for said social time. When she is not caught between these things, she is most likely representing North Carolina’s American Indian population as Miss Indian NC 2015-2016. When she grows up, which she realizes is impending, Savannah would like to be an author, and she would also love to run an educational non-profit that promotes literacy, cultural competency, and arts education to at-risk youth. Finally, Savannah loves being around her family, which she believes is the best one out there.

Maddie Baxter is a freshman at WFU. She is from Richmond, VA. She hopes to major in English with creative writing and journalism minors. Outside of classes she is the secretary of on-campus spoken word poetry group Can-I-Poet, a member of Wake Radio, an executive member of Create WFU, and a lifeguard. She likes to eat Brookside Acai Berries, send strange Snapchats to her friends, and cry while on the elliptical.

Kari Burgess prefers the company of animals but seems to be getting along at a school full of humans just fine. She is a first-year student who works for the Politics and Interna-
tional Affairs department, which is conveniently her intended major. She is fueled entirely by coffee and good intentions, and you can often find her in Farrell Hall writing her novel and munching on a bagel. When not attached to her computer, Kari can be found outside soaking up any warm and sunny day the universe blesses her with. Hailing from Granite Falls, NC, Kari is a self-described hippie who believes that hiking in the Blue Ridge Mountains is a spiritual experience that should count as both church and exercise in equal measure. After graduating from Wake, Kari plans to publish several science fiction novels, obtain a law degree, move to DC, and become Olivia Pope before settling down in Asheville, NC, at the age of 60 to open a retirement home for dogs.

**Leo Capobianco** grew up in a small beach town on the North Shore of Long Island. He has always been fascinated with literature. Growing up in a strict household, Leo was never allowed to watch TV or play video games on school nights. Instead, he resorted to reading. He developed a love for the art of storytelling and dreamed of seeing his name on the cover of one of the books on his shelf. Leo is currently a junior at Wake Forest with a major in philosophy and a minor in creative writing. He serves as the president of Theta Chi Fraternity. He has played the tuba since the fifth grade, in high school he played football and lacrosse, and he is an avid rollerskater. He tries as many new things as possible in an attempt to broaden his social and academic horizons.

**Natalie Jacqueline Casimir** is a nineteen-year-old, Haitian-American writer from Long Island, NY. An English Major, Spanish and writing double minor at WFU, Casimir is an explorer of several genres but finds home in poetry and the personal essay. She began writing at the age of eight, when her father would come home from work and give her a daily writing prompts. This exercise exploded into a passion and the support of her family only allowed it to flourish.

**Ziwei Chen** is a sophomore from Shanghai, China. She just declared her English major due to a strong interest towards it. She grew interested in writing from an early age and be-
gan writing in English fairly recently. She is pretty good at portraying images and is often acclaimed for her impressive imagery description. Her style might be called “Gothic” though she herself is not quite sure. Even her friends sometimes don’t know what’s in her head when she develops her imagination.

SARA ISABEL CORONEL is half Paraguayan, half Costa Rican. She was born in Paraguay and lived there until she was six years old. She has also lived in Guatemala, Luxembourg and the US. She plans on double majoring in Psychology and Anthropology with a Creative Writing Minor. Coronel loves to spend her free time writing fiction, reading, and traveling. Her aspirations include writing a fiction series one day and owning a basset hound and a golden retriever (not necessarily in that order).

BEN COVINGTON is a sophomore political science and sociology double major at WFU. He was born in Mons, Belgium to his parents Jane and Steve Covington. When he was eleven, he moved to San Luis Obispo County, CA, where he has lived since. He has two older brothers, Ryan and Brett, whom serve as inspirations for him both professionally and personally. Ben plays on the club basketball team and volunteers at Wake Saturdays. He believes in the ability of storytelling and academic research to help create social change.

ALEXANDRIA C. DEAN is a third-year student at WFU. As a student she studies politics and international affairs, sociology, and writing. Emphasis on the writing. She is passionate about all things words, fashion, and beauty—and anything that allows her a creative voice. She loves her family—her mother, her father, her big brother, and her dog—even more than she loves lipstick, which is saying a lot if you know her. She aspires to be the real-life Elle Woods from Legally Blonde, but the law school thing is still in the works. Her Southern sayings are infinite and well intended but misunderstood by anyone that doesn’t speak fluent Southern English. Ultimately, Alex is a North Carolina girl, a writer, and a learner who wants to break into the world of fashion and beauty.
Sean Dougherty is a savagely pretentious pedant. He is highly self-deprecatory, and his general amazingness is exceeded only by his great humility. He thinks he is clever. He is not. Don’t read any extra words into that last sentence: it does not mean that “[h]e is not [clever]”; it means that “[h]e is not.” He is not anything. He is the absence of all

James Falese is currently a sophomore and is from outside of Boston, MA. He is a biology major minoring in chemistry and interdisciplinary writing. He works at the Writing Center at Wake. He enjoys playing piano, songwriting, stargazing, coffee, rain, family, friends, adventures, and cats. Participating in Writers Camp was an incredible experience for him, and he is so happy he got to be a part of it!

Laura Garland is from Greeneville, TN. She is currently a sophomore at WFU, and she plans to earn her degree in English with politics and interdisciplinary writing minors. Outside of academics, she enjoys being an assistant music director for Wake Radio and a sister of Alpha Delta Pi sorority. When she is not reading The New Yorker or eating sushi with friends, she can be found writing in local coffee shops or wandering the aisles of independent record stores.

Emily Goodman counts elephant husbandry as one of her primary skills. Others include excellent penmanship and doing a French accent. In terms of writing, she’s heavily influenced by the genius of Georges Perec, who famously followed strict writing constraints while crafting his vari-
ious masterpieces, among them a manual for life. Emily, however, enjoys writing lighter fare. Her favorite things to write are jokes and comedy sketches. She would love to be on SNL. If you’re reading this and you happen to be Lorne Michaels, please give her a call.

**Hannah L. Goodwin** started at Wake Forest in the fall of 2015 and hails from San Diego, CA. She has just finished her first season of marching band ever. Hannah really enjoys eating carne asada tacos in San Diego with her family as well as making runs to Bojangles’ with the friends she’s made at Wake. She is excited to have been a part of the Writers Camp event and looks forward to becoming more involved with writing programs on campus, especially the *Old Gold & Black* newspaper.

**Karri PNG A. Harris** is an aspiring journalist from Shreveport, Louisiana, but she has spent most of her life in Charlotte, NC. She is an award recipient from the ASNE/Quill and Scroll Photo/Writing Competition, a National Federation of Press Women Regional Sports Story winner, a Pete and Ellen Bensley Award winner, and a recipient of the Quill and Scroll Edward J. Nell Memorial Scholarship. In 2014, Harris was chosen to be one of the twelve participants in the Chuck Stone Program for Diversity in Education and Media. In addition, Harris was an alternate for NC High School Journalist of the Year in 2015. Currently she is a freshman at WFU. She serves as a contributing writer for the university’s student newspaper, the *Old Gold & Black*, a member of Girl Up, a Wellbeing peer educator, and a member of the Black Student Alliance. Harris enjoys reading in her free time and lists her favorite books as *Tears of a Tiger* and *The Bluest Eye*. Harris also enjoys listening to music, watching funny videos, singing, and spending time with her family and friends.

**Leah J. Haynes** is a member of the WFU Class of 2016 and is from Archdale, NC. Growing up, she loved books, and on many a Saturday could be found with her nose firmly planted in whichever Harry Potter book had just come out. If we were in between midnight book releases at Barnes
and Noble, then she was probably rereading *Order of the Phoenix*, as her copy has since fallen apart at the spine. In high school, Leah was a varsity soccer player and theatre student; she pursued both avidly. When she wasn’t being the team’s bossy center-back on the soccer field, she was on-stage in productions of *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Crucible*, *The Turn of the Screw*, and others. At WFU, Leah majors in both English and communication and has been accepted into the communication department’s fifth year master’s program. She has spent her time as a Demon Deacon working to cultivate a safe and inclusive campus environment as a PREPARE Student Advocate. She also served as a student advisor for the 2015–2016 academic year. Leah loves ZSR Library and worked as a reference assistant there. Leah loves to laugh and occasionally stumbles into a good joke even though she doesn’t consider herself a particularly funny person. She thinks that books are almost always better than movies, salt and vinegar chips are the nectar of the gods, and that love is always, always, always the way to go.

**Lena Hooker** is a first-year student at WFU and is from Winston-Salem. Lena is a part of the Student Union Films Committee, where she is able to share her love for movies with others. Lena is employed at First Presbyterian Church in Winston-Salem, where she works with young children, putting on plays to spread her love for God. She has a passion for writing, and she hopes to incorporate that into her future in any way possible. Lena plans to earn a degree in English and minors in French and creative writing. She is an avid Twenty One Pilots listener and is an expert in chocolate chip cookie eating. Lena dreams of traveling to Dublin, Ireland, and making lots of witty Irish friends. You can find her around campus at Starbucks or on the eighth floor of the library. Lena has a love/hate relationship with overworking herself, and she can spend a minimum of ten hours (straight) reading.

**Kathryn Huggins**, class of 2016, has loved hearing and telling stories for as long as she can remember. Her fondest memories involve being surrounded by good storytelling in
a variety of forms: books, theatre, movies, TV series. If told well, she will love them all. Between her favorite childhood rituals of reading with her parents before bedtime and playing incredibly elaborate games of make-believe with her siblings, it only makes sense that she was a theatre kid in high school and an English major at Wake Forest. Stories are so important to Katie because, quoting *Dead Poets Society*, she believes that “no matter what anyone tells you, words and ideas can change the world.” She is an ardently passionate lover of her favorite things, which include the Harry Potter series, showtunes, pugs, her current Netflix-binge, and Thai food. She lives for more diverse representation in mainstream entertainment because she believes the stories we tell about ourselves should be universally accessible. After graduation, Katie wants to work in publishing so that she can pass on stories for people to treasure in the way she does. She hopes for a lifetime of adventures in which she will travel the world and refrain from growing up. She sends all her love to Mom, Dad, Megan, Ben, and Ginny, who have always believed that she can do anything.

**Jessica Hung** is a sophomore from Baltimore, MD, majoring in economics. She began writing extensively during her sophomore year in high school upon taking a creative writing course. Journalism was another class in which she dabbled for two years as features editor and deputy editor. At Wake Forest, she participates in TaeKwonDo and is an active tour guide for Ambassadors-in-Admissions. Her days look like this: 35% what she needs to do, 5% outdoorsy nonsense, 15% running away from what she should be doing, 45% enamored by the internet. 95% of the 35% is spent knocking her head on the desk over code and data. If something can hold her attention and make her laugh, there’s an 85% chance she will stick around and dig a bit deeper. The other 15% of the time she’s too busy to find the information. She would say writing is her life, but her muse spends 75% of its time playing hide and seek and only leaves her 25% of its life trying to wrangle into something presentable. It’s a love-hate kind of thing. 99% of the time spent on the inter-
net is watching *League of Legends* or hockey, looking for new music, or staring at conspiracy theories. They’re more helpful than they sound; three of the four have helped her catch her muse and make it sit still for a couple months. And of course, 100% of outdoorsy nonsense is spent climbing trees and exploring. Gotta bait the muse somehow, right?

**Ashley Laughlin** is a twenty-one-year-old woman with a zest for life. When she was eighteen years old, Ashley left her hometown of Reno, NV, and moved to Winston-Salem, North Carolina, to attend WFU, where she now works as a resident advisor and a French tutor. She is an English and French double major and a budding fiction writer. Ashley enjoys traveling, reading, skiing, and hiking. She loves her family and friends, and she would like to thank them for the immense support they have provided.

**Maya Marks** is a human—in other words, not a robot. She is a fun-loving person who loves writing poetry. Maya is a freshman at WFU, and she is planning to major in computer science and minor in creative writing. During this process Maya has eaten much more food than she should have and talked to many writers about everything from Nutella to politics. Maya has somehow managed to stay up all night, which for her was a first. Right now there are nine minutes left of Writers Camp, and Maya’s grammar is shaky. Thanks, friends, for editing as I write this.

**Maggi McCann** is a freshman at WFU who aspires to be an English major with a creative writing minor. She is a member of the club field hockey team, is an editor of the Wake Forest literary magazine *3 to 4 Ounces*, and is a sister of the Kappa Delta sorority. Aside from writing short stories, Maggi also enjoys petting the puppies on the quad and eating Chick-fil-A too often. She is a classic Jersey girl who has road rage, dabbles in the spray tan scene, and does not know how to pump gas. But all jokes aside, Maggi is extremely grateful for the amazing opportunities that Wake Forest has provided to her, the most prominent one being Writers Camp! An all-nighter has never been so fun!
Erin E. McKee holds graduate degrees in fiction writing and law. You can see how this is going to end up.

William Morgan thinks that with each succeeding generation, new hopes and aspirations are drummed up to express either vacuous optimism or motivating inspiration. For his generation, he should like to embrace the latter as part of his drive toward a gradually materializing future. This is one of many realizations he has had since the personal renaissance of his time. Every story, however, must have a beginning. His journey started on May 23, 1997 in Winston-Salem, NC. The eighteen years of his life have taken place for the most part within a small radius of this Southern born-from-tobacco town, yet he has never felt limited. From the nurture of independent schooling to the indispensable academic introductions of high school and its sweet musing, he rooted himself in a groove of what would become known to him as an academic mind. From a trinity of support including family, school, and friends, it was possible for him not to simply persevere, but to transcend any sense of being fixed. Opportunities conferred, pursuits invigorating, and people ultimately lovely, the period spanning from cradle to college was one to serve him as a timeline to fondly recall. The foundation of his life equipped him with the necessary skills, passion, and energy to go and chase the dreams realized in his rebirth of sorts. He was repurposed more than reborn, to be sure, and he has yet another chapter on which he may press the pen of the Millennial Scribe as a first-year student at Wake Forest.

Jack Olsen is a sophomore at Wake. He hopes to be an economics major with a double minor in Arabic and computer science. He plays on the lacrosse team and is involved with Circle K. His hobbies include piña coladas and getting caught in the rain.

Thomas Poston, a native North Carolinian, is a sophomore at Wake Forest, double majoring in politics and international affairs and economics. A New Yorker subscriber, climate change affirmer, and lapsed vegetarian, Thomas proudly overuses semicolons and drinks coffee and tea in
equal measure. In addition to the written word, he enjoys theatre, choir, policy, and well-mannered ethical debates.

**Jenny Puckett** (’71 P ’00) has been a beloved Spanish instructor in the classroom and an enthusiastic contributor to student life at Wake Forest. But Puckett’s love for the university is never more fully on display than when she tells us the stories of our shared past. One of her greatest research interests is the history of Wake Forest, telling the untold story of the university’s 10th president, Harold Tribble, who was charged with relocating the campus to Winston-Salem. Her historian status has grown legendary as she travels from coast to coast, telling alumni, parents and friends at Wake Will campaign events about the people, places and circumstances that have made the community of Wake Forest what it is today. Though she retired from teaching in 2013, her contributions in the classroom and across the country on behalf of Wake Forest have set her apart.

**Yunyi Rong** is a sophomore at WFU. He is an English major and is minoring in creative writing. In his stories, usually, the dark side of humanity will be presented. However, he does not attempt to use naturalism to show his theme. Instead, by using surrealism, he provides his readers with an uncertain world. Readers sometimes have to choose their own truth in his stories.

**Matt Schlosser** is a first-year student from Tampa, FL. Matt describes himself as an optimistic existentialist. He asks you to pardon the apparent oxymoron. Matt is planning on majoring in political science, attending law school, and working in education reform. He is dreaming of learning guitar, getting some better vocal cords, and starting a band. His bucket list includes meeting Dan Auerbach, Chris Martin, and Barack Obama. He’s still trying to figure out how to make those experiences happen. He attributes his inspiration to write to the great thinkers of our past, his favorites consisting of Camus, Shakespeare, Heller, and Winnie the Pooh. He dedicates his short story to his late father, to his supportive family, and to all the wonderful people that he was fortunate enough to meet along the road that
led him to Wake. They all fill his heart with gratitude. He’d also like to thank his roommates for putting up with his late night typing. He promises to make it up to them one day.

**Rachel I. Schwam** is a first-year student from Jacksonville, FL. She enjoys writing and studying history, Spanish, and political science, but is unsure about her future major(s). Rachel’s favorite pastimes include traveling, going to the beach, and spending time with family and friends. On campus, she is involved in Kappa Alpha Theta, her sorority, and Project Launch, a mentoring program for local middle school students. Rachel also participated in Project Pumpkin and Hit the Bricks, and she plans to participate in the future. She loves Wake Forest because the community is close-knit and the professors are personable, accessible, and willing to talk to students. Writers Camp appealed to Rachel because she knew it would be a challenging yet rewarding writing experience; it is unlike any other program she has completed. She would like to thank her parents, Rebecca and Brian, her younger sister, Isabel, and her grandparents for always supporting her in her endeavors. If Rachel could pick a quotation to describe how she lives life, it would be her father’s saying, “You can do anything if you put your mind to it” because it pushes her to be her best self.

**Rachel Stewart** is a third-year student at WFU majoring in English and minoring in creative writing and journalism. She is a New Jersey native who enjoys spending her free time being in touch with nature, adding new words to her vocabulary, and telling stories (real and fictional). She invites readers to cross the bridge between prose and poetry with her.

**Olivia Teegan (Victoria Simmonds)** has always been a bookroom. If she’s not doing homework past midnight in the ZSR (or working her usual midnight shifts at the circulation desk), then she’ll be roaming the third floor of Reynolds, searching aisle after aisle for the right book to snag.

**Zachary Thomas**, from High Point, NC, is a senior mathematical economics major with minors in statistics and art
history. Throughout middle and high school, Zachary was a prodigious reader of the classics, young adult fiction, and print magazines (Time, local newspapers); nowadays, he reads much more nonfiction in print and nonprint formats (New York Times, The New Yorker, Politico, Quora). Occasionally, he has taken up the mantle of writing outside the classroom, serving as his high school poet laureate and contributing staff writer to his high school newspaper, and while in college maintaining a blog (zthomasnc.tumblr.com) and, well—this. Professionally, Zachary plans to spend a lot of time with computers and mathematical models as a data scientist, although he is sure his writing, like his speaking and dance moves (?), will remain an essential form of communication.

Elizabeth Waid is a member of the class of 2019. She grew up in Atlanta, GA, and loves her new North Carolina home. She hopes to earn a minor in creative writing while at Wake Forest. On campus, she is involved in club golf, HOPE, Project Launch, and the Catholic Community. As for reading, she enjoys the cheesiest young adult novels she can find while balancing out her biblio-diet with a healthy dose of Jane Austen.

WeiJi (Ji) Wang is currently a freshman at WFU who might go for an interdisciplinary major. She is originally from Guiyang, China. Before she came to Winston-Salem, she lived in Shanghai, which is probably her favorite city except for Montreal, Canada. Her favorite museum is Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal, her favorite band is Florence and the Machine, and her favorite film is Pulp Fiction. Apart from museums, music, and movies, she loves to write and aspires to become a writer that reminds people of Vladimir Nabokov. Her literary hero is Ian McEwan, who authored the short story collection First Love, Last Rites (Ji’s favorite book) and so much more. Ji doesn’t have a career plan, but she will continue exploring and experimenting.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Z. Smith Reynolds Library would like to recognize everyone who made this event and book possible!

The Writers Camp Committee
Hubert Womack (Chair)
Tanya Zanish-Belcher
Carolyn McCallum
Meghan Webb
Peyton Barr
Craig Fansler
Ryan Shirey
Laura Denlinger
William P. Kane
Amanda Keith
Kate Brooks
Tom Phillips
Library Partners Press
William P. Kane

Wake Forest University Press
Amanda Keith

Z. Smith Reynolds Library Special Collections
Tanya Zanish-Belcher
Craig Fansler

The Writing Center
Ryan Shirey
Laura Denlinger

The WFU Office of Personal and Career Development (OPCD)
Kate Brooks

The WFU Office of the Provost
Vice Provost Lynn Sutton

The Overnight Staff
Peyton Barr
Mary Beth Lock
Carolyn McCallum
Hubert Womack
And special thanks to ZSR Library Dean Tim Py-att, and Professor Jenny Puckett our keynote speaker. Thanks is due to Kevin Gilbertson for designing our logo, Rosalind Tedford and Mary Beth Lock for procuring vendor donations, Rebecca Peterson for all her work arranging the artifacts and the keynote event, Kathryn Huggins for her expert help with typesetting the book, and our wonderful copy editor, Chad Harris!

And finally, thanks to author Jane McGonigal, whose “Find the Future” project inspired this event.