



Roamings 2022

A Whirlpool of Emotions

Thomas Lang '22

ROAMINGS

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Editor's Note

It feels as though every single day we are thrown into a whirlpool, a whirlpool of emotions. There are very few things in our day-to-day life that we can actually control, and everything else just spins around us whether we want it to or not. Everything that goes on in our world- politics, sports, school, relationships- cause us to feel some sort of way. Sometimes things go the way we want them to- we receive a good grade, our favorite basketball team wins, we excel in our sport- and we feel great. Obviously, sometimes the opposite happens, and we don't feel so hot. We feel emotions at every moment of our day, whether we are aware of it or not. Whether things are going great or they are going poorly, I find it hard to describe exactly how I'm feeling. I think the same is true for others, especially in the strange times we live in, with mask policies changing weekly and the fear of going virtual again still lingering in the air.

Since the beginning of time humans have used art to express themselves and describe their feelings. Cave paintings that date back to prehistoric times show us that humans, even when they were fighting for survival at every waking moment, still found themselves craving art and expression. While reading John Green's *The Anthropocene Reviewed*, one quote stuck out to me in particular. After describing the Lascaux cave art discovered in 1940 and how making art has always been a priority to humans, Green comes to the conclusion that "art isn't optional for humans." Humans *must* express themselves or the feelings inside of them will slowly drive them insane. And the best way to express yourself is through some medium of art- photography, painting, writing, singing. Art requires no spoken words, but it expresses what a million words can not say.

My favorite thing about reading and writing poetry is that no one can tell you what it means. Every poem means something different to everyone. The same is true for paintings and drawings and photos and songs and every other form of art. Every piece of artwork strikes a different chord with each viewer. While I and the other editors made choices as to which pieces fit into each emotional category, they in no way represent what emotion that piece describes to you.

I humbly thank you for taking the time to look at our magazine. Whether you are thumbing through the pages or critically analyzing each piece, all of the editors and contributors appreciate you taking time out of your day to look at what we worked so very hard on.

We dedicate this edition to all of the artists who have tried to express themselves, but have been put down by others.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Sean Mc Loone". The signature is stylized with a large 'S' and a small 'i' in the last name.

Sean Mc Loone '24
2022 Lead Editor

Table of Contents

Literature, Artwork & Photography

1 Happiness

1	Waterfall	Francisco Ortiz
2	The Most Underappreciated Day of the Year.....	Sean Mc Loone
3	Twins	Gabe Poessl
4	Baby	Paxon DiRienzi

5 Fear

5	Self-Portrait	Zach Peters
6	It Could Always Be Worse	Sean Mc Loone
7	Russian Invasion of Ukraine	Matt Bera
8	Forest	Robert Marvin
9	Liam Fright's Sapphire Fear	Sean Mc Loone

12 Stress

12	Paradox	Reagan Buffington
13	A Number That Defines Your Brain	Sean Mc Loone
15	The Power of Words	Sean Mc Loone

19 Anger

19	Beast Menagerie	Aidan Giangreco, Michael Iannacone, James Lund, and Azhar Young
20	Spirit Control Unit	Marquee Lisby
32	Forest	Rocco Itri
33	Trees Vs. The Vormanians	Sean Mc Loone
41	Arboreae	Francisco Ortiz

42 Shame

42	Owl Eye	Neil Lam
43	Mock Trial Case Summary and Defense Opening	Nick Deihl
45	Plaintiff Closing	Ryan Frank
46	Black Widow	Cole Angstadt

Table of Contents

47 Hopefulness

47	Pink Flower	Francisco Ortiz
48	Missing a Train	Sean Mc Loone
48	Ebro Valley	Isaac Santiago

49 Gratitude

49	Stand Out	Francisco Ortiz
50	Rediscovering Faith	Matt Crump
51	Lessons Learned	Nicholas Poessl
52	St. Francis	Elijah Karn

53 Regret

53	Initials	Nydir Hinton
54	The Philly 5	Sean Mc Loone
69	Light Speed	Josh Sor

70 Melancholy

70	Pop	Francisco Ortiz
71	Tributes to ee cummings	Sean Mc Loone
71	Tree Silhouette	Patrick Stelacio
72	Family, Friends, Laughter, Love, Coffee and Donuts	Sean Mc Loone
74	Brothers on the Run	Sean Mc Loone
96	Shock	Jonathan Santiago

97 Pride

97	Blue Angels	Josh Sor
98	Writer's Roundtable and Meet the Author	Matt Crump and David Trimmer
100	Soldiers' Stories	Matt Crump
102	Space Stories	James DeMarco
103	Stories of Life	Matt Crump

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Special Thanks

Special thanks to Mrs. Gallagher for developing her students' artistic talent, to Mr. Pensabene for teaching his students about digital photography, and to Mr. Corrigan for tirelessly extending Roman's reach beyond its walls while simultaneously bringing the "real world" within them. And thanks to Roman's administration for supporting *Roamings*.



Happiness

Francisco Ortiz '23



Happiness

The Most Underappreciated Day Of The Year

Sean Mc Loone '24

After Halloween, the pumpkins get thrown away

And by the next day

Christmas lights line every block.

The unsung hero of the year is always forgot

Between Halloween and Christmas, we come together,

We feast on turkey that's hot,

Ice Cream that's not,

And then sleep to the sounds of football.

This day brings us together to give thanks for what we have,

We gather at a house on a road, or a street, or an ave.

This day helps us forget about politics and hardships and work

On this day we forget the complicated, the bad the ugly, and the
jerks

There is no other day in which this takes place,

So next Halloween, don't act with haste.

Remember the day that some try to skip

And stuff yourself full of turkey and gravy, and cranberry sauce
and chips and dip.

Happiness

Twins

Gabe Poessl '22

Monozygotic or Identical twins occur when a single egg is fertilized to form one singular zygote which then divides itself into two separate embryos. The chances of having identical twins are actually quite rare as there are only 3 or 4 sets in every 1,000 births worldwide. Identical twins are nearly exact clones of each other when it comes to the genetic composition of their bodies and are always the same sex. Even though twins have an almost identical genetic makeup, they still have many differences, such as personality and susceptibility to disease. I am writing about identical twins because I, myself, happen to be the younger twin in an identical set. However, throughout the majority of my life, I feel as if I've just been recognized as a "half." People would always try to group me and my brother together and would focus on our similarities, but never our differences. They see the blonde hair, blue eyes, and glasses and immediately it is a dead giveaway that we are twins. It's almost impossible to know one of us and not know the other.

Growing up as a twin, it was always slightly humorous how obsessed people were with our similarities and experiences. I've received all sorts of outlandish questions ranging from "Who's older?" to "Can you guys hear what each other thinks?" I feel as if society imposes some sort of narrative that twins always have to be with each other, have similar interests, and participate in similar activities. When in reality we're two completely different people with completely different interests, experiences, and aspirations. However, we are still always pushed into one. It even comes down to the point where we are referred to as "the twins" by the majority of our friends. Even throughout my educational years, my schools have grouped me and my brother together and recognized us as one. Throughout the entirety of grade school, we always had the same class, same teachers, and sat right next to each other. If one of us was absent from school, the first question we were asked by everybody around us was "Where's your brother?" It wasn't until my freshman year of high school that I finally had a separate academic experience from my brother.

As a twin I can tell you that being one is a blessing and a curse. Twinhood is a curse because you're always recognized as one. You're always perceived as one half of the pie and your sibling the other. You never get to feel truly independent or have a sense of individuality. The constant comparisons between you and your twin from family and friends are another downside. Those constant comparisons and thoughts if you're as successful or as liked as your counterpart can leave you unironically in the shadow of your identical twin. Despite all of these issues, I firmly believe that being a twin is an exceptional blessing. As a twin I found myself always comparing my life and my actions to my brother's. When it comes to athletics, video games, and even stupid sibling arguments, I always wanted to be better or the eventual victor. A perfect example of this is casual one-on-ones in basketball. If one of us lost the first game, the other wouldn't hear the end of it until a second game was played and the other twin won. This repetitive competition in my life showed me, however, that I will always have someone by my side. I will always have my brother no

Happiness

matter what as he knows more about me than anyone else in my life. My best friend for life was practically handed to me at birth, and the odds of that happening are 3 in 1000.



Paxon DiRienzi '23



Zach Peters '22

Fear

Fear

It Could Always Be Worse

Sean Mc Loone '24

No matter the situation I'm in, I always tell myself that it can be worse. No matter how bad my day, week, or month was, I sleep easy knowing that I'll have three meals the next day and a comfortable bed to repose in.

During my eighth grade year, I often told myself this. Everything that I had looked forward to was being snatched away from me and the rest of my class, our field trip to New York, our May Procession, our eighth-grade dance, our graduation, and our traditional parade the eighth graders were supposed to have at school on our last day. I didn't get to say goodbye to anything: classmates, teachers, younger students, the school as a whole. I hated it, and it took me a while to make peace with the fact that I was in high school, and those days were gone, even if I didn't get to part on my own terms. I told myself it could be worse, although most of the time I didn't believe what I was telling myself. *How could it be worse than this? I haven't seen any of my friends in two months. I haven't traveled out of town in forever.*

One day, as things were opening back up, I was out to dinner at my favorite Italian restaurant with my girlfriend, her family, and two of her neighbors. At this dinner, I realized that it truly could have been worse for me. I was talking to one of the neighbors, a highly successful lawyer, and he was telling me stories about the fear everyone around his age felt while the Vietnam war was going on. While he was in college, he received a draft notice, but fortunately, the war ended before he made it to training. Even though he wasn't shipped out, he had countless stories of friends that were. The other adults at the table had similar stories as well. I feel that what he, and others in his generation went through, is worse than what I had and have to go through.

I had a great feeling of thankfulness when I realized what a luxury it is to not have to worry every day about being drafted to war. I would rather have my field trip be canceled than have it be to Vietnam. His stories got me thinking about how Roman students once had to worry about being drafted which made me even more grateful that there was no war going on. I'd never have to worry about the pressure of enlisting or fear of the draft.

Then in November of 2021 when I was visiting my grandfather who was in hospice the Ukrainian priest that was praying for him with us told us about the Russian troops lined up on the eastern border. He told us about his family living there and asked us to pray for them too.

I would have never thought that what he was telling us about would evolve to what it did today. As I am writing this in late February, the most recent news is Russia entering Chernobyl. I don't know what to think of this situation since in my sixteen years I've never witnessed war or conflict of this magnitude. The situation unfolding in Russia isn't comparable to Vietnam yet, but it still is frightening. As bad as this situation is, with a war beginning amid the ongoing lockdowns around the world, it could be worse.

My life isn't perfect, it never will be. But I always have three meals a day, and a comfortable bed to repose in, which is more than kids my age in Ukraine have, and kids my age in 1969 in America had.

Russian Invasion of Ukraine

Matthew Bera '24

So, Putin has invaded Ukraine. But why?

Putin's reasoning for the invasion is that Ukraine "is an inalienable part of [Russia's] own history, culture, and spiritual space," but that does little to justify anything. Just because at one point in history Ukraine was under the control of Russia does not mean Russia gets to take it over; this is essentially identical to if the British one day decided to invade the United States for no apparent reason other than "We want our colonies back." Putin is under the delusion that Ukrainians and Russians are one people.

Another possible motive behind invading Ukraine is that Putin wants to see the Soviet Union restored to its former glory, and taking Ukraine is the first step. Putin once described the destruction of the USSR as the greatest "geopolitical catastrophe of the century," and it's certainly possible he is intent on seeing it rebuilt.

Putin offers a variety of excuses in the attempts to justify his actions. He claims that "Ukraine intends to create its own nuclear weapons," which is a wild accusation given the fact that Ukraine gave up its 5,000 nuclear weapons after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. He also says that the separatist regions of Ukraine welcome him, but that does not account for the fact that he is bombing regions of Ukraine that are very much not the separatist regions, housing millions of people who overwhelmingly *don't* welcome him.

Why invade now?

The main reason is that he senses weakness from the West and wishes to exploit it. When Russia invaded the country of Georgia back in 2008, there were few consequences. Likewise, when Russia invaded Crimea in 2014, there were few consequences. Just last year, the United States pulled out of Afghanistan, leaving billions of dollars worth of the best military equipment in the world to the Taliban. Putin has no reason to fear the West at this point, and why should he? Taking Ukraine in exchange for a few sanctions looks like a winning deal to Putin.

In addition, Putin has major leverage over Europe. That is, Russia is essentially a giant gas station, providing more than $\frac{1}{3}$ of all of Europe's natural gas. There is a reason the sanctions passed against Russia are avoiding Russia's energy markets: although they would hurt Russia the most, it is a double-edged sword in that it would be greatly detrimental to the European countries reliant on Russia for energy.

Fear

What should we do about it?

Sanctions are great, but they're also long-term. No sanctions the West levies on Russia are going to cause Putin to back out of Ukraine instantaneously: they should have been passed months ago when he first began arranging troops on the border to Ukraine. The best response at this point would be to hit Russia in their oil markets and promptly put back into effect something along the lines of the Keystone XL pipeline. Russia supplies the US with roughly 500,000 barrels of oil and petroleum products per day; Keystone XL was said to be able to nearly double that at 830,000 barrels per day. Otherwise, we must continue to send weapons to Ukraine and urge all European nations to step it up as well.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is a war that could have been avoided, and it is a tragedy for the innocent people of Ukraine whose hearts have needlessly been stilled.



Robert Marvin '23

Liam Fright's Sapphire Fear

Sean Mc Loone '24

"Are you sure you want to go through with this?"

"I'm sure Doc. Let's get this over with. I want to live my life again."

Liam Fright developed his fear around the age of twenty-seven. Over the three years between the development of his fear and his surgery, he tried many different remedies to fix his problem. He went to therapy. He wore dark sunglasses. He forced himself to go outside and look at the sky for hours. None of his solutions worked. The therapist had never heard of a problem like his and had no idea how to combat it. The sunglasses only helped him mildly. And looking at the sky only made him cry and cower in fear.

Eventually, he found himself spending all hours of the day inside, with all the blinds to his windows shut. He painted every room in his house gray. He got rid of his old sofa and replaced it with a red one. He threw away all of his old bedsheets and clothes that had even one strand of a thread of the terrible color that he feared. He threw away anything that had even a hint of a faint tint of the color that gave him extreme and irrational anxiety: blue.

One day, he was down the shore with a group of friends. When he was peering over the vast blue ocean, he felt a twinge of fear in his gut. From that moment on, the problem only worsened. Anything blue scared him: blue eyes, blue ink, blue clothes, blueberries. He would run away when he saw something blue approaching, only to run into something else that was blue.

Staying at home wasn't enough to defend against his fear of blue. Somehow, small blue artifacts would sneak into his home. No matter how hard he tried to extirpate blue from his life, mail with blue ink, blue foods, blue-colored ads on television would still invade his home. After putting a lot of thought into how he could fix his problem, the only solution he saw fit was removing his ability to see colors as a whole.

So he researched lasik eye surgeons in his area. After being rejected by at least ten different doctors, who refused the surgery since they felt it would break their Hippocratic Oath, he found a doctor who would do it for him. He was nervous about his surgery, but more than ready. He had been awaiting the day of his surgery ever since he came up with the idea.

"Okay, you're going to begin to feel very relaxed," the doctor told Liam as he put a mask onto his face, which began to fill his lungs with anesthesia.

When Liam woke up several hours later, everything appeared to him like it was a black and white film. He couldn't recognize the color of anything. He was overflowing with joy. He could finally live like he had used to live. When his doctor discharged him, he skipped through the parking lot with a feeling of complete satisfaction.

Fear

He was very confused when he got to his car and found that his key wasn't working to unlock it. He tried unlocking the driver's side door four or five times before kicking the side of his car in frustration. When he did, the car alarm started going off. He started to panic and hit all of the buttons on his key fob. A security guard came out of the surgery ward along with a sophisticated man in a suit.

The security guard pointed a taser at Liam and yelled, "Stop what you are doing! Get on the ground!"

Liam followed his instructions and tried to explain that he was only trying to get into his car. The man in the suit contested what Liam was saying. "Your car? This is mine! Are you crazy?"

Liam looked over to the other side of the parking lot and spotted his car, which was the same make and model, but he assumed was a different color. He sighed as the security guard was putting him in handcuffs.

After the misunderstanding was taken care of, Liam enjoyed a nice evening of watching TV. He was at peace now that he could finally do things like watch TV again. He was excited to start going on morning walks too. Even if he ran into problems occasionally, like getting in the wrong car, he felt the pros far outweighed the cons.

The next morning he got ready to head out for a job interview. Now that he could live his life normally, he decided he would get back out into the job hunt. He'd been doing side hustles for the past couple of years, but was ready for something real, now that he would be able to function with the rest of society. He put on his best suit and tie and combed his hair back, in an effort to look as professional as possible.

He found himself getting strange looks from everyone at the business. He dismissed the looks and tried to get himself into a good mindset before his interview. Once he was finally called into the manager's office, he was beyond nervous. He sat down across from a strong-looking, stolid man. He made no facial expression when Liam walked in, only gesturing for him to sit down. The man neglected to speak for a couple of moments before beginning. "I reviewed your application, and everything on it looks great." Liam smiled and the butterflies in his stomach flew away. "But I have to ask you, is this some kind of practical joke?"

Liam was taken aback. "I'm sorry sir, but what are you referring to?"

The manager shook his head in disbelief. "The wild-colored and patterned jacket paired with the lime green tie and stain-covered white shirt. And not to mention, one sock is black and the other is white."

Oh my God! No! Liam thought to himself. He didn't realize that the shirt he put on was the one he uses when he paints, or that the tie was the one his brother gave him as a joke. He had no clue that the jacket he put on was the one he bought in high school as a prop for his role as Joseph in *Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. And his socks. He had never meant to put on different colored ones! It wasn't a practical joke; he couldn't see any colors! He tried to explain, but it was no use. He had lost the job.



Fear

He plodded out of the office and to his car. He was feeling a little bit down, but reminded himself that life was better when he couldn't see any colors. He picked himself up and decided that he would find another job to interview for before the day was over.

His mood had done a complete turn, and he was on his way home to search for another interview. He sped down the main road that led to his house like a mad man, wanting nothing more than to be home, scouring job sites. The first light he came to was green, the second as well. The third light was red, but Liam kept going! A big black pickup truck came hurtling into the intersection and t-boned his tiny sports car.

He regained consciousness many hours later in the hospital, surrounded by his family.

"Liam!" his mother exclaimed as she kissed him on the cheeks. "Oh my gosh! Nurse, he's awake!"

There was much clamor around him when a multitude of nurses and doctors came flying in. Everyone was amazed that he had lived, let alone woke up only hours after the accident. An old, sage-looking doctor explained to Liam all of the injuries that he got from the car accident, and how it was a miracle he survived. No one, not even his sister, knew that the accident only happened because he could no longer see color. If he had been able to see color, he would have known the light was red.

He subconsciously knew what he had to do after he woke up, but didn't fully acknowledge it to himself until after his family left and he was alone with his thoughts. About two months later, when he was discharged from the hospital, he called an Uber to take him to the same eye surgeon he had originally gone to.

He had gone over what he was going to say in his head a hundred times during his two months alone in the hospital, and he delivered his diatribe verbatim as he rehearsed it: "Doctor, it was very noble what you did, giving me color blindness upon my request. I can't thank you enough. You helped me overcome my fear, but artificially so. I thought I wanted to expel the color blue from my life. What I really wanted was to expel fear from my life. I took the easy way out. I avoided what was causing my fear, instead of confronting my fear. Again, I thank you for what you did for me. I didn't come to spill my feelings out to you or anything; I have a new request. I need you to reverse it. I need my vision back. I want to do this the right way. I will face my fears fearfully, which I firmly believe is better than not facing them at all."

The doctor understood what Liam wanted, and told him that he would do his best to reverse it. The doctor scheduled the surgery with Liam, and he returned a few weeks later. The doctor set him up in the surgery ward and asked him the same question again. "Are you sure you want to go through with this?"

To which Liam gave his same response. "I'm sure Doc. Let's get this over with. I want to live my life again."



Stress

Reagan Buffington '23



Stress

A Number That Defines Your Brain

Sean Mc Loone '24

"Five minutes left in this section," the moderator announced to the classroom full of students.

Regis glanced up at the clock above the blackboard. His mind raced: *Five minutes. 10:34 plus five minutes in 10:39. No, no, that can't be right. No, it's right. Stop doubting all of your answers. That's why you always get terrible marks on these tests. Okay. Deep breath. Oh no, time is running out. What if I don't finish? I have twelve questions left. Okay. Deep breath. Has her watch been ticking this loud the whole time? Why are teachers talking in the hallway? We're trying to test. Okay. Deep breath. Why does that kid have his phone out? That's not allowed. No, it must be his calculator. You mistook a calculator for a phone. No, it was definitely his phone. There you go, doubting yourself again. Okay. Deep breath.*

"One minute left."

Okay. Okay. This is fine. C, C, C, C, C, C, C, C, C, C, C, C. I finished. Phew. That was close.

"Please put down your pencils. I will collect your test booklets shortly. Please do not take out your phone, or take out food or drink. Thank you," the moderator said in a monotone voice.

Why do the moderators always have the most boring voices?

The moderator collected all the books and dismissed the students. Regis didn't want to face his mom after bombing another SAT.

"How'd it go, kid?"

"Same as last time," he said with a frown.

"Was the content hard? Or did the nerves get to you again?"

"Nerves." Regis put his hood up and pulled the strings tight. He wanted to cry.

"You'll get 'em next time, kid. It's all right."

He knew that his mom already reserved him a spot to take the test again next month. She had no faith in him to overcome his chronic nervousness, but to be fair, neither did he. He'd already taken the PSAT and SAT twice each and scored lower than he should have all four times. He knew the information. Every time though he couldn't keep his mind on the test. He spent the majority of the time he had to answer questions trying to calm himself down.

May rolled around and the only thing that changed was the weather. The same thing happened. He took the test, lost his mind, got the test results back, and lost his mind again.

"I scored twenty points lower! Are you kidding me!" Regis exclaimed to his mom and dad.

"It's okay, kid. You'll get 'em in June."



Stress

When the flowers really started blooming in June, it was time for Regis to take the test again. With another month of preparation under his belt, he felt more than prepared. He took the test, and although he was very prepared for the content, his mind got the best of him. The second he got into the classroom it felt like the walls were closing in, and the temperature rising.

It was no surprise to him when he got his scores back and saw it decreased one-hundred points since his first attempt.

Regis ran into his room and ripped the letter into as many pieces as he could. He lay on his bed and stared at the ceiling.

"Regis?" his dad called from outside his room

Regis ignored him, but his dad came in anyway and sat down on his bed. It was quiet for a couple of minutes until his dad started. "Listen," his dad said, and Regis sat up, "it's not as big of a deal as you think. SATs are starting to mean less and less and you can apply to SAT optional schools. Really, it's just a number. Three hours of one day summed up by a number."

"But it's not just three hours. I spent probably twenty hours studying, plus--"

"Regis," his dad stopped him. "You're looking at it as you against the test, but it's you against you."

With that one sentence, it clicked for Regis. His dad left and he immediately got online. He registered for the next SAT and signed onto Khan Academy to start preparing for the test.

After another couple of months of preparing his mind for the nerves and content, he went into the test with a new mindset and came out with a new result.

He got the letter a couple of weeks later and saw the big number he'd been waiting for.

"I'm proud of your score, Regis," his mom and dad told him.

"Don't be proud of the score. I'm not. It represents three hours of one day of my life. The number doesn't show my sleepless nights or bouts of anxiety. It doesn't show my test day nervous breakdowns or fail after fail after fail. But I know about them. And I know that I overcame them. And *that* is what I'm proud about."

"Good job, Regis. I take it back then. I'm proud of what you overcame."



Stress

The Power of Words

Sean Mc Loone '24

For Ron McVay, it was just one of those days. The type of day when the world comes together to conspire against you. It actually started the day before when he had stayed up into the early hours of the morning working on a presentation that he had to give at work. He hated every minute he spent putting together his presentation on his company's financial situation. He had to go into great detail about how and why the company sales had gone down two percent since the last financial quarter. He had worked at Noddingham Tech for four years but still found himself putting together the same types of presentations that interns put together.

Ron was generally an unhappy person. It didn't matter that he had a beautiful wife and a child on the way. He always found something wrong with life. He came home to a spacious condo every day but complained about how the walls were barren, while his neighbors' were covered in expensive art.

Ron had to be at work at 8 AM, and he woke up at 7:56 AM. He was annoyed that his alarm didn't go off, while it was he who had forgot to set it. He brushed his teeth and rushed through his morning routine, scarfed down breakfast, and filled up his travel coffee mug. As he was rushing out the door, he tripped on a shoe that wasn't his and spilled his coffee on his brand new white Ralph Lauren shirt. He bought it specifically for his presentation, hoping his superiors would notice how professional he was being and give him the promotion he felt he definitely deserved.

He contemplated what the best plan of action would be and decided that he was already running too late to go change, so he waltzed over to his Mercedes and went on his way to work. Fifteen minutes into his thirty-minute commute he realized that in his rush out of the house he put on slippers instead of dress shoes. He made a quick U-turn and went back home. He accepted the fact that he was going to be at least an hour and a half late to work and that he would have to deal with the consequences.

After finally arriving at work, his boss hollered at him for being late on such an important day. He tried desperately to explain himself, but his boss would have none of it.

Ron went to his desk and moped around in his own self-pity. He had so meticulously examined and practiced his presentation that he felt all would be forgiven when it came time to present. This, however, was true by no means.

After lunch (during which he complained to his coworkers about how terrible his morning was), the higher-ups from corporate arrived. With butterflies in his stomach, Ron entered the conference room peppered with sophisticated-looking men and women all wearing suits. He stood at the end of a long table and placed his laptop on it. He opened up his laptop to find that some sort of malfunction had occurred. The majority of his presentation was gone. All of the



Stress

graphs that he had so carefully put together seemed to have vanished into thin air. He had a set of index cards in his hands with all of the main points he needed to touch on, so he decided he would call an audible.

He shut his laptop and gave his oral presentation with no visual aids. He felt that he gave a wonderful presentation and was ecstatic when his boss called him into her office after the presentation. He full-heartedly expected to be praised for his quick thinking. He sat down in a small wooden chair across from her. She neglected to talk for a couple of minutes, only staring at him, so Ron swallowed hard and spoke first.

"Why do you want to see me?" he asked, and quickly added, "Ma'am."

"Well, Ron," she said with a deeply disturbing smile. "We specifically talked about creating a slideshow for this presentation. You, however, took it upon yourself to go rogue and use index cards. As if this was a THIRD GRADE BOOK REPORT!"

"Marie, I'm sorry. I know you won't believe me, but I had one made. It didn't save for some reason. I can show you what I had—"

"Then go get your laptop and show me. Now."

Ron booked it out of her office and slid into his desk; he opened his top drawer and pulled out his laptop. He ran across his office to get to Marie's as if he were running an Olympic trial.

When he returned to Marie's office, out of breath, he set his laptop down on her desk and opened it up. All of what he had worked on last night was there. All of his slides had miraculously reappeared. Marie had a lot to say about what seemed like another one of Ron's excuses that day.

"You show up late. You go off-script during our meeting with corporate. You have stains all over your shirt..."

After being torn apart by Marie, he went back to his desk and busied himself until the end of the day. His attitude towards everything around him was as negative as it could get. When the clock struck five o'clock, he darted out of the building. Although his day turned out to be pretty cruddy, he figured he would listen to an audiobook in the car and spend time with his wife, which he predicted would make his day better.

Stress left his body as he put his key into the ignition, knowing that he would finally be able to return home. The engine sputtered and yelped for life. Again, he tried starting the car. Nothing. He punched the steering wheel and put his head down on the horn. He couldn't call his wife to pick him up since she was eight and a half months pregnant and in a very uncomfortable state. And none of his coworkers lived in his direction either, so he couldn't hitch a ride. Completely and utterly defeated, he left his car and walked to the train station, which was only across the street. He was nasty to everyone he crossed paths with. He wore a mean scowl and didn't respond to the polite "Good afternoon" and "How are you" the attendant at the ticket stand offered him. He was set on getting home and wanted nothing to do with anything that could potentially interfere with that.



Stress

He got the 5:26 train home, which would drop him off about a mile from his house. At that point in his day, he would have done anything to get home. He would have walked 10 miles from a train station to his house if he had to!

Only nine stops, he thought to himself, and then I'll be home, watching Sports Center, eating a home-cooked meal. He made his way to the second car on the train. It was the most empty car he could find. There were only three or four other people in the car, all of whom were dead asleep. He planned on doing the same. He scooted into a window seat and placed his head against the cold pane of glass, which made him wince, but he shut his eyes. Soon after, he realized he wouldn't be able to catch much sleep and abandoned the idea.

When the train stopped at the next stop, an elderly man entered the car Ron was sitting in. Ron glanced up and saw the man approaching him. Ron assumed the man would take one of the many unoccupied seats, as opposed to sitting with him, but the man sat down next to Ron. Thoroughly annoyed, Ron surveyed the man for a second and then turned away, not in the mood to have any conversations.

"Sir," the old man said to Ron.

Ron looked at the man. His bright white hair stuck out of the sides of his head. He was wearing formal clothes as if he was going to church and looked very clean. He carried no bags or belongings with him. "Yes?" Ron replied.

"Are you okay?"

The words hit Ron like a tsunami. First, he felt insulted to a degree. *Who is this random man to question my mental state?* After a quick moment of frustration, he realized that the man's question came out of genuine concern for him. The last time anyone had asked him this simple question had to have been years ago. With his mouth wide open, in a moment of great realization, he answered the man's question: "No."

In his great epiphany, he realized that he simply wasn't happy. The materials that he owned and the lifestyle he lived had been what he thought would make him happy, but it didn't. In fact, it made him miserable.

"I didn't think so. What's going on young man?"

"Well..." Ron began. He relayed everything that had happened that day, in addition to his realization that he had had seconds prior. Three stops had passed since their conversation started, but Ron barely noticed the time passing.

When he was done spilling out his bottled-up feelings, he looked at the still nameless man who was rubbing his hairless chin in deep thought. "Well, young man, I'm no therapist, but it sounds like you know something is wrong. And it sounds like you know how to fix it. I don't have any solutions for you. Only you do. But what I want you to remember is very simple. Your words are powerful. My words just made you spew out your truest feelings to a man you've never met. I made you acknowledge things that you've always known. Do something about those feelings. Live the life you want to live."



Stress

The train stopped abruptly and the man rose from his seat. "That's just my two cents anyway."

"Wait," Ron yelled as the man neared the exit of the train.

The man turned around and made deep eye contact with Ron. Ron could see his reflection bouncing off of the man's brown eyes. "Thank you. You helped me. Let me repay you, sir!"

The man waved off Ron's request to repay him and laughed. "Check in on one of your friends and ask the same question I did. Most of us aren't really okay, even though we look like we are. That's how you can repay me."

And just like that, a random man, whose name Ron never even learned, changed Ron's life forever. He was rejuvenated with a sense of control over his life. He had a newfound motivation to live the life he wanted to live. But before he grabbed his life by the horns, he knew it was his duty first to pass on the wise words the man on the train had given him.

After spending the last four stops of the train ride in deep thought, he knew what he was going to do.

He stepped off the train and breathed in the fresh air. He felt renewed and completely aware of his surroundings. He was happy to walk home from the train station, while before he would have been very miffed. He had a young friend named Jeremiah. Jeremiah, being three years younger and three times richer than Ron, lived a similar lifestyle to Ron's. Whenever they got together for drinks, they had fun complaining about life. He knew that Jeremiah could greatly benefit from the advice the old man had to offer.

When Ron was nearing Jeremiah's abode, which was only a couple of houses away from Ron's, he could see Jeremiah pacing on his lawn.

When he got even closer, he could hear Jeremiah yelling into his phone. The stocky man of six feet hung up his phone and took off his suit jacket. He laid it on the lone chair that was on his front porch and then sat down on the bottom step of the porch.

Instead of walking past Jeremiah's house as he normally would, Ron turned into the cement path leading up to the porch.

"What's up, Ron?" Jeremiah asked.

Ron neglected to answer until he was sitting down next to Jeremiah.

"What's up, Ron?" he asked again, slightly more urgent.

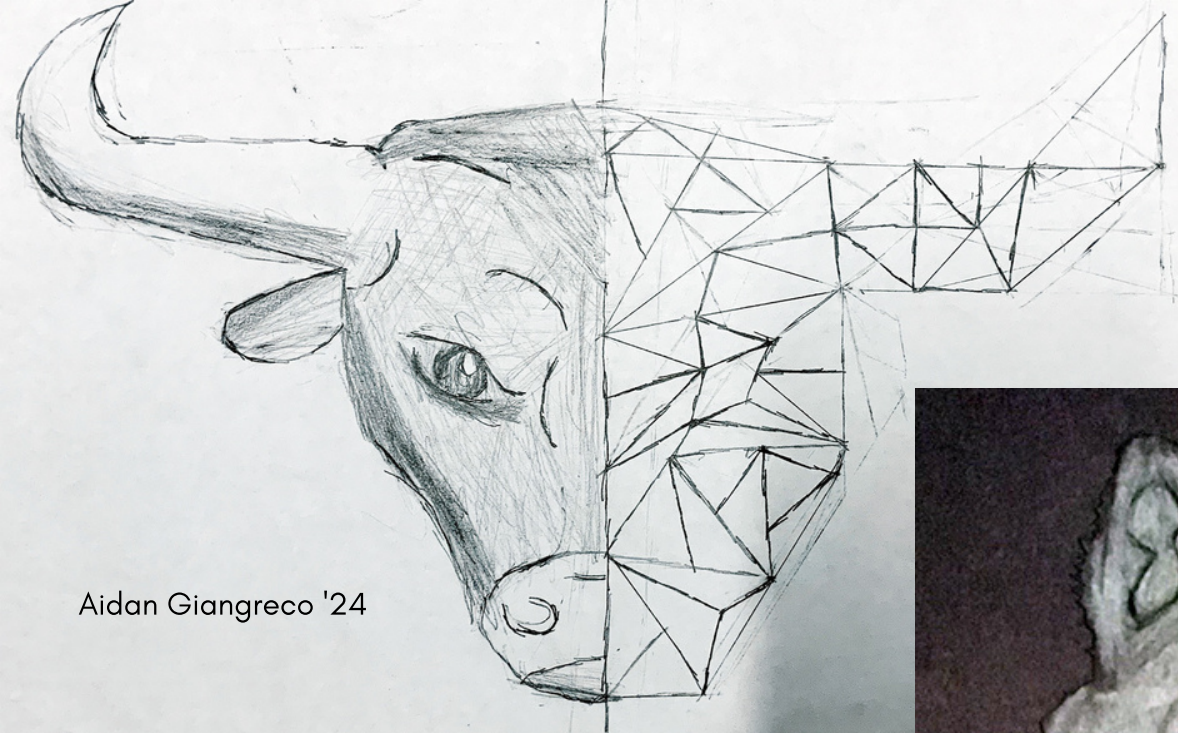
"Jerry," he started, "are you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm fine. What's up?"

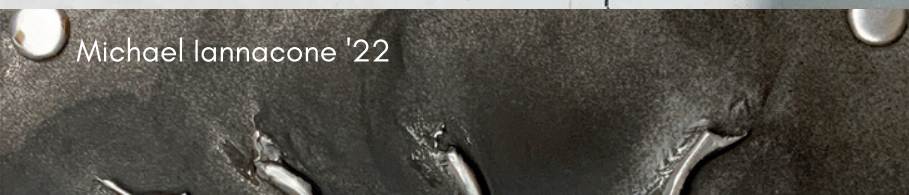
Ron raised his eyebrow quizzically at Jeremiah.

"No," Jeremiah said before he started to tear up.

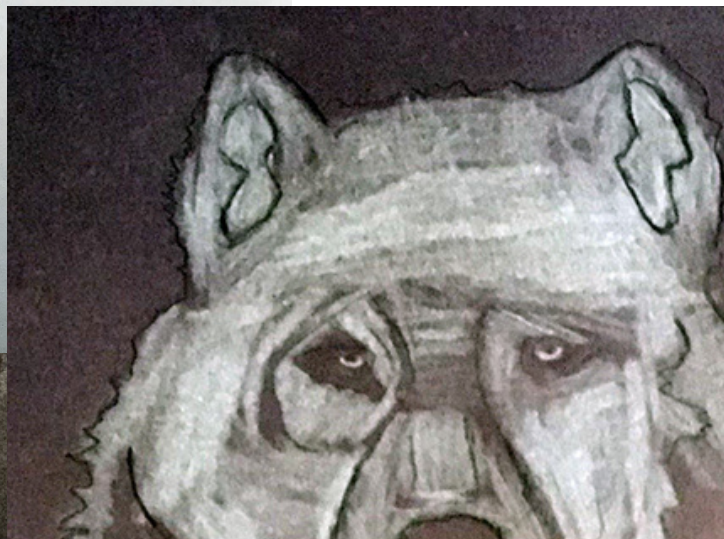
And with the power of words, another life was changed for good.



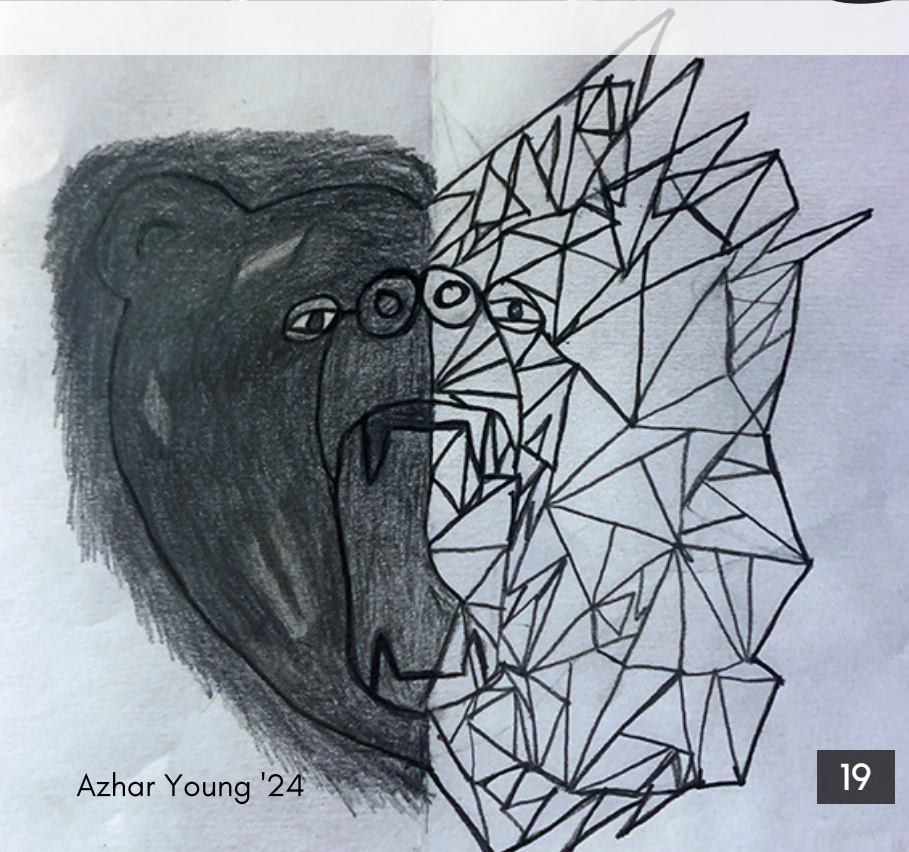
Aidan Giangreco '24



Michael Iannacone '22



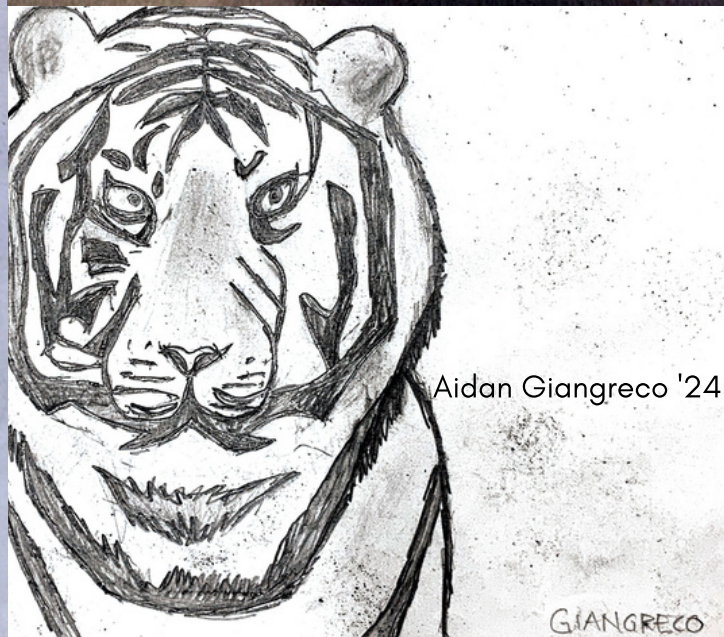
Anger



Azhar Young '24



James Lund '23



Aidan Giangreco '24

GIANGRECO

Anger

Spirit Control Unit

Marquee Lisby '22

Breathe In

All is quiet; all is dark. A young man stands obscured within shadows. Until **FLASH** a bright light pierces the darkness. The young man stands wearing a black coat and black pants. He's in a decently-sized room with two beds.

In one of the beds a young man stirs and mumbles under his breath, "Turn off the light, Mike."

Mike responds, "Do you know what today is?" The young man is already back to sleep.

Mike approaches his roommate's bed and raises his hand. A **SMACK** breaks the silence; this young man now has a bright red mark on his face. He looks back at the one he just slapped; it was his roommate and best friend Raymond Light.

"Hurry up, Ray. You're gonna be late," Mike says as he leaves in a huff.

The young man's name is Micheal Voss. He grabs his phone and sees the time and date, December 22nd 100 AC 5:45 AM. He walks out of the building and sees two others. Aminata (Amy) Nathan, Micheal's cousin and Seneca (Sen) Anderson, Amy's best friend. He waves to them, but before he has a chance to say anything, they hear Ray yell out, "Oh crap!" soon followed by the sound of someone falling on the floor. Mike looks up at his window and then looks at the two in front of him.

"So the usual," Sen says while pointing her thumb at the window.

"I hope he doesn't hurt himself. Today's very important. It would be awful if he were to get injured," Amy says.

"I'm sure he'll be fine," Mike says. As he says that, Ray comes bursting out of the dorms and he apologizes for being late.

"Oh you're finally awake, sleeping beauty?" Micheal remarks.

"Eff you," Ray says as he raises his middle finger.

Ray greets the two with a "Hi." Sen nods.

"Hey, are you okay?" Amy asks.

"Yeah why?" Ray questions.

"Your shirt's on backwards," Sen chuckles.

As Ray fixes his shirt, he, Amy, and Sen start walking down the path. Mike stays behind for a moment and takes in his surroundings. He looks back towards the dormitory, the place he called home for four years. This navy blue building is where he and many others stayed during their journey to become members of the Spirit Control Unit. He looks down towards pathways leading to dusty dirt fields and the Snowball, their training complex. Then he looks towards his friends, their breath visible despite the darkness. Amy and Sen are wearing the winter uniform, a long-sleeved dress shirt and black pants just like him. Amy is wearing a blue one while Sen wears a gray one. He looks at Ray, who's wearing a plain gray short-sleeved dress shirt, the spring uniform.

Anger

Ray never had trouble with the cold unlike him. Mike looks at his heavy coat. It keeps him warm, but it's a bit hard to move. Finally he looks straight ahead towards this brick and mortar school building surrounded by black metal fence. Despite the building's obvious weathering, it's still standing strong.

He looks at the golden plate affixed to the left side of the gates that says: "Making Heroes since Year 2 A.C." By the time he realizes where he is, he's already there at the gates that he's opened so many times to reach his classes. Without realizing it, he had started walking towards his destination. These gates are where he made those first steps all those years ago. He looks at his friends' faces, and they all have the same expression as him. A mix of joy, sadness, and fear for reaching the end of their journey, for leaving the place they called home for four years and for the unknown because once they take those last steps, there is no turning back.

The four of them all start walking ahead. Mike thinks back to where he was in his past and where he is now, and he can't believe how far he's come. He truly can't believe it, so he freezes and looks down at his left hand bandaged tightly as always. Amy notices and starts to walk towards him. His face drops, and he clenches his fist tightly. Sen soon also notices and turns towards him. As soon as Ray reaches for the school door handle, he asks "Are you sure?"

Ray turns towards him.

Amy is the first to speak up. "What do you mean?" she says with a concerned look in her eyes.

Micheal elaborates, "Are you sure we can do this?"

Sen responds, "The tests are just everything we've done before. We got nothing to worry about."

Micheal yells, "I'M NOT TALKING ABOUT THE TESTS!" Micheal lowers his voice but the power behind his words remains the same. "People's lives are going to be in our hands. If we fail, we might die, and not only that, others might die, our friends and family might die!"

Mike, with a defeated look in his eyes, asks again "Are you sure we can do this because I don't think that I can, especially with this." Mike pulls up his left sleeve revealing bandages going past his elbow.

Ray walks up to Mike. With fist clenched, he winds his arm back and delivers a punch to the right side of his face. "SHUT UP!" Ray yells as Mike falls to the ground.

"The hell was that for?!" Mike yells back.

"Payback for this morning number one. And Number two, if you were thinking this way, you should've left a long time ago."

Amy places her hand on Mike's shoulder. She looks him dead in the eyes and tells him, "Mike, you can do this. You've been working the hardest out of all of us. You tried your best at everything and when you couldn't do something the right way, you did it your way."

Mike retorts, "But what if..."

Sen swiftly cuts him off, "Don't worry about it."

Amy helps him back on his feet, and Mike looks at Sen who says, "Mike you're strong, we all

Anger

know this.”

Ray and Amy nod in agreement.

“Do you remember why we’re here?” Sen asks.

Mike once again looks at his bandaged hand, and the look of defeat leaves his face.

“To protect those who can’t protect themselves,” Mike responds.

He walks towards the door and opens it. They all enter the school without an ounce of doubt in their minds. Mike turns to his friends and puts his fist out and says, “Thanks for that.” They bump fists with each other, and Ray says, “Don’t worry about it.”

Breathe Out

The four make their way to the testing area, and they see a man with a cane standing next to the door. He looks old, so old he might keel over and die at any second. His skin is wrinkled and covered with age spots. His nose, which looks much like a parrot’s beak, leads directly to his dark sunken eyes. His stature is small, only made smaller by the hunch of his back.

As the group reach the door the man raises his cane to signal them to stop. “In order to enter the testing area, you must be stamped,” he says. His voice, completely matching his decrepit appearance, is so lifeless and lethargic that the entire group gives a concerned look at the old man. “Hand,” the man says as he raises his hand towards the group. Sen is the first to give her hand. The man places his palm on the top of her hand and a low humming sound is heard, and then a quick flash of blue light is seen. As the man removes his hand, smoke and the combination N5 appear where he placed his hand. The combination N5 glows a sky blue color then slowly turns black. Amy, Mike, and Ray all get their combinations – M8, Z9, and A3, respectively. The man opens the door for the group and speaks in a quiet, ominously deep voice, “Good luck.”

They look back towards the man, and he’s gone without a trace. The group stands in silence, confused about what just happened.

“Hey, what the hell are you standing around for?”

The group turns to see a woman with short black hair and bangs slightly covering her gray eyes. Her scared face has soft features with the sole exception being her sharp, strong eyes. Her outfit consists of a black beater, black pants, combat boots, and a long white sleeveless coat. Her outfit is seemingly made to show off her strong arms.

“Your seats match the combination on your hands.”

The four head down the stairs into the testing area, a lecture hall filled with 260 people seated in 26 rows with 10 seats per row. They don’t recognize any faces as every person they see is a stranger. All of their classmates were apparently sent somewhere else.

“Now that everyone is seated, I will explain the way the finals will work. The finals would usually be broken up into multiple stages. Each one would test a specific aspect that every member of the SCU will need, but this year for this group specifically, there will only be two. The mark on your hands will be for identification that you will need for the following stage. These marks will guide and track you just in case something happens. My name as some of you

Anger

know is Aria Nell, but you will refer to me as Officer Nell, and I will be the proctor of this exam. Any questions?"

The room remains silent as a kid with bronze hair and verdigris eyes stands and asks, "Why are we taking the test all the way out here? We had to take a flight to get here on time and wake up before the crack of dawn to take a test we probably could take at home!"

Aria looks up at him and stares him down and asks sternly "Do you want to leave?" Because the door's right there!"

The boy steps back and starts stammering.

She continues, "If you don't, I suggest you sit down and be quiet. We wouldn't fly you out here for no reason. You guys were all brought here because out of everyone in the Northeast region, you guys are the best of the best. Now this is a basic pen-and-paper test. You will take one multi-subject test, which will test not only your knowledge of our organization but also your knowledge of multiple basic school subjects. And just in case anyone fails this test, it will not be held against you in any future prospects you may have. You have four hours to complete it. Anyone caught cheating will be disqualified, anyone caught leaving the room will be disqualified, and finally anyone who's caught making a disruption will be disqualified! Now Begin!"

As soon as she says the words, there is a bright flash of blue light, and tests appear in front of the students along with a pen and pencil for them to write with. Everyone stares wide-eyed at the size of the test; it's as though someone wrote a small book and gave it to them as a test.

Mike picks up a pen and starts to answer questions without needing to give them a second thought. The sound of pen on paper and paper flipping knocks everyone out of their daze. An hour in, Mike drops his pen and looks at his test; he's barely made a dent in it. He places his head on the table, raises his head up, takes a deep breath and continues taking the test. As time ticks down another hour has passed and some students ask to go to the bathroom.

Aria reaches into her pocket and pulls out a key and raises her voice so everyone can hear her, "I will repeat the rules for the test again once more. Anyone caught cheating will be disqualified, anyone caught leaving the room will be disqualified and finally anyone who's caught making a disruption will be disqualified. This is the key to the staff bathroom which is right behind me. That is all."

She puts the key on the desk and walks out of the room. The student who asked to use the bathroom walks gingerly down the stairs. She grabs the keys, which make a light jingling noise. Some students look up to the source of the noise. The combination on her hand glows bright and with a **FLASH** of blue and a whipping sound, she disappears.

Everyone looks at what had just happened with a sense of immense dread. Sen instantly looks around the hall for any way Officer Nell could see or hear what's happening inside the room. Her eyes quickly glow a dim gold as they dart around the room searching for anything that could show Officer Nell what anyone was doing; she then notices the person next to her sneakily stealing her answers. As soon as she sees him, the student's hand glows blue and then

Anger

what happened to the first girl happens to him.

Sen looks down at her hand, and that's when Officer Nell's words ring back into her head. *These marks are trackers*, she thinks to herself. *The real reason we were given these marks was to test something else about us but what?*

Sen reaches into her pocket. Her eyes quickly flash gold and a rock appears in her hand. She places it on the table silently and flicks it towards someone in the rows in front of her. The person she hits looks around and even stares back at her, but the mark on her hand stays black. *Ok, that didn't trigger it but besides the normal testing what are they trying to get out of us.* She looks to her friends. Ray and Amy are both stressing out, basically pulling their hair out but Mike is laying with his head down, sleeping. That's when it clicks for her.

She takes a deep breath and stops taking her test; she can only hope Ray and Amy will understand. When Aria announces the end of the first half of the test, there are some students that seem refreshed and relaxed while others are panicked and restless. Aria looks around the hall and says, "I will now explain the second half of the test." As soon as the words leave her mouth, the entire room feels a sense of impending doom.

Aria continues, "The entire test you've taken up to this point is only worth 50% of the your score; the other 50% will be one question you will have to answer on the back of your test. If you fail, you will never be allowed to enter this room again, and you will be barred from ever becoming an SCU officer for the rest of your life. Or you can leave right now and try again next year. I will reveal the question after everyone who wants to leave is gone. Once you hear the question, you can't quit. Anyone who wants to quit, stand now."

Mike looks up towards Amy and Sen who are sitting stunned. He then looks up towards Ray, slumped down into his chair with a hopeless expression on his face. One of the other students yells out, "Are you insane?! We can take the test next year, and you're willing to trade your dream on a crapshoot?"

Aria howls on the floor laughing to the point that she's crying. Every student stares dumbfounded except the four. They remain stone-faced with determination emanating off of them.

Aria soon composes herself. "Alright," she says. "Since you're so confident, I'll help everyone out. If even one of you knows the answer to the question, you all pass. How about that?"

Two people stand up and ask to leave.

"Is that everyone who wants to leave? Because this is your last chance, okay?" Aria asks.

Ten more people disappear in the same way as the first two.

"Now the final question: What are 'The Two'?"

Dread sets upon the entire room as they hear the question. They couldn't understand; it was nothing more than nonsense. Ray, Amy, and Sen realize that they have ruined their chances to continue on the path they had chosen. Aria is smiling a devilish grin. She is getting ready to speak, but she is interrupted by the sound of pen on paper. Mike had already grabbed his pen and swiftly written down an answer to the question. He calmly walks over to the desk

Anger

and places his test on it before returning to his seat.

Aria looks confused as she turns towards Mike, and she asks, "Why did you put that here?"

Mike responds, "You can't read the right answer while my test is with me can you?"

Aria snatches the paper off the table and reads the back of the test that was placed on the desk. She takes multiple double-takes, switching from the test to Mike's face which now has a rather smug grin on it.

"You're correct," she says with a fearful look in her eyes. "You all pass the first stage."

Weapon behind their teeth

The students rise from their seats and leave the hall. They have been given 30 minutes to relax before the next stage but that's not what they're focusing on at the moment. As soon they exit the hall Mike is swarmed by everyone and is bombarded by questions. It's a cacophony of voices but the main question can be made out: "How did you know the answer to that nonsense question?"

Mike breaks away from the crowd. He turns to them and says, "It didn't matter if I wrote anything. We had already passed before that."

The crowd murmurs in confusion. Not a moment later a couple of the students realize what he means.

Sen facepalms and groans, "I can't believe I didn't realize it sooner."

A white-haired girl pinches the space between her eyes.

A copper-haired boy exhales deeply.

Ray and Amy exclaim, "What does Mike mean?!"

Their sentiments are felt by the rest of the students.

"We passed the moment the other group left," the copper-haired boy says. "It was a test of bravery. The real final question was Are you prepared to stake your life on a chance and are you brave enough to trust your life in the hands of someone else on the force? But that doesn't explain what you wrote."

"I wrote the right answer to the question she asked," Mike says. "I knew what 'The Two' were; that's all. Oh, and before you ask, I can't tell you what it is. It's a secret."

The crowd, realizing they better use the rest of the time to prepare for whatever comes next, disperse. After the crowd disperses the only people left in the hallway besides Ray's group are the copper-haired boy, the white-haired girl, and one other.

"My name is Lucius Claude," the other says. "It's nice to meet you." He sticks his hand right in Mike's face, completely ignoring everyone else.

Mike takes a step back and says, "The name's Micheal Voss. Nice to meet you." As Mike raises his hand to meet Lucius's hand, Lucius quickly grabs Mike's hand and shakes it violently. Mike rips his hand away from Lucius. He looks back towards Lucius and he realizes that despite his dopey smile, his eyes are closed.

"Allow me to introduce my friends," says Lucius. He points to the white-haired girl. "This is Christina Dawn but she likes to go by Dawn."

Anger

Dawn puts her hands back to back, and then she flips their orientation and points to the group. Sen and Amy place the fingers of their right hand to their mouths and then move their right hand next to their left hand, palms facing up.

Dawn's face lights up as they perform these actions.

"Oh, you know sign language," Lucius says, slightly surprised. "But Dawn here isn't deaf. She just can't talk, so she can hear everything you say. This is Leon." He points to the face of an absolute goliath of a person who's easily eight feet tall with a rather angular body and small black eyes to match. His most striking feature is his massive mop of red hair that seems like it's alive.

"Hey Leon, get down here," says Lucius. The mass of hair on Leeroy falls on the floor revealing that Leeroy has a good black induction cut. The mass shambles around until two small hands poke through it, revealing behind the mound of poofy red hair a short freckled boy with cloudy eyes and extremely pronounced canine teeth.

"The name's Leon, Leon O'Ryan. And this guy right here," Leon slaps the big guy's leg, "is Leeroy Browne. He doesn't talk much. So I'm his mouth, and in exchange, he's my eyes. Hey big guy, greet these people and tell me what they look like."

Leeroy's head is bobbing up and down as he says, "Leon do I have to?"

"Come on, can you please do it? Do it for me." Leon asks.

"Okay. Hello... nice... to meet....you," Leeroy says, yawning in between each word.

Leon hugs Leeroy and says, "Thanks big guy." Leon walks towards where Mike is standing, and he sniffs the air around himself. "You're Michael Voss right?" Leon asks while pointing directly at him.

"Yeah, I am..?" Mike looks inquisitively at him.

"He's about 5'4" with green eyes, short curly blonde hair and light olive skin; he also got bandages covering the entirety of his left arm," Leeroy says, describing Mike to Leon.

"Ok, what's your name?" Leon says while pointing at Sen.

"My name is Seneca Anderson, but you can just call me Sen, though."

"She's about 5'9" with yellow eyes and very fair skin. She has short straight red hair that fades to black at the tips," Leeroy once again explains.

"So," Amy says as she puts her hands together, "are you going to do that every time we introduce ourselves?" As Amy says that she points her hands at Leeroy.

"He has to or I won't be able to know what you guys look like. Also he needs to wake up!" Leon exclaims.

"Ok," Amy sighs. "My name is Aminata Nathan but everyone calls me Amy. Nice to meet you."

"She's about 5'6" with lavender eyes, long curly black hair and brown skin," says Leeroy.

Amy clenches her teeth and strains a smile as soon as he starts talking.

Ray rolls his eyes and lets out an exasperated sigh, "Light, Raymond Light, but you can call me Ray."

Anger

"He's-" Leeroy is quickly cut off by Ray.

"I'm 6'0". I have brown eyes, neck-length black hair with bangs covering my right eye and olive skin."

Leeroy is standing stock still, shocked that Ray cut him off like that. Leon starts snarling at Ray until Lucius grabs his shoulder. Leon then walks back to where Leeroy is and climbs on his shoulder and starts comforting Leeroy. Leon starts staring daggers into Ray.

Lucius stands in front of Mike and asks, "Can you tell us the answer to the final question, please?"

Mike looks up to Lucius, realizing the only reason he even started speaking to them was to get the final answer.

"It doesn't matter, so why do you want to know?"

Lucius's face drops from a dopey smile to an annoyed frown bordering on being furious. He places a hand on Mike's shoulder, and he finally reveals his verdigris green eyes.

"All right. Everyone noticed Ms. Nell's reaction to your answer. Whatever 'The Two' are, they must be important." His face softens as he leans in closer to Mike. "So come on, just tell us what they are."

Mike looks down at the floor - fist clenched, teeth bared. He slowly starts to raise his fist and then stops. He takes a deep breath. "I wo..." Mike stops speaking, his body starts to shake, his eyes grow wide. He slowly looks down towards his chest.

A knife is embedded in it. He slowly looks up towards Lucius, his eyes glowing bright.

"Wrong answer," he says as he kicks Mike in the stomach, sending him flying down the hall. Amy runs to his side while Ray and Sen both try to attack Lucius but end up in front of Leeroy and Leon all of a sudden. Leon's eyes glow a ghostly white as Ray's arms and legs are pierced in multiple places, and he falls to the floor. Sen takes a step back to try and get a better grasp on her situation, but all of a sudden, her body is cut diagonally and she falls. Amy kneels down next to Mike, her eyes glowing silver as she places her hands on Mike. The screams of her friends alert her to the situation at hand. She turns to see her friends on the floor bleeding out. Before she gets a chance to move, she is blinded and swiftly knocked down with two consecutive blasts of light.

"All you had to do was tell us the answer, but noooo - you had to be difficult. Now look where that got you. You and your friends, on the ground, bleeding out." Lucius looks at his knife; it's a large copper-colored carving knife covered in Mike's blood. He sighs, "Alright guys, let's go."

He walks towards the door past the bodies on the floor. The knife in his hand disappears, and as it does, his eyes stop glowing. His group follows him except Dawn who gets down on her knees, clasps her hands together, and closes her eyes. When she opens them, they are glowing iridescent, and the injured on the floor are healed. As her eyes return to their normal white color, she follows her group out of the building.

Mike sits up and looks at his friends.

Anger

"Amy, you ok?"

Amy sits up rubbing her eyes. "Yeah I'm good, what about you two?"

Ray and Sen both raise their hands in a thumbs up.

Mike stands up and dusts himself off. He looks at his friends starting to stand and says, "We got our butts handed to us and I'm pissed about it, and I'm sure you guys are too." Mike's smile grows from nothingness into a malicious grin and his eyes start to glow a sinister green. Then he says, "So how about we show our new friends what we're made of?"

The other three's faces all change to match Mike's. The group makes their way out the building filled with malcontent eyes glowing green, silver, gold, and red. They prepare for the next stage.

Hand we're dealt

Ray and Mike have returned to their room. They have changed out of their bloody uniforms into their training gear. Ray wears a gray t-shirt with eight red diamonds – four large and four small – forming a compass rose on his chest and the words SPIRIT CONTROL printed in red on the back and a pair of gray shorts. Mike wears a blue quarter zip with the compass rose over his heart and the words SPIRIT CONTROL split up on his sleeves and track pants with stripes diagonally banding the legs. The accents of his outfit are green in color.

The silence in the room is broken by a tone. Ray's phone is ringing. A picture of Amy appears on the screen, and Ray answers the phone.

"We're at the training complex, are guys ready?" Amy asks.

"Yeah we'll be there in five," Ray responds.

Amy hangs up the phone.

Sen raises her hand and counts down five...four...three...two...one. The moment her last finger reaches her hand, the doors to the complex swing open.

"So how fast was that," Mike smugly says as he snaps.

"If you guys were at the dorms and started and stayed at a consistent speed, then it would be 720mph," Sen smartly replies.

Mike looks at her confused and then he chuckles a bit. She realizes that was a rhetorical question. Ray looks around the complex, the white tile pattern floor on each side of the room and the spiraling stairs leading up to the multitude of rooms all for the purpose of training the skills and abilities of SCU cadets. He looks to the center where a massive elevator leads to higher levels. Ray stares at the elevator and remembers this building's other purpose: to protect everyone in case the county becomes a No Man's Land. He looks to Sen and Amy. Amy's wearing a similar outfit to Mike's except with silver highlights while Sen is wearing an outfit with gold highlights and another pair of clothes underneath.

The clock strikes 10:30, the marks on their hands glow a bright blue, and they appear in a dark room along with everyone else taking the test. A screen drops down from the ceiling and it shows Ms. Nell.

On the screen she says, "There has been a change of plans. Usually there would be more

Anger

types of tests and many more people here, but after going over everyone's results on the tests before today, we realize that those tests would be redundant. So this year everyone in this room is officially a member of SCU..."

The room erupts with joyous screams except for Sen who continues to look towards the screen as if waiting for something.

The screaming dies down so Ms. Nell continues, "Is what I would like to say, but..." – the room immediately gets tense – "...we always had a contingency plan just in case a group of recruits showed themselves to be above and beyond the average."

A cold sweat forms on the recruits' brows.

Ms. Nell changes her voice to a faux cutesy tone and says, "You guys are so great that we decided to give you some real experience. Good for you, kid. You finally got the answer to your question. This is why you've all been brought here. You have one objective: **SURVIVE. Hahahahahaha. GOOD LUCK.**"

The screen lifts back into the ceiling, and the floor starts to shake and jerk.

Sen yells, "Everyone brace for impact!"

Everyone starts to move but then **Boooooom.**

Meltdown

Mike lays face down on grass. He lifts himself up off the ground and takes in his surroundings. He is in a large clearing surrounded by tall gray trees with a thick brush at the base of them. There are no other people around him, and he sees the flaming tail of a plane right next to him. There's the sound of something rustling within the brush. Mike tenses up and his eyes glow. He quickly ducks out of the way as something soars over him. He spins around and sees what appears to be a puma with its claws stuck in the plane. Mike starts to move to attack the puma until he feels stinging pain in his hand. The pain stops him long enough for the puma to free itself. The two face each other and the puma starts circling Mike its eyes laser-focused on him. Mike is keeping eye contact with it the entire time. The puma stands directly in front of him and starts to change. It grows until it's as big as a tiger. Its coat changes from tan to pure white, its eyes constantly glow a reflective yellow, and its tail splits into three. It pounces towards Mike, but Mike quickly jumps to the left. The creature lands at the spot where Mike was and the ground under it explodes. Mike quickly advances towards the creature with his hands glowing red hot. He delivers a straight punch right into the side of the creature. Upon contact an explosion blasts the creature into the trees. The creature once again pounces towards Mike and he dodges once again, but the moment he moves away he falls down with a **Boooooom.**

Mike's body slams into the ground back first. He tries to lift his legs, but he can't. He feels as though his entire body is being pressed deep into the earth. The creature grows to where it's above the trees to an imposing 40 feet tall. The creature's neck elongates, revealing a patternless white scaly neck as it turns its head towards Mike and smiles a toothy, devious, smug smile. One of the creature's tails starts swaying from side to side, shedding its fur and

Anger

revealing a white patternless, scaly tail with a rattle at the end of it. It starts making a rattling sound.

The beast opens its mouth, and as it does, its bottom jaw splits open, revealing a never-ending darkness that soon starts to suck Mike towards it. Mike gets lifted off the ground and is pulled into the beast's gaping maw. Mike grabs his left arm with his right and places his hand in front of himself. A blue aura forms in his hand, and it grows, enveloping his hand which turns red as it does so. The creature's mouth snaps shut with a smile the moment Mike enters.

"Special Dragon Grenade!" Mike roars as he blasts through the creature's closed mouth, knocking out some teeth in the process. Mike lands on the ground and rolls into the trees. The creature's smile drops as it grows more teeth to replace the ones it lost.

Its neck shrinks and its third tail sheds its fur, revealing an iridescent white scaly tail that curls. Its fur starts changing from white to a rainbow halation. It gains an eye-like pattern covering its ever-changing fur. It starts convulsing and heaving as though something is stuck in its throat. It lifts its head towards the sky and then faces Mike and shoots out a balance ball-sized black hole of its mouth.

Mike rolls towards the creature, dodging the ball. Mike turns and sees a perfectly circular hole leading deep into the ground. Mike sees the beast preparing to fire another one. He starts running towards the creature as he picks up two of the creature's fangs off the ground. The creature fires another one that splits into multiple smaller versions. Mike tries to dodge to the right, but one of them grazes his leg, taking a sizable chunk out of it.

Mike continues his advance on the beast. The beast raises its paw and slams it right on top of Mike. In response he holds up the fangs in an X, stopping the paw from crushing him. Mike feels his injured leg start to buckle as it slides on the grass. He focuses his energy into the tip of the fangs and slashes an X right into the palm of the creature. The X glows red and blasts the beast onto its back. Mike is sent flying back by the beast's hind legs right through a tree, and he drops the beast's fangs.

As he gets up, the beast is nowhere to be seen. Mike stands perfectly still. He takes a deep breath and allows everything around to permeate him.

His eyes start to glow a brighter and more radiant green. All of his senses are going into overdrive trying to pinpoint this creature but it's no use as he is lifted off the ground. Space appears to distort in front of him as the creature's body materializes. His whole body restrained by its tail, Mike is moved to the creature's face. The beast's face, distorted by anger, growls at Mike. Its breath becomes haggard, and it starts to tighten its tail, crushing Mike. Mike screams out in pain as the sound of broken bones fill his ears. The beast bares its teeth and starts snarling, drool dripping out of its open mouth.

"KILL!!" The beast screams out.

As he is slammed into the ground once again, Mike screams out. The creature's head starts swaying from side to side while repeating the one word **"KILL KILL KILL."**

Its eyes start flickering from yellow to black, and an aura of pale blue fire starts to radiate



Anger

ff the beast. It is engulfed in a bright blue fireball. It is so bright the entire clearing darkens to the point where light from the flames clearly shows on Mike's terrified face.

The flames die down and the beast has returned to its original size. Its eyes are all black excluding its pure white pupils. Its whole body has been covered in a bright white glow that flakes away revealing a black coat with an orange color wrapping around the extremities. Its fur and tails are in constant movement as though they are flowing in the wind.

"Hey, I'm going to kill you," the beast says.

At that moment Mike's blood runs cold because the pressure this thing is giving off is at least ten times denser than when it was giant. The creature appears above Mike. The ground glows a bright red and explodes. Mike is sent flying into the sky. The creature stands in the crater and shoots a ping pong ball-sized black hole at him, purposely aiming at the space between his neck and shoulder.

Mike howls as he feels the skin and flesh from his neck and shoulder being ripped off his body. The creature shoots an even smaller hole no bigger than a pinhead; it hits his left hand and leaves almost nothing left of his hand. The beast shoots three more of these small holes at his right leg, his stomach, and his right lung.

Mike lands on the ground, coughing up blood and trying his hardest not to pass out from the pain. The creature once again stands over him and places its paw right on top of his heart.

"I should thank you because without you here I wouldn't have gained this beautiful new form and this amazing power, but I am still veeeeery angry at you, so I'll kill you in the most agonizing way possible," the beast says.

"Why?" Mike groans.

"Why? Well, the attacks from earlier really stung, but it's just mostly because I want to," the creature says with a demented smile.

The beast's paw is being pushed deeper and deeper into his chest. Mike feels an intense weight on his chest that is increasing by the second pushing down on his heart. He wants to scream but he can't pull air into his punctured lung. He starts to lose consciousness as his eyes start to flicker on and off.

As the lights in his eyes start to truly fade, scenes from his past start to flash before his eyes. He sees a small outstretched hand in the sunlight, the bottom half of a woman's face covered in blood, red and blue lights breaking the darkness, and a small bloodstained left hand. As these scenes play within his head, Mike's eyes start to change, his pupils elongate into vertical slits with yellow outlines around them, his irises gain a reptilian pattern, and they glow brighter than ever before.

A blazing flame bursts out of Mike and pushes the beast away. The flames cover his body and fill his injuries. Mike lifts himself off the ground, and flames leave his body, revealing that all of the injuries he suffered have healed. His face looks emotionless yet confused; his eyes are filled with determination and fury. The beast jumps at Mike with its claws fully extended. Mike moves his left arm horizontally over his chest, extends his index finger, and performs a

Anger

slow swiping motion in the air. The beast's claws reach his face; they are so close they touch his eyelashes. He opens his mouth, and "Mon-50" are the words that leave his mouth. As he utters them, the air distorts and a burst of flame blasts the beast back.

The beast prepares another black hole, but before it has the chance to open its maw, Mike disappears from the creature's sight and reappears, delivering a flying ax-kick to the beast's spine, driving it into the ground and making a crater. Mike moves off the beast and walks in front of it, placing his left hand right above its head. And in the first display of his emotions since this change, he smiles a happy smile, a demented smile, an uncharacteristically wide smile as though he is forcing it to be this large.

Almost immediately red energy gathers in his hand in a similar way from before. As it does, his entire arm bursts into flames. He raises his hand above his head and brings it down. The air distorts, the beast is sliced in half, and a massive cut made of molten rock appears in the ground.

Mike's eyes return to normal, and the light fades. He falls to his knees and starts panting heavily. He places his hand on the ground and looks at the beast. He thinks to himself, *What the hell did I just do? Where did that power come from? All I remember is that I remembered something from my past, but I'm not sure what it was. And now I'm drained of almost all my mana.*

He looks as though he's waiting for something to happen. The ground starts to shake as the cut and crater fills with dirt and is covered by grass. Mike's face looks stunned. *The spirit's body isn't disappearing, and the ground is fixing itself. We're not in our world are we?* he wonders to himself. *We're in the spirit world.*

Mike stands and looks at his left hand. The mark on his hand has changed from a combination into an arrow. He waves his hand in front of himself, but the arrow always points in the same direction - into the forest. Mike holds his hand out until he faces the direction of the arrow, and he stumbles his way into the forest.



Rocco
Itri '24

Anger

Trees V.S. The Vormanians

Sean Mc Loone '24

A young man, no more than twenty-one, named Joseph quietly climbed over the tall fence separating his home from the forest that lined his backyard. It was one-thirty a.m., but he wasn't tired at all. He typically slept during the day and worked through the night. He could only get out of his house and into the forest undetected at night. And in the year 2099, if he was caught out of his house and in a government-prohibited area, he would be thrown in prison and likely executed.

It had been twenty years since military forces from Vorman had taken over the United States, and it didn't look like the US military would be taking back control any time soon. It happened when Joseph was only one, so he didn't know a life without the Vormanian soldiers roaming the streets twenty-four/seven. His parents sent him away when he turned eighteen, so he could go to a university in the capital, Nikimanaland, which was at one point the only safe location in the country.

Shortly after Joseph arrived in Nikimanaland, riots, led by vigilante groups, broke out across the city. The entire country was shut down and in ruins. Life was barely livable. Food was delivered to your doorstep if you were lucky. The water that came out of your faucet barely passed as drinkable. School and work were shut down. And three years later, as if Vorman hadn't made their point, the country was still shut down.

Joseph was living in a dormitory at the time of the shutdown but was ordered to move to a government-owned living facility. It was a small, two-room, one-story house, which was built next to 500 identical ones that were used to house students during the lockdown. He was to stay in the house all day and listen to classes taught by Vormanian representatives, instead of US-born teachers, on the radio. The government gave up on trying to teach school but still mandated that everyone remain in their living quarters all hours of the day. Joseph, meanwhile, was developing technology, which he believed would help America return to its former glory.

After he made it over the fence, he army crawled along the forest floor, and slowly made his way deeper into the forest. After half an hour of crawling, he stopped at his destination.

He sat up and admired a young tree, no taller than six feet, but with a thick round base. He pulled a small chip resembling a memory card that would go into a camera out of his pocket and removed a hammer from his waistband. He tapped the small chip into the tree and sat quietly. After fifteen minutes of silence, he pulled a small notepad and pen out of his pocket and wrote down:

Attempt 204- No change. Tree remains the same.

Right as he clicked his pen and went to remove the chip, he heard a voice.

Anger

"Hello?" the voice said.

Joseph was confident in his work but still surprised when his chip was successful. He laughed in pure amazement.

"Uh, well, hello," Joseph responded. He inspected the tree and found that one large eye and a mouth had appeared. "I don't really know how to explain this, but I just injected a stream of consciousness into you. I programmed you with a few sayings, reactions, and abilities, and I'll program more, but we have to leave now, do you understand?"

"I understand. I will follow you."

"Okay good." Joseph was overwhelmed with joy but still grounded in reality. He knew that he had to move quickly and quietly back to his lab where he could leave the tree, and then return to his assigned living quarters before anyone would notice he was missing. "Remove your roots from the ground."

The tree obeyed Joseph and rose another three feet or so out of the ground. It remained stationary and waited for further instructions from Joseph. "Uh, follow me."

Joseph started walking in the direction of his lab, which was about a half of a mile west, and the tree followed. The tree was walking as a newborn would, falling over, knocking into other trees. Joseph stopped the tree and explained to him that if he kept knocking into things, both of them would be arrested. The tree nodded, although he most likely did not understand what Joseph meant by anything he said. Joseph asked the tree if he knew what his name was, which he did. Joseph programmed that tree to know and understand that his name was Ron and that he was a tree. After their sojourn, Ron focused on every step he took, and they made it successfully back to Joseph's lab, an abandoned, run-down factory.

They made it inside the brick building and went into a room on the second floor that Joseph had been using as his lab to develop the chips. The room had a metal bookcase (with very few books) along one wall, a very old desk with nothing but a jar of writing utensils and a laptop on it along another wall, and a silent square-shaped generator along the wall opposite of the bookcase. Next to the generator was a box of scrap metal and wires. The fourth wall had a piece of plywood on it nailed over a window.

"It's not much," said Joseph, "but the Vormani forbid anyone except themselves to do science experiments. So it's the best lab I could get. They forbid anyone except themselves to do anything really."

Ron looked around the room with his singular eye opened as wide as it could open. "Death to Vormanians."

"Ah, right. I made sure to program that into your known phrases. Do you know why we hate Vormanians?"

"No."

"That's what I thought. I didn't want to overload you with information right from the get-go. Let me show you something." Joseph opened up his laptop and opened up a file he had saved. "Watch this, Ron."

Anger

A video played that showed trees being cut down by the hundreds. It showed them being shredded into wood chips and cut into planks. Tears began to roll down Ron's face as he watched entire forests burn to the ground. When the video finished he understood why he hated the Vormanians. "We hate the Vormanians because they hate us," Ron said, matter of factly.

"That's exactly right, Ron. They hate me, and they hate you. You saw what they did. They cut down, chipped, and burned so many of your brothers and sisters."

"ARRRRRAHHH!" Ron took one of his branches and slammed it against the wall with a force strong enough to shake the entire building. "I hate Vormanians."

"Calm down, Ron. Calm down." Ron took some deep breaths and lay on the ground. He took up the length of the entire room.

"I need your help. I need you to help me make more chips, like the one that is in you right now. We can put them in more trees and take over the Vormanians.

"I will help. Vormanians are bad."

"Thank you, Ron. That's absolutely right. I need to get back to my house now, or they will realize I'm missing. Don't follow me. There is water downstairs, and if you need to, you can go outside to get some sun, but do not go through my stuff, and do not draw any attention to yourself. Okay, Ron?"

"Okay. I will do what you said."

"Thank you, Ron."

Joseph went downstairs to the ground floor, which was one open space. He went to the middle of the room and removed a floor tile and entered an underground tunnel. He traveled underground until he was underneath his home. He removed a tile that was underneath his bed, and he climbed out of the tunnel and into his bed. Despite his excitement over his successful experiment, he eventually fell asleep.

A couple of hours later a Vormanian guard woke up Joseph when he came to check the attendance of the houses. After the guard left, Joseph went back to sleep and woke up at eleven p.m. He went through his underground tunnel to his lab, where he found Ron laying down, paging through a book that he couldn't read.

"Hello, Joseph."

"Hi Ron, how have you been?"

"I've been good. I drew no attention, I didn't go through your stuff, and I drank water downstairs. Just like you told me too."

"Awesome. Tonight I'm going to add more phrases and knowledge into your chip. I need to make your mind stronger so that you can be the leader of the trees. And if we have time, I'll start working on a second chip. Do you understand?"

"Yes. I understand."

"You are going to lose consciousness for a little bit, but you'll be back before the end of the night."

Anger

"Okay, Joseph."

Joseph walked over to Ron and pulled the chip out of his bark and Ron fell limp onto the ground. Joseph cringed at the noise, hoping it drew no attention to the abandoned building. After all, getting caught would mean life in jail, if he was lucky. He plugged the chip into his computer and started adding files to it. He attached files that had a more in-depth history of the relationship between trees and the Vormanians, files that taught him how to read and write, and most importantly, files that showed him that Joseph was his greatest ally and cared for him the most.

He tapped the chip back into Ron and asked him to read a simple sentence, which Ron did with ease. Joseph's plan was coming together, and he was overwhelmed with happiness.

The pair worked together into the early hours of the morning until it was time for Joseph to return to his home. The next few weeks followed the same pattern; Joseph left his home late at night, created more and more chips with Ron, and returned early in the morning to his home.

Ron grew stronger through the weeks of working together and began to realize that it wasn't only the Vormanians who hated him, but all humans.

One night when the two were working together, Joseph dropped what he was writing with and it rolled under his desk, into a place he couldn't reach. He didn't think about it too much and just grabbed another writing utensil. Ron kept his eye on it, however, and grabbed it when Joseph left for the night.

He examined it, noticing how the tip of it resembled his bark. He remembered though that Joseph cared about him more than anyone else, and that it was just the Vormanians who hated trees. He dismissed his thoughts as foolish and went back to reading a book.

He kept the object though and stored it inside a knot on his side. He spent days staring at the object before he finally scratched off the yellow paint to find that the entire thing was made of what he was! He tried to tell himself that it was just a misunderstanding and that the object only resembled what he looked like. He couldn't shake the terrible feeling that Joseph was one of the people who hated him, only using him to gain power. As they were getting closer to finishing the chips, Ron grew more and more uncertain. One night he broke one of Joseph's only rules and went onto his laptop. It had a password on it, but Joseph told him it in case he ever got caught and needed someone to carry on the project. He entered the password and opened up a browser. He searched what was engraved on the side of the object: "Dixon Ticonderoga."

Hundreds of images of identical objects flooded the screen, and after a little bit of research he found out that his suspicions were correct! They were made of trees! Ron was enraged to find out that the entire time Joseph had been lying to him. He hated trees just as much as the Vormanians. Ron went through his drawers and found at least twenty more pencils!

The more he thought about it, the more he noticed that wood was everywhere. The desk was made of wood. The plywood covering the window was made of wood. The stairs leading up to the lab were made of wood. Joseph was no better than the people who knocked down

Anger

the trees in the first place, as far as Ron was concerned.

But it was okay because he knew he could trick the silly human. Once they finished the chips and hammered them into the trees, he would tell them of how all humans were bad. The trees could take over the Vormanians and rule the country without the help of any humans! After all, all humans hated trees just as much as the Vormanians and deserved the same treatment.

He pretended as if nothing had happened when Joseph came back the next day. He silently developed his plan and helped make the chips. When Joseph left for the night, Ron would add one more file to the chips, informing the trees that all humans were bad.

A few weeks passed, and after many laborious hours of trying to create a sufficient number of chips, they were finally ready to go to the forest Ron had come from to recruit more trees. The plan Joseph put together went as follows: Go into the forest at four a.m., tap the chips into the trees, leave the forest for the capital at five a.m., and take over the building by six. Joseph figured it would be pretty easy with the number of trees he would have backing him. Little did he know, his plan would go nothing like he thought it would.

The two went into the forest as planned at four. They got to work, hammering the chips into the trees. Once all the chips were in, Joseph took out a small remote and turned to Ron. "Are you ready? After I press this button, there's no turning back. We're all in."

"All in. Sounds good."

Joseph pressed the button, and the trees around them started to slowly come alive. The trees all formed large singular eyes and mouths. It was programmed into them to not speak until spoken to, so all of the trees waited patiently until Joseph began to speak.

"Attention all, I am a human. I—" he began to say before an old maple tree interrupted him.

"You're bad! I know what you are!" he shouted.

Joseph looked up at Ron, wearing a confused expression. Ron avoided eye contact and looked out over the sea of angry trees.

"I think you have confused me with a specific type of human. I am not a Vormanian," he said to the trees. He then turned to Ron. "Ron, this never happened with you. What's going on?"

Ron didn't answer Joseph, but bent down and wrapped his longest branches tightly around Joseph and picked him up. All of the trees cheered.

"Ron, Ron! What are you doing?!"

"Attention, brothers and sisters. Today is the day we take over all of the humans, Vormanians included!"

All of the trees roared with excitement. "As you know. All humans are bad," Ron began. "Even if they try to tell you otherwise."

"Ron, stop! You don't know what you're doing!"

Ron let Joseph finish what he was saying before he squeezed him even tighter, forcing the air out of his lungs.

"This silly, silly human. He thinks I don't know what I'm talking about when it is truly he that

Anger

does not know!" Joseph tried to speak, but Ron only squeezed him tighter. "He tapped a chip into me a month ago and tried to tell me that he was good, that he cared about me. But he is a liar! He told me the Vormanians hate trees. While this is true, he failed to mention that he too also hates trees! They all do! Every human! And I have proof right here." He revealed a pencil that he had been hiding between two pieces of his bark. His audience was confused, so he began to explain. "This right here is a pencil. It is made of trees, covered in paint, and has a graphite core. Humans use it to make marks on paper to record various pieces of data. It's complicated, I know. We are all new minds. I tried to program your chips to include this information, but I have not mastered the art of using technology yet."

The crowd of trees began to boo and chant anti-human catchphrases. After indulging for a little while, Ron stopped them and continued on with sharing his plan. "Humans use plenty of things that are made out of wood. Many of the things that they make out of us you are not familiar with, but that is because you do not have as much knowledge as me. Eventually, you will, and many of you will become smarter than me. I know it. But for now, I will be your leader. All opposed say 'nay.'"

There were no opposers so Ron continued. "First thing's first. Everyone remove your roots from the ground."

All the trees stepped out of the ground and waited for further instruction.

"Now advance closer to me so that I can speak quieter. If the Vormanians hear us, we will be ambushed and die for sure since we don't have a plan yet."

The trees clumsily walked closer to Ron and then stopped. "Okay," Ron said in a quieter voice now that they were all close together. "I'm going to say the entire plan, and then you can ask questions at the end." The trees shook their leaves to indicate their understanding. "We are currently two miles away from the Capitol building. A.K.A., the building where the Vormanian leader, Niki Milikin, lives and works with other government officials. We are going to walk north from here for two miles. We will end up at the back of the Capitol building. Once we reach the building, we can climb onto the upper-level balcony by using each other as ladders. At least two of us will stay under the balcony to watch out for intruders. Once everyone that is going onto the balcony gets on, we will ram through the wall, which will put us into Milikin's office. From there, we begin our takeover. We will hold Niki and the other Vormanians present as hostages, and we will block off all entrances to the building. We will then go into their broadcasting room and alert the country by radio and television that trees now run Vorman. We will tell the humans to give up all of their wood belongings or face the wrath of the trees. Further down the line, we can make more chips to bring more of our brothers and sisters alive. This is the plan. Things may go wrong. Things may get violent. Just try to stick to the plan. Understood?"

All of the trees mumbled some affirmative phrase except for the old maple who spoke up again. "Sir, we don't know what all that means, but we'll do our best."

"Understood. It's go time. Let's move."

Anger

The trees began to move north to the Capitol building. A little bit into their walk, Ron threw Joseph, realizing he no longer had any use for him. No one talked for the entire walk until they got within a hundred yards of the Capitol building. They managed to avoid any Vormanian guards and civilians on their walk by going through the forest. Once they got to the back of the Capitol building, Ron reiterated the plan, with a few added details, and then they moved to the balcony.

Two of the taller trees stationed themselves at the bottom of the balcony and let the other trees climb up them and onto the balcony. Miraculously, no one noticed them until all the trees, except the two keeping watch, were on the balcony. Just as Ron was about to bust through the wall with the rest of the trees, a soldier spotted them outside of the window and started yelling to his associates.

"Through the wall, trees!" Ron yelled to his crew. The trees effortlessly broke down the cinderblock wall but were met with showers of bullets from the soldiers' rifles. A few trees fell dead when their chips were hit, but the trees overpowered the men. The falling trees only made the situation more chaotic and confusing for the Vormanians. With almost thirty soldiers injured, and only a few trees down, the Vormanians ceased fire and fled out of the office.

All of the trees went to their assigned posts and blocked off the exits and, as expected, the Vormanians tried to evacuate Milikin. As they made their way to the west wing exit with Milikin heavily guarded, the trees stopped him and told him to return to his office, where Ron was waiting with two other very intimidating trees.

Niki entered his office, the room the trees entered through, with eight guards ready to defend him. Ron asked them to leave, and they obeyed him without any protest since they could see the damage that the trees had done to the office and knew what the trees were capable of doing to the humans.

"Niki," Ron started, "we trees have a problem with how you have been treating us."

"I'm sorry?" Niki said with a gulp. He looked more scared than confused, although he was obviously both.

"Well, I've seen what you've done to us: chopping down, chipping up, and burning us. It doesn't really sit well with me."

"I'm sorry, but how can you talk?"

One of the trees standing next to Ron slapped Niki and he went flying into a wall. "WE WILL ASK THE QUESTIONS!" Ron yelled.

Niki slowly got up and nodded. "Now," Ron continued, "you are going to give in to all of my commands, or else. I think you understand."

Niki began trembling and stuttered as he spoke. "I, I, I will d- d- do anything you w- want. I'll t-take you to the v-v-vault. Anything."

One of the trees standing next to Ron hit Niki again and said, "We don't want your stinkin' money."

But Ron corrected him and jumped in. "Actually, take us to the vault. Right now. And round

Anger

up all of your soldiers.”

Niki left the office, followed very closely by Ron, and used the intercom system to tell all of his men to meet him at the vault, and upon Ron’s request told the trees to stay where they were. They unlocked the vault, which was loaded with money from wall to wall. Ron, with the two other trees, peered inside. The two trees went in to start getting money, but Ron stopped them and walked a couple of feet away from all of the Vormanians to have a word with them about his new plan.

They walked back to the vault and with one motion swept all of the men into the vault and slammed the door without locking it, so the trees could still open and shut the door with ease.

They opened the door a crack and called for Niki and whoever typically controlled the broadcasting. The two came to the door and they were let out. Ron went with them to the broadcasting room while the other two trees stood guard against the door.

Ron wrapped his branches around Niki, just like he did to Joseph, and stood in front of the camera, waiting for the producer to put him on air. Once the producer finished his countdown and told Ron he was live, he delivered his diatribe:

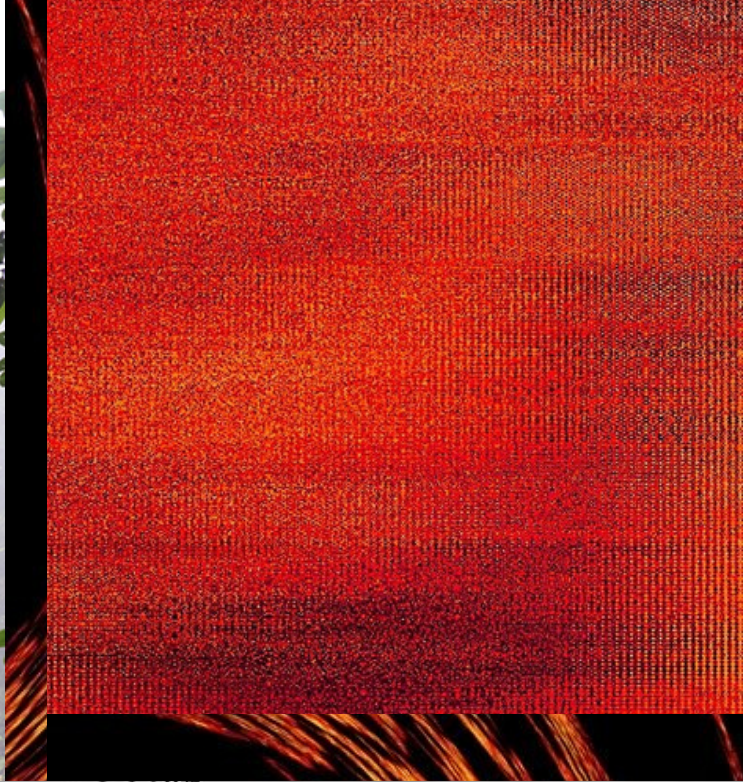
“Attention humans. All of you watching on TV can see what I am, but I will explain for those listening on the radio. I am a tree. A Norway Maple to be exact. I was brought to life by a tree-hating human. He planted a chip into me which gave me a stream of consciousness, a mouth, and an eye. He tried to trick me into thinking that he liked trees, but now I know that there is no such thing as a human that truly likes and respects trees. Even those who pretend they do live in a wood house or use pencils. You cut us down, chip us up, and burn us. We trees see this as a problem, but a problem that can be solved. Our solution started with taking over the Vormanian government. We now control your country. As you can see, I have your beloved leader in my branches. Starting now, you are under the control of the trees! There will be no more cutting down of trees. They will be left where they were planted until they die. And when they die, they will be left where they died to decompose. Since all humans have disrespected us for all of eternity, you must prove to us that you have changed your ways. If you want to live a life worth living, you will show us your loyalty. You will do this by bringing all of your wood belongings to the Capitol building. We will confiscate them and give them the proper burial they were deprived of when you killed that tree for whatever malicious reason. If you do not bring us all of your wood, you will suffer the wrath of the trees. Thank you, that is all.”

The producer told Ron that he was off the air and they left the broadcast room.

“I can get all of my wood for you now,” Niki said to Ron. But Ron didn’t respond.

He brought both the men back to the vault and put them inside. This time, however, he locked the door, and unfortunately for Niki and the rest of the Vormanians inside, Ron didn’t know the password.

He went to his office and looked out over the city. A smile grew on his face as he watched the people leave their homes pushing wheelbarrows full of wood in his direction.



Francisco Ortiz '23





Shame

Neil Lam '23

Shame

Addison Babbage vs Ruffed Grouse High School 2019 - Negligence suit

Mock Trial Case Summarized by Nicholas Deihl '22

The case was “Addison Babbage Vs. Roughed Grouse High School.” Plaintiff was a 5-star chess recruit who fell victim to online cyber-bullying from fellow students; Plaintiff claimed that the wealthy suburban school was negligent in not protecting him adequately and that there were members of the administration actively egging on and participating in this anonymous online cyber-bullying.

The defendant-Rough Grouse High School-put forward a different version of events. They claim that they didn’t know that the cyber-bullying was occurring, that resources existed for students who were being harassed online, and – to the extent that there was any cyber-bullying within their walls – that it was this plaintiff who engaged in it.

The events in question culminated in the defendant suffering a mental breakdown, and he subsequently brought suit for negligence seeking monetary damages.

Defense Opening

Nicholas Deihl '22

A normal high school student spends about six hours at school every day. That’s 30 hours a week. In that time the school has the ability to set the policies and procedures that protect its students. Within its walls, a school has the ability to enforce these policies and to punish those who break them. But when that same student leaves the four walls of the school, schools don’t have that authority. When a student is at home, on their private computer, schools can’t control the internet. It’s reasonable to hold a school accountable for what happens inside of its walls, but to hold a school accountable for the actions of anonymous, untraceable, online cyber bullies is not, and that’s what this case is about.

The plaintiff has the burden to prove four separate legal elements, each by a preponderance of the evidence. They have to prove that Ruffed Grouse High School had a duty to prevent the plaintiff from being cyberbullied; they have to prove that the school breached that duty by acting unreasonably; they have to prove that the plaintiff suffered some injury; and they have to prove that some unreasonable acts by the school are what caused that injury. But you’ll see they can’t meet that burden when you think about the evidence in three main categories: the problem, the response, and the alternatives.

Shame

First, the problem. As Mr./Ms. (opener) just told you, cyberbullying is a problem. No one disputes that. But what Mr./Ms. (opener) wants to gloss over is that cyberbullying didn't actually happen at Ruffed Grouse High School – not in the cafeteria, not the hallways, not during after-school activities because inside their walls Rough Grouse made it impossible. Principal Eckert banned cell phones. No Twitter, no Instagram, no Facebook from the time those students walked into school until the time they left. And it was only after those students went home that the plaintiff was bullied online on Facebook – on devices that were miles away from Rough Grouse High School and by anonymous people hiding behind fake social media identities. What's worse, the school had no way to know who these cowards were. You'll hear evidence that even though Ruffed Grouse reached out to Facebook, the social media company didn't respond. And a school can't subpoena records or take down accounts bullying their students. This was a problem that was beyond the school's walls. Still, Ruffed Grouse was reasonable.

Which brings me to the second point, the response. The plaintiff was bullied because his/her parents purchased a plot of land in town known as "the eye." When students started wearing "Save the Eye" shirts into the school building, the school banned them. When the school learned about the bullying, an on-site school psychologist met with the plaintiff. That trained expert with a PhD from Carnegie Mellon will tell you that even though the plaintiff didn't report anything about cyberbullying at the time, the counselor scheduled a follow-up appointment, but unfortunately, the plaintiff declined to attend it. Each time the school received information, the school had a reasonable response. And here's where I have to correct something that Mr./Ms. just told you. S/he said that Mr. Eckert, the principal, was bullying Addison on a Facebook account called Partridge Party. That's just not true. Principal Eckert's going to take the stand today, and he's going to tell you that, yes, he did use this account to monitor online activity at Roughed Grouse. But the evidence you'll hear today will show that he stopped using this account in October of 2017, months before these comments were even posted.

Finally, I want to talk to you about that last point, the alternatives. I didn't hear opposing counsel mention what the plaintiff's lawyers think Ruffed Grouse should have done. I ask you, what could they have done? When the plaintiff unfortunately declined to attend counseling? When Facebook ignored Rough Grouse? The plaintiff needs to answer those questions with evidence. And you need to hold them to that burden. At the end of the trial I know you'll find the school had a reasonable response and that you'll find Ruffed Grouse High School not liable.

Shame

Plaintiff Closing

Ryan Frank '22

It's over for Addison. His chance at a normal life: gone. His dream of going to college: finished. After months of unrelenting cyberbullying caused a psychotic break, even his name was taken from him. He's changing it. The teenager you saw today is a shell of the promising young man he was. Make no mistake, the reason he sits in this courtroom despondent and dejected is the defendant's negligence.

And that's what we proved to you today: the defendant acted negligently. We had to prove that the school should have known it had to act but didn't. And we had to prove that "by a preponderance of the evidence," meaning that it is more likely than not the school behaved negligently. We did this by showing you evidence of three things: the culture, the culprit, the casualty.

The culprit. Why did this principal refuse to act on repeated reports of Addison being cyberbullied? Because the principal was the culprit – a wolf in sheep's clothing. That's the evidence the defendant wants to run and hide from most – because it's truly unimaginable. (pickup Ex. 10) "You're literally the biggest loser ever. You have no friends." The principal made those posts and lied to you about it today. We know that because he admitted it was his account. He admitted that nobody else ever used it. And he admitted that password was kept in his desk at his house, from where he would cyberbully Addison. (When I asked Ruffed Grouse's principal if he wanted to apologize to Addison for that, how did he respond? *If yes:* He apologized. He knew what he had done to this teenager; the damage he had caused. No apology will ever give back Addison that life taken from him. But what you can give him now is justice. I can't. The judge can't. Only you can. *If no:* He said no. Despite the vile posts he made, the harassment and humiliation he put this teenager through; despite forcing Addison to flee town and change his name. That's no surprise seeing he's the one that caused it. He wouldn't acknowledge Addison as the victim because he's the culprit.)

The casualty. Addison's chance at a normal life – the defendant took that from him. Addison knew this account belonged to the principal. Imagine how helpless 16-year-old Addison must have felt sitting at his computer reading that. And now the defendant's lawyers are really suggesting that: 1) this 16-year-old was supposed to make more complaints or go to more sessions with people who worked for that principal? No, Addison heard the message loud and clear from his principal: "The pain will never stop until you leave Wisawe." Well, Addison's gone for good now. 2) Addison's parents didn't do enough to help. If the defendant wants to assert that Addison or his parents are responsible, they assume the burden to prove it to you. With evidence that the parents should have known – despite this school never once picking up the phone and telling them.

Shame

The psychotic break Addison experienced in May 2018 was inevitable after months of unending cyberbullying. And it was devastating. The people Addison expected to help him tormented him. Instead of protecting him, they preyed on him. And there was no escape. He broke. Because they failed him. Find the defendant liable.



Cole Angstadt '22



Hopefulness

Francisco Ortiz '23

Hopefulness

Missing a Train

Sean Mc Loone '24

Often I see people running fast
Running for trains, or buses, or planes
I laugh as they run past
The wise who know have brains
That plane, train, or bus won't be the last



Art by Isaac Santiago '22 inspired by Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants."

A close-up photograph of a white dove perched on a stone wall. The dove is facing right, with its head slightly turned. Its feathers are white, and its beak is a light pinkish-red. The background is blurred, showing other birds and a dark, possibly overcast sky. A semi-transparent white horizontal band is overlaid across the middle of the image, containing the word "Gratitude" in a black, elegant script font.

Gratitude

Francisco Ortiz '23

Gratitude

Rediscovering Faith

Matthew Crump '22

As a child, I was raised in a Catholic household, taking part in church every Sunday, praying before meals, and attending a Catholic high school and middle school. I never questioned my faith as a child and never doubted that there was a God. That all changed in the blink of an eye when tragedy struck.

Growing up, my mother taught me everything she knew about the Bible; she would preach to me every day the importance of having a good relationship with God. I never fully understood the concept as a young boy - a "magic man" that lives in the clouds that created everything? It wasn't until I was 12 years old that I began to understand just who God really was. I began to look forward to going to church every week, and I even became an altar server. I enjoyed being in a Catholic middle school so much that I decided to attend an all-boys Catholic high school. During my sophomore year the entire world changed. The Pandemic changed not only my life but also everyone's around the world. During the quarantine period my grandmother became severely ill. I prayed night and day for her recovery, but she only became worse. She was placed in a nursing home, attempting to make her comfortable in her final days. Seconds began to feel like days and days began to feel like years. Eventually after a lot of persuasion, the nursing home allowed my family and me to make an "end-of-life" visit. When I walked into my grandmother's room, a wave of sadness swallowed me like a black hole. "This is not my grandmother," I thought to myself. She looked so sick, you could tell her condition the second you laid your eyes on her. I sat down and held her hand. She was unable to speak, but I wanted to believe that she could hear me. I selfishly asked her to hold on for me; I had not yet begun to accept that she was truly in her final days. On April 6th, 2020 at 3:26 AM, my father received a call from the nursing home that my grandmother had passed away. My mother woke me up and informed me that my grandmother had passed. All I could do was cry in her arms. I felt so lost and did not know what to do. I began to question my faith. I could not fathom how God could hear my prayers and let her die. I stopped praying and took down my cross above my doorway. I told myself that nothing would allow me to regain my faith, not even a miracle. Two months later I decided to take a walk around my neighborhood, when I stumbled across my middle school's church. I walked onto the church steps and sat down and began to cry. This was the first time in months where I felt safe. I began to understand that my grandmother was out of pain - that God had heard my prayers and had taken her into his arms. I sat on those steps praying for one hour and told God that I would repair our broken relationship. I reached out to my school's counselor and deacon and asked them for their help. With their guidance I was able to regain my relationship with God.

This may not be the last time I question my faith, but with the help of my community and my loved ones, I will be able to maintain my faith in God.

Gratitude

Lessons Learned

Nicholas Poessl '22

Since early adolescence, I've always seen and developed a curiosity about money. The full concept of money and its power, though, hadn't crossed my mind fully yet. However, the idea of working for my own money was always a goal of mine in my youth. Due to my age, though, places would say that I'm too young or many places would just not be hiring due to other circumstances. Time and again, I filled out many applications to places like Salad Works, Dunkin' Donuts, and my local bakery.

Another place I applied to often was my local CVS, and this time I was called to schedule an interview. Now I'm not going to lie: I was extremely nervous about it. The interview was about 20 minutes long, and they informed me I'd be in consideration for the job. About a week goes by and I get a call that I have received the job offer. I was immediately met with an abundance of excitement for what was to come. I was hired a few weeks before the big holiday rush for Christmas, and on my first day I was learning everything. From the register to the photo center and money grams, I was learning everything there was to learn about CVS. As time went on, I only continued to learn, whether it was the job itself or meaningful lessons I'll take with me for the rest of my life. One of these lessons was that the people I work with and the customers I serve make the job what it is to me. My experiences with customers and my fellow employees have taught me so much during my time at CVS. Working with all different age groups has shown me that money has a much higher value than I previously thought. For each and every one of us money has a different meaning. Another thing I learned about was the sacrifices you sometimes have to make for money. These sacrifices could be as simple as working overtime or picking up extra shifts or as serious as going back to school for more job opportunities and career growth.

CVS not only helped me a lot with seeing different views on materialistic things like money and working for a check. Another thing that really affected me at CVS was the experiences in customer service itself. Each day a plurality of customers would ask me to help them, whether it was to find an item or even just to ask for a price. Mostly though, customers would ask me to help them with their coupons and rewards, and to explain to them how to save the most with the coupons they have. I've even formed relationships with regular shopping customers, and it is always a great time seeing them shop. With always helping customers and people each day, I thought to myself how much that means to me. That every day I can go into work and actually affect someone just by ringing up their purchases or helping them save a few bucks. It really meant a lot to me knowing that even if I didn't have a smile on my face that day, I could still help to put smiles on the faces of other people.

Lastly, the most important moment to me at CVS is what happened on a seemingly normal spring day. That is until an elderly man with a cane came in and started yelling, "I need help, I

Gratitude

need help.” I turned and noticed he was blind. He then asked me if I would help him shop. I said, “Of course,” and began to help him shop for everything he needed for the week. The whole time as we shopped we conversed; we talked about movies, sports, and many other things like our favorite foods. Some of the items I helped him get were his favorite cookies, Nilla wafers, which he’d have with his coffee every morning. An additional thing I helped him purchase was little hoop earrings for his 3-year-old granddaughter. As I finished the transaction, I helped him pay with his card and made sure he was happy with his purchases. I knew our time was over, and I could say definitely I felt like he affected me in some way. He made me think about how some people have it worse than others but how some people carry themselves so positively just with a certain mindset – in the end enjoying the little things and appreciating the gift of life in general.

In the long run CVS has taught me so much, whether it was about myself and how I feel about responsibility and making money for myself or about other things like the importance of time, money, and most memorably having an effect on others. By learning and experiencing all these lessons that I can apply to the rest of my life, I will forever be grateful for my job at CVS.



Elijah Karn '23

The artwork is a complex abstract composition. It features a textured, golden-yellow background. Overlaid on this are several large, irregular shapes in a vibrant blue and a dark, charcoal grey. These shapes appear to be layered, with some parts of the blue and grey shapes visible beneath others, creating a sense of depth. The overall effect is one of raw, expressive energy, with the colors and textures suggesting a tactile quality. The word 'Regret' is centered in a white, elegant script font, contrasting with the bold, abstract forms.

Regret

Nydir Hinton 24'

Regret

The Philly 5

Sean Mc Loone '24

Brianna

I woke up at 4:45 AM on Friday, November 26th, feeling the same way I did every day: depressed. Ever since my sister, Sydney, was diagnosed with cancer, I had a feeling of complete defeat. I was flying to see her that day, which I was excited about, but I couldn't shake the idea that it was possibly the last time I'd see her before she passed. Everything about the situation was terrible. A) my sister was dying, and B) the plane tickets I bought weren't exactly cheap. And as a young American one year out of college, I was, well, broke.

I had planned to fly down to Florida to see her at Christmas time, but once she was placed in hospice in early November, I knew it would be in my best interest to see her sooner rather than later.

Despite feeling as though a 200-ton weight was pushing me into my bed, I sat up and stretched. I had a strange feeling that Friday the 26th would be a crazy day. I had no idea how right I was.

Although my train was at 5:31, I wanted to get up early so I could take my morning slow. I ran through my typical morning routine: prayers, hygiene, yoga, cook, eat, leave. I had to get on an earlier train than I usually took so I could make it down to the airport to catch my flight to Florida. I had never taken the train to the airport before, but I wasn't worried about it. After working in the city for the past couple of years, I knew the Philadelphia transit system better than people who'd lived in Philly their entire lives. I'd seen my fair share of weirdos and crackheads, but nothing had ever gone seriously wrong before on a train that I was on.

I triple-checked to make sure that I packed everything, and when I was completely sure that my shampoo contained no more than 3.4 ounces, I left for the train station. Once I felt the frigid air hit me, I seriously considered calling an Uber to drive me three blocks to the train station. However, I could practically hear my dad lecturing me on how it was a poor use of hard-earned money, so I begrudgingly walked through the cold fall morning to the train station.

I neglected to sit down on the bench that was next to the ticket office because I knew that it would only chill me more. A group of two young men who didn't share the same thought process as I sat down and squealed about how the bench was cold. I bounced up and down trying to warm myself, but it was no use.

I clicked on my phone to check the time. 5:30. It seemed that all the warmth that left my body during my bitter walk was breathed back into me when I saw the phone background which featured Sydney's sweet smile. Tears began to well up in my eyes. In the photo, her chocolate brown hair was being braided into cornrows by me, and we both wore smiles that stretched from ear to ear. That hair had fallen out during her treatments, and I hadn't seen her smile that way

Regret

during any of our countless Facetimes over the months prior.

Thankfully, the train rolled up exactly on time. I was the first in the line of five people waiting for the door of the first train car to be opened. I was very specific about where I chose to sit. I liked to sit as close to the conductor as possible, while still being in a window seat. I sat at my seat and soaked up the warmth of the train for a moment. I threw in some earbuds and rested my head on the cold window, hoping that I would wake up when the train arrived at terminal F, which was the last stop on the train ride.

Arron

I woke up at 5:20, which left me a grand total of eleven minutes to get dressed, eat breakfast, and get to the train station. I had hit snooze on my alarm clock five times after it went off for the first time at 4:30, which left me in the situation I was in. It wasn't the first time that it had happened though, so I knew I'd be able to get to the train station on time.

I shot out of bed and looked at my bathroom. I wanted to go in so bad and take a nice long warm shower and brush my teeth. I slapped myself, partly to wake myself up, and partly to snap myself out of my fantasizing. As a second-year medical student at Temple University, I knew the importance of brushing my teeth. However, on mornings when I hit snooze as many times as I did, I sacrificed that privilege and pleasure.

I stayed up until two in the morning looking over copious notes(which were taken in sloppy cursive), textbook pages, complicated anatomy charts, and transcribed lectures. Most medical schools got rid of the typical grading system and replaced it with a pass/fail system. If you pass the test, even if it's by a hair, you're golden. If you fail, then you have to have meetings with your dean and teachers about "getting back on track." And if you fail enough, you get kicked out. I had failed three tests at that point of the year. My dean told me about how I was on "thin ice," and how one more failure that semester would get me kicked out.

A part of me wanted to get kicked out. I only went into medicine because my parents made me. My parents immigrated from Korea to America when they were in their twenties so they could give their future child(me) a better life. They were paying for my education in full, so I felt a certain obligation to finish med school.

I snapped out of my trance and crawled along my slightly damp, carpeted floor, searching for clean scrubs. It was my first ever apartment, and in the three months I had been living there, I hadn't dedicated any time to cleaning it. After finding four different sets of body odor scented scrubs, I found a clean set. I threw the scrubs on and bolted across the apartment to my kitchen, where I had a half-full pot of coffee leftover from the day before waiting for me. Again, I had the urge to take my morning slow and relax. I wanted to sit with a nice warm cup of coffee and truly absorb the early morning. And again, I had to force myself to keep on moving, reminding myself that I had an exam to take and a train to catch in seven minutes. I filled up my travel cup and threw together the belongings that I would need for the day.

Regret

I was making perfect time when I left my apartment, but I still decided to jog to the train station since I couldn't afford to miss it. It was imperative that I got to school on time since I had to take my exam. I made it to the train station with just under a minute to spare. I spotted my friend Maurice waiting by the only bench at the train station, which was right next to the ticket office.

Maurice and I arranged to take the same train every day. We were both in med school and had been friends for the past eighteen years. Maurice had always been more intelligent than me when it came to school. For as long as I knew him, he received top marks. His time at medical school was no different.

I walked up next to him, and he pulled out his earbuds.

"Yo, what's up Arron!"

"The sky."

Maurice rolled his eyes and we did our patented secret handshake. I sat down on the metal bench and Maurice followed.

We both jumped right back off the bench. "Holy hell is that cold!" Maurice yelled.

The train arrived promptly at 5:31, and we joined the line of people waiting to board the first car of the train. A kind looking lady in front, followed by me, and then Maurice.

We picked a seat near the back of the car, separate from everyone else, so we could study in peace.

Maurice

I woke up at 4 AM feeling my best. I got a full eight and a half hours of sleep the night prior. I shot out of my bed, clear-minded and excited for the day ahead. I was more than prepared to take my exam that was coming later in the day. School has always been my thing. I got all of the academic excellence awards possible in grammar school, and in high school I finished as the valedictorian of my class. After high school I attended Temple on a full academic scholarship. I went on to the Temple medicine branch after I got my bachelor's degrees (I was a triple major). None of it would have been possible if I had neglected to start my mornings off right.

I washed my face with cold water, as I did every morning, and then brushed my teeth. I took a shower at the speed of light, and then did my daily meditation. I reflected on my habits and pondered how I could better myself. It is my opinion that no humans ever max out their potential. Lots of people, like Einstein or Van Gogh, come very close, but never actually hit the roof. I want to get to the roof. Some people, especially my high school classmates, said that my desire to be number one in everything was unhealthy. I agreed with them to a certain extent. Striving to be first just to get a title, like valedictorian, is unhealthy. But my motives were different. I simply want to be better than I was yesterday.

I needed to get to school on time so I could take my exam and pass with flying colors. I was going to do everything in my power to get to school on time. And if that involved breaking

Regret

few rules, so be it. I wasn't going to let the me from yesterday win.

I drank a smoothie and ate a plate of scrambled eggs for breakfast. My best days always start with a good breakfast. While I was enjoying my delicious and nutritious breakfast, I read a self improvement book, titled *The Power of Positive Thinking*.

I had more than enough time to walk to the train station to catch my 5:30 train. I decided I would take advantage of the time by listening to a podcast about economics. I was already planning out how I would make my money in retirement. I got to the station about seven minutes early, just to be safe. At about 5:30, with one minute until my train was due to arrive, my good friend Arron, who I went to grade school, high school, college and now med school with, meandered into the waiting area. That's so like him, I thought to myself, to show up last minute. Even though he was and still is my best friend, he's insanely unorganized, especially when it comes to time management. We shook hands and sat down on the bench next to the ticket office, which we quickly regretted when we realized how cold the bench was.

I got into the line to get into the first car, behind Arron, who was behind a woman I'd never seen on the 5:31 train. We took a seat towards the back of the car and opened up our textbooks to cram some last-minute facts into our brains, although I really didn't need to.

Will

I got out of bed at 4:40 on Friday, November 26th, although I had actually never fallen asleep. I tried for hours, but my brain wouldn't shut off. It was packed full of thoughts about my divorce and child custody trial that was coming up in court.

The reasons for my divorce are complicated and plentiful. My ex-wife, backed by her rich father and multitudes of lawyers, was sure to put up a good case against me in court as to why she should get full custody of our children. One of these reasons was that I didn't have a job. But by the end of the day, I was hoping that would be different.

I wasn't a bum or anything. In fact, I still had our house. The only reason that I didn't have a job as the trial was coming up was because my entire company liquidated just a week prior, without so much as a warning to their employees. I had an interview set up with an amazing company in West Philadelphia. My salary would double, and I would be doing what I loved: writing. I was slated to interview for a job with a magazine company for a position that would make me the head of the editing team. I needed to catch the 5:31 train, for myself, and my kids. If I was late to the interview, the job was as good as gone. If I had no job, my wife would surely win custody.

I dragged myself out of bed and hopped in the shower. I turned the water to the coldest setting in hopes of washing away my grogginess, but I stayed at the same level of tiredness. It was only after I drank a very large cup of joe that I gained a little bit of energy. I inhaled my breakfast and filled up another cup of coffee before leaving my house for the train station.

I shivered in the cold as I waited for my train to arrive. I leaned against the stone wall that supported the coffee shop that was attached to the ticket office. I shut my eyes, and I swear, I

Regret

fell asleep standing up straight, but I was awoken by the train pulling in at precisely 5:31.

I walked up to the queue of people forming outside of the first train car. There was a woman with a suitcase leading the line, followed by two chatting young men. I was going to let the man approaching the line at the same time as I go first, but he held his hands out in front of him, signaling that I should go first.

I got into the train car and found a window seat in the middle section of the car. I figured the window would make a good headrest for me while I tried to catch a few z's.

Charlie

I woke up on Friday, November 26th, feeling disappointed. I had to leave America, the place that gave me so much, and go back to Canada. My student visa expired a month prior, but I was granted a grace period of one month before the authorities would force me out.

When it comes down to it, hundreds of thousands of people want to come to America, all for different reasons. Some come to escape persecution. Some come to make more money. Some come to travel. My impetus for coming to America was my desire to get a high-quality education. I came to America to get my master's degree in mechanical engineering, after getting my bachelor's degree in Canada. I knew wherever life took me, having a degree from an American university would look great on my resumé.

Whatever someone's reason may be, there's only so much room in one country. I knew that honoring the expiration of my visa would only help someone else out. I wasn't bitter towards whoever was getting the opportunity to come to America to replace me, but I was simply disappointed that it wasn't me that would be in America.

I knew that the longer I stayed in bed, the higher my chances were of missing my 5:31 train that was coming in exactly one hour. If I missed my train, I would miss my plane. If I missed my plane, well, it wouldn't be pretty. I would be removed from the country on the terms of ICE (AKA The U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement team).

Now if I did happen to miss my plane, due to something that I couldn't control, I'm sure the powers that be would understand and grant me another few days to leave the country. But I could barely afford the plane ticket I had, and I most definitely did not want to buy another one. I'm not proud of what I did on November 26th. I did what had to be done. I did what I did to ensure my safety. Or at least that's what I tell myself.

I packed days in advance to avoid having to rush the morning of my departure. I wanted to take my last day in America nice and slow. I made myself a nice plate of scrapple(my favorite American food), hash browns, and eggs. I did some yoga while I watched the morning news. I listened to the reporter talk about the rain that was supposed to come later in the day. I hoped that it would come. The weather would then match my melancholy mood.

I took an Uber to the train station, which is a luxury I don't have in my home city of Winnipeg. I gave my driver an extra large tip since I had to spend my American money on something before it would become useless. Philadelphians would have described the weather

Regret

as cold, but to me, it was almost warm. I waited outside for the train in jeans and short sleeves. I saw only a couple of people heading for the first train car when the train arrived, so I decided to stand at the back of the line waiting to get into the train. We all took our respective seats and drowned ourselves in whatever arbitrary thing we wanted to distract ourselves with until we got off the train. I chose to read William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*.

Brianna

I never really fell into a full sleep. I hovered between dreamland and reality, which is why I was slow to act when I heard banging coming from inside the small closed-off portion of the train where the train operator resides.

Just as we had come to a full stop at the next station, I heard a loud distinct bang followed by a series of quick, but quieter banging noises. I was sitting the closest out of all of the passengers, which made me feel like I had a certain duty to check out what was going on inside.

I peered into the small window in the door of the cab and saw a middle-aged man shaking on the ground. I gasped loud enough to grab the attention of the two young guys that were in the back of the car.

"Is everything all right?" one of them yelled to me.

I started to breathe faster. I couldn't get any words out. I just gestured for them to come to me. Once they got up close enough to hear the banging, they hurried their pace and gasped as well when they saw the seizing man. One of the guys unlatched the door and dragged the man out into the open aisle, which grabbed the attention of everyone in the car. Everyone moved to the edge of their seat to watch what was happening. Another man entered the train car and came closer to see what everyone was looking at. By then, the two young men were treating the driver for a seizure. They took off their coats and made makeshift pillows so the man wouldn't hurt himself while thrashing around. They also instructed everyone to move away from the scene.

Will

I looked towards the back of the train to see if anyone else was coming in, but instead I saw the man who was sitting two seats behind me getting up and shutting the door to the train car. He took off his tie and tied it around the latch so that it couldn't be opened from the outside.

"What are you doing?!" I asked him. "Leave that door open!"

Everyone looked up from the medical emergency and to the man standing at the door. The train suddenly became quiet.

"I need to get to the airport," he said in a monotone, yet almost scary voice.

"Get off this train and catch another one. You're selfish. The driver is having a seizure," said the man who most recently entered the train.

Regret

"No, I *need* to get to the airport. You don't understand."

"And this guy has gotta get to the hospital!"

The hostile man blocking the door pointed at me. "Where are you headed to?" His Canadian accent revealed itself in the way he spoke.

"A job interview. West Philly."

"That's a hike. You'll need to take a couple buses once you get off this train, won't ya?"

"Yes, I will."

"And you, young man," he pointed to one of the men wearing scrubs. "Where are you headed to?"

"Med-school. I have an exam."

"Can't afford to be late to that. I assume it's the same for you," he said, pointing to the other med student. "And I'm assuming you're going to the airport too, young woman? Judging by your suitcase."

She nodded silently. Sound had still not returned to the train car.

"Can't miss that either. Someone get in that damn cab and drive the train."

We all looked at each other dumbfounded. "Listen, man, I don't know who you think you are," started the man, "but none of us know how to dr—"

I butted in and corrected his statement before he even finished making it. "I do. My dad used to drive trains, and I'd sit in the cab with him."

I looked around at everyone. "He has a point. We all have somewhere to be," I said.

The Canadian man spoke again, "And none of you are doing anything wrong. Just the man driving, and by the sound of it, he's fine with it."

I hated myself for it, but I was okay with leaving that man shaking on the floor, so I could get to my interview on time. The Canadian man brought up very enticing points.

"I ain't gonna stop you," said the woman kneeling by the still violently shaking man.

The only man who'd been objecting the entire time jumped in yet again. "You can't be serious! We'll all die here when this idiot crashes the train, or we'll die in jail!"

I jumped over the seats separating me and the cab. "Handle him," I said to no one specifically. I knew I had to get into the cab and get driving as soon as possible to avoid drawing suspicion from the conductors collecting tickets in the other cars. We'd already been stopped for far longer than usual.

I whipped the door open as fast as I could and took a cursory glance around the inside of the train driver's booth. The smell of cigarettes and cologne hit me like a tsunami, overwhelming all my senses and disorienting me. Once I began to take a deeper look at the multitude of levers and buttons I realized how complex driving a train must actually be. I recalled sitting on my dad's lap a good twenty-five years ago and I tried to remember the small bits of information he had told me about driving a train. I remembered him telling me that to move the train forward, you need to push a lever in the direction you wanted the train to go. In a matter of seconds I found what I thought was the lever that would propel me forward. I

Regret

eased into the lever, only trying to move the train ever so slightly, but a terribly loud screeching noise followed, and the train stayed in place. *Shoot!* I thought to myself, *the brake is on!*

I pulled a couple of different cords and pressed a few different buttons only to hear the screeching continue. I pulled back the lever that I eased forward and the deafening scream ended. I looked over the control board and found the brake lever and released it. After that, it was smooth sailing. I understood the most important concepts of driving a train: how to start and stop. Once the initial adrenalin wore off, I took a comfortable seat in the chair that was anchored to the ground of the cab.

I slowed down the train when I saw the signs along the railway that were hinting that a stop was nearing. *One stop down*, I thought to myself.

Aaron

"Keep," *bang*, "your," *bang*, "mouth," *bang*, "SHUT!" the Canadian yelled at the man who confronted him. He repeatedly slammed his head into the window, which miraculously didn't crack it.

He looked up at me and Maurice, who were staring at him. "Soaree. I assume I've left a bit of a poor first impression on ya. I'm, uh, Casey," he said, and glanced down towards his book sitting wide open on his seat. "Casey Golding. And ICE is after me."

The man Casey had just beat up was lying motionless on the ground, and probably in a worse state than the engineer who had stopped his seizing and lay motionless as well.

Charlie

"I'm not like this. I'm not malicious and I don't beat people up. But..." I trailed off. "I gotta get home. If I miss my flight I'll get deported, and forcefully so. And...and that guy was blocking my path home." I could barely breathe. What had I done? I started to sweat. It began to bead up on my brow. I drank a sip of water from my bottle, with an unsteady hand carrying the bottle to my parched lips. "We have to stop this train. We can't do this."

One of the med students jumped in. "We're too deep in. I'm sure this is out of character for all of us, but we can't explain our way out of this one." He was still sitting on the ground with the engineer, but he slowly stood up and approached me. "I'm going to fail out of med school if I get to school late. I'll miss my test," he said. "I'm Aaron by the way." The others in the car began to introduce themselves as well.

"I'm Brianna and I'm going to see my dying sister."

"I'm Maurice and I have to take an exam as well."

"Well," I started to say to our crew, "how are we—" Just as I was about to put together a plan with everyone, someone tried to open up the door to the train car. Twice they tried before any of us moved.

Maurice and Aaron picked up the engineer and dragged him over to the cab. The

Regret

makeshift engineer that was doing a surprisingly great job didn't protest at all when they jammed the actual engineer in the booth with him. I slid the guy I beat up under my seat and I nonchalantly walked over to the door and removed the tie, and then opened it for the conductor.

"Is it jammed or something?" I asked, with a slight crack to my voice.

"Yeah. It does that sometimes. Anyhow, all tickets and passes please!"

I pulled my ticket out of my pocket and showed it to him.

"Can you go to your seat, please? I check from back to front. These gentlemen are closest to the back," he said, gesturing to Arron and Maurice.

"Oh. Yes, yes, of course." My muscles suddenly unclenched and I walked to my seat. I took my bag from off of the rack above my seat and I moved it down by my legs to cover up my wrongdoing.

When he came around to check my ticket I tried to act as cool as I could. He punched my ticket and when he was just about to leave to check Brianna's he saw my suitcase and said, "You know you can put that up top, right? I'll move it, if that would be more comfortable."

"No," I said, perhaps a bit too forcefully. "I don't mind it here."

"Uh, okay."

Brianna

The conductor stopped halfway between Casey and me and looked at an empty seat. At first, I didn't think anything of it, but then I remembered who had been sitting there: the guy who took up the responsibility of driving the train. And he had left all of his belongings in his seat.

"Is this any of y'all stuff?" the conductor asked.

Potential lies began to swarm my head. I was trying to think of the most plausible reason that someone would have forgotten all of their stuff on the train.

"Oh, John!" I said, creating a fictional person. "He's always forgetting stuff. He's my neighbor. I'll see him later this week and give it to him."

The conductor bought my excuse but shook his head disappointedly. I sat in my seat smiling dumbly. "Ticket?"

"Ticket. Yes. Here." I said, speaking as if I was having a stroke.

When he was done checking my ticket, I saw that we were nearing the next train station.

"This stop, Fern Rock!" bellowed the conductor.

I let out a breath of relief, but apparently too soon.

"Ryan! Ryan, what are you doing?! We're at Fern Rock!" the conductor yelled at the engineer, whose name was apparently Ryan.

Will

I heard an unfamiliar voice yelling in the train car, although it was muffled by the door

Regret

separating us. Once I made out a little bit of what the voice was saying, I got the message. I had sped past a stop.

I knew I couldn't stop once I realized it; what would be the point? I put two and two together and figured that the yelling voice was a conductor. My heart was racing, and my head was pounding. *I messed it up*, I thought to myself, *for everyone*. I had to think quickly. I tried to harness the adrenaline I felt when I first started driving the train. I did the same thing a twelve-year-old would have done and decided to imitate the engineer's voice. There was only one problem, I didn't know what his voice sounded like.

The pounding on the door continued. I took my eyes off the track for a second and looked at the man. I analyzed him. *He looks like he has a deep voice*, I thought to myself. And then I remembered the stench that I was choking on ever since I entered the cab. *He's a smoker!*

I pressed on my Adam's apple to produce as raspy a noise as possible, and said, "Yo, sorry boss. That one's on me."

I glanced down at the engineer and saw his name tag. Ryan. I felt a pang of guilt. I thought of how he had a family, and maybe kids, and keeping him here meant he couldn't receive proper medical attention. But then I thought of my kids. I needed to prove to the judge and lawyers that I could provide for them. I needed to drive that train.

"Fourteen years I've been on this train with you and you've never missed a stop! What the," he stopped himself before yelling out a curse in front of paying riders, and quieted himself, "heck is wrong with you!"

I tried to think quickly on my feet. *What would Ryan say?* "I just forgot my morning coffee, you know how it is. Won't happen again. I swear."

"Better not! Now I have twenty livid passengers who missed their stop. And I thought that coffee was bad for your epilepsy?"

My stomach dropped. Did I mess up? "Yeah, but I drink it anyway."

"Hmph."

Phew, close call. I thought to myself.

Maurice

After the conductor interrogated our new train engineer, whose name I later learned was Will, he walked past all of us and into the train car behind us. I heard him muttering incoherent grievances as he walked past us. I let out a deep breath after he left. I was trembling the entire time he was in the car. We slipped by, but barely. I wasn't sure if we would make it to school on time, or if we would be spending Christmas in jail.

I became even more unsure when our train engineer, whose name I learned was Will, came out of the cab and called me to him when we stopped at Wayne Junction. I didn't know why he chose me, but I knew for certain that it was my turn to step up to the plate.

He explained the controls of the train to me in a very rushed manner, but I understood the gist of it. He emphasized the importance of removing the brake before I eased the train

Regret

forward. He left the cab and announced to everyone that he would be leaving for his interview.

"It has been a wonderful experience becoming felons with all of you, but I need to leave now," he said as he gleaned his belongings. "I wish you all nothing but great things. God bless you all."

Brianna and Casey wished him luck, but Arron had his nose too deep into his textbook to care. I stood silent at the entrance to the cab and gave him a salute as he exited the train.

I double-checked to make sure the brake was off, and then I pushed forward on the lever that Will said would move the train forward. I tried to remain calm, but adrenaline was coursing through my body. I was breathing heavily and going a little faster than I probably should have been.

I didn't even consider the fact that I would only be driving for one stop when I accepted Will's offer. I could hear the conductor yelling, even though he was probably three train cars back.

"This stop, Temple University."

I slowed the train to a stop and quickly explained the controls to Casey and Brianna, leaving it up to them to decide who would get the burden of illegally driving a train.

Just like that, I was on my way to school with Arron, making perfect time. The guilt had not completely set in yet, but I knew it would soon.

Brianna

Just like that, there were only two of us left. "I'll do it," I told Casey.

He reluctantly agreed, and I went into the cab. I felt relaxed at the beginning. I followed Maurice's instructions, and things went according to plan...until they didn't.

While I was driving to our next stop(Jefferson Station), I had some sort of spell of anxiety. It wasn't quite an attack, but I knew that if I didn't get out of that cab, it would become one. I had been prone to anxiety for a while, but my spells were getting less and less common as I grew older. I tried to take deep breaths and relax, but I had no success stifling my anxiety. I stuck it out until we got to Jefferson, but left the cab the minute we got there.

"Casey, I can't do this. It's," *deep breath* "too hard."

"All right," he said, in a tone that implied to me that he knew I would chicken out.

"Don't talk to me like that."

"Like what?"

"That tone. You know."

"Oh Brianna, I just feel bad for you."

"Why?"

He moved his suitcase and revealed the passed-out man. "Because this is your problem now."

He got up and went into the cab without another word.

Speechless, I squatted down to observe the body. I felt his pulse, and he definitely still had

Regret

a heartbeat. For a fleeting moment, I thought about getting off at the next stop and just leaving that crazy situation. But then I remembered why I had started doing all the crazy/illegal things: Sydney. I needed to get to the airport, to get to Florida, to get to Sydney. I took a deep breath and took a pair of sunglasses out of my pocket.

Well, I thought to myself, here goes nothing.

Charlie

I took a step back and observed the entire situation we were in. It all seemed so unreal. I'd never heard of a situation as wild as the one I was in. A couple of regular Joes, including myself, hijacked a train, committed identity fraud, and deceived a person of authority. Whatever the penalty is, I thought, it's definitely better than what I'd receive for eluding ICE. It was all sinking in. It felt like a lead weight had fallen into my stomach. I shook my head, as if it would symbolically shake the guilty feeling out of me. And it did in a way. I took a deep breath, and drove on.

I heard a ton of banging in the train car as we got to Suburban station. I couldn't identify what the noise was, and frankly, I didn't care.

I stopped for a few minutes, to let passengers enter and exit, and then I was on my way to 30th Street Station. I was amazed that no one had entered the first car since our original group of five, and the jerk I, unfortunately, had to beat up. The banging persisted, and as we reached the Eastwick station, I had to leave the cab and see what Brianna was doing.

Brianna

"What? Did you have any better ideas?" I said to Casey.

"I mean...whatever. Screw this. I'm just gonna drive. Also--"

"No, wait. I have to get him out of here first." I hoisted up the passed-out guy so that one of his limp arms was wrapped around my shoulder. I covered up his shut eyes with my dark lensed sunglasses.

"I--"

"Give me three minutes. I'll knock on your door when I'm done." He rolled his eyes at me, but as long as I could finish out my plan, I didn't care what he thought.

I tried to make the man look as alive as possible, but it was a challenge for sure. He was heavier than I thought he would be, and he was not supporting himself at all (not that I thought he would be able to). I dragged him to the exit door and tried to make a fake conversation with him.

"Oh haha, John," I said. *Why did I always choose the name John for my fake excuse names?* "You're so funny. Get some rest now. Be safe."

The conductor that was in our car earlier looked over at me and raised his eyebrow. "I thought 'John' left earlier and forgot all of his stuff?"

"Oh. Different John," I said. I was becoming very good at thinking of lies quickly.

Regret

"Hmph," the conductor grunted.

"I'll see you later! Say hi to Jessie for me." I plopped his limp body down onto a bench. His head tipped over the back of the bench, but he was sitting up straight. I felt bad leaving him outside without a coat, but I continued in my selfish patterns of the day and bid him farewell.

"All aboard!" the conductor announced.

I walked back onto the train to find Casey waiting for me at the entrance of the cab.

Charlie

"As I was saying before you cut me off, I'm getting off at terminal A. Where are you getting off?" I asked Brianna.

"Damn it. Terminal F. The furthest away from A. I guess I can walk from A to--"

I cut her off mid-sentence. "Woah, woah, woah, woah. You're finishing this out. We can't just abandon the train with three stops left."

"Casey, I can't do this. I can't drive again."

I felt her struggle and wanted to comfort her. I took her hand. "Yes, you can. Now, sit with me in the cab or peer in the window at least to get a view of the controls. If you understand the controls it's really not that hard."

"You don't understand!"

"We can't talk right now. I need to get this train moving. But you can do it. You can overcome this."

Brianna looked back at me, and I could see my reflection in her eyes. I noticed her eyes becoming increasingly glassier.

After I shut the door behind me, I looked back just to make sure that Brianna was looking in, which she was. I acknowledged her with a nod, and she nodded back.

"A hell of a day, and it's not even seven yet," I said to myself, although it turned out I wasn't the only one who heard it. Ryan sat up.

"What the h--" he started.

I took my hands off of the controls and let the train coast. I looked back to see if Brianna was still watching, which she was not. I took his head and kneed his forehead as hard as I could, which seemed to put him back into a daze.

Brianna

I watched Casey drive the train for a couple of seconds and then I paced around the train car until it was my turn. I predicted that watching him would only make me more nervous. When he stopped at terminal A, he grabbed his things and wished me luck. It was strange, but I sort of felt like he was my friend. I had been through so much with him, despite only knowing him for an hour.

I entered the cab and manned the controls the way that Maurice instructed me to. After observing all of my other engineers, I knew the most important things to pay attention to: the

Regret

brake and when to stop for stops. I did everything in my power to avoid drawing suspicion. I carefully stopped at each terminal. I went only the posted speed. I took up the brake so there were no loud screeching noises. In the end, it apparently was not enough. When I rolled up to Terminal F, there were at least ten armed police officers waiting for me.

Charlie

The second I stepped off the train, I called the police. I told the operator about how a deranged young woman entered the cab and how loud noises followed. I told them to meet her at Terminal F, because I knew she was getting off there. I told them how I saw her move a limp man out of the train car and onto a bench at Eastwick Station. I told them she was acting hostile the entire ride, threatening to take over the train. I made up lies about her when really it had been me lying the entire time.

I was telling the truth about ICE being after me, but I knew I couldn't give them my real name. After they saw me beat that man nearly to death, I made up a name on the fly. I always liked the name Casey, and the name Golding came to mind when I looked down at my copy of *Lord of the Flies*.

I felt terrible, and I still do. I'll never get over what I did on November 26th. I still tell myself that I did the right thing. That I did what was in everyone's best interest. But that's not true.

Brianna

They pressed me for information and I told them everything. I told them the first name of everyone because that was all I knew. Except for "Casey," whose last name I thought was Golding. I deserved everything I was slated to get, and I knew it. I had deprived Ryan of the medical attention he needed, and because of that, he could have died. They took me away in handcuffs, while I was bawling my eyes out. I never got on my flight to Florida. I did get to see my sister, however, only it was through a plexiglass screen. My family flew her out to Philadelphia so I could see her one last time. And shortly after I saw her, she passed away.

My face, along with the rest of the "Philly Five" as the media had taken to calling us, was plastered on television screens and newspapers. I didn't even bother opening my mail anymore, because I knew that it would only be filled with hateful letters.

The manhunt for the Philly Five ended when they finally captured the Canadian liar, whose true name I don't even recall. I hope that scum-of-the-earth man rots in jail forever. He tried to pin it all on me. And thank God it failed.

Charlie

When the police forces did their normal rundown of the crime scene and searched for evidence, they found my copy of *Lord of The Flies*, which had "Ex Libris Charlie Coat" written inside the front cover. My cover was blown, although in a way I'm thankful it was.

I'm not a particularly religious man. I went to a Catholic school for a couple of years in my

Regret

youth but was kicked out for fighting, among other behavioral problems. Although I don't regularly praise God, I've always known that there was a Higher Being. The Higher Being always, always makes sure that you get what you deserve. And I deserve to rot in prison forever.

After one month of evading the law enforcement of two countries simultaneously by simply staying with my brother, I was caught. Too many cops to count showed up at my brother's house to take me down, but I put up no fight. I was relieved to be taken away. With my arrest, the endless guilty feeling that had controlled me for what felt like years finally ended.

Just as he always does, The Higher Power from above delivered justice to everyone I wronged that day.



Josh Sor '23



Melancholy

Francisco Ortiz '23

Melancholy

Tributes to ee cummings

Sean Mc Loone '24

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Patrick Stelacio '24

Melancholy

Family, Friends, Laughter, Love, Coffee, and Donuts

Sean Mc Loone '24

It was a typical day for Ian Goldstien when he woke up on May 14th. He got out of his tent, or what was left of it after 6 months of weathering, and grabbed his fishing rod. It had been exactly 173 days since Ian had eaten anything other than fish, nuts, or berries. About 6 months prior to May 14th Ian decided to go on a short weekend camping trip. Little did he know, his short trip would turn into a half year of torture, with no way to contact the outside world. Well, to a normal person it would have been torture, but to Ian, it wasn't all that bad. He liked his long beard and simple way of life.

At the stream he always went fishing in, he caught a large rainbow trout and decided that it would most definitely be enough for breakfast and would possibly contain enough meat for lunch and dinner as well. The batteries in his radio miraculously did not die over his time in the thick of the Rocky Mountains. He flicked on his radio (from which he heard that the Phillies crushed the Rockies) as he put together a fire to cook his breakfast. He had become a professional at starting and sustaining strong fires in a matter of minutes. The only fuel available to start his fire was dead leaves, which gave off a powerful stream of smoke once lit that reached out over all of the towering trees around him. As his fire began to roar, he placed two fat deboned filets directly on top of the fire. He meandered over to his favorite raspberry bush and began picking away with a smile on his face.

A loud noise came from above. To Ian, it sounded like a lawnmower. Although, he wasn't even sure if he correctly remembered what a motorized device sounded like after 173 days of seclusion. The noise faded out and then became stronger. Once again, it faded out. For a couple of minutes, there was silence, but once again, the noise came over his head. This time, it didn't fade away. Dirt began to fly in every direction, and Ian's long beard began to undulate.

A helicopter came into view, and with the sight of other human beings, Ian felt a pang of fear in his gut for some reason. "Why now?" he thought to himself. For 172 other days, no planes or helicopters had flown over him. "The leaves!" he thought. The smoke from the leaves must have alerted the helicopter when it was flying near him. "Not yet!" he thought to himself. A man approached him. He wore a headset and fancy business clothes. Of course, anything would have looked fancy to Ian after his months of living in torn-up t-shirts and sweatpants. Since he started his trip in the winter, all of his gear was meant for the cold of a Colorado winter, but he had modified it to be appropriate for spring weather. He cut up his long sleeve shirts and pants to create shorts and t-shirts. The businessman had his hair slicked back, causing it to stay unmoved by the powerful wind created by the helicopter. The helicopter's blades slowed and then stopped.

Melancholy

"Hello there!" yelled the unnamed man. Ian waved back but did not reciprocate the man's positivity.

"Hello," Ian replied.

"Ian Goldstien?" the man asked, and Ian nodded slowly. "Pilots everywhere have been looking for you!"

"*What took you so long?*" he thought to himself. But what he really said back, in as excited a tone as he could muster, was, "Oh wow, I can't believe this."

"This helicopter over here," he gestured towards the helicopter, "is at full capacity. We're going to send another helicopter to this location to pick you up though. We are very happy to see you again, Mr. Goldstien."

"Thanks." The still-unnamed man returned to the helicopter and flew away. Ian sat down on a log and looked at his dirty hands and feet. "A warm, seasoned, home-cooked meal would taste great," he thought to himself. "But no. Life is so much better out here. No responsibility or problems."

He stood up with a quick jolt. He looked around for a few seconds, took a deep breath, and looked at the sundial he made, which also doubled as a compass. He picked north at random and ran. He ran up hills and through thick patches of bushes. He ran down hills and through open game trails. The bumps and bruises and cuts didn't bother him. Nothing compared to the relaxed life of the wild, and he was not going to give up his way of life. He was one with nature. Problems didn't exist. There were no bosses to answer to or annoying people to deal with. After a few days of travel, he reached the peak of a tall mountain. He could see a small town from the peak and realized what he would be leaving if he committed himself to a life of seclusion. Yes, there were annoying people, but there was also laughter and love, friends and family, coffee and donuts, among millions of other things he would miss if he never returned. He set up a shelter for the night and pondered what his next step would be.

The next morning, he made a sundial and headed south, so he could return back to his original campsite. After days of travel, he found where he had been camping and looked around. His belongings had been moved, but nothing was taken. He realized at that moment the mistake he had made. He would never again see his friends or family, enjoy coffee and donuts, or share laughter and love. He spent very little time considering what running away from his help would mean, and because of that, he would spend his life alone. He let his fear of a return to normalcy after months of unprecedented isolation cloud his vision, which made him forget what he truly loved. Ian Goldstien meandered over to his favorite raspberry bush, but this time he picked away at the berries in melancholy.

Melancholy

Brothers On the Run

Sean Mc Loone '24

It was May 14th, 1887, and Warren Baker immediately shot up off the ground, instantly shaking off all his tiredness from his sleep the night before, when he heard a rattlesnake shaking its tail to the left of his head. He yelled to William, who was already up bright and early, "Rattler, rattler!"

When Warren and his brothers lived in New York, the only snakes they ever saw were garter snakes. Now that they lived in the West, they actually had to worry about snakes that could kill them with one bite. William knew how to handle snakes, so they didn't faze him, but they made Warren jump like a little school boy.

William, who was always annoyed before his morning coffee, didn't even hesitate, and responded with "Oh shut yer mouth," and rolled his eyes before saying, "I was shaking the tin of coffee beans, you yellow belly. There's no snake, idiot."

Warren and William had formed a bond over their 17 years of brotherhood to the point where a phrase like "yellow belly" barely even registered as something that was supposed to insult him. It wasn't until William's insults became more intense that Warren became upset. Warren's mind, always moving very fast, had already forgotten about his blunder of confusing a rattlesnake with a coffee can and was moving his hand to grab the cast iron pan that laid on the log next to where their fire was with a mischievous smile on his face.

"Cook me up some beans, why don't ya?" William asked.

"I'm not getting the pan to cook with, William."

William's mood improved drastically. He knew exactly what Warren was talking about and developed a big smile. Warren smiled even bigger than William did, which revealed his perfectly straight teeth. An outsider would say that what they were about to do was cruel, but the brothers had a special bond where this was just a practical joke. Warren walked over to Roy, the youngest of the brothers, and held the cast iron pan a couple inches above his sleeping head. William yelled at the top of his lungs "Lawmen! Lawmen!" Roy jolted up and smacked his head into the pan.

Warren and William howled in laughter. They knew it was mean, but it was only their nature as older brothers to mess with him. Roy sat up and rubbed his head. "You guys are the worst," he said in his high 15-year-old voice. He rubbed his head and felt a little bit of blood, as was usually the case after his brothers did this to him.

William took command and said, "Okay, horse play is over. Warren, lay out the plan. We have to be serious now." He glanced at Roy.

"Why are you looking at me like that, you're the one that just hit m-,"

Warren cut off Roy and said, "Be quiet, I think one of these could be my most creative plan yet. I have a couple in mind. I'm just going to lay them out and y'all can tell me which one you like best."

Melancholy

William interrupted him just before he finished speaking. "Just pick a damned plan, Warren."

"Alright, alright. Did you not have your morning cigarette or something? Relax," Warren said, expecting to be met with laughter. However no one found his joke funny. "William and I already went over the basic setup of the Bonesaw Bank together, so we just have to fill in R—"

"Why don't you guys ever include me when you talk about robberies?" asked an upset sounding high voice.

William rolled his eyes and combed his fingers through his thick black facial hair, "Will you shut yer mouth? We don't have a lot of time," he responded.

Warren proceeded, "I'm going to be the internal look out, scanning the inside for lawmen. Roy, you'll be watching the horses. There are three doors, two directly under the sign that reads 'bank' and a third more inconspicuous door behind the counter," Roy opened his mouth to interrupt, but all William had to do was look at him, and his jaw locked tightly. "All three of us will leave our horses by the back door, but William and I will enter through the front doors, while Roy stays at the back door with the horses. All clear so far?"

Roy daringly questioned his plan, "Warren, you two don't even trust me with a loaded gun, so why am I even staying with the horses? How do you stop someone from taking our horses with an empty Colt revolver?"

Warren thought without speaking out loud, "God, why won't he just follow the plan?" Now speaking out loud he said, "Fine, I'll load your gun up before we leave."

An ear-to-ear smile grew on Roy's face, revealing his two defined dimples.

"I'll stand at the back of the bank. William, you go into line and approach the banker and say 'I would like to withdraw money from an account under the name Dime Jobbinghue.' If the banker has half a brain they should catch on pretty quick, and unless the bystanders are intently paying attention, then they won't suspect a thing. If it's necessary you can give the banker more specific instructions, if you know what I mean," said Warren, and he gave William a wink. "Then I will move to the doors, so no one can get out and alert the lawmen. Then, William, when you have the money, we will long jump over the counter and leave through the back door. Roy, at this point you can get on your horse and then we'll be on our way. Most importantly, *no blood shed*," stated Warren, putting emphasis on the final thing he said.

After their quick briefing, William rolled up a cigarette as he always did in the morning, and Roy went to use the bathroom, leaving Warren to clean up, as always. The other brothers didn't care for organization and knew Warren would just clean up anyway. He rolled up tarps, put away pans and other cooking utensils, and kicked out the fire. He threw everything into their bags in a rough manner, trying to get it done quickly. Except there was one thing that he carefully put in the most secure pocket on his satchel, and it was his book.

His dear Eliza back in New York taught him how to read and sent him with a single book when he left. In addition, she sent him with a nail filer, because she knew neither of his brothers thought enough to bring one. It didn't matter though, because he had still chewed his nails all

Melancholy

the way down to the nail bed.

Clean up was done, everything was packed, and it was time to leave. All three brothers had stomachs full of coffee, beans, and butterflies. The night before they had settled in a small, secluded cave-like area. There was a rock that was about four feet tall and 12 feet long. On each end of the long rock the top jutted out, forming a small roof to sleep under. On one end the ground was smooth with only a couple pebbles that could possibly interfere with whoever ended up sleeping there. Naturally, the eldest brother claimed the spot with no challenge from his brothers. That left the other side. This side had a puddle of water, which was quite possibly the only puddle of water in the entire state of Arizona, which appeared to be the bathtub of a couple young lizards. Warren passed on his opportunity to sleep in the small swamp, as did Roy. This left the two more youthful brothers no option but to sleep with no covering above them. Fortunately for them, rain was never a problem when they were choosing their settlements.

The brothers left the area looking as if they were never there. It was important to leave minimal clues around since they were constantly on the run from the law. The robbery they would be committing wasn't their first, and they didn't expect it to be the last. Their last robbery had been at a general store in New Mexico. They spent the money conservatively, and it lasted them three months, but the job they were to carry out this day was expected to give them enough money to last a year. They had all been in the West for about a year now and considered themselves experienced robbers.

William, Warren, and Roy all got on their horses, and they planned to ride along a hard dry path for about four miles, which would eventually lead them to the entrance to Bonesaw. Bonesaw, being the most populous town they would probably ever trot through in Arizona, made them feel like they would have no problem slipping in, undetected. The orange dirt they rode on was as cracked as a shattered pane of glass, with the jagged lines seeming more numerous than the towering rocks that reigned above them to their right and to their left. The constant beating of the sun, everyday, followed by endless droughts of rain had dehydrated the soil. Warren could see, just barley in the distance, a wild mustang trotting through high dead grass.

William, now 19 years old, sat up tall and straight on his horse. His lankiness was noticeable, but overshadowed by the rest of his strengths. If he were to sit down and drink and eat all day, he still wouldn't gain a pound. He bent over slowly and scratched his knee through the gaping hole in his jeans.

"Why won't you just buy new jeans?" pondered Warren.

"I like these ones," William said before turning his head 90 degrees and looking at the bush that was to the left of the boys. "You could eat those you know, if you wanted to. The berries on the bush, I mean."

His knowledge of nature had always amazed Warren. "Let's grab some if we pass the bushes on our way out of town," Warren said.

Melancholy

Warren looked at William and envied his long hair. He wished to grow out his hair that long eventually. For now he took pride in what he had, which was on the longer side itself. The shiny brown hair that grew out of his scalp in multitudes was parted in the middle. He envied William's tough-as-nails facade, but knew it was all a show, because he had seen him break down into a softie in front of Ann, his wife of three years. Warren began to whistle to fill the dead air, before being harshly told to stop by both his brothers. The four-mile ride felt short, and they finally arrived at the entrance of Bonesaw.

They entered the town and looked at all the dark brown houses. There were so many people compared to the other towns they had been in and out of. This fulfilled their prediction that they could infiltrate the town very easily without being noticed. The sun beat down and made Warren sweat. He couldn't tell if he was getting hot flashes due to his nervousness or just the pure heat from the summer sun. The powerfully harsh sun, complemented by the dryness, was practically a recipe for heat exhaustion.

They spotted the bank and quietly rode to the back entrance. It was here that the nerves started to settle in and consume each brother, especially Roy, as evident by his constant scratching behind his ears. He developed scabs behind his ears from how often he nervously scratched them. William, being the older brother he was, said, "Relax, brother. Stop being such a baby." Warren felt the same way Roy did, but he was too embarrassed to express it.

William and Warren hopped off their beautiful stallions and strolled to the front of the bank, leaving Roy alone with the three horses and a Colt revolver. Warren's dark brown eyes scanned the front of the building. He saw women sitting outside the bank and peered through the window and saw one man waiting in line alone and one at the counter. "Perfect," he thought. William's face was emotionless as always. William walked up the single step that was the bridge from the ground to the bank and held the door for Warren. After they got inside everything went so fast, but just as planned. William waited behind the man in line, and Warren stood in the back. Warren blocked the man from leaving when he attempted to do so, but instead of using physical force, he only talked to the man. While Warren was distracting this man, William was doing the dirty work.

He looked at the teller and said what William told him to say verbatim. "I would like to withdraw money from an account under the name Dime Jobbinghue."

"I'm sorry, sir. There is no Dime Jobbinghue in my records," the clerk stated.

William took a deep breath and said, "I think you want to look again, it's under *Dime Jobbinghue*,"

The man looked up with terror-stricken eyes, and William cracked a smile. He slowly lifted his hand and placed a revolver on the hardwood counter. "Just fill these bags. I'm not here to hurt anyone," William said in his deep raspy voice.

The man nodded and reached to take the bags from William's hand. He began to stuff them with handfuls of cash. The man was surprisingly submissive considering his life savings could be in the establishment the brothers were robbing. After what felt like the shortest five

Melancholy

minutes of William's life, the man said, "I can't fit anymore." William was satisfied and yelled to Warren, "Let's go, brother!"

Warren abandoned his conversation faster than light and jumped over the front desk. The adrenaline was flowing through their veins and they were on a high. William was halfway out of the back door when Warren was jumping over the desk. There were no words spoken, but they all knew what to do. They got on their horses and darted away. The only noises that could be heard were the horses' hooves hitting the ground, and William's heavy breathing. He couldn't run more than 25 meters without panting. It was clear that his excessive tobacco use had affected his lungs for the worse. Instead of leaving town through the same point of entry they entered through, they rode between two strips of stores and through the first point of exit they saw. They maneuvered between a general store and a barbershop and were then back on the main road. They slowed the speed of their horses to a trot to look as if they were leaving town and not running away from the sheriff who had most definitely been alerted by now.

"That couldn't have been more perfect. Look at all this cash we made off with!" said Warren.

"You may have spoke too soon," William stated.

"Oh Lord," Warren responded with.

Roy felt his stomach turn over, and he got very nauseous. The brothers thought they were moving away from the lawmen, but in reality they were moving towards them. The brothers approached five grown men that were moving in on their horses. The men were very clearly men of power. They were wearing top hats and expensive jackets that glittered in the sun. The man in the middle had a badge on that could be seen even though the brothers were 200 yards away.

"I think I might throw up," said Roy.

This elicited an angry response from William, saying "Will you just shut your damn pan, Roy? Let men who have actually hit puberty handle this."

Roy took a small rock out of his pocket that he had for some unknown reason and threw it at William, but missed to the right.

"God, you two are so immature," thought Warren, just before saying, "Get your crap together. They are going to confront us. William, tell them we cut through Bonesaw to get back to our wives in Colorado or something and we're on our way back from trying to pan for gold."

"Uh, okay,"

As the cocky lawmen approached it became more and more evident that the man in the middle was a sheriff. When the brothers were nearing the other group, Warren buttoned his long coat to hide the gun on his hip. He didn't want to appear as a threat to the lawmen. The two groups were just about to cross paths with no dialogue or communication between them except maybe a couple of head nods. The brothers hoped they would get off scot-free, but the man in the middle said, "Hey partners, I haven't seen you around here before. Are you lost or something?"

Melancholy

William took the lead, "Oh no, we were jus' cutting through Bonesaw here on our way back to Colorado. We was panning for gold further west."

"Oh yeah? Did you get anything? Let me see what pans y'all used," asked the man furthest to the left in an accusing tone.

"With all due respect, we should be on our way," said William to ease the tension and try to get them out of the situation.

"Men, I know the only reason outsiders ever pass through Bonesaw is to do trouble, and I'm not entirely convinced that y'all are telling the truth. I know y'all don't know, but I'm the sheriff 'round 'ere. James Adams is the name," said the man who was positioned in the middle. The words poured out of his mouth at the speed of molasses dripping from a jar. His star-shaped badge glared in the sunlight.

William appeared as cool as ice. He never appeared to be scared, and Warren fed off this and felt the same way. Roy, on the other hand, looked as nervous as ever. He was scratching behind his ear the entire conversation, which only gave Adams more reason to believe they had done something wrong.

William started, "Sir, I can assure you that—"

Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang!

William and Warren turned around with an expression of pure shock on their faces. *What had he just done?* There were no words exchanged; all three brothers knew what they had to do. They rode away at top speed. The brothers heard the gunshots punching their eardrums; they must have come from the five lawmen. Warren turned around to see only three shooting. One was gripping his shoulder in pain, and the other officer that had been hit was hunched over, motionless. The truth hit Warren like a ton of bricks. *Roy just killed a sheriff.* There was no sound of the stamping of hooves following them, but they knew it wouldn't be long before there were. Roy, who had always been particularly good with horses, sped in front of the other brothers and rode for what seemed like an hour, slowing down here and there to give the horse a break, but never stopping. When the brothers reached a secluded area covered in short dead shrubs, they decided to stop.

"Roy, what the hell? Do you know what you just did?" questioned William, yelling it at the top of his lungs. He was boiling with anger and could barely contain his indescribable emotions.

"I wasn't thinking, forgive me. I thought he would find us out, and we would go to jail forever. And I would never get married, or go back to Weiser or—"

"Well, say goodbye to it now, you big lunk! Roy, you are going to be facing the death penalty. You just endangered all of us, you are truly an idiot. Unbelievable. Do you see why we never gave you a loaded gun? God, of all the people I could be robbing banks with, I get you two dopes," William practically screamed.

"What did I do?" asked Warren.

Melancholy

"You're the loon that gave him a loaded gun," said William.

"It's not like you tried to stop me. No one could have known this would happen."

Roy interjected, "I'm done taking this from you, William. None of us are perfect. You have to try to think what it was like for me. You might not have a big brain under that ugly hat, but I'm sure it can fit a few thoughts. I was scared. I was nervous. I had never been in a situation like that before. It's not like you never done anything wrong. I'm very certain that you must have done something wrong."

William had been packing his tin of tobacco the whole time Roy was talking. "Calling me dumb? Yeah I probably did do something wrong, but did I shoot 2 lawmen today?" William snickered. "No I didn't so—"

Warren couldn't handle the argument anymore and decided to share what he was thinking. "Enough, William. Yes, Roy messed up. I've messed up before too. We all have. But you know what? We're brothers, so we stuck together. You really need to shut your mouth, because it already happened. What good is it going to do yelling at each other? Either we survive together or fall separated."

William ignored every word that came out of Warren's mouth. The anger was bubbling over. William couldn't take how Roy tried to criticize what he did, when Roy had put the brothers in the position they were now in, so he said, "Roy is still an idiot, and I don't need either of you."

Warren's sentimental speech did not resonate with William. At this point the sun was just about to fall behind the horizon in the distance. Warren thought it would be best if the other two brothers separated for the rest of the night, so he voiced that opinion. "Each of you is morbidly angry, and before one of you blows the other's head off, you should just separate for the rest of the night. I'll bring each of you your dinner, and tarp, and mat."

Roy went one way into a small clearing that was in the middle of the shrubs and sat down on a rotting log, cursing and kicking the log once before sitting down. His slouched back was curved like a "C." He made sure to go a good distance away from his current enemy.

William dragged his feet in the opposite direction into a small natural structure that was made of rocks. He sat in the middle. His knee was exposed through his cut jeans, and it scraped along the rock.

"Pick up your feet when you walk, you'll get even bigger holes in those boots," Warren said.

William ignored him.

Warren started the fire, unpacked, and made dinner for his brothers. Warren felt the need to have a conversation with each of his brothers, so he could feel some sort of closure. He started with Roy. Roy had changed positions from an upward seat on the log to laying on his side on the hard dirt.

"Leave it there," Roy said, signaling to Warren to leave it on the far end of the mostly bug-infested log.

Melancholy

Instead, Warren sat on it. "You know we're gonna be okay, right? William always gets like this, saying things he doesn't truly mean."

"How do you know he don't mean them? Besides, I don't even care. He could leave and I wouldn't care." Roy's immaturity was showing.

"Come on, Roy. The only way we'll fix this is as a team."

They sat in silence for the next couple of minutes. Warren got up and placed Roy's hot meal on the log and then went over to William's rock fortress.

"What?" William said as Warren walked up behind him. A cigarette hung from his lip, clinging to the little bit of spit on the inside of his dry lips. It was almost as common to see a tumbleweed blow on the ground as it was to see William indulging in tobacco. He must have smoked five cigarettes since they had arrived at their settlement, and it was likely he would smoke five more before the night was over to cope with the stress associated with being chased by lawmen. Although in truth, he would have smoked most of them even if he had nothing to stress about.

"I'm just bringing you dinner, relax. And I want to talk about something."

"Oh great, I'm real excited."

"William, just meet me halfway, please. I'm begging you, just give me a little bit. No one is happy, but you don't have to be acting like you are."

"Hmph," William mumbled.

Warren put his meal down and walked away. William knocked the meal off the rock that Warren had placed it on as a sign of disrespect. Warren heard it hit the ground, but he didn't even twitch his head. He couldn't stand up to his brother. He was weaker than William and couldn't win a physical fight and would only embarrass himself if he yelled at him. His buff physique was no match for William's six-foot-three-inch build. He just put on a happy face and forced himself to sit next to the now dwindling fire.

His mind had always been sharper than the other two's, which is why he made plans for each robbery. But the current problem they faced, Warren had no solution to. He thought to himself as he lay on his tarp, looking up at the starry sky, "Give your brain a break. You'll wake up in the morning and it will slowly start to work itself out." He couldn't keep his eyes open any longer and he drifted off to sleep while thinking about his girlfriend back in New York.

Roy shook Warren out of his sleep and said, "What the hell happened here!"

Warren sat up to the most discombobulated campsite he'd ever seen. Pans were on the ground, cans of food were thrown everywhere, coffee beans were spilled, and matches and flint were scattered on the orange cracked sand. "Where is William?" Warren asked.

"I can't find him, his bag, or his tarp. And half our money is gone," Roy said with a dreary tone.

"Oh boy," said Warren. He thought it was impossible to be more shocked than he was yesterday when Roy killed the Sheriff, but that idea was proven false by how he was feeling after seeing William had run away. "Well, let's waste no time, let's go look for him," Warren

Melancholy

confidently stated. He assumed the role of leader now that their usual leader had abandoned them.

"I'll clean this junk up I guess. Can you make breakfast?" Roy asked. Although it didn't really matter because Warren would end up cleaning and making breakfast anyway.

"Sure."

And so they cleaned up and ate. They had no clue where they were going or where they were currently, but that didn't scare them because they were set on finding their big brother.

Warren got on his strong horse and Roy did the same. They decided to hit up whatever town they passed first, as long as it wasn't Bonesaw. They stumbled upon a small development of buildings called Loneridge. The brothers went in hopeful and left dismayed. They asked around at the Saloon, the general store, the barber, and even the bank, in addition to asking passersby on the street.

The conversation went the same every time. The brothers would say, "Have you seen an outsider pass through here? He's tall and lanky. He has long black hair that almost touches his shoulders, a birthmark on his left eye, and a thick beard. He was probably wearing all black other than his blue jeans."

Whoever they asked would respond, "Hm, no," or something along the same lines.

The day felt long and unproductive since they got not one solitary lead. They only went through one other town that day before calling it a night. They found a new place to camp, 25 miles east of where they slept the night before. They were now pushing on the border of New Mexico.

The two brothers sat around a campfire, cooking up some beans and corn. The bright fire was warm and comforting on each brother's face. It was the first time all day that the brothers stopped moving and could sit down and talk.

"Warren?"

"Yes?"

"Did I cause all this? Is it my fault that William ran away? What if he never gets to see Ann again?"

Ann and William had been married for three years at this point. Which consequently meant that Roy and Warren spent a lot of time with her. William was very private about his relationship with her, but the other two brothers still knew how much he valued her. If he never came back home, she would be devastated, and Roy would feel even worse than he already did.

"I'm not gonna tell you that you didn't do anything wrong, because you really messed up. If you get caught, you're going to be hanged. If William and I get caught, there is a real good chance that we will be too. And that's your fault."

Roy began to tear up. He couldn't stop thinking back to the moment he pulled the trigger. He didn't need to, because William really could have gotten them out of the situation. "But William had no business running away. He lost his temper and he was wrong for that. We'll

Melancholy

find him, or he'll come back. He's not dumb enough to genuinely think he could survive without us. And about Ann, if he never sees her again that's his fault for running away, and no one else's," he said just before letting out a deep, heavy sigh. "I can't help but wonder how this could have gone differently if I had just gone with a different plan."

Roy let out an awkward, yet authentic, chuckle when Warren degraded William's intelligence. "That's true, about William and running away. But it's not true about you thinkin' it's your fault for choosing this plan. Whatever plan we went with, we would have ended out at the same place, and met with the same five lawmen. I'm more tired than a hibernating bear, let's hit the hay."

Warren agreed it would be best to get to bed now and wake up early before the sun tomorrow for another day of looking. Each brother rolled out their tarp and mat, but didn't actually get to sleep for another hour. They couldn't seem to stop talking about all of the events that had taken place, and how surreal it all felt. They finally fell asleep feeling faithful that they would find their big brother the next day.

Meanwhile, William was making enemies. Without any source of money coming in, he turned to what he was best at. Stealing. From a young age William had swiped food from markets when he had the chance. His lack of formal education was most likely to blame for his inclination to turn to crime. William had taken at least half of the brothers' money from their heist, but he wasn't satisfied with just that.

He waited till his brothers were asleep and he took all of what he owned, along with the coffee supplies and some money. His anger had consumed him. He no longer cared if Warren and Roy got caught; he only cared about what happened to him. He got on his horse and rode to a place where cowboys had evidently settled for the night. He went and without even thinking stole watches, money and food from them. He rode for the rest of the night, taking breaks to eat and drink at times. He stumbled onto the east coast of New Mexico and fell asleep, hiding behind several rocks that provided cover on all sides. He let his greed draw him away from his blood, only caring for himself anymore. He didn't wake up until dusk the next day. The little light that was still out blinded him and revealed the red-colored rocks to him that he had fallen asleep under the night before. He decided he'd do the same thing he did last night and hit one or two camps. *What's the worst that could happen?*

William strolled up to a group of men sleeping in the middle of the desert landscape. He could clearly see that these men were robbers just like him. They all wore jagged clothes and had long hair. William's mind only wanted more though. Without a second thought he bent over and tried to remove a watch from one criminal hand. Either the man was not asleep or had felt something foreign touch his arm because his eyes opened and William's stomach dropped.

"Who the hell are you," the man yelled, as he grabbed a hold of William's wrist.

"I- I-"

Three other men woke up and pointed guns at him. "Stand down, I want to kill him myself."

Melancholy

"What the hell did it matter that I was stealing it, you probably stole it anyway too ya low life snake!"

"Do you know who you are talking to?" the man asked.

"No."

"I'm Nicky Burns, and I've probably killed more men than you've met. And I don't care if I kill you too boy."

William's pride was getting the best of him. He responded by saying, "Bluff."

Nick's grip tightened around William's wrist, "What did you just say boy?"

"I said bluff, you dense idiot."

"Keep the watch and meet me outside Rollston, tomorrow at 12 for a duel. You hear me?" Nick said.

"I'll be there."

Nick released his grip and laid back down. He mumbled a couple words to his buddies, but William was already out of ear shot. "*Where the hell is Rollston?*" William thought to himself. He knew he messed up, and he knew he got too cocky.

William tried to shake the uneasy feeling he was having. He decided to stroll around and find Rollston. He packed a lip of tobacco and after a half hour of trotting on his horse, he found the town and decided to spend the night right outside.

After his restless night, he decided to take the edge off by getting a few drinks at the saloon in Rollston. The anxiety he was feeling was obviously partly to blame for his poor sleep but also the fact that he didn't put down his sleeping mat didn't help. The rough dirt on the ground felt like pointy blades scraping at his face, and he woke up with scratches on his face. After a couple drinks of whiskey he couldn't help but to explain his situation to the bartender.

Warren and Roy rose bright and early in the morning. Warren shook back his flowing hair and cracked his knuckles. He had more faith than ever that he would track down his brother. There was a town in the distance that he didn't spot the night before, but now that he saw it, he knew it would be their first stop of the day. Countless clouds covered the sky, and as far as Warren was concerned that was a good thing. The clouds made it so he didn't have to hydrate every ten minutes and squint when he looked towards the sky. He was looking forward to a day with no pounding sun. These cloudy days were precious to the brothers. Thoughts skipped across Warren's mind about how William especially loved these days. Williams' hair draped down to almost lie on his shoulders. His dark hair absorbed more light than either of the other brothers' hair did. He loved these days since it didn't feel as if there was hot tar on his scalp.

"Good morning, Warren," a dazed young boy said.

"Good morning, Roy."

"I already made coffee and breakfast, to make up for the fact that, you know, I broke up the family."

"Oh be quiet, come on now," Warren said as he dug into breakfast. He sipped his burnt coffee that he pretended to enjoy. He eyed the small town in the distance feeling particularly

Melancholy

good about what it would hold. With all that was going on, Warren wanted to relax a bit, so he decided to read the book that Eliza sent him with, *The Abbot*.

His eyes moved over the pages, but his mind kept wandering. He missed Eliza, and he missed Weiser. He began to think of her curly hair and crystal blue eyes. He dreamt of how relaxing her smooth voice would be if she was there at that moment. Her voice, slightly lower than average, had not a hint of rasp to it, for she had never inhaled anything other than the air that surrounded her. He could read, but not very well. He didn't understand the majority of the book, so he gave up on reading it. Instead of reading, he started to daydream about Eliza. Before he knew it, it was almost midday and Roy had already packed up for them.

As they did every day, they got on their horses and glided away. Left and right, there were huge rocks that towered over the brothers. The wind blew, but since the dirt was so dry, no dust came up. Warren's flowing hair blew left, and in an effort to get it out of his face, he looked left as well. He saw Roy hunched over on his horse.

"Sit up straight," he said to him.

"Take that back, that's not true..."

The argument carried them all the way to the brink of the town that was spotted earlier. As they peered in they saw a sign above a business. "Rollston Saloon," it read. The brothers relinquished their horses outside and entered. The man behind that counter welcomed them by saying, "Greetings, what can I get you two?" A couple of drunks were scattered around the small circular tables. Roy looked similarly to them, because of his disheveled appearance. His buttons weren't lined up correctly, and he missed a belt loop on his pants that morning.

"Just an Adam's ale. I'm staying sober today," Warren stated.

Roy didn't speak because he was self conscious of speaking in his naturally high voice around such gruff men. He was clearly the youngest there, probably being a head shorter than the man who was closest to his height. And his baby face stuck out like a nail in a loose floorboard.

The man poured the water for Warren and gave both brothers a strange look. "Anything else I can do for y'all?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," Warren said. "We're looking for our brother. He has long black hair and a thick beard. He was probably wearing his black bandana and his black jacket. Have you seen anyone like that?" he inquired.

"Why? Is his name William?"

Warren's face began to glow with joy. "Yes sir, yes it is," he said with an excited tone.

The man's face began to appear gloomy. "He was in here this morning and he told me he was going to be in a duel later today, at 12. Why, that's in ten minutes! You better get a move on if you want to see him. He'll be on the far end of town, that-a-way." He pointed east down the main street.

The brothers thanked him and were off. They raced as fast as they could, in truth, faster than their horses should have run. Warren saw two men standing parallel to each other in the

Melancholy

distance. He recognized that the men were separated by 20 paces, as was traditional in a fair duel. The speed of his horse increased even more.

"William!" Warren screamed.

They may have been far away, but Warren could pick William out of a crowd of 400 men in one second. He knew it was him. The way he moved his non-shooting hand looked as if he was packing tobacco. It brought an infinitesimal smile to Warren's face when he officially knew it was his brother. But the short-lived joy of reunification was quickly destroyed. He watched the men raise their guns and fire. As Warren watched the bullets leave each man's gun, it was almost as if the bullets were moving slower than normal. The shots were as loud as the slamming of tavern doors. He saw the shots collide with William. William, who was still on his horse, fell forward. Warren, filled with passion and still 100 yards away, emptied every shot in his gun, but not one hit for they were too far away. A couple men gathered around William to take all of his money and valuables. They scattered, just as Warren and Roy arrived at William's body. Warren prayed he was alive, but there was no hope when he saw that the bullet had hit him right between his eyes. It depressed Warren more than anything to see that William's face bore no expression. It was blank and pale. Warren sat with Roy and wept. Their leader, their brother, and their best friend was dead. Blood fell out of the back of his head. Warren held him in his lap and cried.

Roy thought about how William would never see his wife again and he couldn't help but feel that he was at fault. The air still smelled of the sulfur from Nick's gunshots, and Roy became consumed with anger. There was a pile of small rocks and Roy ran over and kicked it. He kicked the small shrub that was right next to it as well. He yelled every curse imaginable and then sat next to Warren again.

"See what happens when we separate," Warren said with bloodshot eyes.

Roy nodded without saying a word, because he knew if he said anything he would burst out crying. He could feel a tightness in the back of his throat.

"Promise me Roy, we'll stick together and go back home."

"I promise, Warren."

Warren looked around, hopelessly. "Look what happens when we split up. We need to go home, we'll be safe there. Away from all this danger," Warren said. The rate at which he breathed was increasing, faster and faster.

Roy slowly nodded, filled with every negative emotion known to man. He didn't know what to say. Warren said, "Let's take a few minutes, but it's for the best if we leave at once." He had to force himself to say it. He wanted to stay for hours, but he knew they were one wrong move away from being caught and punished for their wrongdoings. They couldn't afford losing a second. He knew he was on the run, but he was barely consciously worrying about it. This event overshadowed all others that had occurred in the past days.

Roy now held the lifeless body, while sitting on the hard orange dirt and took off William's belt. "Something to remember him by," he told Warren. He gave it to Warren and slowly

Melancholy

slipped it through the loops on his pants, almost feeling unworthy to wear the belt of his older brother.

Roy let go of the body, and laid it on the ground. About twenty yards to the left of him there was a dried up stream and a couple of bushes. Roy held onto the stiff legs, and Warren held onto the arms of William. They dragged the body behind the bushes, which was as respectful a grave as they could find. Each took his time and stood next to William's deceased body. They took four or five shrubs, that were as dead as William, out of the ground and covered William's body. Warren looked up and swore to Roy that he could see a mountain lion far off in the distance. It was now time to begin their expedition back to Weiser, New York. They hoped to pick up where they left off, when they abandoned their old life about a year ago. The clouds were blocking out the sun, yet Warren was still sweating profusely. He felt sweat drip off his nose and hit his lower lip. The saltiness of the sweat was a reminder to Warren that he needed to take a drink of water, but he was too engaged in his thoughts to care about his dehydration.

Still with tears in their eyes, the brothers got on their horses and tried to accept what had just happened. "We'd better get a map and some food if we want to make it back home alive," Warren said. "But it's okay Roy, we'll get through this and get home."

"I saw a general store back in town. Let's go there," Roy said. His lips had gotten severely chapped over the past couple of days, perhaps being a result of his stress.

"Maybe let's pick up some beeswax too, to sooth your bright pink lips," Warren said in a joking tone.

Roy moved his lips ever so slightly to crack a small smile, and they rode back into town. Arriving at the front of the store, they tied up their horses. At this moment, the paranoia set in for Warren. He had almost forgotten that he was on the run from law enforcement. Now he was scared that every corner he turned, there would be someone waiting.

"Roy, get in and get out. Okay?"

Roy nodded. Money wasn't a problem, considering only a couple of days ago they robbed a bank. They entered the store and began to load their bags with containers of coffee, oatmeal, dried beans, fruits and what not.

Warren's eyes moved up and down as he stared at his many food options. His younger brother sensed that Warren was beginning to read too deeply into his trivial decision of what he wanted to eat, as was always the problem when they stopped to get some food or other supplies. Roy came up behind him and forced his knee cap into the section of Warren's right leg, between his thigh and calf, causing Warren to almost fold like a cheap pocket knife. "In and out, right?" Roy subtly reminded him.

No response came from Warren, as he knew Roy was in the right.

The man at the front desk questioned them, "You can afford all that, young man?"

"Uh, yes sir," Roy's voice cracked as he answered.

"I've never once seen you. What the hell are y'all doing in Rollston? What's your names?"

Melancholy

the man said as he touched his gray beard.

"I'm, uh, Jacob, Jacob McFarlen. And that's my brother Tommy. We're just passing through town," Warren said slickly.

"Hm," the bearded man said. The rasp in his voice was strong. *Clearly he smokes*, Warren thought.

"Sir," Warren said kindly. The man looked up and Warren put a map that he would be purchasing on the table. "We're right here. So if I'm on my way to New York, I should go 100 miles north to start, would you say? And then just head straight east."

"Not how I would do that," the man barked back. "Maybe 250 or 300 miles north, which 'ould put you in northern Colorado, and then it would be a straight shot."

"Thank you very much," Warren said as Roy dropped the last of their supplies on the counter. They bought what they needed, and they were on their way. For about 12 hours they rode, at a constant speed, only breaking once to spend a penny. On the ride the brothers discussed how from now on they would live under their aliases. And if anyone asked about their destination and back story, they would say they were coming back from Colorado, where they were panning for gold. Warren kicked around the idea of taking a train as far as it would take them, but he quickly squashed the idea for fear of being caught.

It was a depressing day. The depressed feeling was only enhanced by the ashen clouds that loomed overhead. They pushed through a couple of towns with brown houses, none bigger than two rooms each. The only variation in color that they saw was in the houses that had recently been on fire. Warren's horse brushed past a short shrub as he let out an audible sigh. The bugs and flies that were living in it were apparently startled by Warren, as they flew off of the bush in each direction. Warren tried to throw on a smile, but he couldn't even fake it this time. Whenever something went wrong he was the first person to smile and move past it. But this time his emotions were stagnant. He glanced up at Roy and saw the same expression on his face as well. Each brother was being held down by the weight of their brother's passing, not yet able to act normal again.

Finally at a comfortable distance from town they decided to stop and rest for the night.

"I don't want to jinx it, but I think we are out of reach of any Bonesaw lawmen. No one knows who we are here. For God's sake, we're almost 3 states away from where it happened!" Roy said.

"Shut the hell up. Don't say that until we're back in Weiser." Just as the words left his mouth, he felt a shock of uneasiness move through his body. *Ann*, he thought. How would they tell her? "Ann is going to be crushed."

"I know, it's going to be unbearable for her. I'm sure she already misses him like hell."

"I do too, and it's only been half a day. I'm gonna miss his jokes and snarky comments."

"As will I."

The two brothers reminisced on the fine times they had with William, sharing memories and such. It sure would be a hard journey home without the third member of their exclusive

Melancholy

posse.

Days moved into night, and night moved into day. By the time the brothers reached Kansas, the initial feeling of paranoia still did not fade. One night in particular, Warren was feeling especially paranoid. He jolted awake and heard what he thought to be voices. Voices of those who wanted to catch him and turn him in. He heard the cracking of branches on the ground. Even though they moved less than a thousand miles, the nature that surrounded them changed immensely. If they were still in New Mexico, there would have been no branches to be cracked because trees were scarce. The green plants were as abundant as the birds that flew overhead. Green plants may have covered the landscape in Kansas, but one thing that did not change was the heat. The heat and dehydration brought about these delusions in Warren. Any sane person would have said that night was as silent as a church during prayer. But Warren claimed he could hear these voices and he had just about had enough. The cracking rang in his ears. He rolled over to Roy. "There's someone here," he said in a hushed whisper.

"Go back to sleep, you're scaring yourself again."

It had been almost everyday in the past week that Warren claimed to hear someone sneaking up on them, so Roy dismissed it, as Warren had not once been right.

"Get up."

"Come on, no one is here."

Warren's pulse rose, and he punched Roy in the gut. "Get the hell out of bed. We're leaving," Warren said.

Roy did as his leader said. Everything got thrown together into bags, and some things got left behind. The paranoia overtook Warren. It consumed him. It controlled him. They got on their horses and they rode. They rode for the next 24 hours. The constant fear Warren had lived in numbed his senses. He didn't eat and seldom drank. The paranoia made Warren do things he never chose to do before. Warren never chose to blaze trails through untouched forests, but now he felt they would serve as perfect covering from the men that were "coming to get them." Roy had no choice but to go along with what his psychotic leader said. Just as Warren couldn't challenge William in a physical altercation or argue with him for fear of embarrassment, Roy faced the same problem now. In truth, however, Roy enjoyed going through the never before touched forests. The gargantuan leaves from the towering trees acted as a roof, blocking the sun from pounding down on their necks and backs. Roy warned him that he had to drink. It was very normal that Warren forgot to eat while on the journey, but Roy was there to help him remember.

It wasn't until the brothers quite literally had to stop that they did. Roy's horse rode itself to death. The combination of the summer heat and the continuous riding killed the horse. It collapsed and Roy was thrown to the ground. He was flung off like a rag doll onto the damp dirt. Their journey came to a crashing halt. The thousand pound creature hit the ground with a thud, and Roy cried in pain. Warren stopped his horse and took a grounding breath.

"Are you okay, Roy?"

Melancholy

"My shoulder hurts worse than when I got bit by that snake." Roy had been bit by a snake when the brothers first arrived in Arizona, which prompted his everlasting fear of snakes.

"Let me feel."

Warren hopped off his horse and knelt by the fallen horse and his hurt brother. He took his hand and placed it on Roy's right shoulder. He then touched his own and compared how the two felt. "Jeez, Roy. I think it's dislocated."

"I agree with you on that one," Roy said, wincing at every slight movement of his shoulder.

"Where the hell is William when you need him? He'd know how to put it back."

"William is dead so we're gonna have to figure something out," Roy said sarcastically.

"Hold still, the earlier I do this the less it will hurt."

"No, you have no clue what you're doing--"

Warren put his foot on Roy's chest, forcing him to lay back, and then grabbed his right arm and pulled till he heard the magic "clunk." Roy screamed dramatically and punched at Warren's leather boot, still firmly placed on his chest.

"All better?"

"It's back in place that's for sure. I wouldn't say it feels any better."

Damn it, the horse! Warren thought. His horse was panting and probably close to death as well. Warren kicked it with his spurs and it ran off. "No use keeping the horse," Warren said.

Now that they were moving progressively east, the residencies became more abundant, and he knew it would only be a couple hours' walking before they saw a house. With Roy only half standing up, slowly rubbing his shoulder ever so lightly, Warren observed the scene and recognized the brothers needed a rest. But still one thing needed to be done. They needed new horses.

"Come on, I'll carry your bag. Let's get out of here. We need new horses."

"And you need some food as well. I can tell you're going to start getting in your hungry mood soon, where you're mad at anything," Roy chirped to Warren.

"You can just shut your mouth...." The two would find just about anything to argue about to take up time. The conversation carried on until they saw a large fenced-in establishment. Bigger than any house Warren had ever laid eyes on, he knew someone rich and important lived there, which likely meant they owned high quality horses. Warren's eyes scanned the gray stone building, looking for some signal that horses lived there. As he saw the troughs that lined the fence, he knew they had found where they would acquire their new horses. Dazed, hungry, and confused, Warren never even considered paying for the horses. Instead of paying, Warren simply opened the fence and walked out horses. One was white with black spots, and one was brown. The brown one went to his younger brother, while he kept the Dalmatian-looking one.

"Get on and let's move," Warren told his brother.

Roy needed a little boost up, since he couldn't put pressure on his shoulder. But after he was on, he listened to his brother, and they left. They rode as long as they could without their eyelids shutting every couple of seconds. In Kansas, there were more places to hide, which the

Melancholy

brothers greatly appreciated. They could go into wooded areas that stretched for miles, which they often did. This night they did the same. They tied their horses to tall standing trees and the second their heads hit the ground, they fell asleep. Dew droplets formed on them as they slept, but nothing could wake them out of their deep slumber.

They woke several hours later and the paranoia in Warren continued. They traveled great distances everyday, but never topped their 24 hour trip. They crossed state borders slowly but surely. After they left Kansas they went through Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, briefly through Pennsylvania, and finally landed in New York. The journey – that still had a great while until it was finished – had lasted for close to seven months. The anxiety of being caught faded, but not the anxiety of having to explain to Ann what happened to William. The temperature became colder, but this made Warren and Roy more comfortable than they had been in a long time. The temperature only reminded them of the kind world they left behind to live the easy life in the West. It was during their short trip through Pennsylvania that they remembered what it was like to see their breath. They were accustomed to the heat that held them back everyday.

“What in the hell...” Roy said one morning shortly after he woke.

“What?”

“My breath. I can see it in the air. When was the last time we could see our breath?” Smiles fell across the brothers' faces as they sensed that they were moving closer to their home. No words were exchanged yet on the topic of moving closer to home, but each knew what the other was thinking.

“Sure wish I had a coat though,” Warren added on. With it being mid-October, the brothers didn't face any extreme coldness, but it didn't make life any better. Everything changed for them. Everything from the shade of the dirt to the dew left on the morning grass. The routine persisted as follows: wake up, eat, ride, eat, ride, sleep.

Similarly to when they first saw their breath again, there was the first rain since they left Arizona. The rain first hit them when they were in Missouri and was a recurring problem ever since their first encounter. It took them by surprise and soaked their horses. They then adapted, making sure to take cover each night under the fat green leaves that were overhead. The grassy fields they passed sparkled like the stars in the sky each time they passed them in the early morning. The horses started to leave footprints in the black dirt they trotted through. The mountainous regions they passed through were fairly untouched. As they peered up tall hills they could see the paths brave men before them had left. They were so far away from the paths at times they appeared as thick as twigs from the ground level. The “firsts” seemed never ending. Now it was more common to see a flowing stream than it was to see a slithering venomous snake. It had been the complete opposite just seven months ago. The streams were clear with beautiful fish swimming about inside.

The only thing Roy looked forward to everyday was Warren's cooking. He enjoyed Warren's never burnt toast, beans, and coffee. On occasion, they would purchase fresh eggs in a town they passed through, which each brother very much enjoyed.

Melancholy

Warren had a little bit more to look forward to than Roy did. Everyday he looked forward to seeing his Eliza again. Thoughts of his reunion with Eliza crowded Warren's mind everyday at this point. He dreamed of embracing her again and seeing her curly locks and very blue eyes. The pair of eyes that he used to look at everyday were practically imprinted into his memory. He could vividly recall the icy blue eyes with stray, dark blue streaks going through them.

Warren never laid a blade on his hair the entire trip. It was now the length of what William's was before he perished a half of a year ago. It laid on his shoulders. Contrary to William however, he couldn't grow a piece of facial hair. He now wore William's belt with pride, as if he earned it for his successful expedition home, a feat that William would have had an easy time accomplishing. Roy cut his hair every chance he got, so it was as long as it was when he left. He still had the same rat tail coming down from the bottom of his head, which Warren teased him for. The brothers camped out about 40 miles from where they used to live, and they anticipated arriving there the next day. The brothers woke up bright and early with that intention. The chilly New York breeze brought back a rush of memories of what it was like living there. The air smelled like the flowers that covered the fields they passed. As comfortable as they felt, there was still the idea of telling Ann what happened that made them uncomfortable.

Warren rolled over and put his elbow in the grass to the right of his sleeping mat which he quickly regretted. His elbow sunk into the grass and dirt. The damp grass felt like it was bread that had soaked in water. "Good sleep last night, Roy?" Warren asked.

"Terribly, as always. I can't wait to sleep in a real bed." The dream of sleeping in a real bed had been lingering in the brothers' heads since they left New York. "Can we stop by a store and grab some candies? I'm feeling stressed," Roy continued.

"Sure, if that's what you want."

For the last time, the brothers would get on their horses and be on their way.

"I miss Eliza," Warren blurted out. "I wonder what she's been up to. I wonder what she's been reading and such. She's probably read 100 new books since we left. I'm sure she's grown even smarter since I last saw her."

"I'm also sure she's grown angry at you since we left."

Warren knew Roy was right and cringed. Soon they arrived at the store they were seeking. Roy picked out some chocolates, peppermints, and butterscotch candies. Most people sought out other ways to relieve stress, but for Roy, indulging in sweets made him feel better.

Warren thought he had come to terms with how he would have to explain to Ann what happened, but when they came within ten miles, his nerves became more extreme than he could ever imagine. When William died, Warren subsequently became the leader of Roy. He put on a brave persona when he was scared and acted positive when he was sad. But this he could not handle.

"What are we going to say to her?" he asked Roy.

"Warren, I'm just as nervous as you are, but we can't cower now. Warren, we just traveled 2000 miles without our older brother. We survived seven months in the wild. We successfully outran lawmen. And we can, as heartbreaking as it will be, face what we left behind and

Melancholy

explain to Ann the devastating truth that William is no longer with us.”

Warren felt goosebumps running down his spine. “You’re right.”

The squawking of birds sounded like they were welcoming the brothers back to their true home. In the distance they could see their homes. It almost brought a tear to Roy’s eyes. For the first time in a long time Warren took a nice grounding breath. The air tasted like the hay that was being used at the farms they passed by. As the population and temperature decreased along the journey home, he became less paranoid about being spotted. Now the paranoia finally vanished. The stretch of houses they were advancing towards only included five or six properties, and the next cul de sac wouldn’t be for another quarter mile.

Warren looked to his right and saw a pack of trees with slightly browning leaves. “Oh my gosh, Roy.”

Roy slowed his horse and cocked his head right to see what Warren was looking at. “Good God. We’ve been climbing those green monsters since we were twelve.” Memories rushed through their minds. The brothers were finally home.

“I must have climbed those trees a hundred times with William. I’m surprised we made it here without him. He’s the one that knows about nature and such. I was worried we’d stop under a dead tree and camp under it. How did we make it without him?”

Roy was just as dumbstruck. William really had been the knowledge hub of the brothers when it came to where to settle and what was okay to eat. Their small journey down memory lane ended as they drew closer to the gray and black rock house that Ann resided in. The one story rancher was built of hundreds of rocks with silver highlights going through them. They hadn’t seen a building like that in over a year. There was no need for thick rock houses out in Bonesaw, for the only purpose they served was to keep heat in during the winter and fall.

They arrived at the house of Ann and William Baker.

Knock, knock, knock, knock. The rapping of Warren’s knuckles against the door rang in Roy’s ears. Ann opened the door and without a word threw her arms around Warren and Roy. The second the latch of the door was torn open, a gust of welcoming heat met the brothers. The chilly winds outside weren’t a problem, but they most definitely preferred the warmth of the house. The wood burning fireplace Warren spotted over the left shoulder of Ann brought back memories of indulging in whiskey with William countless nights of the seemingly endless winters. As she let go of them, Warren made swift eye contact with her and was able to see her entire figure. Before, her hair had been smooth and lay loosely on her back. Now her hair was matted to her head. It looked almost as if she hadn’t washed it since they left. She looked completely different, but all the same, simultaneously. Her way of dressing was the same, with her many layers and white apron on top. Only before the apron had been the most clean form of white. Now it was dirty with stains everywhere. Her eyes had dark bags underneath them that weighed her whole face down. Her eyes were a mix of blue and green and were filled with water as she looked around for her husband.

“Where is William?” she asked.

Melancholy

Warren took the lead. "You might want to sit down." He paused for a second. "I don't want to delay telling you this any longer so I'm just going to say it. Ann, William was shot and died." Silence.

Tears flowed out of her eyes. They drenched her already stained apron and dress. "I'm so sorry for your loss," she said. Her empathy had gotten the better of her once again. The man she knew more about than anyone else had died, and she was worried about how his brothers felt. The care she had for others made her forget about how this was her problem too.

Roy responded with tears in his eyes too. "Ann, we've had our time to grieve and accept it. We are sorry for *your* loss." She sat with her arms crossed, while holding both of her elbows. She nibbled at her bottom lip and chewed at her cheek.

"Come here," she said. She hugged Roy and Warren.

Unexpectedly, without a knock a familiar face walked in. It was Eliza. Her blue eyes glistened in the single ray of light that peaked through the curtains of Ann's house. Everything about his hometown had changed since he had left. Everything except Eliza. She was in her typical floor-length dress, and the only difference in her appearance was that her hair was out of its normal braid. The curly hair bounced on her back as she strutted in. Her fishbelly white skin had not changed one bit in tone. The freckles that grouped under her eyes were in the exact same position. She saw that Warren was crying and instinctively joined the group hug. Within a few seconds of the hug, she pulled back and looked Warren directly in the eyes.

"Damn it, Warren. I sent you with a nail filer for one damned reason. And you *still* chewed your nails to the bed." She had a copy of *Eight Cousins* in her hand. She was clearly annoyed, but her tone showed no sign of frustration in Warren, though her body language said differently. The smooth, raspless voice was just as he remembered it. Warren opened his arms up and she hugged him again, and then she sat next to him on a chair. She continued, "Ann, no one told me what happened yet, but judging by who is and isn't here, I can conclude what happened. If you need anything at all, let me and Warren know."

Roy chimed in, "And me too."

She could barely get any words out, but managed to say, "Thank you, and let me know too, if you need anything. He was your friend too. And brother to y'all." She let out an awkward laughter right after she finished talking.

Her saying "y'all" reminded Warren of how William used to say that, which caused yet another tear to drip down his face.

It had been over a year since everyone saw each other, so the colloquy naturally lasted for a time. Tears were shed, laughs were had, and stories of the last years were exchanged. Eventually that conversation led to the decision that the brothers would abandon crime for good and get a job in Wieser, most likely in a factory. Although it was agreed that it wasn't vital to live under their new names of Jacob and Tommy, they collectively agreed that they still should live under their aliases for extra precaution. After some time Roy made his way to an old friend's house, where he would live for the time being. Warren and Eliza got ready to head

Melancholy

home as well, but not until after Eliza reiterated that Ann could come to her for anything she needed.

Warren and Eliza left on the cold New York night to go home. Warren was wearing no jacket because he didn't follow yet another one of Eliza's suggestions and didn't bring one on his trip. Warren was a bit confused on how to address Eliza. Her stone-cold facial expression led Warren to believe she was upset, but he could never tell with her. He decided he would let her talk first. Two minutes of walking down the gravel road passed before she spoke. He looked down at her nails and picked at them. She gave Warren a soft punch on the shoulder.

"A bit chilly are you?"

"Yes I am."

"Maybe if you used the damn nail filer I sent you with, I'd be more inclined to lend you my sweater."

"I'm sorry, Eliza. Not just for not using the nail filer, but for heading West and leaving you here. I brought back a lot of money though. And we can really start our lives together now."

"Sorry, sorry, sorry. That's all I ever hear from you, Warren Baker."

A short silence followed. Warren looked past Eliza, who was to his right and saw a fox scamper over a green field. By now, there was only a tad bit of light, but it was still enough for Warren to see Eliza's impossible-to-interpret facial expression. *Was she joking? Was she serious?* He thought to himself.

"I'm only half serious. I'm not just going to forget that you did this. But I love you, and you know that. At least you're here now," Eliza said.

"Phew," Warren said as he motioned as if he was wiping sweat from off his brow. The two laughed.

"Why did you come to Ann's place?" Warren asked.

"I heard that you and Roy were back in town from a couple of people at the factory. They said they saw you coming home on your horses."

"Oh, that makes sense. How's the factory been anyhow?" Warren asked. He already knew what she was going to say though.

"How high quality can it be to sit in a factory for 12 hours a day?" quipped Eliza. She had a brain full of knowledge yet she was restricted from using it in a more valued job. If she was only given a chance, she could show what she was capable of. "At least I am not berated by my superiors everyday like Ann is. Ever since William left, she's been anxious and full of sorrow. I've seen her go hours without touching a piece of machinery at work. I expect she'll be sleeping a lot, since that's how she's dealt with her most complicated dilemmas over the past year. It's not like she could hang out with her husband to relax, because he was thousands of miles away."

"God, I can't even imagine what she's feeling." Warren, who had never been an expert in confronting what he was feeling, wanted to shift off of the topic as fast as he could. Bottling up his feelings was just an easier alternative. So he asked her, "Where did you get that book?"

Melancholy

"I stole it from my boss at work."

Warren rolled his eyes and smiled. "I have no room to judge, I guess. I did rob a few places myself. Robbing the bank in a town in Arizona is what you could say led to William's death." He began to choke up.

Her nostrils flared when he told her this, as they always did when she was startled. "I can conclude that most, if not all, of the money you brought back is coming from that robbery. So Warren, or should I say Jacob, what happened that day? And what happened to the rest of your expedition home? I know it might be hard to talk about it, so only share what you feel comfortable sharing."

"Well, the beginning was actually kind of funny. It was May 14th of this year, and I jumped off my sleeping mat because I thought I heard a rattle snake..."



Jonathan Santiago '22



Pride

Josh Sor '23

The Writer's Roundtable

Matt Crump '22

In mid-February of 2022, Chris Gibbons '79 – author and current president of Roman Catholic High School's Alumni Association – sat down with the teachers and some of the students from Roman's Research Seminar Class. Mr. Gibbons graciously agreed to four mornings of roundtable discussions with the students who had read selections from his book *Soldiers, Space, and Stories of Life*, which collects dozens of his essays that have been published in numerous newspapers, magazines, and websites.

Distinguished Guest: Mr. Chris Gibbons '79, author and current President of Roman's Alumni Association

Faculty Moderators: Mr. John Corrigan and Mr. James Flannery

Research Seminar Students: Matthew Crump '22, James DeMarco '22, David Trimber '22, Jack Kearney '23, and Eldred Malinich '23,

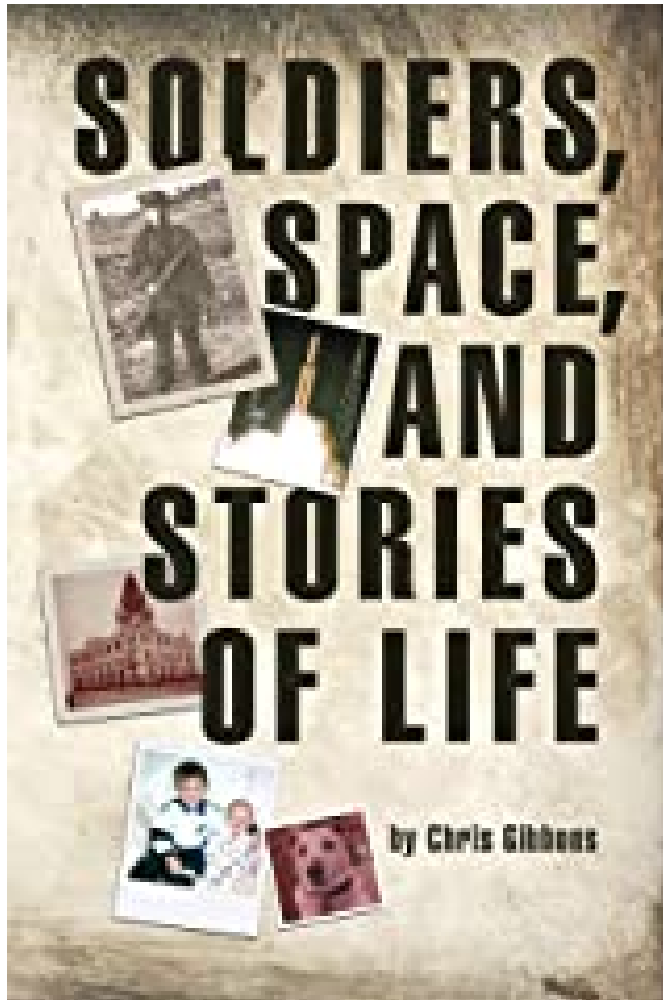
The following are excerpts from Mr. Gibbons' four mornings at the Writer's Roundtable in the Board Room of the 1890 Building.

February 15, 2022 – Meet the Author

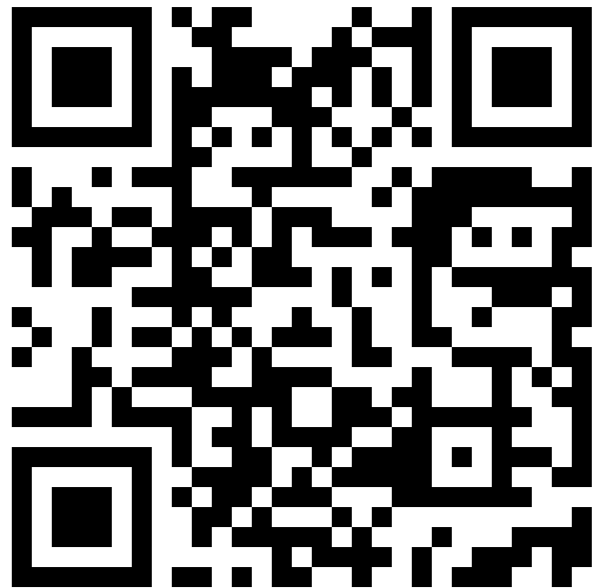
David Trimber: How would you go about getting a contact like an editor or someone else higher up in the publishing world?

Mr. Gibbons: If you google "Op Ed submissions to newspapers," there's this really helpful link [<https://www.theopedproject.org/submissions>]. A group put together the contacts at various newspapers around the country where you can send your Op Ed submissions. It gives you their email, the contact name. That's been extremely helpful for me. It enabled me to find the right person at the *Orlando Sentinel* and at the *Houston Chronicle*. As a result of that, I was able to get a few things published in those newspapers. So feel free to use the internet to get those names.

But you guys – you live in a changing world, which I think is better in that the newspapers used to control everything; now they're starting to lose their sway, if you will, and they're not as important. They're losing their power, but it's better because there are more outlets for writers. [An article] doesn't have to be in print anymore. If it's posted somewhere, that's just as effective and powerful. You guys live in a world that I think is better; newspapers don't control everything anymore.



*Use the QR code to listen
to the entire "Meet the Author"
discussion from February 15, 2022.*



February 16, 2022 – Soldiers' Stories

Matt Crump: I read “A Soldier Considers His Fortune” with Dave Coonhan. He served at Pearl Harbor, but he did say that that wasn’t the worst part that he went through. He said Okinawa was the worst that he went through. He’s from Philadelphia. It was crazy to see that he went through so much in his lifetime. To go through something that I would consider to be so horrible, and he said that that’s not even the worst thing is really crazy. And to think that you’re from the same area as someone like this – that you have something in common, it makes it more real, and it makes it scarier, but we need to see that. We need to understand that these things really happened, and that it is scary. It’s supposed to be scary. But his story and what he went through, it’s really crazy to read. And I thought it was well written.

Mr. Gibbons: Thank you. He was a really interesting guy. Remember what I said yesterday? That I really don’t like when someone comes up to me and says, “I have a really good story idea for you” or “Boy, you should write this story.” I think I want to take a lot of that back (laughs). As I started looking over some of these stories that you guys went over, a lot of them were [written] because someone approached me. I started thinking that, and I was like, what a second – a lot of these stories were people saying, “You should write this,” and it turns out they were right.

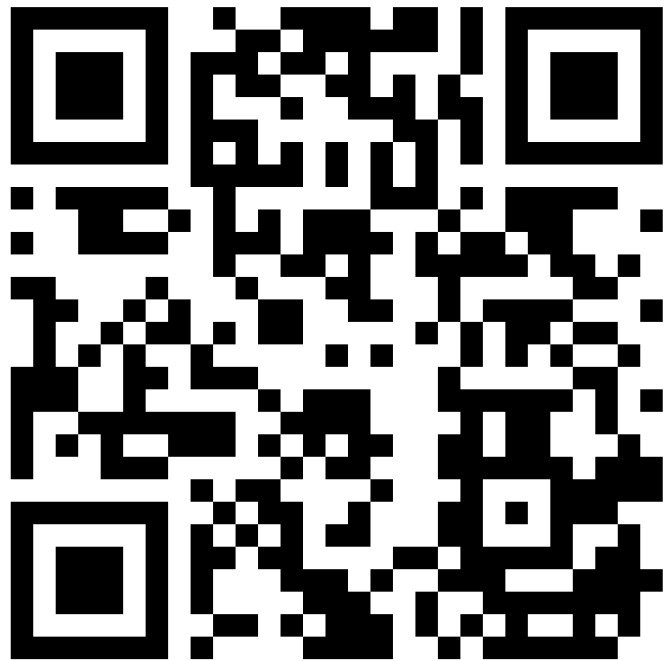
It was [Dave’s] daughter who approached me because her brother worked with my sister. And she approached me and said, “I think you should interview my dad because of what he went through.” So she arranged for me to meet him at her home. An interesting thing about him – any soldier or former soldier that I interview, there always comes a moment when I’ll say to them, “You don’t have to answer this question if you don’t want to, but what was the worst thing that you went through?” And his demeanor through the whole interview was generally okay; he was a jovial kind of guy. But when he talked about Okinawa, his demeanor *completely* changed. You could tell that he went through something really, really bad. And I know a little bit about Okinawa because another story that I wrote “The Scars of War” [is] about my friend’s father, my neighbor [Jack Kerwood] who was wounded in Okinawa. And he had the worst scar that I ever saw in my life. I couldn’t believe his arm was still attached to his body when I saw it. It was like someone took an ice cream scoop and scooped out five inches from here to here [motioning from his shoulder to his chest]. It was that deep. I was shocked number one that he was alive and number two that his arm was still attached to his body. So when I heard that Dave went through Okinawa, I knew that he had seen some really, really bad stuff.

Anyway, something funny about Dave was he comes home from going through all of that, and the trolleys weren’t running. So he had to walk all the way home. And I said, “Man, that must’ve stunk,” and he said, “No! I was home! Trust me – that was no problem.” So he was a great guy. I really loved interviewing him.

Matt Crump: You said his demeanor changed when you talked about Okinawa?

Mr. Gibbons: Without a doubt. His mouth began to quiver. You could tell that he just didn't want to talk about it. It was something that I half expected. Because my father from the Class of '48 fought in the Korean War, and he wouldn't want to talk about it either. He did a couple of times, but I could tell that he regretted it. But you just know when you see these guys what they must've seen must be pretty horrible. To this day – I think when I interviewed him he was in his 90s – to this day, they just can't even talk about it. I mean that must have been pretty bad. To still not be able to talk about it is pretty alarming.

*Use the QR code to listen
to the entire "Soldiers' Stories" discussion
from February 16, 2022.*



February 17, 2022 – Space Stories

James DeMarco: Most of your other stories are about something most people don't know about or haven't heard of. What made you want to write about such a widely known topic as Apollo 11?

Mr. Gibbons: The topic is widely known, but what isn't widely known is that Neil Armstrong had to take over to land it. A lot of people thought that the landing went very smoothly and that computers were involved and that everything was fine. Not a lot of people were aware of the fact that he – because of that last alarm – had to land that spacecraft. I got a number of emails from people saying, "I had no idea" and that kind of thing.

That's why I did that story. I said I think I can educate some people here. And it was around the 50th anniversary, so that was why they were interested in publishing it. That was the *Orlando Sentinel*. I've gotten a relationship with them because a lot of NASA employees work in the Orlando area or live in the Orlando area as a result of Cape Canaveral. So that's why they're always interested in my space stories. They know they have a natural built-in audience for it.

So not a lot of people are aware that Armstrong had to take over and land it, and the other thing that I thought was really interesting was how calm they were – for the most part. How many of you have read the book or seen the movie *The Right Stuff*? I highly recommend that you read the book *The Right Stuff* because it talks about the origins of the space program, and it started with the test pilots. Neil Armstrong started out as a test pilot, and you're just not going to believe the remarkable stories around these test pilots. They were just incredible. I'll give you one example. They talk about Gordon Cooper who was an astronaut on Project Mercury. This to me is insane. Right at lift off of his craft – which was not a safe at all, it had barely even been tested – at lift off, his heartbeat was normal. I mean...how is his heartbeat normal? And if you read *The Right Stuff*, you get into the mindset of a fighter pilot or test pilot – a lot of the NASA guys were fighter pilots – that they could just be that calm. Neil Armstrong just demonstrated that by instead of panicking, he just did what he had to do. And he landed it.

*Use the QR code to listen
to the entire "Space Stories"
discussion from February 17, 2022.*



February 18, 2022 – Stories of Life

Matt Crump: I read “The Fight of the Century” about Joe Frazier in 1971 and how he fought Muhammad Ali. To me, that’s crazy because Frazier was from – well, not from but had moved to – the Philadelphia area.

Mr. Gibbons: We generally regarded him as Joe – our Joe.

Matt Crump: You mention that you were on a first-name basis with him in the article, right? You met him, right?

Mr. Gibbons: I met his son. IHM used to have dances on Friday nights, and me and my friends used to always go. And back then you could hitchhike and be relatively safe. So a buddy of mine going to the dance...we were in high school and they still had CYO dances...and we were hitchhiking, and Marvis, Joe’s son, picked us up, and we were just beyond excited.

Matt Crump: In a way Muhammad Ali seemed like a god-like figure the way people were talking about him, and I love Muhammad Ali, but I know that you were rooting for Joe.

Mr. Gibbons: Yeah, I’ll give some personal reflections on that. [Aside to Mr. Corrigan: You remember that fight.] It was just...the biggest thing. Back then, I think there were really four major sports – baseball, football, college football, and boxing. It’s since veered away from that. But that fight was so huge. If you can imagine, I was in fourth grade when that fight happened, and the *nuns* were talking about it to each other. That’s how big the fight was.

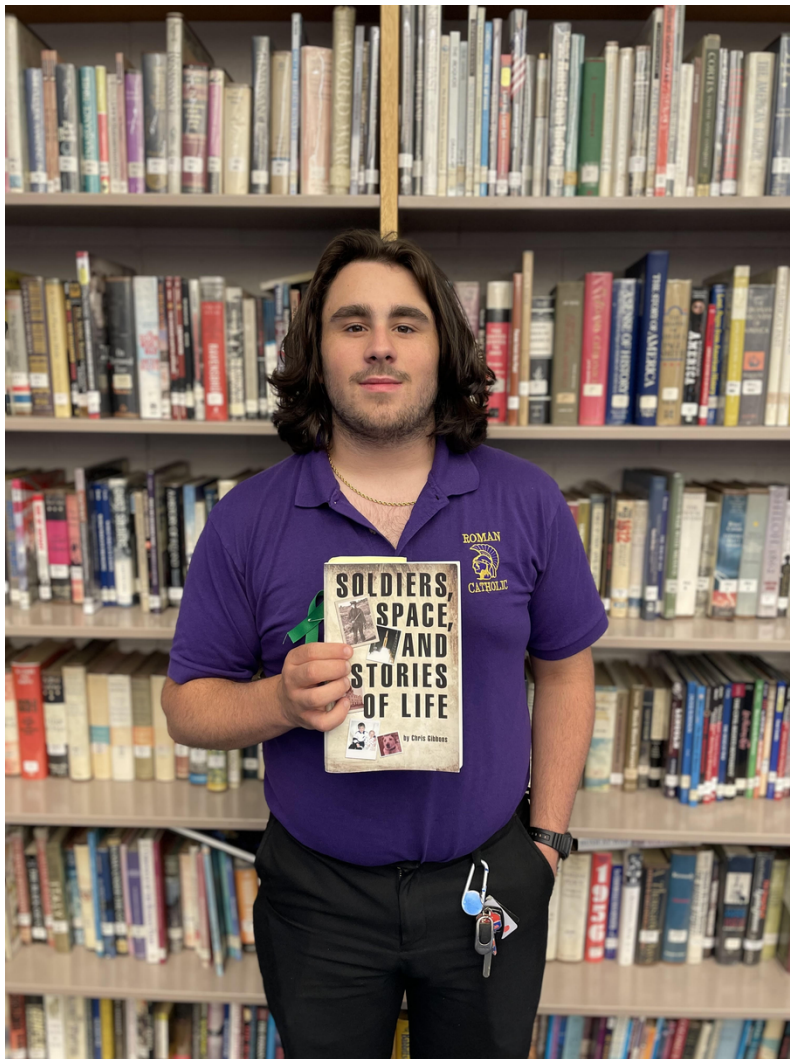
The other thing is I never, ever in my life saw a color photograph in the newspaper until the day after that fight. The front page of *The Inquirer* had a color photo of Joe after he knocked him down. So that fight was just huge.

And you mention Muhammad Ali. You have to understand at that time, he was not as beloved as he became. He was a very polarizing figure. He had the people that loved him, but there were tons that hated him too. And people were generally split for that fight right down the line. It was later that I began to get a new respect for him as time went by. When that fight happened, I hated him. But by the time in the 1990s when he was well retired, I recognized how great he was, and I liked him. So it was weird how I shifted.

Pride

Matt Crump: What was the atmosphere like in Philadelphia after the fight from what you experienced? How were people reacting to Frazier's win?

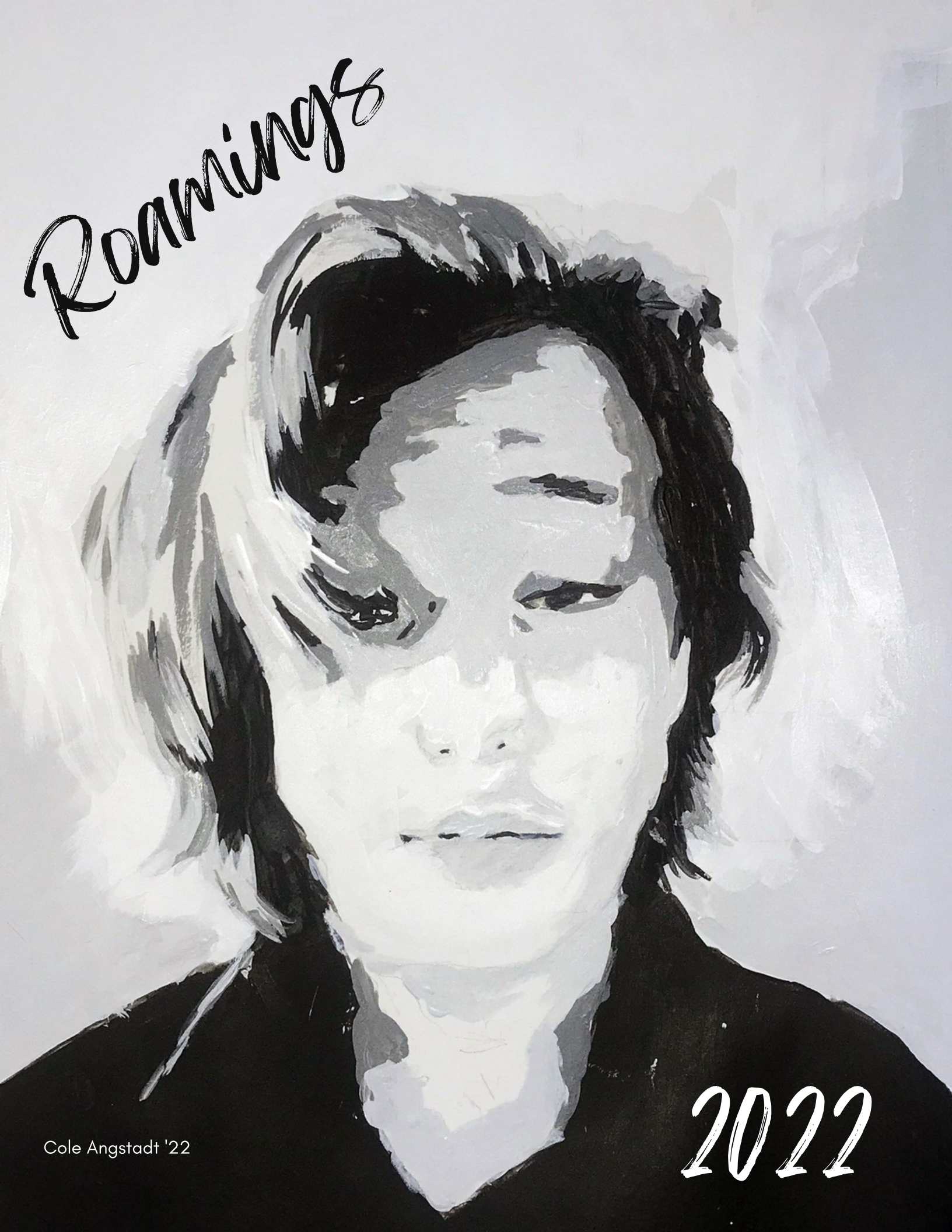
Mr. Gibbons: Well, we were all ecstatic of course. But again, even in Philadelphia, it was split. I hate to say it, but it was split generally along racial lines. You generally had African-Americans - even in Philadelphia - not all of them, but a lot supporting Muhammad Ali because they viewed him as someone they sort of looked up to more than Joe. But in my neighborhood, we were fully for Joe. So we were just ecstatic. As you saw in my afterward [to "The Fight of the Century"], we were just in tears after Joe lost to George Forman. And what was odd about that was we viewed Ali as a little bit of a hero because he got back at George Forman for us for beating Joe. So it was kind of weird that it was part of the whole evolution of us liking Muhammad Ali.



James DeMarco '22

*Use the QR code to listen
to the entire "
Stories of Life" discussion
from February 18, 2022.*





Roamings

2022