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Acquaintances, Companions and Those Called Friends

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2021

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## Abstract

### Acquaintances, Companions and Those Called Friends

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This project explores the topic of friendship, as a modern fact of life and a cultural constant. It is comprised of personal reflections, short stories, and poems, presenting friendship from various perspectives like a Picasso painting. The Prologue is a personal introduction to the project and the various reasons I arrived at it, as well as offering the logistics of the project. The Introduction begins with a brief historical overview of the topic of friendship, extending from classical Antiquity to the social media culture the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The second half of the Introduction explains and makes a case for the hybrid form in which I present my findings and reflections. Along the way, this project addresses readers, inviting them to consider their own friendships and how they have evolved.

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I would like to first acknowledge Christ who has led me through life and most especially the last four years, tumultuous and glorious as they have been, without whom there would be no honors or thesis or friends or talent.

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Finally, I will acknowledge myself, because none of this would have been present without my willingness to dive into new territory. I have done well, so I will indulge myself with thanks.

You, reader, also get an acknowledgement, I did it all for you.

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## Prologue

Recently, I participated in a conversation with the poet, Cathy Park Hong, as she was discussing her latest book, *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*. She discussed her process of trying to write the ugliness of racism and identity, first as poetry, then as fiction, and finally as this collection of non-fiction essays. The whole project was a tennis match to see which serve could get over the net, which form could answer her questions. This thesis is my tennis match, and the topic is an offshoot of my journey with separateness.

An only child, raised by a single mother with intermittent glimpses of a father with far too many friends that stole away his time, I grew up alone. My Jamaican childhood was idyllic, with two-day vacations to private beaches and afternoons in mango trees, legs dangling and a plaid tunic sticky with sap. After we let go of our helper, Ms. Ilene, I spent summers alone in our apartment watching *America's Next Top Model*, using my face as a palette and pretending to be a boy. On those odd days when I wanted company, I would call my Aunt and ask her to come get me so I could play with my cousin Julian, who was also my best friend. I lost him last December, kidney failure, he was a year younger than me. The rest of the year, I went to school and to my dance academy; I was in the choir and I acted in school plays; I did sign language at church and that is what Sundays were for anyway. I had friends, but I never spent time with them past the school gates. Of course, I would have preferred to take my relationships out on the town, but I was also fine with leaving them where they were. I understood that we lived too far apart to walk safely and most mums and dads worked into the evenings on weekdays, and my weekends were for dance and church, so there was no time for friends outside of school.

I had a lot of Justine time, and mummy time, and Jesus time, so I didn't register a need for anyone else. I got a variety of experiences from my numerous family members and didn't expect anything past a funny conversation or field-trip companionship from my school



mates. My life was separate; I had a public persona and a private persona, and they didn't need to mingle. But university life forces them into collision, and it has been difficult for me to remain grounded at times, in my identity apart from the validation of others.

Entering University meant my life was now a combination of home and school life. I was away from my family because I lived on campus, which meant I was in control of my time. I could do what I wanted like pursue non-family friendships and work on being a Christian. The problem is that I had never had so much peer to peer interaction and I began to see my peers as fickle, too focused on themselves, academics and hedonism. My expectations had been skewed by my friendships with my family members, who were usually older: aunts, uncles, cousins, my mum. When your family members are also your friends there is always a reason to persist in the relationship, with non-family friends the reasons aren't biological but manufactured and upheld by all parties involved, otherwise the relationships dissolve. I wanted everything to be spontaneous and organic, which worked out for the first two years, but afterward I had to learn how to plan social time and prioritize the other people in the relationship.

After a depressive fall semester during my junior year and a long separation from my friends due to the Corona virus I had to take stock of myself and my bad attitudes. I reflected on my selfishness and obstinance in refusing to schedule time with those I called my friends. I learned to love them the way they received it best rather than the way I liked to give it. Recognizing my shortcomings and trying to change was and is still hard, but the people I do it for feel more appreciated and valued. The problem with a schedule is that it feels stifling to me. Planning my social interactions feels awkward and boring, it's an activity that feels too adult for me, but these feelings are fading with maturity and an orientation toward relationship

maintenance. I am still working on this flawed perception of scheduled interactions, but I care to see the faces of my friends, so I continue to do it.

When my mother and I moved to the United States, I was almost 13. I don't suffer from homesickness so I adjusted well. School was appalling to me as I had come from a mannerly private school atmosphere into what I experienced as a wild, outlaw community. My first friend came in the form of another Jamaican student with whom I felt a welcome similitude. Once we hid in the cabinet of the art room during a school pep rally so that we wouldn't have to attend. That was grade 8. I moved to a more diverse community for high school and made a few acquaintances from the swim team; I say 'acquaintance' because they haven't stuck around. I realize now may be the best time to define what I mean by acquaintance, and companion. An acquaintance is a person I know in passing, someone whom I have probably met while engaging in one of my regular activities: a club member, a classmate, a colleague, my favorite coffeeshop barista. A companion is one that I engage with precisely for the duration of a journey, perhaps we continue a friendship afterward, but usually not. These are people I meet on outings: my companion from England or those I met in South Korea even my hiking buddy on a monthly club hike.

Finally, the reason I am writing this piece, "friends." I have always comprehended a great deal in the term, 'friend': a commitment to love and protect a similar enough companion. It is a dense term to me: one who considers herself as having only two real friends at this moment in time, the two friends that I have always had, my mother and Jesus. The term friend sags with grief now in the final semester of college, having been seared by the split affections of those I considered my people. I don't blame them for being concerned about themselves and their future, I just thought there would be room in there for our relationship to take priority. My college

experience has been a scattered one, each fall has been marred by some tragic turn of events: personal illness and stress, my father's cancer and passing, my pastor's sudden death, and I have learned through absent messages to let go of those who do not want to be present in my story.

I have realized that I am apart from others, whether by artificial walls or emotional divides or by intense modes of feeling that others just can't grip with their minds. This thesis came about as a way of exploring my experience of friendship and its distance from my ideal. It is about being alone as much as it is about being in relationship. I write about friendship as the ideal state of connection that humanity strives for, of unity and harmony and justice, because I wanted to focus on the great potential of friendship.

As much as others have not been able to latch onto me and we haven't been able to intertwine our lives in an endeavor of friendship, so too have I struggled to grasp the concept of friendship. It is a 'sweaty concept,' a term coined by the British Australian scholar, Sara Ahmed, who describes this kind of laborious process for her blog, *The Feminist Killjoy*. She states, "A 'sweaty concept' might be one that comes out of a bodily experience that is difficult, one that is 'trying,' and where the aim is to keep exploring and exposing this difficulty, which means also aiming not to eliminate the effort or labour from the writing" (par. 3). Ahmed, who writes on critical race theory, feminist, queer and post-colonial theory was highlighting the difficulty with which she came to certain subjects, the struggle of understanding something that had been discharged as a weapon to harm your sense of self and isolate you from the world.

I approached the concept of friendship with melancholy, not knowing whether I had any authority to speak when my life reflects nothing of the relationships I champion. But why not speak when no one has stolen my tongue and I still choose to pursue others knowing my pursuit may be in vain.

This thesis is a journey through a series of tunnels and detours, and its focus has been found through accidents. In the same way that Ahmed describes her process of exploring her subject as “a way of being redirected by what we encounter, by what we happen to find when we follow things wherever they go” (par. 6). I decided early on that this would not be so formal an endeavor as searching out several scholarly sources in a library or database, but rather a series of intimate portraits of friendship at the college level. I needed freedom and what the Vietnamese-American scholar and writer, Viet Thanh Nguyen calls, “narrative plentitude.” This is the concept he created while writing about the myriad of Vietnam war movies that Hollywood has put out. It is a way of exploding the box that confines a subject, by presenting it from every angle that you can imagine, kind of like a Picasso painting. I wanted a diversity of voices, so I focused on international students and their experiences. I imagined that they would have share the peculiar alienation I had felt but also challenge my view of friendship. This exercise also revealed just how universal notions of friendship are, shown in the fact that many of my interviewees said the same things. The greater part of this project is in my preferred medium, fiction and poetry, which is a rebellion against the scientific, research driven space that I have inhabited for the last four years. I do not think in sequence but walk through trackless fields of association. The formal introductory essay is a springboard from which I launch into strange tales and imaginary scenarios of friendship, each being a sound byte from one or several of my interviews. I have taken inspiration from class readings, movies, peers, television series, other stories and fairytales in order to craft this thesis. I have become a mad hatter in my own right following this project, as I have been historian, journalist, poet, and therapist to myself in the process.

To delve into the details of the interview process, I sent out a survey of about ten questions to the entire international undergraduate listserv, with the help of the International Student Office. The questions were demographic (name, cultural background, school year), as well as specific (do you have friends, what is friendship to you, and is that definition personal or cultural). I got 66 responses, yet fewer than half were willing to have a conversation about their experiences. I chose eight people to interview based on creating a wide geographic area, China, South Korea, West Africa, Europe, Latin America, and India. I just wanted to make sure I got a voice from the four corners of the earth, and I had no interest in focusing on one region. A few people never responded or did not show for the interview so I ended up conducting five formal interviews in all, supplemented by several informal conversations with friends.

The formal interviews were always over Zoom so that I could record the conversations for later viewing. This was a difficult medium to work in as my brain and theirs had to contend with the absence of body. Some of the interviews were less informative than others and I chalked that up to the difficulty of opening up to the cold screen and inanimate camera of a laptop. Conversations were whenever we could fit them into one another's schedule and lasted they lasted about an hour, though I did have two interviews that lasted more than two hours and those were my favorites, because we had so much in common that there was always fuel for the conversation. All my conversations were lively enough, even with the nervous first year students who, though stuck in their rooms most of the week, welcomed the opportunity to talk about themselves with an interested senior. I introduce each of my interview participants in the five lesson chapters. They each have their own vignette prior to the fictional stories and the person that first sparked the general idea of the story will be the one featured. The stories

themselves are amalgamations of all the conversations because I allowed my brain to incorporate associations whenever they occurred.

This project is a polymorphic production of average proportions. It is not exclusively, or even primarily interview-based. It does not rely on one form to bring its point across but rather uses the range of materials at its disposal: interview, essay, fiction, poetry, movies, song. It aims to be easy reading, a short story rather than a novel with a focal plot. The theme is friendship, and each mode of writing serves a different purpose. The interviews were necessary to maintain motivation in the lonely season of online learning as well as functioning as a stream of lively outside opinions. They provided diversity of thought in real time, as opposed to reading articles and essays from people, dead or alive, who I had no access to.

**Introduction:**  
**Those Called Friends...**

“Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” John 15.13

(KJV)

This Body of Work

This body of work began as a box of soggy matches in my pocket,  
I could hardly begin my arsonist dream-works with them,  
wet and smooshed as they were in the brain nonsense of my head.

They began as a question,  
I am hardly able to get anywhere with a question.  
What is friendship, what is a friend, who is a friend?  
So, I began with an answer, “It’s a person”  
And what is a person but a collection of stories.

People are boxes of matches, ready if you won’t smash them  
or smoosh them, or confine them to words and sin, taxes and strictures.

I began with the head, dull prospect,  
I moved into the trunk, the bulk, the lungs, the legs  
and with a spring of its feet, it leapt forward.

This body of work began as a question, fiddling around in my brain,  
knocking about in my head, it wouldn't settle down, I couldn't get to bed.  
And one night it hooked somewhere, found a lodging and began to sprout.

This body of work began as a box of wet matches,  
housed in the dampness of my mind.

I let the matches spill into the open air, let them dry for a moment  
A moment of several months, and finally  
they were ready to blaze a trail through 70 pages.

The sparks formed feet, and boots, and began stomping around my room.  
Running off in every direction, clutching all my attention between minuscule fingers,  
plump and peach, skipping and groaning, until it came back and stared me in the eyes.

Surely a friend is not a friend until they've worked on you,  
worked on you, soul and body.

My idea ran back to me, having become body and soul,  
"I am your friend, and you are my body of work."



**Friendship: When & What? Why & Who?**

The endeavor of this essay is to explore the realm of Relationship. The most universal and transforming territory of which, is friendship, because a friend is essential for the journeys of life, and their presence changes you, for better or worse. One of the core needs of a human is to connect, and thinking of it biologically, if we fail to connect, we fail to live, individually and collectively. We attach in order to survive and thrive. Our need to attach led us to form settled civilizations with governments and schools and churches. Friendship is connection at an individual level; it is a self-sacrificing endeavor for the good of the other and it is all that remains at the end of one's life. I will not attempt to fasten a single definition to the term 'friendship', though I will emphasize certain historical conceptions of friendship. This introduction serves as a historical survey of three questions: What is friendship? Why are friends valuable? Who is a friend?

The first half of this journey takes place in antiquity, and is centered on Greek, Roman and early Christian thought. The discussion is populated by male thinkers since much of the intellectual exchange during this period took place in the public realm, in which women had little or no presence. The second half of the conversation moves us further along in history to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and shifts our attention to the private realm, where women dominate. Finally, we come to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where the introduction of social media makes the private public.

Since knowledge became a valuable commodity, philosophers have examined human life and advocated the value of friendship as necessary for the thriving of humanity. One of the earliest forays into the topic of friendship is Plato's dialogue, *Lysis*. It attempts to discuss what friendship is, and how one becomes a friend, but Socrates challenges all definitions that arise. The only certain one is that genuine friendship relies on the reciprocation of genuine love

for the other, not pretense. For greater clarity, Plato's Socrates likens true friendship to philosophy, the love of knowledge, and false friendship to sophistry, the use of deceptive arguments. In short, for Socrates friendship is the reciprocation of genuine, rather than pretentious love.

Let me swiftly move on to Aristotle, a pupil of Plato, who expounds on these earlier thoughts on friendship in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle remarks that friends are most "necessary for our life" as rich and poor alike need friends equally, though their reasons are slightly different (VIII.1). The poor need friends as refuge and the rich need them as beneficiaries and protectors of their prosperity; even legislators need friendship, as in friendship there is no need for justice because "justice that is most just seems to belong to friendship" (VIII.1). Aristotle goes on to propose three kinds of friendship: utility, pleasure, and virtue. The first two are easily dissolved when the usefulness and pleasure fade, but the last endures so long as the participants share virtue (VIII.2-3). Aristotle also calls this kind of relationship: complete or perfect friendship in the sense that they have their telos or goal in themselves, that is, they do not need anything else to be added to them from outside. However, I would like to propose that the first two, namely utility and pleasure, are but acquaintanceships and companionships as they do not rely on intimate knowledge of another's character in the same way that friendship does. From Socrates to Aristotle, we can observe a shift from individual to social interaction, as Aristotle is inclined to define friendship as an instrumental relationship based on mutual gain.

Further expanding on this idea of shared virtue or excellence<sup>1</sup> as the foundation for true friendship, Roman philosophers Cicero and Seneca, reject the idea of friendship as arising out of

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<sup>1</sup> The Greek word *arete* connotes the excellence or good functioning of anything: an axe, a table, a hand, or person.

need, but rather see it as a feature of human nature, a capacity of self-sufficiency. Cicero's view, as written in *De Amicitia*, is far loftier and more restrictive than Aristotle's. He proposes that friendship is a true affection shared only by the virtuous and insists that it is more essential than water and fire (V.20- VI.22). To Cicero, friendship is "complete sympathy in all matters of importance, plus goodwill and affection" and capable of aspiring to such completeness because each friend is something of a model of the other (VI). Cicero's view is reflective of some of the views expressed on my survey when students were asked to define friendship: the desire to see and aid in a person's flourishing because they remind you of yourself.

Seneca's view is like Aristotle's in that he discusses the nobility of real friendship, friendship for its own sake, but unlike Aristotle he dismisses utility and pleasure as marks of friendship. He proposes that friends are desires of the wise, but not necessities, which seems to be an incomplete view of the matter, because a man with no friends seems to be the worst of all, and I mean friends in the Aristotelian sense, as alliances for both rich and poor. Seneca also differs from Cicero in saying that a wise man desires and may have many friends, as making friends is better than maintaining friendships, but this too seems a flippant or incomplete view of friends. Seneca would have you make as many friends as possible and keep none of them, which would leave you feeling emptier than if you had just stayed to yourself to begin with. Also, a person cannot sustain depth in too many relationships as that is quite taxing on the soul, which may be what he was considering with his comment about maintaining friendships. In short, Seneca would have no friends, only acquaintances, because he would not be willing to put in the time of effort it takes to really know someone.

Though friendship always maintained a divine aspect for the old philosophers, that aspect becomes a central focus of contemplation after the entrance of Jesus into history and as

Christianity began to travel the known world. The context in the early centuries AD shifted the consideration of friendship from a social one to a spiritual one, with the flourishing of the soul taking a prominent place. Christian philosophers and theologians began to think of friendship from the perspective of a single creator - God - who made humanity to be in relationship with him and each other. Aelred of Rievaulx, a medieval Christian thinker, and Thomas Aquinas, an Italian Catholic philosopher, agreed on many points in their thoughts about friendship. They considered friendship a spiritual endeavor, with its roots in charity, but extending far beyond this divine principle. They considered nearness to God and, therefore, love of God and others to be the foundation of affection for one's neighbor, who could become a friend. Aelred, however, considered friendship to be distinguished from universal love (charity) in its intimacy with the other. For Aelred there is no other friendship but this intimate affection for the soul of the other, and all other modes (utility and pleasure) are corrupted relationships. Aquinas agrees on this latter point and calls these lesser friendships base and selfish, ultimately considering them a "love of concupiscence"<sup>2</sup>. For the Christian, love and friendship are aspects of the divine character and therefore ideals which we live by though unattainable fully within ourselves in this existence. The mark of love and friendship is self-sacrifice and concern for the well-being of the other. Furthermore, Aelred holds that a friend is the guardian of the spirit, someone who knows the secrets of their friend's soul. In conclusion, the early Christian thinkers saw friendship as two souls being bound together, sharing intimacy and affection, with an end in pushing each other toward God.

Jumping forward in time to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and across the world to the United States, we enter the private realm and must now engage with feminine writing if the sketch is to be a truer

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<sup>2</sup> Pakaluk, 147

and more comprehensive painting of friendship. The earlier philosophers thought of friendship as an idealized state and therefore were little concerned with the material world, often speaking of goodwill and intimacy and affection, but rarely illustrating that in life. Coming back to the women of 19<sup>th</sup> century America, they are more concerned with the physical manifestation of friendship rather than the ideal of friendship. In letters, they opt for descriptions of their friends and what they do for each other to elucidate the depth of their relationships. I think that this is more impactful than discussing ideals when it comes friendship, and that is what I have tried to achieve in my poems and stories.

Though women were historically excluded from any gathering of minds, they held just as important a role in social dynamics as their husbands, brothers and sons. In her essay, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” Carrol Smith-Rosenberg discusses the consuming nature of female friendships, which were bound to be formed in that peculiar, gendered isolationism of polite Anglo-American society. These friendships, often formed between female relatives and their female offspring, were “deeply felt,” “highly structured,” and “an essential aspect of American society”<sup>3</sup>. These friendships, as recorded in the letters of women to each other, show that women had a poet’s tongue and charm, using the language of lovers more often than not. The problem for the historian, as Rosenberg states, is that of “method and interpretation” as the historian cannot enter a discussion of same-sex relationships without the possibility of lurking eroticism, thanks to Freud, and then perhaps the friendship is tainted with ulterior sexual motives. The artist has no such problems, able to see that lurking eroticism, makes no difference at all so long as mutual affection and commitment to the other’s well-being is constant. If anything, the ardor

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<sup>3</sup> Rosenberg, 2

of the language reveals the loneliness of female life without the warmth of another's heart, and so often that desire was quelled by the only consistently pleasant - I mean present companion, another woman.

These relationships had their hardships like any other however, most often being forced to separate due to the jobs of their husbands, which continues to plague many friendships today. The strain of choice and priority will forever remain a tenuous negotiation with the egos of those in your lives. Should my romantic partner of five minutes be given as much space in my life as my best friend of five years? This may be an unhelpful comparison but it is the situation for many people who have chosen to structure their lives around another person who is not their spouse. Jealousy is the mistress of new romances when a friend clearly has a larger portion of a person's heart. In a story for *The Atlantic*, writer Rhaina Cohen poses the question, "What If Friendship, Not Marriage, Was at the Center of Life?" I agree that friendship should be the basis of life because so often friendships outlast romantic entanglements and marriages. I am of the opinion that one should marry one's very best friend, though that is not the modern basis of romantic attachments. The problem seems to be that these things are thought of as separate and independent entities, as if a person can genuinely compartmentalize their relationships like different files on a computer. As a fully involved, non-sexual partner, a friend should be seen as the equivalent of a spouse. A friend dying is "tantamount to losing a spouse" and results in the loss a piece of yourself, the piece that only your friend could bring out<sup>4</sup>. A friend is like a super-sleuth, able to find games and new smiles and toys that you never knew you had among the storage. Many people who have never had such an intimate connection are not able to fathom the loss that takes place; friends take those smiles to the grave.

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<sup>4</sup> Cohen, par. 20

In *The Four Loves*, C.S. Lewis devotes a whole chapter to the discussion of friendship as a neglected portion of human interactions. He calls friendship a drawing apart together from the herd as it begins with a “What? You too?” He argues that the importance of friendship in the modern world, 1960’s England, has been displaced and ignored as an inferior form of love. He is speaking about romantic or erotic love, and friendship’s subordination to it. This view is what propelled the hardships I discussed previously, in which romantic partners are given priority over friends, even if they have yet to prove their worth, which continues to be a debate. Furthermore, I would say that this assessment, of friendship being a neglected interaction, is even more relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as friendship has become a social media commodity.

In the early 2000’s, social value was quantified by Facebook ‘friends’, but now influence is the prize and social value is measured in ‘followers’. People are lonelier now than ever before, and that’s because we are failing to connect in valuable ways. We isolate and socialize online and Zoom has replaced the café and classroom, our peers replace parents and we are faced with constant stressors. Dr. Gabor Mate, a family care physician with a focus on child development and parenting, would suggest that this crisis begins in childhood, a stage that is crucial to the development of healthy adults. Neglectful parents create anxious and neglectful children who grow without a sure foundation of love and are unable to cultivate healthy friendships. Social media is only a part of the problem, it is peer prioritization<sup>5</sup>.

It is clear that there exists an order to our relationships, just as there is an order to life. Human beings need to attach, and we have known and observed as much throughout history,

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<sup>5</sup> In their book *Hold on to Your Kids* Dr. Mate and his co-author, Dr. Gordon Neufeld explain that “children today increasingly look to their peers for direction—their values, identity, and codes of behavior. This “peer orientation” undermines family cohesion, interferes with healthy development, and fosters a hostile and sexualized youth culture. Children end up becoming overly conformist, desensitized, and alienated.”

what may have been unclear is how much our friendships depend on our stability of mind and pursuit of virtue. We owe our friends concern for their well-being and our unselfish attention. These traits begin in childhood, and a healthy attachment to our parents is perhaps the single greatest aid in our journey to form friendships. We need security to cling responsibly to our friends so as not to drown them in our identity or dissolve into theirs. Friends are necessary for the flourishing of our minds and the joy of our hearts, we need their presence as much as we need their support and in an era marked by pandemic isolation we must prioritize friendly interaction and savor the moments we share until we have bodies again.

### **In Defense of Stories and Poems**

The academy may seem very soulless and logical at this moment in time, with many senior projects imagined in the form of fifty-page persuasive and esoteric essays with only the faintest tinge of the student's imagination, but it was at one time created as a space dedicated to imaginative inquiry and exposition. Plato, Cicero, Socrates and Seneca all favored dialogues, stories and letters when discussing grand ideals and concepts. Their discourses on the natural world usually received more formal treatment, but in topics such as justice, truth or friendship, at the heart of which is humanity's relation to each other, for these they constructed narratives and conversations to illustrate their points.

Furthermore, a greater authority than these prefers the potency of story to the impartial narrative or tedium of analytical essays. The religious books of Islam, Judaism and Christianity are primarily ancient storybooks and yet they contain the secrets of the universe, of living, and of God. In history, nothing outlasts a good story, nothing teaches like a good tale. This is the reason that Greek epics survive, and Shakespeare is lauded as one of the most important figures in



human history. In short, Aristotle calls friendship a virtue, and following the lead of Jesus, the best way to explain a virtue is with a story.

In his book, *The Literary Mind*, cognitive scientist and linguist Mark Turner declares that “Narrative imagining — story — is the fundamental instrument of thought. Rational capacities depend upon it. It is our chief means of looking into the future, or predicting, of planning, and of explaining.” For this reason, we often give children whimsical literature, fill their rooms with Dr. Seuss’ fantastical and imaginary beasts, encourage them to play pretend and tuck them in with an adventure, because it is understood that stories make the best teachers. Clara knows that kindness is a good practice because Cinderella was kind to those who were mean and she married a prince. Lacan knows to be wary of strangers because Little Red Riding Hood was stalked by a wolf who ate her grandmother. I know that cleverness is an asset because Anansi the spider can outwit all his enemies and have fun in the process<sup>6</sup>. We need stories to tell us about ourselves and our world. Sue Monk Kidd, author of *The Secret Life of Bees*, describes it best when she says, “Stories have to be told or they die, and when they die, we can’t remember who we are or why we’re here.”

Though academia has deviated from this path, for reasons apparent enough but impossible for me to articulate here, as I would be out of my depth, I will continue the tradition of presenting thoughtful narratives that at first entertain and amuse, but then linger and disturb. The stories that you will encounter in the following pages are for your imagination because, as Blaise Pascal puts it, “the heart has its reasons that reason does not know.”

The importance of story is all too familiar territory to educators, and I have no need to trail that wagon. I prefer to enter the conversation as a person, not a student of the academy,

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<sup>6</sup> Anansi the spider is a character in Jamaican folk tales, appearing in many stories, across multiple locations and timelines.

and I would expect that you, reader, enter the tales as a person, as a storyteller yourself. I know that you at the table, in conversations, during the holidays, do not sit and discuss just the formula that you discovered in the lab, but the context of the discovery. You sit and recount the sleepless months of research and the chill of the office, the coffee spilling on your trousers and the rabbit eared textbook leaves, the partner that is as silent as the rest amid musical notes, and the one that only speaks in pun, the moment that everything clicked and you sat down to write your findings. The entirety of your life is a story that you tell, in which you reminisce, on which you reflect and learn and grow and change. Just as Shakespeare describes in *As You like It*,

“All the world’s a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances;  
And one man in his time plays many parts”.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to narratives, I have chosen to include poems of reflection after each lesson. The poems are intended to slow down the comprehension process as well as to expand the moment of feeling, of being in the lesson. In “Poetry is/and (the) Political,” Hélène Cixous writes that poetry is a “lesson in slowness” and writing a “practice of unveiling”<sup>8</sup>. These lessons need patience in order to appear as they are, in full embodiment of themselves. It takes no time at all to read an analytical essay if the thesis statement is clear because the direction and nature of the paper is outlined without apparent ambiguity. This is a falsehood to me and the essay leaves far more questions than it could hope to answer. It entraps ideas and presents them in straitjackets, immobile and sedated. Friendship requires a warmer reception, greater freedom to browse the halls of your intellect. It needs ample time, and a wide place to make its approach because it is an intimate subject that is

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<sup>7</sup> Shakespeare, Act II. Scene VII

<sup>8</sup> Cixous, 1-2

so close, it remains unseen and you need to receive it with patience, in all its ambiguity. I would like you reader to ponder the multiplicity of my stories and the precision of my poetry as we explore the nature of those called 'friends'.

### **My Friend, My Locket**

What shall I call you, honey?

You're a hell of a time, one of a kind easter bunny.

No, more like my rum-soaked joyride and my two-speed motor.

You're my apple butter in coffee promoter.

You prefer pie, have a twitchy eye,

and a crooked molar on the left side.

Got a laugh like a startled cat fleeing from a gang of rats.

I met you down an alley, where you accosted me for money,

But only to buy some chewing guns- gum and sunnies.

Never imagined I'd get mugged by someone who likes maple syrup on rice,

Or slightly warm oolong tea with a thumb of allspice.

## Lesson 1:

### On Time and Distance

These narratives are the long and short of the last four years and lingering questions about my time in university. These have certainly been an exhilarating and strained four years, though invaluable in their contribution to my growth as an individual and rebel, striking out into the world in the next few months.

In the last year, the corona virus has shown me how much I value presence. The immediate and intrusive is far more valuable to me than any other aspect of a person. I need my friends to be immediately at hand or intrusive in their communication. I need a constant reminder that you are here, or there, for me, in order to continue any relationship with peace of mind. I have often thought of this as shallow, but honestly, I have no trust for people who don't care to show up in my life. You can't very well tell me that you are my friend, when I haven't heard from you in two months, and you haven't responded to my text messages.

Time and distance test the quality of connections, and thus far I have realized that I have misidentified acquaintances as friends, like Aristotle does with friendships of pleasure. I comprehend a great deal in the idea of friendship, that of a commitment toward the well-being of the other person, toward fun and excitement in relaxed times, rags and shoulders in somber times, and attentive ears and sound advice in anxious times. This is like Montaigne's ideal of friendship in which two people blend souls and create a new color, but mine is tempered by the knowledge that a commitment so complete can only originate from God. I know not to expect perfection from people, so I lower the expectation, but not so low that I expect nothing from my peers.

I had a horrid fall, my third year at Emory. I dealt with massive blows to my psyche in the form of a dying father and the re-emergence of repressed childhood trauma. I began going to therapy and my counselor was very handsome and soft-spoken so I enjoyed our weekly sessions. Maybe two weeks into dealing sorting through the coals, my roommate began to distance herself from me emotionally. She stopped speaking to me casually, only ever asking pointed questions about this or that in the room or chores or logistics. I tried speaking to her about it and she said she just needed some space because she felt depleted. I said okay and did my best to give her space.

Even a week later when I was distraught following a visit with my father, I couldn't talk to her because she still needed space. I withdrew completely because I could handle it with my counselor and my god. I leaned into my other friends and our apartment became awkward. We eventually made up but nothing has really changed. When I left in the spring, I barely heard from my friends, I initiated most conversations and just felt distant. Through the pandemic I fell off the earth, which is what I say when I lose contact with the outside. Even now as a fourth year, I am uncomfortable now with my "friends" because they have one again become strangers. If we are friends, there is no distance because we commit to staying in touch. We aren't lazy and we swim against the tide that would take us out to sea. The longer we are apart the greater the joy at reunion. But one person can't sustain a relationship because they will fall apart under the weight of loneliness and let the tide carry them away. I have been sea debris for a while now.

Here I would like to introduce my first contributor, Jake, the South Korean graduate who inspired this story of a failed homecoming. He told me that he is now learning the lessons that his grandparents taught him in childhood, and we had a good laugh about the necessity of

distance in revealing the character of people you cherish. As Seneca would agree, it illustrates the difficulty of maintaining friendships.

## After War

Yu laid down in the moss field, gunfire cracking in the air above him. His kingdom had been at war for sixty-two summers and this was his seventh month away from home. Stilo, the sniper, had given him his headphones to sleep, but he continued to twitch with every shot. He couldn't hear anything but the ground shook with each fire of the enemy's canons.

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Now Yu came from an important family and his grandfather was a kingdom official, and the kingdom was wonderful but as the people watched and listened and followed everyone else jealousy brewed among the citizens. Everyone wanted to be better than their neighbor, and their brother, and their classmates. They all competed for the best place at school, at university, at the office, the best clothes, the most money, a foreign car, a foreign education, all this the people pursued with ferocity. But the people did love each other, and many hardships had taught them to be generous, but prosperity came with comparison and burdened their hearts which were full of a perfumed poison.

While Yu lived in the kingdom of Eya, he was a young boy, so the envy of the adults let him be, but once he moved to the more affluent foreign kingdoms of Ada and Tes, the Eyan parents hated him very much and told their children to avoid him. The Eyans knew that he was the grandson of a kingdom official and hated him for it. Yu was a butterfly and had many friends and knew many people. He was often happy when he was in company, but the Eyan parents turned many of his friends against him and told lies about him. The adults felt threatened by him and said he was a bully and almost got him thrown out of school. The poison of Eya had followed Yu, but he continued to befriend everyone and eventually left the rotten adults behind.

When Yu went on to university, he blossomed even more. He befriended the entire student body and was never alone. All the residents knew his name and he was very popular. Yu had learned the corrosive nature of envy on a relationship, because it had ruined much of his childhood and adolescence, so he tried to stay away from those kinds of people. He became very selective with the Eyan students he called 'friend' because any one of them could have carried the green monsters in their suitcases or behind their dimples and honeyed words.

Two years in and he had some solid relationships: lots of people to pass the time with or unload the burdens of his heart, but his time at this place was coming to a close, as he was called back home to Eya to join the war effort. His friends threw him a grand celebration in the center of the university grounds and he danced into the twilight dawn surrounded by friends and lovers. They carried him to the train station and said their farewells, promising to write and call and stay in touch.

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Yu twitched between sleep and the smog covered morning in siege territory. Stilo had been keeping watch while he slept, and soon began shaking Yu awake. "I can see them in the scope. Starting packing up." They had been camping at the top of the hill overlooking the enemy valley, and sent reports to their base about the other side's activities.

Stilo packed up his rifle and scope, while Yu packed the camping gear. They stole down the rocky hill and began the two-mile river jog to their base. When they arrived they went straight to debrief with their captain, a ten-minute conversation in which Yu barely spoke. They then headed to the canteen and finally to their bunks. Mail had been delivered and Yu got a package. His spirits lifted as he cautiously opened the box from Tes. He quickly read the small note on the lid; it was from his brother. He closed the box and went to sleep.



The next year passed in much the same way, each month he would receive a package from either his mom or brother until two months before he was to return to Tes for a friend's graduation when he received a message. "You know graduation is in a month, but Rhys and Wen and I are on a train that evening for Ada. Our parents surprised us last minute so we couldn't say no. I know you were supposed to come but..." Yu didn't hear the remainder of the message, he just hung up and walked to his captain's office in the late afternoon shade to rescind his request for leave.

### **When Laughter Ends**

When laughter ends, I am sitting around a dining table  
at a breakfast trial. The odds are unstable  
as the three judges air their complaints over the defendants  
Style, and manner of behavior.

When my stomach has stopped foaming with mirth,  
I am on my bed, after a day in a whiffy nursing home,  
alone with a roommate that cuts me off mid sente-,  
“I already told you stop, and you keeping talking.”

When my zygomaticus major has ceased flexing,  
I am away in a mountain cabin or across the pond  
with a lack of letters and busted laptop thinking  
about whether I am a forgotten entity.

I still think about how I can send you a message in a paper  
plane, and how you sat in the airport smiling like a fool  
thinking back to countless jokes told over 3 frothy chais,  
because our laughter ends but doesn't die.

## Lesson 2:

### On Cultural Differences

I was reading a short story recently, called “Shem and Japheth on the Train,” written in 1889 by a Jewish author. It was a slow portrait of a Jewish family and their Polish companion. The patriarch explains how this Pole began using abusive language and engaging in property damage following some anti-Semitic measures by the government. He thought himself above his Jewish neighbor who was expelled from the country, but soon he was also expelled and discovered that the ruling classes also regarded him as scum. The funny thing is that they had begun as friends, brethren in poverty, but one begins posturing in illusion and ruins the relationship for a time. After they are both exiled and meet by chance, the Jew forgives the Pole and they continue their exodus together, bowing their head toward adversity (Abramovitsh). The author writes the ending with ambiguity as the Pole speaks to the ticket master. The audience doesn’t know what he says and we want to assume it is above board, but because of his past betrayal we cannot be certain.

This may seem bleak, especially following a chapter about abandonment, but I won’t be discussing discrimination here, rather that we all differ in cultural heritage and entrance into relationships. Friendships across these lines can be enriching or damaging, depending on the reception and honesty of the participants. I conducted a short survey with Emory’s international students asking them what a friend was, and the answers were essentially the same. These are people coming from diverse backgrounds, but their idea of friendship is the same. The way they enact friendship may be different, but they all say that it involves intimacy or confident closeness. I say ‘confident’ because you need to be certain that this person has your

best interests at heart in order to get close to them and find out who they are. You need to believe that they are who they claim to be.

Perhaps a person is who they are, but their definition of a friend differs, even slightly, this can create strange dynamics between you. The difference is not always clear to identify, but observation and frank conversations can show the path crooked where it claims to be straight. Sometimes you must disregard popular or traditional opinions in pursuit of connection instead of allowing invisible walls to separate you from a wonderfully abundant world.

Here I will introduce my second contributor Kelyu, a Chinese junior, who spent her time connecting with both native and international students. We spoke about cultural differences and the work that comes with maintaining these different relationships. We bonded over her lively declaration of the importance of food in creating a bond between people regardless of their background.

You may, or at least I hope, recall the Christian thinkers' views on the intimacy of friendship, not regarding the soul, but just the vulnerability or honesty necessary in creating bonds. If not, allow me to elaborate on this point with the following story. It is about what happens when an introduction leads nowhere when the participants thoughts and actions are laden with pretenses and assumptions about the other person and their intentions.

## Getting Nowhere

Rajah met Ben in the summer, under a palm tree, in the middle of an oak forest. Rajah was on vacation with Wilem and Ben was trying to get away from the U. The day was freezing, the draft under the canopy was enough to burn unsuspecting fingertips within a few minutes of exposure. The U had been running missions to the Beat for years, almost four decades and everyone was exhausted. The forest was the only place they didn't have detectors; it was a popular plot of land with employees and lovers and anyone who knew about the detectors in the first place.

“What should I call you? What does anyone call you?”

“Take your pick, I have nothing invested in the outcome, whatever you may decide, just remain consistent”

“Just tell me your name”

“Alright, tell me yours, and you too”

They stood there eyeing each other. It went on like that for thirty-seven minutes, how the time passed so quickly, or how they kept it up, no one will know but eventually all the necessary introductions were made.

I don't like you, your hair smells of metal and your eyes are red, drugs maybe? Lab rat. What should I say, the introduction was such a task, I don't want to waste my time, there's only twenty-three minutes left?

I know you don't like me; I can see it on your lips. Your nose it's... too taut...uncomfortable? But you'll trust me, I know that much. What should I say, the introduction was hard enough? There's no time for this, seventeen minutes isn't a long time.

“Are you from around here?”

“Around where? The only thing here is us, and I don’t know anything about you except your name”

“So, you’re a comedian. Would never have guessed, but you know what I mean, just answer the question”

“Be more specific, I’m not from this forest”

Your little game is getting annoying... “Are you from anywhere that is within a forty-mile radius around this tree?”

“Are you? Do you work around here or are you two on vacation?”

“No, it’s our lunch break, answer the question”

“You and your friend are quite different. So, we are all here on our lunch break? The U?”

“Don’t know what that is.”

What are you getting at? The U isn’t in the business of lunch breaks.

Why so many questions? The U doesn’t allow lunch breaks.

The frosty air was beginning to slide beneath the jackets of the people around the palm tree. It was becoming a bit too comfortable on their skin, settling into their pores and restricting their capillaries. The conversation was pointless, no one had learned anything new and maintaining it any longer would have led to lies flying through the air like dust.

“Are you alone?”

“Are you?”

“How much time do you have?”

“Less than ten minutes”

“So do I”

“It was nice knowing you”

“We didn’t make much progress”

“We didn’t make any progress”

## **Speaking through Walls**

Knock, knock: who's there? *Me*.

Oh, long time no see...

Yea, haven't seen you since I was 23,

And you left me to pursue dreams of notoriety.

Forever to go down in history, in infamy

For blasting through the walls of dignity

To nip-pick, and exact every favor you ever did for me

But- why are you here?

You asked for one brick, I gave you three

I thought you were building a pavilion for you and me,

But it got really lengthy, and you wanted it to be sturdy,

And you kept building it higher like a little birdy,

Until eventually, I couldn't see, and you didn't look for me..

That is until now, when you need money or honey,

Are you lookin' for love from me,

Because sweetie, you built that wall too quick,

It's too thick, you thought you were slick,

But as for honey, everything you say is comin' in funny.

You built a wall of mickey D's McFlurries,

And told me to keep away with my shaved ice and congee.



You never wanted to share a meal with me,  
But hopped in my uber as free company.  
My friends were too noisy, I was too fussy,  
Too homely to be a true homie,  
The apartment walls were as thin as sashimi  
And you couldn't wait for the year to end,  
So you could escape me.

You weren't a friend to me,  
And now you're asking for sympathy?  
Through this ridiculous wall you built so lovingly,  
So dismissively, so dismissing me, a foreign banshee,  
Locking me out of your cement world,  
You didn't intend to return, did you?  
But now you see, the wall isn't for me,  
You built yourself a cage and forgot the key.

### Lesson 3: On Amplification

I would say another way to think about amplification is ‘social reinforcement.’ Most people know the saying: *Show me your friends and I'll tell you who you are.* Which is to say that the prevailing characteristics amongst those in your friend group is an accurate reflection of your individual character. If we come at this from a musical direction, you may be a wonderful bassist, but if the amplifier that you plug into is busted, the poor sound quality will reflect poorly on you. In the same way you may be an exceptional student alone but if you fall into company that amplifies your laziness, your grades will take a nosedive and you'll be in a parent teacher conference where your mother has already sussed out the culprit of your tragic performance lately. You'll be crying because you know she knows and is disappointed in you and that is more painful than all her storm and fury. I was in fifth grade when I learned this lesson.

There are a few memories that come to mind when I think of plugging into the wrong or right communities, both of which came through my time abroad in London and Seoul. When you are alone abroad that is the time to observe yourself and your choices to discern who you really are and what is important to you. I had no ready-made community waiting for me to step into when I arrived in these countries, but through many happy coincidences I found energetic and adventurous people with whom to share my time.

I have two stories to recount, one from each country. My first story is about the time I inadvertently joined a cult. Shocking isn't it. When I went to London I joined a small drama club at my school. I went to practice each week and had dinner with the members, we had a nice thing going. They were all worthwhile individuals as far as I was concerned so I had not reason to be suspicious. I met a young woman called MJ who invited me to a bible study. I said no at

first because I already had a campus ministry that I was invested in, which was also connected to my church that I was attending. Anyway, time passes and in early April, a man approaches me on the school campus and begins proselytizing. I humor him and he also tells me about MJ and her bible study. I relent because why not have more Jesus in my life. I go to an individual meeting with MJ which goes well, not sketchy in the least. I think it's legitimate so I agree to go to the group study two days later. Three other young woman were present, I had no idea how old these people were, they weren't spring chickens though. One of those present took my notebook and said she would take notes for me as she had already been through the study. That was bizarre to me but not threatening. The study ends and I am satisfied enough with the content though it wasn't a feast for the soul. I say see you next time and I leave.

Later that evening, I am walking through Westfield Shopping center and I get a call from one of my drama club mates. He asks me about MJ and why I was with her, another drama club member saw me at the bible study and told him to caution me. He proceeds to tell me that I should stay away from her because she is in a cult. I laugh. He does not laugh. *Are you pranking me right now? Seriously is this a joke?* His tone is somber, he isn't joking. He tells me the name of her church and about how they have been petitioning to remove their organization from the university grounds. I was thrown, and intrigued. I read up about them on the internet, they were in the news, suffice it to say I never saw MJ or any of them ever again. That was a long recounting, but my point is had I not been in the drama club I would not have met MJ, but I would not have met the two young men that were looking out for my well-being. I appreciated them so much more after I found out that they cared enough to get the message to me. I was naïve but my community was wiser than me and they pulled me back from the threshold of the pit.

That story was like a dense brownie, but this one is a chiffon sponge. My experience in south Korea was truly exceptional. It lasted only nine days but the four girls that I spent that time with were people after my own heart. We went around Seoul wining and dining ourselves, morning shopping, afternoon cafes, evening dinners: I cherish that time in my heart. My story is about my first experience of karaoke, 'noraebang' in Korean, which means 'song room.' The first Sunday, we all went to church and after that went to lunch at a Japanese restaurant, then we sat around at a café for an hour and a half, with each stop our group expended a person or two. I enjoy being carried along the waves of decision so long as it moves me toward new territories, so I happily acquiesced when a karaoke session was suggested. I had never been. My group loved karaoke. They loved it so much that I felt myself in the middle of a drunk K-drama set with the amount of energy and force being propelled through their singing and dancing though I knew none of us were swimming in inebriation. When the mic was pressed into my hands I felt the exhilaration of the crowd as several hands pushed me to the front of the room. I took a deep breath and began singing whatever they chose and I hardly knew it, but I continued and dancing and handed the mic off.

The second opportunity was a Love on Top, which is my favorite Beyonce song and I belted it along with the whole chorus of our room. I was wet with sweat from bobbing and jumping and my voice was shot. Apart from new experiences like speaking in Korean to shop personnel and eating purple rice or fermented cabbage this karaoke experience was one that would not have happened had I not been a group of people who were as passionate about it as life itself. I travelled on impulse but my daily experiences were dictated by those I was around and I am so grateful that my amplifiers didn't suck.

My third contributor is Adithi, an Indian sophomore who split her youth between New Delhi, Australia and the U.S. Our conversation was short, but she spoke to me about how her friend and roommate taught her to be more patient with her brother. She boasts of a wonderful sibling relationship now that she has learned how to listen. She doesn't get on his case now about slacking off at home since school is harder than she had it.

The next story takes individual friends and imagines them as a community, since I believe a person should have a community of friends rather than a single one since that turns into romantic territory all too quickly without some temperance. Anyway, a community shapes a person's outlook on life and has the power to remold even the most adamant detractors.

## **The Children of Ife and the Dishead Life**

Once upon a year, in a land much like your own, a great happening occurred.

In the great Forest of Ife, where everyone grows old and no one grows up, where all are content and life is whatever you imagine it to be, the happening happened. Ife was a land of viridescent valleys and blooming hills. The sky was always pastel like a whipped meringue. Colors of blossom and lilac adorned the morning, while periwinkle tucked everyone in at night. Cream puff clouds ushered in the spring and winter rains, which made the vegetation burst with freshness. The water tasted like sparkling linen, refreshing and clean, as it gushed out of the Rocks of Ore.

The children of Ife, as they called themselves, were growers. In autumn, they sowed tiny seeds of many colors and kinds: red seeds and white seeds, blue seeds and pink seeds, but the gold seeds were the most precious of all. The gold seeds grew the gold trees, which gave gold fruit which shone and sparkled. Each color of seed grew in its own field, and so there was a red field and a white field, a blue field and a pink field, but the gold field was the most beautiful of all. At spring harvest, all the children of Ife would gather in the Golden Groves and celebrate the abundance of crops and food and thank their father, who lived atop the Rocks of Ore.

The father of Ife came down every day at dawn to water all the fields and teach the new children how to be growers. He taught them the best way to sow seeds. This is what he said: “When you go to sow, till the soil into shallow trenches. Then take a friend and each snip a tiny hole in your trouser pockets. Fill your pockets with the seeds you need to plant and walk with your friend in each trench, one beside the other.” To this the children replied, “Why do we need a friend, can’t we do that alone?” The father said, “Of course you can do it alone, but that is no fun, and whilst chatting along with a friend soon the work is done.”

So this is the way they worked, always together, always with joy, though sometimes they grew tired under the auburn sun. At such a time they emptied their pockets of excess seed and went into any house nearby, where they were given water and marble snaps, a small river fish they roasted with ringing peppers. After they finished eating, they would rest until the sun moved down in the sky. Then they returned to the field to deposit the rest of the seed.

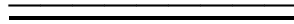
The growing season was autumn through the first week of spring, after which they harvested for four days and the fifth was the celebration. One year, on such a day, the third morning of the spring harvest, a curious thing appeared. In the middle of Downy Field, a door appeared. It was a cold metal door, large and odious, which floated a few steps off the ground. It remained this way through the third and fourth day of the harvest, until the morning of the celebration.

The children of Ife had all been busy in the fields, picking and cutting, gathering and transporting. They had all seen the door, but since it lay stationary, they paid it no attention, until the morning of the celebration.

On the fifth day, early in the morning, just as the first rays of blossom filled the sky, the door flew open and a peculiar people poured out. They wore gray clothes, dusty with black flecks, and hard gray shoes. Around their waist was a thick braided belt from which hung a small cage. They had one pocket in which they carried a set of gray and black tipped fire starters. They looked dreadful in that kind of attire, but the oddest thing was that instead of a head, they had a dish, large and gray, like everything else about them.

They filed into Ife, every other one carrying their belt in hand. They moved swiftly through Downy Field and knocked on every door. When the morning-eyed homeowners opened

the door, a belt was wrapped round their neck and they were led off to the door. After the first door opened, several more began to appear, and hundreds more Disheads filed out in the same manner and continued to round up the inhabitants until all were present. Then a Dishead at the entrance of each door broadcasted the same message, “We come to take you to a place of discovery and understanding, of light and interest.” Then they began to lead the children of Ife through the doors. They did not struggle or resist, but followed with excitement and suspicion.



They walked through the doors and all was gray smoke and white fog as far as they could see. Their feet sunk into the ground at every step. The earth was soft, but not cool and moist like moss or grass, it was a warm, black powder that dirtied their trousers, tunics, and skirts. The children of Ife quickly realized that this place was a wasteland. There was nothing interesting or any light at all, except faint little fires sporadically lit across the horizon.

The Disheads had carried them to a giant ash heap, full of coal and cinder. The children of Ife coughed and struggled as the black air knocked around in their lungs. They were not used to such harsh conditions. Their captors took the leashes off their necks when they closed the doors and the same ones that said the deceptive message began to broadcast again. This time they said, “Do not be alarmed, there are many good things to be found here. So please begin to search, and when you have found something yell out to one of us and we will assist you with an examination.” The children of Ife just shook their heads and began working.

They began as they always did, with a friend, but this was unacceptable to the Disheads, who promptly separated each pair, so they were forced to work alone and in silence. All that



could be heard was the sound of sooty coughs, small children sniffing, and the murmuring of the Disheads. They worked like this for hours, with only time to straighten their backs and take a deep breath before the overlords began knocking their little cage close to their ears.

Soon a muffled yell was heard, and all the children of Ife turned toward it. It was Kinin, who everyone called blueberry because when he was cold his nose turned powder blue, but his nose was awfully cherry now. Kinin had one arm straight up, clutching a piece of wood in his hand. A Dishead made its way over and snatched the wood from his hands. Then it retrieved the tiny cage from its waist and a fire starter from its pocket. It lit the end of the wood and placed it in the tiny cage. Then about fifteen of the closest Disheads gathered around it to watch it burn; they enjoyed the crackle sound, the bright color of light, and the heat on their hands. This ritual happened every time a piece of wood was found. It would be snatched and burned immediately. The Disheads loved it because there was always another bit of wood to find and another little hand being raised.

This toil continued for several weeks, perhaps months, until one day the most brilliant thing happened. Ilan, one of the new children, found a gold leaf while digging around in the ash. She had plucked it from a young gold tree, which was growing deep down beneath the ash. She called her growing partner over, who was also a little older and asked what she thought had occurred. They squatted down in the ash, so no one could see them, and whispered so no one could hear them. “I found this leaf, but I also found its tree,” and Ilan quickly brushed away the ash to reveal the little gold tree. “How could it have followed me here?”

“It didn’t follow you, silly, you must have brought it.”

“How?”

“I don’t know, but look, I also have a secret,” and she took two fresh leaves out of her pockets, one blue and the other red. “I found these yesterday, and I think Kinin had found several white ones.”

“They must have begun growing when we got here, but there’s no sun, or rain, or seeds. How could these grow with no seeds in such a desert?”

“Think about it Ilan, there must have been seeds. We had been harvesting for days, there were seeds all over our clothes and in our shoes. We must have taken them along when they brought us here.”

“We brought them here? And they fell out of our clothes as we moved and worked, and got sown in the ash?”

“Exactly. That must be what happened.”

“What should we do? They’ll burn them if they find out.”

“We won’t say anything. In a few more weeks they’ll start poking their leaves out of the ash, and by then they’ll have their bark on and the fire won’t be able to scorch them.”

“Okay, but do you think we should tell the others?” But little did Ilan know that all the other children of Ife had been keeping this secret for weeks and each of them had been carrying a leaf in their pocket.

Over the next several weeks the air began to clear slightly and breathing became easier as the trees began to pop out one by one. The children of Ife were ecstatic, and to their surprise the Disheads did not seem to notice the clearer air or the colored leaves that littered the ground. They just walked with their big boots, stomping wherever they pleased, and when they bumped into a little tree, they assumed it was one of their captured workers and kept on moving. Until one day, they just got fed up.

The same few Disheads that always broadcasted did the same again, “Why is it that we continue to bump into you day after day, and you just remain in place, don’t you see us walking?”

A few of the older Ifeians replied, “Us? You haven’t been bumping into us. You have been running into trees.”

“Trees? But there were never any trees here.”

“Maybe not before, but there certainly are now. Red trees and white trees, blue trees and pink trees. Can’t you see them?”

“No, we are blind, we cannot see colors.”

At this Ilan piped up saying, “Is that why you burn things? For the lights?”

“Yes, we can feel the heat and see the brightness, but everything else is darkness.”

To this, Ilan walked over to one of the broadcasters, took out her gold leaf and placed it in its hand. It felt the leaf between its fingers and it began to crackle because it was dry; the sound reminded it of the wood burning sound.

Just then, small holes began to appear in the black fog sky and auburn rays touched down on the ash heap, lighting every tree that had grown up in the dark wasteland. There were trees everywhere, all colors and kinds, set about with no rhyme or reason, not in orderly rows or specific groupings. Each red tree had a blue friend and white trees were rarely without a pink tree, but the most special thing of all were the gold trees scattered about. Their leaves caught and reflected the auburn light of the rays which shined in the center of the Disheads’ dishes; they were blinded by it. It was the brightest their world had ever been.

Before long, a lengthy rain shower came and washed the children of Ife clean, and turned the ash into mud. The Disheads were overcome by the feeling of rain on their skin and the water

seeping into their clothes. When the rain ended, they could feel the clarity of the air and the sweet fragrance of new trees tickling their necks. They were surprised at these new experiences; excited for what else would happen. They felt no urge to begin burning anything and the water had also soaked their fire starters, so they wouldn't be able to burn anything for a while anyway.

When the rain fell, most of the new children began to cry, as they hadn't done so for a long time. They wanted to return home dreadfully, but the elders had now set about teaching the Disheads how to live in this new way: how to grow and how to harvest and how to use fire for other purposes.

A few days after the rains, the first door appeared again, but this time it was not gray and odious, it was gold and green. It was round and bright, and floated a few dishes off the ground. Little Ilan was the first to notice it, and when she did, she took hold of the knob and pushed, but she pushed too hard and fell right through the doorway, landing on her bum in the center of the Golden Grove.

#### **4 Years of One Painting**

There was a painting on the wall of the thrift store.

A portrait of a child sitting in front of a table,

covered with books and pages,

bought for less than the price of a condom.

The picture is monochromatic,

with black shadows and white highlights,

and silver linings for the pages and lips of the child.

On Monday afternoons the child wears a smile

while facing the westward window and the

sun turns the covers gold and the hair blond.

During December evenings,

The dewy air of the den discolours the paints,

and the child's expression is stale grey eyes

and a flexed shale mouth.

Sometimes the sunrise changes the mood of the child,

And the whole painting becomes a campfire.

Ruby kiss, rouged skin, a ginger child,

Amber pages strewn underfoot.

On Thursdays, when it hangs in the lanai,  
the vegetation in the window left of the child  
grows into an ivy faced backdrop to dangling  
celery stalk legs.

When you bought it, you thought it was monochromatic,  
with black shadows, white highlights and silver linings.

## **Lesson 4:**

### **On Generosity**

I do not have much to say here because I am still learning what this means. I am learning how to balance boundaries with an unrelenting desire to give all of myself away in a relationship. I will say that here, generosity has a lot to do with the immaterial as well as the material. It is just as necessary to give your time as well as your resources, to give wise counsel and a listening ear.

While reading this story I would invite you to think back on the female perspective in the introduction because it is a physical description of how people comfort each other primarily through action. It is not lofty but juvenile and offers the reality of friendship. These children were generous in many ways and gave of themselves even when the new student was not being the most considerate. Imagine if they had treated him the way he deserved and had been patient and kind with their interpretation of his behavior.

My fourth contributor is Kevin, who held that a friend is someone you can trust with anything because you know them so well. Our conversation took many diversions and more than half of it was spent discussing his future plans and ways he can improve in Creative Writing. I allowed for this because the conversation was interesting. Sometimes even when you have a goal, just listening to someone may add value to their life in some way. In these circumstances, I advocate for an approach like Cixous: do not stifle conversation to a fit a miserly topic but with patience give it a wide breadth and you may encounter treasure.

## **Class Lunch**

The bell rang for the class to have lunch and Mr. Spiller told the students he would be back with the lunch cart. He took Aden, Nikki, Isla, and Phan with him. Each week four students would help share the lunches for the others and another four students would help clean up when everyone was finished.

Today was Leisl's first day at this school and he had been crying a lot that morning. He wanted to go home and would not speak to any of the other students. When Mr. Spiller and the others returned to the classroom with the lunch cart he ran to the front of the line. His classmates said nothing, they just allowed him to go first.

When he got to the first station Phan gave him a soft smile and one and a half scoops of rice. Leisl looked at the rice and returned a twitch of the mouth to Phan. At the next station Nikki gave him two salmon fillets and a wink. He was startled but tried to wink back though he could only blink with enthusiasm. Next was Aden who had baby carrots and peas, he gave Leisl three baby carrots and they exchanged milk teeth smiles. Aden was about to place a scoop of peas on Leisl's plate when he said, "I don't really like peas." So Aden gave him two more baby carrots and an "Okay, Leisl." At the final station was Isla with juice pouches and milk boxes. She looked at both and then returned her gaze to Leisl whose eyes were fluttering between both. She laughed and placed both on his tray. His round cheeks squished his eyes as he beamed at her, also giggling.

He walked back to his desk and put his tray down before returning to the lunch cart and thanking his servers. When he sat down again, his four desk mates had adjusted their desks to face his. Manassa, Jorey, Felix and Briton peppered him with questions about where he was from and if he was okay now and if he would share his rice and carrots.



**What do you have to give?**

I don't have wealth enough to outfit the ships of Troy,

or gold to fund the Roman army and live coy.

I can share my privacy and poverty in my cardboard mansion.

I have time and tunes like a day shared in a crocheted hammock,

the river winds pushing us to and fro like a gambler pushes luck.

I have a heart with a swelling score, that will bring us to sobs,

because you never knew how pitiful I was,

borrowing shoes from the hermit three bridges down.

I have time, burnt bread crusts and stale sugar cubes,

For your growling belly and strained jaw.

Strong knuckles to open the cans of tomato paste

And black olives from the weekly pantry.

I have time and backlogged knowledge of law school

for when you break the store owner's leg while fleeing,

friends in the 52<sup>nd</sup> precinct to sneak you out when Ernie

locks you in holding cell nine,

close to the delivery door and Olympic Ave rail line.

I have time and space in my eco bag for the woes you bring,

I can carry them along the city's nose-bleed alleyways

And exchange them for a few cents to buy you

A kind word, and a blanket for the chill.

## Lesson 5:

### On Following Strangers (and Pursuing a Few)

This is a lesson I learned while working on this thesis. It is also a lesson everyone learns in their life, we learn to pursue select strangers, because the best friends were once strangers and we had to prioritize them in order for them to become our friends.

I was mostly alone in the fall, with a single friend on campus, but my time was rich with new faces. I decided I would be more open and invite people who were on campus to socialize with me. I spoke to many strangers during the interviewing process but only pursued two afterwards. The first was Jake and the second is my fifth contributor Josephine.

Jo and I met during my second week back on campus in the fall. She told me she liked my hair and I responded with a complement on her hair scarf. We exchanged names and went on our way. A week later I found her in the Emory directory and emailed her asking if she would be interested in talking to me about friendship from her perspective as a Ghanian. She said yes, and what followed was four months of scheduling conflicts and broken inboxes and just chaos. We exchanged numbers when her email was fixed but by then we were on our ten-week holiday.

When I returned for spring semester, we booked each other's time for the second Tuesday back. We finally sat to have our conversation and it lasted two and a half hours. We decided that now was the right time to have met and we bonded over our mutual faith and childhood/family similarities. Now we hang out at least once a week, for a walk, tea, lunch or dinner. She adds quite a bit of value to my life and I am happy that I remained steadfast in pursuing a conversation with her.

Imagine all the goodness that we miss out on when we close ourselves off from new people and experiences. My senior year had the potential to be one of the loneliest ever, but it

turned out to be one of the most rewarding years for my relational growth. Though I am saying go after people, I think the next story will illustrate how the opposite effect is possible when you spread yourself thin among too many commitments. We must learn to discern the potential of our new relationships and be selective with our time and energy so as not to destroy people with our carelessness. It is a delicate balance to strike, but it is possible especially when we check in with our relationships ever so often.

## **Forest or Garden**

You are a person, an ordinary and yet special person. Each day you are given a magic seed by a worm that leaves them under your pillow. You plant each of these seeds and you never know what will grow. Some seeds spring up overnight and others over years, some grow green or pastel, some have thorns, others are just flowers or bushes. Soon you discover that you have a forest of greenery. You parade through your forest daily, stopping to admire the fragrances of the carmine rose, and tortoise lily. You nap under the shade of a nutty oak, with leaves larger than an elephants ear. This forest of yours is quite peculiar, but as the wind plays its hollow melody through the spidery branches, the top of your head glows with delight.

On each of your walks, which you regularly walk, you make a detour into the lesser travelled portions of your forest and behold, the most suspicious thing has happened. Every so often some of the plants die, very suddenly of course, but you remain steadfast and you water them daily. You get help from the local farmers and re-route water from the streams to irrigate your land. This whole affair has become very professional and expensive, after all you are no farmer and you had never planned to be. The plants keep dying in large numbers and you still have no clue why. You are irritated but you enjoy the blooms, so you decide to install watcher birds to report the nightly happenings to you. They tell you that the worm has been spraying poison on the trees every night. You are outraged, how could he do that after giving you the seeds himself. So you ask him on one of his nightly seed deliveries.

“Why are you poisoning my forest?”

“The land is rich, but some of the trees are poison for the soil, so I kill the poisonous ones before they infect the land and kill the good trees.”

“Won’t the poison you spray also kill the good trees?”

“Of course not, they are resilient and quickly develop shields from the damage, but if the poison infects the soil, they will die.”

“How do you know which ones are poisonous?”

“Pay close attention, time tells all. The poisonous ones never do as well as the good ones, they either remain scrawny and weak even with all your attention, or they spring up quickly and remain leafy but their branches and trunk are rotten. You must inspect your trees at regular intervals, and I saw that you were not doing this so I stepped in to protect the land from your carelessness.”

“How could I possibly inspect an entire forest of trees?”

“You didn’t begin with a forest, it was once a well-tended garden, but you were greedy and took every seed I left.”

“I thought that’s what you wanted. You could have just told me to stop.”

“I just give you more of what you want and you wanted more than you could handle.”

**Let's Meet**

Before we've transcended life and this world is a stranger,

let's meet somewhere full of noise and danger:

like in the engine of a McLaren on lap one of the Monaco Grand Prix,

or between the blades of a commercial jet turbine,

in the brick coffee shop off the quad at lunch hour,

or in the study lounge during midterms on floor eight of the library.

Perhaps under the screen of your mum's razor flip phone blaring *Ring My Bell*,

or on the space bar of a transcriber's keyboard at the longest trial in history,

between the smokers and dopers at last fall's Posty concert,

or in the warp and weave of Salon Saturdays and braiding sessions.

Perhaps at the crossroads at the end of the river Styx,

or between the huddled boulders that catch Niagara Falls,

maybe somewhere under the bleachers during dodgeball,

or even in the cupboard of the art room hiding from a pep rally.

Perhaps where the vultures gathered for yesterday's feast

or on the chest feathers of those peach hummingbirds,

inside my father's car leaving the football stadium

or in the new chile restaurant you mentioned in the ER.

Let's meet swimming in the blood sugar of a soccer match,  
Following the lines of lyrics the real fans are chanting,  
or as we smile like fools on the steepest coaster in the west,  
displaying our vaseline smeared veneers.

Or perhaps, the reality is that we cannot meet at all,  
But before another excuse comes, let's schedule a Zoom call.



## Lesson 6:

### On Vulnerability

This is a bonus lesson and comes from the tragic fall semester that I mentioned way back in Lesson 1. It is just a story this time, no poem, because it was written as a reflective exercise at the time. It is an imitation of the Plato's *Lysis*, because I think conversations are valuable tools for illustrating lessons.

#### Practical Advice for Youngsters: Vulnerability and Friendship

“At home, besides being Peter or Jane, we also bear a general character; husband or wife, brother or sister, chief, colleague or subordinate. Not among Friends. It is an affair of disentangled, or stripped, minds [...] Friendship [will have] naked personalities.”

C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*

*The time was early Spring, about March. Nico and Aly had been in the garden all afternoon having a conversation about Nico's recent dilemma with his friend Marcus. Several months earlier Marcus had joined an art club called 'The Courtesy Club for Young Renaissance Gentlemen'. Aly suggested they take it to Eli, their father, since he always had the answer and if he didn't, he would offer whatever truth he did know and point them to the book of an expert. This is the conversation and conclusion of the matter.*

*Eli* Okay, so, what's going on?

*Both* (silence)

*Eli* Are none of you brave enough to speak to your father? I won't get upset no matter what it is that you say, I promise. Unless of course you have been engaging in dubious activities, in which case we will have to discuss that at length, with your mother.

*Aly* Nico has something to tell you. (She nudges him)

*Eli* Son? What's going on that it has you so quiet? Is it school? Class? A teacher?

*Aly* Nico, tell him. This isn't my problem; I dunno know the details. (Pushing him forward)

*Eli* Son, you know you can tell me anything. Right? Do you want Aly to start?

*Aly* He's upset because Marcus has been being mean to him since he joined the weird art club-

*Nico* (Palm raised, shushing her) This is what happened. (looks at Aly and sighs; turns back to Eli) It doesn't matter, I don't care anyway.

*Eli* (softly) Don't shut down on me Nico.

*Nico* (deep breath, and a sigh) Uh...In January, the Courtesy Club started recruiting and Marcus joined. Then he was around less and less, spending all his time with the other guys in the club. When I would see him, he would be nice, I guess, kinda. I dunno. Anyway, we would be talking and then he would say something wack, about football or fencing, and it didn't bother me at first, but then it sorta felt like he was talking about me. So, a week ago I just had enough and told him that he could go and play macaroni<sup>9</sup> boy as long as he wanted cause I didn't care about the 'renaissance' anymore. He punched me in the stomach, so I kicked him in-

*Eli* (surprised) You and Marcus got into a fight?

*Nico* (slumped posture, eyes downcast) I guess. Nobody won though.

*Eli* How are you feeling about it now?

*Aly* (awkwardly) I'm gonna leave now.

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<sup>9</sup> Macaroni n. a fop; a dandy

*Eli* No, you'll both benefit from this conversation. Nico?

*Nico* (shy) I dunno, it's whatever I guess. (breathy chuckle) I coulda won the fight.

*Eli* (nodding) Yes, you could have won the fight, and then you have beat up your best friend.

*Nico* (timid) Yeah, but...

*Eli* (earnestly) But what?

*Nico* (quietly) He was being wack with my feelings.

*Eli* Did you tell him the first time that you didn't like what he said? Were you honest with him before you got **really** angry with him?

*Nico* (shakes his head)

*Eli* Marcus is smart, but he can't read your mind. He can't know how you're really feeling if you keep playing off how annoyed you are. If he upset you, you have to tell him, otherwise you can't be upset that he just kept saying things. Does that make sense?

*Nico* (nods)

*Eli* Have you spoken to him since last week?

*Nico* (shakes his head) No, we haven't talked. It's like we don't live in the same world anymore. (shrugs) If he doesn't want to be my friend, I don't care, he was wack anyway. I don't need people like him. (quietly) He's a traitor,

*Eli* So your best friend of three years is wack? Are you wack too? Because you were friends with him for a while.

*Nico* Of course not, I'm not him. I don't just leave my friends for new friends. **That's** wack.

*Eli* Why don't you tell him that then? Cause it sounds like he hurt your feelings a lot, even though you said you didn't care, especially since you feel like he betrayed you.

*Nico* (agitated) I don't wanna talk to him; I don't care anymore.

*Eli* If you didn't care, why would it be a topic of conversation with your sister a week later?

*Nico* I don't know. I was thinking about it I guess.

*Eli* So you **do** care?

*Nico* (eyes down, he nods)

*Eli* leads the kids into the family room, he sits them on the couch, and pulls up a chair to face them. *Nico* is now glossy eyed, quite close to tears. *Aly* is uneasy, but curious. They sit quietly listening to their father.

*Eli* Of course you care about Marcus' friendship; He is like an extension of yourself, you've known him for long enough for that to happen, and I would hope that you had some love for him<sup>10</sup>. Is that why you can't tell him, you don't want to lose him?

*Nico* Yes, papa.

*Aly* Abba, how did you get better at telling the truth to people you cared about?

*Eli* That was quite a lesson to learn. It took years and, to think it was set off by some bizarre chain of events<sup>11</sup>:

When I was in high school, about 15 or so, I was in an anime club. Mhm, it's real funny to know the weird hobbies your dad had. Anyway, each year there was an anime conference at a hotel in

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<sup>10</sup> "Man can experience his innermost soul outside himself most easily and completely in another. In sight, in sound, in the mind's emotions, in the play of imagination, in the many tugs of the heart, it exerts itself among other people. This is why in knowing others, coming close to others, and in doing others' work does it fill to the brim." Rabindranath Tagore "Visva Sahitya"

<sup>11</sup> "In friendship...we think we have chosen our peers. In reality a few years' difference in the dates of our births, a few more miles between certain houses, the choice of one university instead of another...the accident of a topic being raised or not raised at a first meeting--any of these chances might have kept us apart. But, for a Christian, there are, strictly speaking no chances. A secret master of ceremonies has been at work. Christ, who said to the disciples, "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you," can truly say to every group of Christian friends, "Ye have not chosen one another but I have chosen you for one another." The friendship is not a reward for our discriminating and good taste in finding one another out. It is the instrument by which God reveals to each of us the beauties of others." C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*

the city and this was my first year I could go. I was a senior member and the dues covered three people's expenses. The day arrives, I'm all excited, and nervous, since it was my first time. Well, on the way there, a huge accident shut down the interstate and your grandparents and I had to take the back roads to get to the hotel. As you can imagine the roads were absolutely flooded, cars streaming in from all sides, it was mayhem. The twenty-three-minute journey took more than an hour and a half. I was so agitated. I got so annoyed that I was late. When I got there, my friends had already gone in, settled down, and were nowhere to be found. I was wondering through the hotel frantically, I really thought it would have been easier to find, since it was supposed to be a big conference.

I ended up stumbling into a conference room in the basement, with people sitting in a circle, talking. One of the guys turned around and said, 'Eli, welcome man. Come sit down, Ronnie saved you a seat.' I was so confused. That was **my name** that he said. So, I just stood there for a moment until he beckoned me over. So, nervously I sat down with my eyes plastered to this one brown square in the carpet. I must've counted every speck of gray in that patch a hundred times. I was so nervous. Turns out it was an AA meeting an-

*Nico* Papa, what's AA?

*Eli* Sorry sweetie, Alcoholics Anonymous, it's a place where people can get support for their addiction to alcohol. They talk about their story with it and help each other stay sober.

*Nico* Sober?

*Eli* Uh, to stay away from alcohol.

*Nico* Okay

*Eli* So anyway:

I sat in this AA meeting listening to everyone say the whole, ‘Hi my name is so and so and I am an Alcoholic.’ It was weird cause I had never seen an AA meeting in such a nice place before.

Everything I’d read and watched on TV had them in some dank and depressing space that really just upset your spirit. No one would want to be honest in such dark spaces<sup>12</sup>. But this place, this fancy uptown hotel with its high ceilings... just lovely.

*Aly* Like the hotel, us and mummy went to last September with the chandeliers and ice sculptures in the dining room.

*Nico* And the glass fountain in the lobby.

*Eli* Well it was newer than that hotel. It had been redone recently when I was there. Should I continue or are you guys bored now?

*Aly* Keep going, what did you say?

*Eli* Well I said nothing. But afterwards Ronnie, the guy I sat next to, came up to me and handed me a donut. He said ‘I know you’re not supposed to be here kid, but why are you?’ I told him about the conference and he laughed at the anime and he told me to check with the concier- the front desk guy, and told me I should come back and that they met every Friday night at 7:45 in that room. I left feeling like a joke. I didn’t know why I had sat there for so long instead of going to my conference. But in a way I think I liked it. After the conference I went home and thought about going back, if not for me then for Ronnie, to at least tell him the truth. So that Friday, I went back. I took the rail and walked the half mile from the station to the hotel. I sat in **that meeting** and didn’t talk either, but I realized why I liked it so much. It was the ‘instantaneous

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<sup>12</sup> “Do not be misled: evil associations corrupt excellent morals.” 1 Corinthians 15.33. Paul tells this to the Corinthians so that they beware of those they befriend. This is a quote from Greek dramatist Menander (and likely from earlier, in Euripides, and derived from Aristotle). This could be taken a bit further to a discussion of environment and its effect on behaviour. Here, Eli is telling the kids that darkness does little to inspire truth or transparency.

vulnerability'. Well, I didn't need to build up trust with anyone, it was a space where trust was the default, understanding that we were all the same, struggling with the same thing. I thought they were all so brave to be sharing how messed up they were with complete strangers<sup>13</sup>. I started going every week, cause even if I **was** a bit of a punk, I wanted to hear all the stories from the older people. They had so much to share and I guess I needed that at some point. I didn't speak until week seven or so when Ronnie called me out. I was real pissed at him after that, but I figured he was right<sup>14</sup>. I had been skulking around til then, feeling like a bit of a thief, stealing the other people's feelings without giving anything in return<sup>15</sup>. I supposed I was being selfish in a way, and sure, it was fueled by **some** awe, but mostly self-righteousness and pride. I thought I was so above those people<sup>16</sup>...

**Nico** Papa, you keep saying words, but I don't know them.

**Eli** Which words?

**Nico** Self- something, and pride, and vulcan-ability. Those ones.

**Eli** Self- righteousness and pride are when you think you are the best person in the world, and that you're smarter than anyone else, so no one can correct you or give you advice. And Vul-ner-

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<sup>13</sup> "It takes courage to live through suffering and it takes honesty to observe it" C.S Lewis *The Problem of Pain*. If one is to heal or recover from pain, addiction or trauma, one must step into the muck and mire, stare it in the face and welcome it with open arms. You cannot leave your beaten and bloody body on the battlefield to chase glory in the hope that it will survive on its own. You must tend to your pain. Suffering also intensifies in isolation, so observe with friends, or kindly strangers in this case.

<sup>14</sup> "If anyone can give me good reason to think that I am going astray in my thoughts or my actions, I will gladly change my ways. For I seek the truth, which has never caused harm to anyone; no, the person who is harmed is one who persists in his self-deception and ignorance" Marcus Aurelius *Meditations* 6.21

<sup>15</sup> "Therefore those who love for the sake of utility love for the sake of what is good for themselves, and those who love for the sake of pleasure do so for the sake of what is pleasant for themselves and not in so far as the other is the person loved but in so far as he is useful or pleasant" Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 8.3

<sup>16</sup> "For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but think of yourself with sober judgment, according to the measure of faith God has given you." Romans 12.3

ability is being able to be completely honest with another person, and sometimes yourself, about how you are actually feeling, good or bad.

*Aly* That's the really tricky one.

*Eli* Exactly

*Nico* What happened when you told your story to the AA?

*Eli* They were all very kind to me. At the end, some of them came up to me and hugged me. They told me thanks. That evening I felt so at home there, I thought "Wow, these people are my friends." Then at every other meeting they would hug me as a greeting and hold my hand as they told me about their lives over coffee and sparkling water<sup>17</sup>. I ended up having my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday there, that was the best one up until then. I fell into some tough times after that with your grandparents and I ended up really leaning on Ronnie...But that's a story for another time. Anyway, my point was-

*Aly* Your point was that it took time to be honest, but it only took you seven weeks, Nico over here hasn't gotten there in three years.

*Nico* I just never had to say anything. We never really disagreed before now.

*Eli* It does take time, and yes, you have had three years, but it isn't always automatic. Sometimes you must be forced into the light by some unpleasantness, in order to stop hiding from those you care about<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> "Affection is responsible for nine-tenths of whatever solid and durable happiness there is in our natural lives." C.S. Lewis *The Four Loves*

<sup>18</sup> Shame and fear trap us, and separate us from people, but connection is what brings purpose to life. Vulnerability is the only way to feel truly connected and that takes plenty of courage. Brené Brown



### **Final Thoughts**

This project began with an evening of divine inspiration, though unlike Dante I did not set out to write a salvific text. As I said at least fifty pages ago, this was an exploratory excursion into the realm of relationship. It was undertaken in a year when the world was in upheaval and everyone was trying to cling to connection in lockdown. This project served as my conduit to the outside. It connected me to the Emory community in a way that I would not have envisioned four years ago. I reached out to strangers and devoted many hours of my time to thinking about their lives and meditating on our conversations about friendship.

This project was a very rewarding, but also extremely challenging endeavor. It was far more ambitious than I had intended, and I didn't accomplish some of the goals I set for it. My disappointment is mostly in volume, both overestimating the number of interviews I would have conducted and underestimating how long the writing process would be. I am mostly pleased with the outcome: being proud that I spent so much time delving into one topic, and that I got to speak to several disparate people. Writing was the part that I loved and despised the most. It was not often a struggle, but when it was, I felt my creativity had completely abandoned me and every word was dull. I felt rather discouraged for a majority of this year, where this thesis was concerned, because I felt I hadn't done enough. It was not until I put the whole document together that the sense of accomplishment began to set my body aglow with pride, which has persisted with varying intensity for the last two weeks, and will certainly reach an apex at the time of submission.

Shifting the conversation to the institution I am situated in: I suppose the way of life I am advocating for in these sixty or so pages is one that decenters the artificial mode of relationship often found in the university space. It is a departure from the formulated recipes for connection

that accosts incoming first years during orientation. In many ways I refuse the understanding handed to me, that community is ready-made merely because we are in the same boat when we all arrive on campus. That is simply not true. It is important to note that the university has an agenda of its own and we are not merely agents acting on our own behalf, but in many ways are funneled down particular paths and ways of living, that often contradict the inherent inclinations we have toward deep connection. I may want to spend more time with my friends this summer, but am constantly encouraged to seek this and that internship opportunity to build my resume; you may need some time to unwind at the weekend, but your professors seem to think that assignments are the only valuable use of your time and now you blow off social engagements to forge ahead with selfish ambition. I counter this institutional agenda with a different message: Place your friends, familial or otherwise, at the center of your life, not the expectations of an institution. Turn outward and begin to place yourself more firmly in community, where your flourishing is not just your own concern, but that of everyone around you. Let the institution dictate the terms of your degree, but not the degree to which you live your life apart from its clutches, otherwise it will consume all your peculiarities and specialness, replacing you with an ambitious and tepid version of yourself that succeeds by emptying yourself of humanity, which is to love and be loved. I suppose this is what Michel Foucault was describing when he remarked that friendship should be a way of living. It is to define your own mode of living, and being in relationship, apart from the institutionalized dictates, that either dissolve personalities or rely on sexual exchange. You may say, how does this relate to university, and the answer would be, simply, don't let what is expected of you at university cause you to miss the value of those you are sharing this time with. The ones you chose as friends to share life with.

As this academic year and this project comes to a close, I sincerely hope I haven't hackneyed the words "friend" or "friendship" in writing such a long piece on it, but that I have made it a bit more enticing. There is no soap box or microphone and I do not have a pastel box wrapped in folded organza and tied with a mauve satin ribbon to present you with here. I only have a few final thoughts to share, hoping that you will have come to appreciate those that you call your friends even more, because the good ones are doing incredible work.

**First**, if you would like to grow in friendship, write it on the inside of your forehead and lead with it as you walk through your life. This is Epicurean<sup>19</sup> understanding and suggests that you give friendship the time it takes to develop, not hurrying it along because it isn't efficient, but appreciating that it is profoundly productive.

**Second**, don't let fear stop you from pursuing the stranger that you notice similarities with, the one that seems cool, or funny or would be great to have if you were stranded on a Canadian ice floe for four days.

**Third**, let your friends change you, positively, I would hope you aren't pursuing hooligans. Let them take your time and energy as you become more selfless; let them demand comfort even if you're depleted, and you demand the same of them.

**Fourth**, just go, do it, schedule the tea time, get food, play monopoly, or Cards Against Humanity, or poker, or whatever it may be and tell your friends "Thank You" for their days, weeks, years of kindness and support.

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<sup>19</sup> Hadot, 89. Friendship is a pleasure above all others and must be considered presently, with all consideration. It is a spiritual exercise in mindfulness and mutual affection and correction resulting in the happiness of all parties.

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