

And They Shall Be Men

An Original Anthology & Analysis of Modern Male Bildungsroman

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**Abstract**

The stories that boys have been told about what it means to be a man change throughout history. This study considers the postmodern effect of masculinities, female empowerment, as well as the canon of Western bildungsroman in an attempt to understand how the narratives have changed over the past 50 years. Additionally, an anthology of original fiction illustrates how universal stories persist within the changing social narratives.

## AND THEY SHALL BE MEN

**Introduction**

Within Western culture, the predominate stories that girls have been told about what it means to be a woman have changed throughout the years. No longer are girls expected to find themselves within the two major classifications of either a tomboy or a girly girl. Now the postmodern, Western culture predominant in American society raises girls with narratives that emphasize how they can not only do whatever they want, but also that they have the right to become whomever they want to be. This narrative shift has been widely publicized within mass media, aided by an increase of dynamic, self-actualizing female central characters in literature and a proliferation of public figures for girls to model themselves after. Yet any development that occurred in the narratives that society tells boys about what it means to be men seems to have gone unnoted by Western culture. Over the past 50 years, the Postmodern worldview, the feminine empowerment narrative, and a growing awareness of varying masculine modalities have altered the narratives of what it means for a boy to become a man.

**A Brief History of Childhood:**

“Anyone who has survived his childhood has enough information about life to last him  
the rest of his days.”

(Flannery O’Connor, *Mysteries & Manners: Occasional Prose*)

“Because never in my entire childhood did I feel like a child. I felt like a person all  
along—the same person that I am today.”

(Orson Scott Card, *Ender's Game*)

Surprisingly, a common consensus on the meaning of childhood did not exist in the West until the 1800’s. In response to the Age of Enlightenment’s emphasis on cold reasoning, Romanticism prized the unique, subjective experiences of the individual person and longed for the world to (return to) its presumably once ideal state. This nostalgic sentiment permeated not only the literature of the time, but also had an impact on the culture’s view of children. In their textbook on Childhood Psychology, Hess, Magnuson, and Beeler acknowledge how, until the early 1800’s, the Western world viewed children as miniature adults (Hess et al. 48-49). Yet, once childhood was recognized, Romantic poets like Blake and Wordsworth captured childhood’s beauty through scenes of innocent chimney sweeps or deified youth. Child labor laws, coupled with compulsory education, carved a place for the cultural perspective of a beautiful, innocent childhood in the Western world’s understanding of identity (Hess et al. 48). Since then, the general feeling of the Western world towards kids has emphasized their

unexperienced innocence, joy, and value. So, too, have the stories that populated the Western world.

Once established as a separate stage of life, childhood necessitated distinctions between kids and adults as well an understanding of how a child becomes an adult. Thus, the coming of age process followed a journey with tangible mile markers such as careers, marriage, and financial independence which formed the loose network of moments that most people would associate with becoming an adult. The cultural codification of childhood not only led to a more defined adulthood, but also necessarily introduced the concept of adolescence. In his textbook on adolescence, John Santrock discusses how those in the psychological field consider adolescence through a variety of either biological, social, or cognitive lenses, yet each view considers it as a truly liminal time in an individual's life when he or she experiences rapid development. Influential thinkers like Aristotle considered the significance of adolescence as a time when a person became more truly human by practicing self-determination. Others, like Rousseau, believed adolescence comprises different stages of mostly cognitive growth (Santrock 4-9). Throughout the twentieth century, more attention has been given to the specific significance of what occurs physically, emotionally, and cognitively during this stage of development. The understanding of adolescence itself proves to be multifaceted even before it is reflected in literature.

Given this multifaceted understanding of adolescent development, the traditional economic or social standards of when a child has grown up are similarly complex. Stanrock notes in his text on adolescent development that "Western industrial countries

are notable for their lack of formal rites of passage [which] mark the transition from adolescence to adulthood” (Stanrock 401). Instead of culturally recognized events, subjective criteria asks the questions which determine an understanding of each stage. Has a boy become a man when he graduates high school? Has manhood started when he leaves his childhood home or begins his first job? Simply measuring a boy’s maturity by his assumption of larger responsibilities does not take into account the reality of any boy who has had to deal with larger issues long before he could understand or endure them. Is an eight-year-old a man if he, like a college bachelor of 21, is responsible for feeding himself and getting to school because his mom is too strung-out to care? Should a 12-year-old bear the mantle of adulthood just because he dropped out of school to work full time? As the Western world and postmodern worldview continuously allow for more self-determination, these estimations of manhood become more subjective.

**Postmodernism, Female Empowerment, & the Young Men in Between:**

“When the whole world is silent, even one voice becomes powerful.”

(Malala Yousafzai)

Just as childhood was a time period in life that was virtually invented during the era of Romanticism, the notion of universal truth did not begin to deteriorate in the Western world until sometime around the 1950s with the inception of postmodernism. As Julie Lindas notes in her work, *Engaging with Postmodernism*, “the general sentiment in academic and artistic circles in the mid-twentieth century was that Modernism had run its course and reached its logical conclusion” (4). Modernism assumed that a well-ordered society governed by overarching systems could effectively address worldly brokenness. Yet, as history unfolded, the narrative seemed to fail; two World Wars, increasing skepticism in universal claims, and traumatic events like 9/11 or the Sandy Hook shooting seemed to disprove the Modernist hope of a comprehensive, stable world order. As a worldview, postmodernism skeptically rejects metanarratives of recognizable social norms, authority structures, and universal experiences.

Postmodernism’s skepticism has called out many dehumanizing or destructive metanarratives that have perpetuated as truth throughout history. The rejection of long-held values or traditionally affirmed narratives has given expression to the previously marginalized voices of society. For example, throughout history women were often considered second-class citizens to the point that stories often portrayed them in generalized stereotypes or as not capable of self-actualization. In his study of how American literature has historically portrayed the male identity, Joseph Armengol notes

that “[i]n Western patriarchal discourse, the universal person and the masculine gender have traditionally been conflated” (76). A postmodern worldview teaches that the first approach to any tradition, authority, or truth statement is to be one of critical self-reflection that considers how the individual thinks or feels about it. As upcoming generations begin to locate their understanding of identity within this skeptical and self-reliant worldview, the traditional representations of masculinity and femininity as binary antitheses have been increasingly scrutinized.

Having historically been considered the lesser or weaker sex, girls have been raised in a culture that has held them to specific standards of behavior by which their identity as a woman would be measured. Yet postmodernism served as a catalyst which permitted these narratives to break from the measurable universal standard and instead focus on the individual. The demands for strong women, women-empowerment messages, and equality of gender opportunity within every social sphere have dominated the cultural narratives of the Western world. Since the 1950s, women have gained a more equal place within the workforce, government, and in literary representation. The current archetype of a strong independent woman has increasingly reshaped the narrative that young girls are told about what it means to be a woman.

As girl-centered narratives increasingly focus on their own experiences which define them as capable, holistic individuals, the subjective measure of adulthood no longer applies only to boys. A girl too can now be seen as a fully-grown woman if she has left her parent’s house and started her career. Whereas women were traditionally dependent on men, who were the ones responsible for governing nations, influencing

cultures, stewarding economic production, and even physically tasking work, these areas are no longer specifically manly. How then, is a man judged as masculine or a woman feminine if not in contrast to the other?

It is naïve to think that just because women empowerment narratives positively impact young girls that there are not some ramifications for boys. This shift has impacted the stories that girls have been told about what it means to be a woman and, inescapably, what it means for a boy to become a man who must relate to them. The stories that we tell ourselves today will result from the ones that men both tell and show future generations as they respond to this feminine shift and major ideological shifts like postmodernism.

**The Significance of Bedtime Stories:**

“Write the vision make it plain so that those who run may read it.”

(Habakkuk 2:2)

“Without a vision the people perish.”

(Proverbs 29:18)

Narratives and the beliefs of a given social group feed each other in a never-ending loop. The feedback men and women give one another shapes identity, perceptions, expectations, and values. No story or culture exists separately from the people who not only create but also receive them. The general populace is no longer satisfied by an overarching metanarrative. The postmodern worldview not only continues to erode the social acceptance of universal truths, but also has emphasized the importance of the individual voice. Men and women resist accepting a fully independent narrative by still attending to the larger narratives of history, societal values, and formative communal experiences. However, in its validation of individual experiences, postmodernism provides understanding for how multiple measures of identity can comprise gendered experiences. Instead of comparing each man or woman’s story to an assumed norm, postmodernism emphasizes the truth of masculinities and femininities that result from personal biographies.

Masculinities acknowledges that, rather than determine a person’s identity, gender and its expression are diverse because of identity. Gender is a part of who a person is, just as ethnicity and age are, rather than the whole of that individual. As each culture holds to

different standards of normalized gender expression, the concept of both masculinities and femininities is most evident at a global level. For example, in Jordanian culture, the scene of two men holding hands as they walked through a market would signify an entirely different reality than the same situation in most American contexts. In the former context, the men have done nothing outside the expected behavior for male-to-male relationships; in fact, to hold hands with a woman would be scandalous. Yet should two men do so in America, it is assumed they have romantic feelings towards each other and, at some level, have disrupted the assumed cultural standards of acceptable manhood.

Literature gives voice to the diverse cultural realities and lived personal experiences of many young men. Armengol specifically addresses the need to study narratives of masculinity, saying “Because masculinity tries to retain its hegemony by passing itself off as normal and universal, rendering masculinity visible becomes essential for its analysis and critique” (76). Stories provide a release and point of connection for the young men reading them that many boys may lack in the everyday relationships they have with one another. While many adolescents experience similar changes, the isolation of this self-focused time tends to limit the possibility of empathetic connection that might occur for others who have outlying experiences. Storytelling thus equips readers to practice his or her empathetic consideration of the ‘other.’

Literature provides a clearly articulated expression of the often-indirect voices and values that boys hear. Written stories frame the tension between independent voice and cultural narratives in a way that few other mediums can. Masculinities, coupled with fictional literature’s inherent ability to assume multiple perspectives, allow both

readers and writers to understand the diversity of male coming of age experiences.

Armengol recognized that,

Like social concepts of masculinity, then, literary concepts of masculinity are culture-specific and context-bound. Moreover, cultural and historical changes in the meanings surrounding masculinity often result in- and reflect back- changes in literary representation of masculinity (Armengol 79-80).

As a subgenre, then, children's literature uniquely portrays not only what masculinity is, but also who the boy reader could become.

A society that writes stories for children, in which children themselves are the central characters, reveals not only the cultural message that children are significant enough to warrant their own narratives, but also reveals the assumed values by which these children's lives are guided. Children's fiction and young adult novels articulate experiences of what it means to be human that most deeply resonate with their intended audience: children themselves.

With the advent of children's fiction, inaugurated by Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, societal narratives began to shift in Western culture. This new genre of fiction, the only one of its kind to be defined by its intended audience, empowered children to independently explore their own understanding of the world, themselves, and others through imaginative content specifically written for them rather than adults. The truism that 'art reflects life' oversimplifies the significance of how fiction takes on the assumed values of individual storytellers or normalized societal values, especially in stories meant for children. Should a story normalize a given

behavior through a positive or even neutral portrayal, the reading child may unconsciously assume the behavior as acceptable. As adolescents learn to navigate the world around them, the narratives they take in reinforce or diminish their individual points of view.

**Criteria for Study:**

Within the genre of bildungsroman, certain novels more overtly tell stories with didactic intent for how boys should mature. Others inadvertently reflect the coming of age process through the stories they told. Of the books studied, the majority fell within this latter category as well as the following set of criteria:

First, each book is capable of being read as a standalone story. Some, like *Ender's Game*, later developed into a series. However, for the sake of this research, each story follows each main character's development within the same novel. This standard eliminated well-read series such as *The Hardy Boys*, where the central characters' growth occurred over a succession of plotlines. Each narrative studied needed to be self-contained in its examination of the main character's development. This exclusive choice allowed for a more in-depth analysis of the coming of age process in a greater variety of texts rather than focusing on the prolonged character arch that occurs in a single series.

Secondly, each narrative focuses on a central character who is a human boy from 8 to 18 years of age. Any narrative with a central character outside of this age range would not reflect the development narratives common to adolescents and their underlying assumptions. In his psychological study of adolescence, John Santrock notes that most Western cultures acknowledge the beginning of adolescence to start between ages 10 to 13 (Santrock 14). The window of 8 to 18 allowed for the real-life occasions where individual boys experienced either a premature or delayed adolescence.

Third, the stories had to take place within the Western world or a world understood from the Western context. In other words, even if the story was set in a

fictional world or an unspecified location in a realistic world, the culture represented within the story had to be directly translatable to a Western expression of gender identity. Within Eastern European, Asian, or Middle Eastern socio-narratives, the standards for gender identity and male development are different than that of a western European, UK, or North American narrative. One purpose of this project is to emphasize some of the universal experiences of boys' development, yet the cultural differences create very different narratives despite global similarities.

Then each book, published within a given decade, had to reflect stories that were common to the current time in which they were written. This meant that historical fiction narratives such as *Bud, Not Buddy* were excluded. Every decade's narratives shape the following decade's narratives. Yet the nature of historical fiction seeks to look back to how life may have been. Thus, those narratives had to be excluded for the sake of focusing on the Modern and postmodern eras.

Additionally, each novel had to be well-known enough to be commonly found in public libraries, classrooms, or suggested reading lists for boys. As Nancy Disenhaus acknowledged in her study on the relationships between boys and literacy, "Mass Media and academic journals are filled with discussions of boys' lagging achievement in literacy in the United States" (6). Given that the cohort of adolescent boys is among one of the most illiterate, the likelihood of any tween or adolescent boy picking up an obscure novel would be unlikely. A common literary narrative has the power to effect people, even those who have not read the novel itself. Yet for the sake of this study, the novels

selected were not only influential in culture, but also popular enough to more likely be read by adolescent boys themselves.

### **Findings of Surveyed Literature:**

The stories I surveyed directly acknowledge how growing up impacts individual characters and provide a touchstone for real boys as they experience their own development. The intent of this study was never to define boyhood or manhood. Rather, in surveying the literature, I considered what experiences, feelings, and developments consistently marked this transition. As I read, certain themes as well as key moments appeared frequently throughout the books. Despite the diversity of literature, each story upheld the importance of empathy, self-actualization, and connectedness as a boy grew up. These elements foundationally impacted each boy as he became a man.

#### **Empathy**

Almost every book surveyed contains an experience where the main character empathetically connected with someone or something very different than himself. In most cases, this experience was shared with an animal. The ability to see themselves in contrast to a hawk (*My Side of the Mountain*), a fox (*Pax*), a coyote (*The Stars Beneath Our Feet*), and even a cow (*The Bridge to Terabithia*) enabled the boys to see themselves as distinct yet similar to the natural world.

These empathetic moments also occurred in the boys' social worlds as they dealt with interpersonal conflicts. In novels such as *Holes*, *Hoot*, or *Bless Me, Ultima*, characters confronted another person who was extraordinarily different than themselves. Novels such as *Peak* focus more on the character's own adventure without directly including a moment of empathetic realization. However, the main character's

relationships with his dad and Sun-jo, the Sherpa boy his age who may steal his record summit, are significantly impacted by moments when he practices perspective taking.

An intentional inclusion of empathy within the overall genre of children's fiction does not take away from the importance of how universal these empathetic moments were throughout this survey of literature. In their textbook on children's fiction, Barbara Kiefer and Cynthia Tyson consider the impact of naming this genre as both a "sliding glass door" and a "window" for children to consider the world (15). This mimetic view should not be limited to nor limit a serious consideration of this genre specifically. Rather, it should validate this specific art form's ability to simultaneously point beyond itself as well as reflect a reader's reality back to him or herself.

The ability to reconsider one's own life or to imaginatively consider the life of another person forms individual identity as well as the ability to relate better to others. These empathetic moments allowed each boy to better relate to the world around him as well as his internal world. By recognizing the differences and similarities within himself to both the natural and social world, each main character experienced a shift in his perspective that proved to be essential in how he acted throughout the rest of his story.

### **Self-Actualization**

Given that each boy was the main character of his own novel, his self-actualization necessarily fueled the plot of the story itself. Many boys wrestled with feelings of powerlessness and frustration as the world around them either overwhelmed or undermined them. Some boys were able to express very visceral anger when situations in their lives became too overwhelming (*A Monster Calls*, *The Outsiders*, *A Separate*

*Peace, Pax*). Other boys relied on humor in order to navigate their inability to affect change (*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, *The Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, *Holes*, *Calvin and Hobbes*).

Many stories showed how boys were both resilient and inhibited by their age when confronted with a world too powerful, chaotic, or broken. The amount of change that a character was able to enact on the world around him varied. Some like Sam in *My Side of the Mountain* or Prop in *The Thief Lord* seek out smaller arenas in which they can effect change, attempting to maintain their own sense of control; Sam feels overwhelmed by his busy city and large family, Prop cannot save his little brother from being legally separated from him and adopted by their cruel aunt.

### **Connectedness**

Meaningful connections with family, friends, and other individuals were essential in order for each character to understand himself as well as the world around him. Very few of the boys in these novels would be considered popular in the traditional sense of having large groups of friends. However, each of the boys from these novels had deeper connections with at least one meaningful person. Some boys, like Junior in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* or Roy in *Hoot*, start their story as socially isolated but ultimately connect with a significant peer group by the end of the novel. Not every single one of these connections was necessarily easy or essentially positive, yet each one of these connections was deeply formative (*The Giver*, *Ender's Game*, *A Monster Calls*, *A Separate Peace*). Each boy was profoundly changed by the connections

they made with another friend, an older mentor figure, or the community their circumstances and decisions lead them to confront.

This connection can also be seen through family. No book reflected a perfectly harmonious family and many boys were almost completely separate from their family for the majority of the novel. Some like a *Hoot* or *Peak* included thoughts of boys who had very positive family perceptions. While the boys of these novels made decisions that often caused them to be at odds with their family, they just as frequently drew support from them. More frequently, however, characters picked their own families. Many of these boys struck out on their own or did not have a traditional family at all. In books like *Holes* or *The Outsiders*, the brotherhood formed between the central characters and their self-elected family radically changed who the boy became by the end of the novel.

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**Preface:**

“Children are caterpillars and adults are butterflies. No butterfly ever remembers what it felt like being a caterpillar.”

(Cornelia Funke, The Thief Lord)

“And what is a boy if not a glowing thing learning what he can get away with?”

(Sarah Kay, “Jakarta, January”)

One sunny day in July, I found myself in a snow ball fight with around 20 boys on the top of a mountain- the same ones, who despite having known me for less than a week, had moments before, shared their very real dreams and fears about growing up. Just after my first year of college, I was guiding for a summer program in Colorado when a large, high school youth group tumbled out of their rented coach bus onto our campus. The ragtag brotherhood of senior boys quickly roped me into their family of inside jokes, awkward moments, and late-night milkshakes. They celebrated their last summer together with all the careless preoccupation that only high schoolers could.

The potential and the chaos of growth sits uncomfortably with most people, especially when it’s a smelly 7<sup>th</sup> grade boy who keeps making the same inappropriate jokes day after day. No longer precious, too messy to deal with or forced to conform to the adult standards before their time, adolescent young men deserve the necessary attention for the life stage they are in rather than valuing its potential. Just as the experience of the aged should be valued, the state of *being a kid, tween, and teenager* can and should be considered with wonder at just how captivating life really is.

May these stories, then, cherish both the beauty and burden of youth. May these stories speak life through empathizing with the boys who found themselves in impossible situations, those who felt broken in the midst of a great, golden world.

*And They Shall Be Men*

**Michael: “Who is like God?”**

It is a mint green wall with framed pictures, none gilded,

but the morning sun is hardly a tentative thing

And holds them each like the boys they once were.

A gallery of the men who would prefer if everyone forgot

They, too, once crept unwillingly to school

Here are faded memories of the many parts

They once played-

Teenaged baseball uniforms with red dirt stains,

Staged smiles of toddlers with wide, toothy grins,

And cardboard Halloween costumes when money was tight.

These are the ones who’ve now grown familiar with

Stuffing their testament palms

Inside worn Carhart pockets and

Who won’t say,

‘I love you,’

More times than they were ever told.

These photos are the only evidence they weren’t always giants

With thickened arms like old magnolia branches and hardware store hearts

Where neatly labeled boxes store the things that matter-

Gently hardened memories like nails that only  
Rattle when practicality calls upon them.  
Maintenance and mending became second languages for care  
when mouths grew tired of trying to communicate in  
Unknown tongues of hurt  
of vulnerability,  
of home,  
of the person they'd hoped to be by now.  
Instead, these foremen seek the purposeful places in their  
maybe too busy hearts  
Reaching for buzzsaw sheets of hand-me-down facts  
For dog eared jokes from older brothers,  
For hard cinnamon candies to cover up cigarette breath,  
For the effort to hold off the world long enough  
To craft something together  
That might withstand the indecent apathy of entropy.  
Because these are the boys who learned  
The best way to navigate a world too wide  
Was loving time alone in the spaces where  
Air stained with sweetened Maxwell House and sawdust  
Simplified the questions found  
In scars and missing things.

Legacies were hand-me downs and

Reputations were still crafts to learn

Like a promise in a letter from their forefathers.

Some mornings, once the men unfold their spines from their dreams,

They pause before their portraits just long enough that

Each picture becomes a mirror in the 7 AM glow.

In these moments before their next beginning,

They can see themselves in the boys they once were.

**David: "Beloved"**

Him as a dad to his son:

When I was younger,  
There were so many Big Men, son,  
And their voices were so  
loud.  
They spoke of  
Black and White  
War and Peace  
And son, I chose to ignore them all.  
At least- as much as I could  
Even if apathy wasn't much of an option  
It was still my choice to make.  
I thought it would make me more of  
a Man  
If I did something for me,  
Didn't give in to everything those voices kept  
Shouting at me what to believe.  
But after I did-  
I silenced the biggest Man whose voice  
ever meant anything  
And that hush shot through me  
almost killed me more than  
All the fights I ran from,  
It kept me caged more than any other lack  
Of grace I saw in the world around me

You see, son,  
You never know how much you're loved until  
the Man who first taught you to talk  
tells you "you're not."  
There is no worse fall from grace then  
When the hands that held you  
Through your first steps  
don't know how to take you back  
after you ran away.

Son, I know you wanted to see what it  
Feels like to be  
a Big Man  
Cracking knuckles in school yards to  
show how tough you are, but son,  
the Bigger Man  
can't stain his fists bloody to prove just  
how much he's willing to give for whatever  
He believes.

I have seen how the  
Bigger Man has  
gentled hands that are able to  
Hold fast,  
no matter the wreckage, sustaining scuffs and scars  
to carry hope close  
And believe me, son,  
Sooner than you or I will know it

You will have to grow strong enough to stretch your limbs out tall enough  
to shelter all the ones you want to save  
Even if your back breaks.  
Son,  
Let your refusal to run always be the  
Evidence of your  
Strength-  
no matter the fight.

Him as a young man to his dad:

When I was little, I used to love coming home  
down a street where everyone  
Waved  
At me.  
Do you know what I'd give  
To untie your own knot of knuckles and leather stained skin?  
The same ones that must have held mine as I learned  
to walk, sheepishly stumbling over ...  
to drive the truck, one stretched out pointing, the other secretly strangling the armrest  
to climb the magnolia in the backyard, scrambling skyward through jungle green leaves  
it was better than being a friend  
because I was still your  
beloved.  
But then I  
Tied your hands, taut with the packing twine I used  
To box my things in the back of the truck, sneaking out towards the north

in the orange haze of sunset when you were still at the shop

Pops, it's been so long since I've heard you clear your  
Throat before you spoke.

Pops, I didn't mean to go against  
everything

You stood for,

You know that, right?

After all, you taught me how to "plant my feet  
Firm."

When you believe in something

I guess it's just

Different

For you had to be

An old man

So young

while I-I get to

chose

To be

There's so much we'll never see

Eye to eye on

Can you even speak to me like

You did with those

guys at the mechanic shop?

About their jobs, their girls, and their dreams?

The young guys- the ones my age-

that you always

egged on with my good grades or the catch of my last fishing trip.

Are they any more of a man than me now that they're never coming back  
home?

Am I still your son-

To you-

Even if I've fallen

So far from

the tree?

**Jason: “To Heal”**

Jason couldn't run far enough. He knew he was slower than half of his class, but he couldn't stop. He thought, *Maybe if I keep going, it could fix me. Fix this.* Throughout the months he'd spent out here, he'd seen his body leave himself behind. Not just when he'd lost most of the weight that Bryan had ridiculed him about for years. No, sometimes it was as if someone else was running. Trees blurred like watercolor, like grace. During those runs, the bad and the good get swept up into themselves, only just detailed enough if he turned his head for just a minute. But out here, he alone got to choose what to focus on. Most of the time it was just the trail itself and where it inevitably, irresistibly disappeared into the horizon. Even when he was slick with sweat and quivering with exhaustion, he couldn't shake the thought, *but where does it go? What else is out there?*

All he knew was that out here alone, there weren't any problems. No step brothers' hands to dodge from. No faces he had to ignore or worry about accidentally making eye contact with for too long. Here, in the woods behind his housing development, Jason just ran.

*Focus on your breath, Jason, keep it easy,* he heard his Coach's voice in his head. Not his actual cross-country coach at his middle school- the scraggly bald guy with a too loose tie and a constant cigarette singing at the corner of his mouth.

No, in his head, Jason's true Coach was like the older brother he always wanted. Fit, smart, and consistent, his imaginary coach would slip into his thoughts after the 7th mile or so. Jason imagined Coach would look him in the eyes and listen without

laughing. Bryan had stopped doing that the day his dad married Jason's mom. There was no more reason to pretend; either way, they were stuck with each other.

Jason felt his pace shift. His old sneakers scuffed against the dust at a slower tempo as his chest relaxed. *No, I wouldn't ever make the 200 meter*, he thought to himself. But there were always marathons- he'd sat fixated in front of the living room set and watched the one from Boston before Bryan came home from work. Most days, Jason knew better than to be around the house alone when his step brother got back. Even after the pain had faded to join other yellow memories on his skin, Jason couldn't forget the power he'd felt while watching those men endure so many miles.

*Maybe women should be allowed to run, I mean, they let me run, after all.* Something twisted in his chest. *But no one knows- would they still let me run if they knew?*

He glanced down as his knees, their pace strangely unencumbered by his thoughts. Some days were worse than others. Some days, he was just so thankful for what those bones and muscles could do. Some days, though, he could hardly look at his inescapable self.

The ground hit him before the adrenaline did. A shaky laugh mixed with a moan as Jason rolled onto his side. A small patch of blood gathered around gravel on his shin.

*You have to be aware of your body, Jason*, Coach's voice gently reminded him. Jason shifted until he sat with his elbows resting on his knees.

"It's just the sweat. That's it," Jason hissed through gritted teeth as tears mixed with the salt stinging in his eyes.

Maybe he could convince himself if he said it out loud. Even though no one was around, he knew he had to defend himself. He was the only one who ever did anyways, so he knew he wasn't weak.

Last night had been the worst yet. Something must have gone wrong at Bryan's high school or at the diner where he worked. Or maybe there wasn't a reason at all. Maybe everything Bryan ever did to him was just because he could. And Jason hated him for it.

A breeze shook the trees that sheltered his dirt trail from the nearby neighborhood. *What if I left? Maybe I could find someone to take me to Colorado, forget the marathons, I'd just run into the mountains and never come back.* He stared at the patch of sky between the sheltering tunnel of green. He couldn't wait to be an adult. Instead of a twiggy middle schooler with more emotions than a girl, he would finally be big enough, respected enough to stop things when they went wrong.

A cry broke through the cricket song of the afternoon. Jason snapped from his thoughts. The hawk sat high in a tree just to his left. It shuffled its body over its talons, leaning over the branch to carefully preen. The gravel was too loud even though Jason had only adjusted his foot. Freezing, with his head curled over his talons, the bird's golden eye considered him.

*Why aren't I you?* Jason could feel the sharp rocks etching into his palms as he willed his tendons to keep impossibly still. *Do you ever get scared?*

The hawk arched its wings back like a shrug, brown and red feathers quickly flashing through the sunlight until he disappeared into the pines. Jason watched him as

long as he could. *No one would ever think of you for being a coward for flying away No one would see anything besides how strong you are.*

Jason stood up slowly, silently arguing with every part of himself that wanted to stay on the ground. The blood on his leg had dried in a ribbon down to his sock, but he didn't try to wipe it off.

*Okay, Jason. Ready?* Coach slipped into his mind, gently dusting off his back.

“Sure, Coach.” And his feet began again.

**Ray, Gray, & Anthony: “A Cord of Three is not Easily Broken”**

“Do you boys understand why you’re here?”

Three heads looked anywhere but at the officer. Why should they? Even if he wasn’t yelling, there wasn’t anywhere they couldn’t hear him in the white, cinderblock room. They wouldn’t look at each other either. Nobody had answers or wanted to be the one who did.

The three boys had been found in the middle of it all. They each went to different schools, each played different sports, lived in very different parts of town. Two of the boys were leading athletes for their teams and each had good academic standing. But each had been brought to the county detention center to hash out their futures.

Anthony winced as he shifted in his seat, trying to escape the ache in his ribs. *I can’t believe this. I shouldn’t be here. I’m no sellout. Isn’t that what you do to fix a poorly painted wall? Just put a fresh coat of paint on it and you’re good. Cover it up and no one will notice the knuckle marks on the drywall. There’s always a way to fix something. Besides I’m not those guys. Just look at them. Ray’s just ghetto and Tyler’s weakass cousin can’t even stand up for himself. Man, I can’t believe this.*

The officer sat on the edge of a desk with a rumbled sigh. The boys had been found with drugs after the fight had been broken up. The cops shook their heads and rubbed their sore backs as they talked about it. It would be known in the station as *The Fight* for years to come. A full out brawl that had taken almost the whole station to shut

down. The linemen of a football team, half a soccer team, and most of a local gang had gone head to head on the basketball court downtown.

“It seems, boys, that one of you if not all of you are responsible for this,” the officer said watching their faces closely. “Anybody want to man up and tell me about it?”

Ray kept his eyes focused on the officer’s hat as his thick fingers twisted it around and around. He had been responsible alright, more than he had ever known. The black band of the cop’s hat brought him back to the court a few weeks back.

It had been nothing but hot for the past week. Stupid and thick- almost choked you stepping out onto the back porch. But Ray wanted to get some practice in every morning before school started. He had to. He passed the basketball back and forth on his fingertips as he walked to the court. *Mama’s kind of a poet, but there’s nothing about it that’s like Tiana’s ballet. The balance you need comes only in shots, shifting from the toes of scuffed J’s then straight back to the hips.*

The empty court was already throwing heat back at Ray as he dribbled towards the net. The last week danced through his mind.

*Cut in front of Jeremiah- quick, ‘cause his jump shots are killer. He may not be able to let you over to his place anymore, but, man, on a good day, you can still trip him up with a laugh. Just throw out your old joke about the time y’all stayed at Gram’s when you were still too little to know who was in the business or not. Too little to be interested in that power; y’all were too interested in your own games anyways.*

Jeremiah hadn't laughed that day though. His head wasn't even on the blacktop. It was still running around the last sale that went wrong. Ray didn't ask him about it. Just let him dribble it out- no one really knows how to talk about when the blood stops coming out even if the eyes stay open.

Wherever his cousin was that morning, Ray hoped he was okay. Lately, there'd been too many days that Jeremiah hadn't even smiled. *Business must be really bad.* Ray shook his head as he pretended to fake out an invisible defense, twisting around to shoot from the three-point line when-

"Hey, *basura!*" The ball bounced off the rim as Ray turned to the shout. It was Sam, one of Jeremiah's boys.

"Get over here! Now!"

Somehow, the ball kept beating against the blacktop even when Ray's heart must have stopped. Jeremiah was slumped across Sam's shoulders, awkwardly weighing down his small frame.

The chair let out a metallic squawk as the officer pulled it in front of the desk. Ray hadn't moved since he sat down, ramrod straight, but the noise shocked him from the memory of his cousin's swollen face and his gaze snapped to the officer. "Well boys, anyone care to start?"

Gray repositioned the gauze on his forehead. The blood had begun to leak a bit and he licked it off his thumb. It tasted like the first time he tried beer- acrid and confusing- why did Tyler protest he would like that shit? The whole deal had been his

fault. He knew it. But there wasn't a way to explain it to this guy. Gray studied his hands below the desk. He could hardly explain it to himself.

It had been the first thunderstorm since the heat wave rolled in. Gray tried to breathe slower. *Just keep moving*. Survival instincts led him forward through the crowds of swarming black raincoats heading towards the buses. Ducking his head to adjust the headphones that weren't playing anything, Gray felt the urge to look back like a bad itch. His backpack strained against the weight of the delivery. *Man, no one in their right mind would do this for fun besides Tyler*. The football players came out of nowhere. He almost ran into them even though they were wearing jackets from the rival school. Either way, he was done for.

"Ah, come one, just man-up. It's one drop off," Tyler said as he launched the ball at him. The soccer ball smacked grit from the driveway into Gray's palms as he caught it. "Do it for me, man. If you don't, *I'll* take Julie out 'cause clearly you don't have any balls." Gray jokingly flipped Tyler off, but he heard the real threat in Tyler's voice. He'd finally decided it was time for Gray to step up.

After his deadbeat dad took off and his ma stopped answering phone calls, Tyler had been Gray's only brother despite being the cousin that got passed around the family. Gray's parents tried their best. They sent Tyler to the same prep school as Gray and tried to raise him like their own from the time he was 12. But Gray knew that as much as he loved his cool cousin for showing him how to talk to girls or for teaching him how to knuckle-kick the ball, he knew that Tyler was dangerous. And when he started doing deals with the boys downtown, Gray knew he was only going to get worse.

*If this man says one more thing, I'm going to punch his dumbass mouth. Maybe. Maybe if he wasn't an officer and if I wouldn't go to jail, I'd do it. No. I wouldn't. I'm not Ray. Not Jeremiah. I'm better than them. I was just in the wrong place. Man, the guys better know where my phone is. Are they even smart enough to delete those messages? Maybe if Dad comes to get me, maybe I'll be okay. Anthony tried to keep his breathing slow. If Mom comes, I'm done.*

Gray dove too late and the ball rattled the goal. “Come on, Foremen! Move for it!” Mud had taken over the field and rain blotted out the team’s faces as they drove soccer balls towards the goal. Gray pushed himself off the ground, setting his teeth as mud mixed with the blood coming from his knee. Normal practices didn’t happen like this. Normally he could slow down each ball that rocketed towards him. But today, they shot past him, ricocheting against the goal frame and net. He hadn't known Tyler was in so much trouble-hadn't known how much he'd gotten into just to see if he could. *What if they already know? Where is Tyler?* He could barely make out the faces of his teammates through the rain. *Maybe some of these guys would back me up. But are any of them my friends?*

Ray tried to ignore how his hands shook as he and Sam moved Jeremiah onto a bench. Jeremiah’s face had already begun to swell, and he held his side to keep his breath even.

“They came out of nowhere, man,” Sam spat as he paced. “A bunch of the football guys from West caught this scrawny-ass soccer kid who somehow got a hold of

‘Miah’s deal before he could get it to them. Then the bastards came after him when they figured out soccer-kid was a plant.”

Jeremiah groaned as he shifted away from the pain. “Ray, it was Anthony.” Ray went cold. Anthony grew up across the street from them until his dad made it big with some company and they moved to the nicer part of town. By the time they got to high school, Anthony had grown up mean. As a star on the football team, no one could ever know he was the kid who’d cried himself to sleep more times at his neighbors’ place than at home. No one could ever know how badly his mom hurt his dad and since Jeremiah and Ray were the only ones who knew, Anthony had terrorized them.

Ray buried his head in his hands. Anthony wasn’t just mad about a bad deal; he was scared too. He was scared that ‘Miah could tell the truth and wreck the life he’d made for himself in his dad’s shadow.

“Hey!”

As if they’d summoned him, Anthony came towards them from across the court, leading a crowd of linemen behind him. He threw a bag of weed towards Jeremiah’s feet. “So, we have a problem now?”

Ray slowly stood up from his place next to Jeremiah as Sam leaned against the chain link fence and took out his phone. From the corner of his eye, Ray saw his cousin quietly laugh and rest his arm across the back of the bench, settling in like he was about to watch a movie. Anthony’s guys may have been meatheads, but they were on the wrong side of town. Sam’s text would bring the rest of the gang in minutes.

Jeremiah sucked his teeth, “Man, we don’t got a problem.”

Ray hated when Jeremiah talked like that. After he dropped out to work full time with the gang, he started codeswitching. When he was working, he'd never show he should have been valedictorian.

“Where’s Tyler?”

“That white boy isn’t my business. He doesn’t work with us.”

“He said he would be here. And somebody owes me an explanation because this shit is straight out of a teabag,” Anthony only smiled with his mouth, but his eyes stayed cold.

Car doors slammed as boys from the gang unhurriedly walked onto the court, most of them laughing with one another or still talking on their phones.

“Yo- heard we were invited to a pick-up game!” someone called out.

Some of the football players had relaxed, but Anthony’s hands tightened into fists. He knew better. The youngest crew member was only 13, but even he had a rap sheet longer than a grocery list.

Then, a Subaru pulled up. “Man, what is this? Some Teach for America prick just showed up.”

Gray didn’t come past the fence as he scanned the crowd, “Anthony. Where’s Tyler?”

“That’s what we all want to know.”

“Wait! That kid’s the plant!”

Gray shoved his hair back from his face, wiping away the sweat that had broken out on his forehead and tried to steady his voice. “Look. My cousin texted that he was

going to be here. All I know is that he got me to help with a drop off. Then he disappeared.”

“What the hell is going on?”

Suddenly, Tyler’s truck door slammed as soon as he pulled in behind Gray. Some of the rougher guys from the soccer team crowded in the back, half drunk and dazed. He stood next to Gray with his hands on the fence but refused to look at his cousin.

“I’m done trying to prove myself to you bastards. I’m done taking shit from people who don’t think I can take care of real business. You think you can threaten me? From now on, Anthony will deal with me.”

“Ty-”

“Shut up. You were a tool, Gray. That’s all you’re ever good for. You don’t know a damn thing about what matters.” He didn’t even look back at Gray as he walked onto the court. The gang watched as Tyler ignored Anthony and went to stand over Jeremiah. Ray had never seen anyone look at someone with as much rage as he saw in this stranger’s eyes.

“If you can’t even take care of some kid who intercepted a drop off, how can you claim to be the boss, huh?” Tyler hissed through his teeth, “You’re nothing. I’m taking over”

Then he spat on Jeremiah’s face and Ray didn’t know he’d punched him until his fist came back to his own side. The court exploded. It didn’t matter anymore who owed an explanation. Football players were toppled by gang members and soccer players alike.

“Sam! Help me!” Ray left Tyler to a few of the boys from the gang. He yanked Jeremiah off the bench before his cousin could even join the brawl. The two boys shoved him into the nearest car they could find just as they heard the first police sirens.

“We’re taking you home. Don’t tell anybody. I’ll be there soon.” Ray rushed back on the court, desperate to find who drove whichever car Sam was holding ‘Miah down in.

But he was too late. The police hurtled to a stop in the middle of the street.

“Gray! Haul ass!”

Gray heard Tyler shout through the scrambling crowd, but he stood outside the court, the palm of his hands bitten by the chain link he couldn’t seem to let go of. He was so cold with hate. *It never mattered how much I loved that jerk. He isn’t my brother. He never gave two shits about me.*

Boys desperately fled the court. If only some of their coaches knew how to make them run that fast. Anthony ignored them all. He had Tyler pinned to the black top. And his fist wouldn’t stop.

It didn’t matter anymore who had messed up the deal. It didn’t matter who would lead the team or if his dad found out about his drug habits. Maybe he’d finally taste the same metallic mix of shame and pride that choked his son everyday. It didn’t matter anymore if he held back all of the anger that relentlessly bit at him inside. Suddenly, Anthony felt hands around his throat. He swung blindly behind his head, but the pressure just increased.

Gray gritted his teeth against the pain that exploded in his temple after. He couldn't look away from his cousin or the blood that had seeped into the collar of his shirt.

*It doesn't matter. I have to take care of him. I can't let him die.* Gray's ears were ringing by the time the police pried him from Anthony's neck, but the thought just echoed in his head. *It doesn't matter. I have to take care of him.* He felt the officer's hands grab his wrists behind his back, but all the strength had left him as he watched a big officer pick Tyler up from the ground and hold his limp body against his chest, calling for a medic.

Another sigh filled the room and pulled each boy from their thoughts as the officer got up from the desk. He stood silently, carefully studying each boy as they looked at him, waiting for him to say something. Instead, he left, shaking his head as he left the room. What else could he do? No one would tell him the truth.

Eventually, the school superintendent washed his hands of the boys' guilt, but only of the two whose families could pay for it. The officers and the school board quietly nodded as two records were expunged; with their grades and valuable athletic potential, what more would their guilt be than a loss of capital for the school district? Yes, it was much better to allow them a low profile. Hadn't they learned their lesson anyways? In such close proximity to true thugs, they must have seen how close they'd come to losing their futures, their very morals. Yes, it was far better to send the other one to his fate by lumping the charges onto him.

The criminal charges were only refuted by one officer, the one who had interrogated the boys himself. Leaning back against the black linoleum of his desk chair, he fiddled with his hat. *It couldn't have just been him, that ... They're all smart boys.*

*What went wrong?*

**Zion: “The LORD’s Mountain”**

These Postmodern boys

These 21st century almost men

were born too old

Already, men’s wrinkles line their brows,

Untimely crowns weighing down

Would be dreamers

Identity is shaped on

too small screens, reduced to

characters cast in lower case font

With too many choices of colors without any lines to fill-in

They’re left to create their own penmanship

over discredited palimpsests of censorship, erased history, and hope.

Do they taste the thrill of life anymore now that the world is no longer big?

No longer breathtaking?

We dream to see them as large as titans-

To game about with broad shoulders and lit eyes,

but we don’t know how

to keep them just high enough between the waves and sun

We have lost the finer arts of

Stealing fire

We’ve lost the way up the mountain to the gods

(they’re only myths, after all)

And all our boys inherit now is

hindsight.

Maybe their wings will grow stronger  
without melting in the heat of our fear  
That somehow, in the space between men and gods,  
they'll rise to become heroes without falling

Twelve years of ping pong warfare  
and chocolate milk revelry have only given you this  
Instead of a becoming a legend  
The years of fairytales you've been told along the way  
Of all the lives that may have been  
Have come to lie fallow  
Without even a golden fleece to show for it  
No one but the Fates themselves remember  
giving men an enduring heart  
But your labors start now  
Not with pushing boulders up a mountain  
instead, you must learn the craft of  
Grappling with Pandora's truest gift

You feel it  
Clawing in your rib cage,  
Quickening just beneath your sternum  
when told you're being  
"Just  
Too  
Much."  
but you are not a jailer and that imprisoned creature

and the locked box within your heart is nothing less than  
a gift.

It bears your name.

You've been told to

Tame it

Tamp it down, lock it up to never let it feel the light.

Once the world was wide enough for you

To question, to yell,

To build up Lego towers

just so you could

Watch

Them

Fall

Down

But the part of you they call

A monster-

A creature-

It's kinetic.

There's a thread of your soul knitted in the strength of a

God too big for

Time and space

You bear His image

And we have forgotten

God is wild