

*And it's been a long December and there's reason to believe
Maybe this year will be better than the last
I can't remember the last thing that you said as you were leaving
And the days go by so fast...
And it's been a long December and there's reason to believe
Maybe this year will be better than the last
I can't remember all the times I tried to tell myself
To hold on to these moments as they pass...*

Michael Feraco-Eberle: Nobody really cries at graduation.

Andrew Sun: Really?

Michael Feraco-Eberle: Yeah, you'd think it would be a place for tears. But it isn't. It's a place to sneakily take cellphone pictures with your friends, to try not to lose your place in line, to throw your hat in the air. It's businesslike. Grad Night's a different story. You get to 4am, it's starting to dawn on people, everyone's exhausted, and out come the tears. That's why I always leave at 3.

Andrew Sun: The thing people tell me they always hear people saying at Grad Night is: *I wish I'd met you sooner.*

Michael Feraco-Eberle: That's perfect. And I wonder if those people turn around and make the same mistake again when they get to college.

Picking Up Pieces (Somebody That I Used to Know)

David Eng → Alton Wang: #walloffame (links to *Chapter the Last, Part the First*)

Alton Wang: Aww heck yeah.

Time passes

Alton Wang: I just read my old post and I'm horrified by it.

Alton Wang: Jeez it's almost embarrassing...

Alton Wang: [Michael Feraco-Eberle](#) I am almost tempted to rewrite it...

Alton Wang: Never mind, I just read my absolute last post and it summed up what I would say pretty nicely...Oh how quickly a year flies by.

Michael Feraco-Eberle likes this.

Michael Feraco-Eberle: Don't you dare re-write it! The point was – *is* – to capture who you were. That was everything – *Define Yourself, Down the Memory Hole*, the grad speech. I wanted you to preserve that because you lose it so quickly – apparently, in a matter of months, right?

Alton Wang and David Eng like this.

Alton Wang: Very very true. It's been a year and I can barely recognize the way I used to think...

Michael Feraco-Eberle: Besides, if you had the power to erase that because it was embarrassing, you'd be erasing the kid I knew and replacing him with the man you became...that you're still becoming. And I really liked that kid.

Alton Wang and David Eng like this.

Alton Wang: I think it just takes me aback how different these two people are, in just a matter of a few months. Even though I don't feel too different.

Michael Feraco-Eberle likes this.

It was a wrinkly, fragile thing. She held it without really *holding* it, the thing gently resting on the upturned palms of her small, soft hands, and she stared at it the entire time she spoke to us – perhaps because she was afraid to look at her fidgety audience, or perhaps because she was afraid it would disintegrate if she took her eyes off it for an instant.

A snakeskin. She held a snakeskin in her hands. I had never seen one before; I was transfixed.

Some of the other kindergarteners whispered excitedly, debating whether it had come from a king cobra, and it was quickly decided that yes, she'd somehow taken it from the great snake and lived to tell the tale. When Mrs. Summer told us that a common garter snake had left it behind, our disappointment was profound, in that way that preadolescent disappointment can be.

I don't remember the name of the quiet girl who shyly held the skin aloft. I *do* remember one of the kids asking if it hurt when the snake lost its skin. Mrs. Summer replied that it didn't, that it felt like taking clothes off. She said the snake didn't even have to think about it; he just grew and grew and grew until he got too big for his skin. Then his skin opened up – she said “unzipped” – and he slithered out, leaving the too-small-shell behind. She said he was OK without it, that his new skin was enough for his new adventures.

But I remember wondering whether the snake ever missed his old skin.

I started illegally downloading music in 2000. The first song I stole, at 1.56 KB/sec, was Guster's “Fa Fa.” It took hours.

As my collection grew, I shared songs more and more readily with my friends. And when you share songs with friends, you come to associate that music – art they had no role in creating – with them on a profound level.

All of my early romantic relationships were defined by music. Jessica and I made mixes for each other: Ben Folds Five, Our Lady Peace, very '90s-alternative. I stole her locker combination on Valentine's Day (our school had...lax security) and left her a dozen red roses and a copy of Tonic's *Lemon Parade*, the album she'd wanted most (and one that, like our teenaged love, would not withstand the test of time). Jennie and I did the same thing: I burned her the soundtrack to the original, still-superior *Spider-Man* before she left for a three-week trip to Australia, and she returned with a mix CD she'd decorated herself with thick dashes of paint. I bonded with Shannon by scribbling Jimmy Eat World lyrics with a Sharpie onto the sides of her white Chucks, and she'd cut her classes early to listen to my college-radio show on Thursday nights.

Throughout all of those bonds, a couple of bands have consistently stayed in the picture. I wish I could say they were the more artistically-daring ones, but generally the ones that all of my partners have liked are the safer ones – not groups I'm embarrassed to like, by any stretch, but bands that won't do anything to bolster my hipster credentials. And when you have a multi-year – really, a multi-decade – relationship with a band, you get to know it pretty well. Maybe you've hit the Wikipedia page of a favorite group a few times over the years, or seen one of them multiple times live.

One of the “survivor” bands from all of those early relationships was Lifehouse, a fairly-likable middle-of-the-road alt rock band whom I happen to enjoy way, way more than I probably should. I

watched their first music video when I was sick and stuck at home for two weeks during my sophomore year (it took days to download – you have no idea what life was like before YouTube). I wore their band T-shirt, saw their show at a little San Francisco club, even bought their albums instead of stealing them. And I found out little things about them, like that their bassist always dreamed of being the lead singer on one of their songs (and never got to do so, because the big draw of Lifehouse was, of course, their lead singer).

Late in their career, after entering the “we’ve been around too long, but we don’t want to stop, so we’re just gonna release albums with a couple songs you like and nothing more” phase that all bands you love inevitably hit (assuming they don’t end in a fiery breakup), Lifehouse released *Smoke and Mirrors*, a collection notable mostly for a poorly-thought-out collaboration with Daughtry and a move away from the kind of songwriting that had served as their calling card. But I’m a loyalist, and a collector, and an obsessive, so I bought it anyway.

Midway through the album, there’s a song called “Wrecking Ball.” If you don’t know the band well – don’t know its secrets – it’s probably a catchy but unremarkable cut. To me, it was something else entirely.

Because the voice is different.

Again, if you’re a casual listener, it sounds like Lifehouse. I was not a casual listener. I tore open the liner notes and saw, in small print, the bassist’s name under the vocals for “Wrecking Ball.”

He finally got his chance to sing.

And if you listen carefully enough near the end, when the vocalist trails off in a series of “Ohhhh, ohhhh, ohhhhhhhhs,” you can hear the sound of three other guys in the studio (the other band members, who are present while he’s tracking his vocals) absolutely going nuts – hollering, applauding, whooping it up.

It’s there, plain as day, but almost nobody hears it. If they do, it doesn’t occur to them that the background noise means anything.

But it makes me almost unspeakably happy, every time I hear it: the sound of someone fulfilling their lifelong dream, with their best friends cheering them on, the moment preserved unforgettably, unchangeably, in perfect sonic clarity.

I can’t remember when I stopped recognizing my own face in the mirror.

It may have been as early as my freshman year at Occidental (and yes, that’s all the way back in 2003, for those of you keeping score). That’s the year I first began wearing the glasses I had needed for years but stubbornly avoided. Up until then, I’d just forced myself to get by without them. I didn’t want them, so I told myself they weren’t necessary. I even sat in the back of all of my AP classes, as though I could force my eyes to adapt by making them suffer. It didn’t work, obviously, and after a final senior semester spent swapping seats with kids in the front row every time I needed to take notes, I gave in and picked up a pair.

I wasn’t a fully-willing convert. I tried going without them for long stretches; it hurt my eyes to focus so sharply all the time, and I was willing to trade blurrier vision for a little more comfort. (Who

needs to read all the license plates on the cars in traffic, anyway?) Plus, as I mentioned above, I really, really didn't want to be someone who needed to wear glasses all the time.

But I kept finding myself in situations where I did, in fact, need them. My life suddenly felt defined by my constant proximity to flat things, which my astigmatism left me unable to properly see. The glasses enabled me to live that life with far less effort. And when it came time to head to Occidental for my Orientation Week, I surrendered to the inevitable and started wearing them full-time.

I imagine I won't be able to wear contacts until the thought of placing something directly on my eye stops giving me near-panic attacks. As for corrective surgery, my mother's procedure was botched a couple of decades ago, leaving her worse off than before and unable to drive at night. The technology has come a long way since (no more blades!), but I'm still understandably anxious about undergoing the surgery myself. That means I'm probably stuck with the spectacles for the long haul.

It's been about twelve years since I first started wearing them. I met many of the people who matter most to me after receiving them, and they – like some of you – find it difficult to imagine me without my glasses. I remember removing them while speaking with Shannon's parents after we'd already dated for over a year and a half, only to see their startled expressions and feel incredibly self-conscious. It hadn't occurred to me that, just as I once couldn't imagine my grandmother with unframed eyes, I had become a person whose glasses were a part of the "default" face he presented to the world.

The funny thing is, though, that I still don't see those glasses on my face when I picture myself in my mind's eye. (Nor, for that matter, do I see a beard.) The spectacles are an attachment, a crutch I lived without for years – something seemingly forever foreign to my presence.

At what point, then, will the glasses become a part of me?

For that matter, at what point will I stop seeing a "young man" in the mirror, and start seeing a man, full stop, no modifier – start seeing an adult?

When will my answers to the *Define Yourself* questions match the responses from the people around me?

And when will I start seeing myself the way everyone else in the world I've built – the *life* I've built – already does?

The posters that used to hang on the rear wall of D101 were from a first-semester assignment called *The World Around You*. While that project exists for a bunch of different reasons – to let kids do something fun and artistic, to get the things that cripple so many personal statements out of their systems in advance – the work's title stemmed from the first UC prompt: *Describe the world you come from – for example, your family, community or school – and tell us how your world has shaped your dreams and aspirations.*

Each year, I order my students to focus on the second part of that prompt, telling them it matters far more than the first half of it. To that end, I asked them to do something very specific at the end of the poster:

Write a reflection about where you believe you'll be in a year – geographically, personal-development-wise, etc. In which ways will you be different, and in which ways will you remain recognizable? This shouldn't be a short reflection; I want to see how realistically you're viewing the effects the next year will have on you, and I can't do that if I only have a single paragraph to work with. Finish your reflection by explaining what your ideal (but realistic) path and destination will be (don't say "I don't know"), and work it into the rest of your poster's design.

It is a perpetual disappointment that so few of my students ever throw themselves into that reflection. Many forget my advice regarding prompts – *always check the second part before re-reading the first!* – and write strictly about where they think they'll be in September 2015 (which, in September 2014, feels quite the opposite of immediate). You can probably guess what those predictions generally look like: they're variations on the usual "I'll be in a dormroom at my dream college" bit, for the most part. That's very safe, and it's usually not wrong in the general sense: most of you seniors will, in fact, be attending classes and such come September 2015.

But what they very rarely write about, and what I honestly care about more, are the steps between the Septembers – the long December. I want to know what they see when they look ahead at senior year itself: what they'll learn, how they'll grow, who they'll meet, what they'll keep. But that year is already lost to so many of them, well before they begin it.

Honestly, most of the September 2015 predictions are wrong in the specific sense – wrong school, wrong place, wrong interests – because most kids can't bring themselves to take an unflinching, honest, realistic look at their own futures. They still hold out hope for a randomly radically better senior year, particularly compared to their junior years: *This will be the year I stop procrastinating. This will be the year my social life improves. This will be the year I step out of my comfort zone.*

Those are all great hopes! But they don't just spontaneously erupt into realities. Realizing any of those ambitions takes specific, targeted efforts and choices, takes adaptability and versatility. It takes the ability to fail and not retreat to the familiar – such a rare quality, and so, so important to possess. It takes making, as David Foster Wallace puts it, a million unsexy sacrifices.

Students in the first part of their final year tend to be uninterested in unsexy sacrifices. They're too busy looking at the green light. But before you go accusing me of getting my Gatsby references as horribly jumbled as Baz Luhrmann did a couple years back, let me explain.

You know that Jay Gatsby hopelessly chases a past he cannot bring back into being, forever reaching for something ephemeral that's already faded. The green light he reaches for is not Daisy Buchanan herself, not Daisy in the present, but the idealized version of past-Daisy his memory's left him holding. Of course the woman who exists in Gatsby's present isn't her, and cannot measure up; this doesn't stop Gatsby from pursuing her anyway, from insisting he can repeat the past, until his efforts to do so lead to his untimely death. (Spoiler alert for anyone who slept through junior year?)

Look again at what Gatsby's doing: He looks at the green light, and sees not the past, not even strictly the present. He sees a present that will define his future – a future that will mirror that present, which is of course meant to mirror his past. In short, he looks in front of him and sees what's

behind him; his path forward, his glimpse into the future, is a slave to his past. It's the punishment the Diviners and Fortune-Tellers suffer in Dante's *Inferno*, and Gatsby inflicts it on himself.

And it's what I see when I read those tentatively-offered reflections each year. Those looks forward are largely defined not by the students' own great expectations, but by the expectations of parents and educators – by the people who make up each kid's past, the people who won't be following them where they're going. Most of my September students not only don't know what to expect from their future, but don't really want to contemplate it yet. When their English teacher gently pesters them to hurry up and contemplate it already, they reply with something safe. They look past the specific joys and challenges of senior year without really pausing to consider that, yes, the life you lead during your senior year *does* have some impact on the path you take once it's over.

And I still see this, to a certain extent, reflected in the senior projects' concluding sections: *I'm going to this school. I will major in this subject. I will graduate and get a job.* All of the destinations, and none of the steps; all of the finish lines, and none of the racing; every sold-out arena, and none of the scrapped demo tracks. None of the eating, or learning, or moving.

I think some of you owe it to yourself to look harder, for the path ahead sure as heck isn't a straight shot, just as senior year probably wasn't for most of you. And the destination at the end of that path cannot merely be an attempt to bring the things we wanted in our pasts into reality in our presents.

The things you'll come to want, in short, will not be based on what you sought as children, let alone on what your parents have sought for you.

The dreams you'll realize will most likely be the ones you haven't yet slept long enough to form.

I like to collect things. It's a tendency I've inherited from my father; my mother is incredibly neat and organized, but my dad and I are pack-rats. It drove (and drives) her crazy, and I don't blame her. I have a stack of a dozen empty Wheaties boxes, each with a favorite childhood athlete on its front. That stack still teeters in the closet of my old bedroom, and I haven't lived there for years.

I've wondered in idle moments why I like to collect things. After I started teaching at Arcadia, I thought about whether my habits resulted from a need to reinforce one of the star points. Perhaps I wanted to make myself feel more secure by surrounding myself with familiar objects. Maybe these objects reflect parts of my identity that I don't want to lose as I age; after all, my heroes aren't on Wheaties boxes anymore.

But I don't just keep Wheaties boxes. I keep everything in boxes. Pieces of bark from hiking trips in Yosemite during high school. Grass blades, covered in blue paint, that I pulled from Cal's Memorial Stadium (that's UC Berkeley to most of you) after I ran down to the field following my first Golden Bears football victory. Dozens of haphazardly-shot pictures of squirrels...well, my family only owned disposable cameras, and I liked finishing off the last three pictures of a roll by taking pictures of squirrels. (I don't know why; I was a little kid, and that's probably an explanation in

itself.) Notes from middle school, weird little knick-knacks, foreign coins I found heads-up and picked up for good luck – boxes all.

The note my little sister wrote to me before I left home for college – the one begging me not to forget about her – is in a box. The only photograph I have left of my aunt Anna is in a box; I put it there after taking it out of my wallet, the one I ended up losing a week later. I have a box in a box; it was Angela's, and I coveted it because it had a picture of a treasure map on the box-top. (If you know anything about conventional big sister/little brother bonds, you know this means I couldn't have it...until I was old enough to have it bestowed upon me as a gift, an age which happened to coincide with the date when she was ready to get rid of the box.)

The letters my high-school sweetheart wrote me, every memento she gave me – all of the assorted fragments of an old relationship – lie collected in a Nike sneaker box and stored in a closet, just below the Gap box that houses the photos and concert tickets and memories that commemorate the six-plus years I spent in the relationship that followed (just above the Wheaties boxes, naturally). I even have a "student box"; it's where I keep the cards and letters I've received since I started working at Arcadia.

But I'm missing a box, and its contents can't be replaced. Specifically, I'm missing the box I threw away after my first relationship ended poorly. I kept everything from that time in that box, but mainly letters – affectionate ones, and handwritten to boot. (There's just something better about handwritten letters...)

Three weeks after the relationship ended, I was in an awful mood, sitting alone in my room – and I suddenly stood, seized by an urge to purge, and began pulling everything that reminded me of that girl off the walls. After that was done, I went through my desk and removed every memento I could find. Finally, I picked up the box, took out the letters, tore them up, and threw them out, one after another. Then I took out the trash, threw the box in on top of them, and went back inside.

That happened in 2002. I was seventeen. I'm thirty now.

And I *still* feel awful for throwing those letters away.

You may wonder why. They were just letters, after all – scraps of dead paper left over from a dead relationship. But they were more than that; every one was written happily, affectionately, genuinely. And I just threw them away like gum wrappers or old homework. No, worse – I tore them apart first.

It's hard to explain this to anyone who doesn't love words a little too much, and I'm aware most of you don't love them nearly as much as I do. But you can probably understand if you've ever written someone something like that, something that meant something to you as you wrote it, something that expressed affection without the guard you usually raise and maintain around yourself. Each note's a piece, a piece of something larger and meaningful that still carries that meaning in microcosm.

To throw that away, to repay that honesty with indifference, to respond to heartfelt words with heartless action, just seems wrong somehow...almost cruel.

I don't think of myself as a cruel person, but that wasn't something I could undo, and the more I look back on it, the colder it seems. The very things I once collected so lovingly were the

things I discarded in a heap. I mean, I keep everything – empty cereal boxes and blades of grass and pictures of squirrels. But I didn't keep the pieces of paper that chronicled some of the happiest times in my life, and I have to admit it would be nice to be able to look back, sometimes, at reminders of who I used to be, and at how deeply someone once cared about me.

I resolved never to do something like that again after some time passed, and went back to saving everything. But that incident has nagged at me ever since, even though, having talked to her since, I know it wouldn't have mattered to her at the time.

It's nagged at me because I still don't understand why I destroyed everything that reminded me of that relationship. Really, it was a weird thing to do. It's not like those letters made the bond go sour; we didn't break up because of something she'd written. The words still meant what they'd always meant. And I didn't feel any better after trashing them. Why didn't I stop tearing them up after, say, realizing two letters in that I wasn't feeling any better?

Why didn't I realize that I'd never be someone's first love again?

We're creatures of habit, really. We're very good at setting routines for ourselves: set the alarm for *now*, hit the snooze button *this* many times, eat *this* thing for breakfast, drive *this* way to school, etc. Our inertial tendencies fuel Hesse's argument that it's easy to be blinded by illusion ("maya"), fuel Gladwell's and Wallace's warnings against assuming a single frame (a moment in time where a person does something) reveals the whole filmstrip, and fuel Gertner's assertion that we are so bound by habit, routine, and tradition that we mistakenly assume anything that shakes them up must be profound, and therefore profoundly important.

All of that leads to this: We think we can predict our own behaviors, reactions, and choices in advance, mainly because the time we spend in our own heads gives us a lot of data – enough to make those anticipatory calls seem accurate. And we believe this because we believe that past is prologue, that the moments preceding these next ones matter because those next ones depend on our past's existence – that the aforementioned "data" isn't just unrelated noise. Since we know what we've been through and what we've done, we believe we know how we will behave when we're under pressure. We believe we know whether we'll be honest with others if the benefits of lying markedly outweigh those of telling the truth. We believe we know how selfish and how generous we are, how trusting and how courageous we are, how resilient and how adaptable we are, all because our memories provide us with what seem to be answers. Put in *X*, and you get *Y*. Simple.

But certain things change those calculations. Certain things interrupt our sense of routine, change the processes we've always used to get things done. And when our *Ys* shift in response to those calculations, we feel confused, or less like ourselves.

On the one hand, love is one heck of a fantastic routine, provided it works, and provided it works for you. On the other hand, if it doesn't work the way it should, that tie can be stifling. Love's the excuse for, say, personal stagnation: I would have pursued my dreams, but I had my family to consider. Plus, there's the whole vulnerability issue. We know love can hurt us. We know friendship can hurt us. We know even family can hurt us. Most of us know what it's like to feel pain from those

types of relationships; most of us expect to feel hurt again, which is a bitter but realistic thing to swallow.

Yet we still seek out friends and partners; some even seek to form family units of their own. We seek these connections out, even though doing so sometimes runs contrary to what our histories might suggest.

For example, my parents parted ways a little more than twenty years ago, a bit before the time most of you were just entering the world. According to Summer Finn, this should have left me scorning our Hollywoodified concept of “love.” As it so happens, I turned out more like Tom Hansen after his parents’ divorce, precociously adorable little sister and all.

Twenty fairly interesting years later, I’ve experienced my fair share of romantic highs and lows – from all over the spectrum, really. I’ve seen friends’ marriages succeed; I’ve even played with their kids. I’ve also seen marriages fail, sometimes surprisingly.

And after all that I’ve seen, I still want a family of my own.

Five years ago, one of my students, while talking to me about personal-statement struggles, asked me why I wanted kids. (In all fairness, I asked why he wanted them first; you leave an unsupported statement like “I want to have kids!” in your college essays, and you know what you’ll end up facing...) I was a little surprised to have the question turned back on me, and just gave him a bunch of answers. Most of them were decent...but to be honest, I articulated my thoughts poorly, as I sometimes do when I don’t have time to write them down and polish them up.

Truthfully, I think I’ll feel incomplete if I never get a chance to raise children of my own.

Now, I get that that sounds a little melodramatic, so I’ll try to give you a little more context.

When it comes to our major connections – loved ones – humans tend to feel that those connections enhance our existence. We feel somehow completed in the company of a loved one, even though we’re formed as individual beings.

The ancient philosopher Aristophanes once tried to provide an explanation for this feeling, and for the existence of love itself. He postulated that ancient human bodies had two heads, four arms, and four legs. This original design was cleaved in two after we angered the old gods.

As a result, human beings are born both complete and incomplete; we exist on our own, yet long for a re-connection with our “other half.” Love results when long-sundered souls encounter one another again, capturing each other in a mutual orbit like unsteady satellites. Love therefore embodies the expression of this re-connection; theoretically, by searching for love, we are searching for completion, for enlightenment, for purpose.

Now, before you say this sounds like nonsense, that humans couldn’t ever have possessed multiple heads, etc...OK, I’m with you. But really, what better explanation could Aristophanes have proposed? Sure, we can explain love in terms of chemicals and learned behaviors. We can talk about pheromone interactions until the cows come home. But Aristophanes’s explanation is somehow more reflective of the human spirit, at least the way I perceive it: ever-curious and eager to explain the seemingly unexplainable in the most imaginative way possible.

Perhaps, instead, Aristophanes has it backwards: we start complete but isolated, and slowly give ourselves to the people we love, our families and our friends and our partners, until we're incomplete without them. Rather than searching for completion in others, perhaps we're simply searching for something – or someone – worth giving a piece of ourselves.

Perhaps now you see what Ishiguro was doing with “donating” and “completing.” The pieces we give away aren't loaned; lose the person holding them, and you don't get your bits back. And in the long run, that's OK.

I think that's how I see parenting, because I think I'll give a lot of myself to my children. Without them, I'd have too much to share and no one to share with.

To be clear, it's not my kids' job to complete me, or to even be like me. (I'm kind of hoping they'll be better...) But I think I'll feel happier with them in my life; I think I'll improve as a person once I start navigating those parental frontiers. And I think I'll feel more complete, somehow, once I've given those pieces of myself away.

Yes, it's a paradox...but then again, isn't love?

For better or for worse, your lives are going to pieces right now. The march towards graduation requires a certain degree of separation. Consequently, you've begun casting aside the remnants of your childhood, shedding connections and sentiments like so many pieces of dried skin. Some are doing this more easily than others; some haven't really begun. But the process is inevitable. You *will* molt!

As you move forward, you're leaving behind some fascinating things – impressions, stories, memories, influences. Those things are your version of the snakeskins I used to look for as a little boy: the quotes you leave in yearbooks, the pictures you snap during that final week, the goodbyes you make time for (and the ones you don't).

Although you're leaving those things in your wake, that's not to say you'll never come back here. After all, Alumni Summit 2015 awaits.

...But, to be honest, you'll never return to the place you're leaving behind.

I'm sure you've heard the old phrase about not being able to go home again. I'm also sure that some of you don't believe it. But it's true. It's real. To an extent, it's a variation of the divide between two partners who resume a fractured relationship. Yes, you're back together – but you'll never share that old bond together once you've been able to be apart. That division's unbridgeable.

Similarly, you may come back here, in the same town, at the same place. You may stand in the same spot as you once did, hear the same bell tones at the same times, watch people with backpacks swarm through the halls the way you remember swarming through them. But it will have stopped being “home” for you for a little bit – and it can never be “home” again once that abstract bond's been severed.

Homes are so influential, so connected to our definitions of ourselves – you can see that in everything from *Never Let Me Go* to *Making Islands Where No Islands Should Go* – that we can't help but change once we've been removed. You're aware of this, even subconsciously, and I think that's

why some of you, when we've spoken, have expressed real terror about leaving your families behind...about leaving your friends behind...about leaving so many pieces of your lives behind, venturing out into the world suddenly less complete, less put-together...

The person who returns to Arcadia High to visit his/her teachers is not the person who graduates, any more so than the man or woman you marry is the man or woman with whom you'll grow old. We are not our twenty-year-old selves at seventy; nor are we our sixteen-year-old selves at twenty.

Former students tend to visit around Christmas break. I'd seen these students maybe six months earlier, and I had *known* them – read their writings, spoken with their friends, learned about their hopes and fears all semester, said goodbye to them and wished them well and read their names into a microphone the night they left this place for good. How much, really, could one person change in such a short amount of time?

A great deal, as it turns out, and as Alton Wang and scores of others can attest.

Over the years, I've been repeatedly, immediately, and profoundly struck by the way every single one seems older. Most of the visitors are still pleasant/good people, and most seem pretty happy (albeit exhausted, and with the unusual litany of freshman-year growing pains). Most of them still look the same, although some features have sharpened or matured to the point where I struggle to recognize them at first. (And yes, some had already packed on the "freshman fifteen.") Some had even started embodying that old college tradition: women start cutting their hair, and men stop cutting theirs.

No, what had changed wasn't a matter of a few pounds here or a shaggy head there. What had changed was something less definable, but no less noticeable: Every one of them seemed more centered. They carried themselves more quietly, more assuredly. I had never realized how differently I carried myself from my students until those same people began acting like me instead.

We tend to talk about the same things – our past, my present, their futures – when they return. They inevitably tell me how odd it feels to come back – if not the first time in winter, then definitely by spring. The teachers they had once seen each day had aged dramatically, six months in the blink of an eye, just as they had aged in ours (and just as their parents, siblings, and pets had). The kids at the school – even the seniors – looked so little to them. And I see something flicker in their eyes when the lunch bell rang and the kids swarmed through the halls. It isn't quite sadness...nostalgia probably comes closer.

Nostalgia for school bells and hallways: further proof that life can be odd.

I feel both sad and proud while speaking with my alums – more the latter than the former, for obvious reasons. Still, it's always a bit jarring to reach Alton's realization: that what I knew, what I had known, of these students no longer really existed. I'm part of their past now, not their present. I'm another piece of their snakeskins, just somebody that they used to know.

Please understand that that's not to devalue myself, nor to minimize the role I played for some of them, or for some of you. Some of my alumni have thanked me, sincerely, for making a difference in their lives. Others told me that they really missed the opportunities they'd had in these

courses to get to know everyone, that they missed smaller class sizes and the chance to know their instructors.

And I've grown close with many of them, forming bonds that have lasted years and years. My entire coaching staff is comprised of people I once coached or taught; they come over for poker, movies, burgers. They know my old roommates; they've seen my high school yearbooks. They're my friends, legitimately – not because we once shared this place, but because the people they became were people I would've befriended had we met under any other circumstance.

Brian Poladian was one of my original students, and in the years that have followed, I've edited his law school essays, he's helped me move from apartment to apartment, and we cheered his upcoming marriage over dinner and drinks at one of my favorite Pasadena pubs. I've Liked pictures of my alums' weddings and babies on Facebook; I've traded e-mails with those entering the Profession of the Damned as they struggle through their first years at the heads of their own classrooms. And every single one of them has changed; each now bears a passing resemblance at best to the person each was when they sat listening to me in a darkened classroom, just as you've done so many times.

Look, we're fascinated by snakeskins. We love stories, love figuring out how people become who they are. We treasure memories, connections, legacies. We're so fascinated by the skin that we sometimes forget to contemplate the snake who sheds it. But the snake lives life, not the snakeskin. The stories the skin preserves as physical record happen to the individual. And that life continues in a new fashion once the old fashion's left behind.

It is hard for me to accept that you're leaving, just as it was hard for me to accept it last year, and the year before that, and the year before that. I've known about some of you, cared and worried about and hoped for some of you, for four years now. You were, legitimately, my tiny baby little ones once.

And now you're old. You've grown. You're literally too big for these little desks and plastic chairs.

I don't think it will ever be easy for me to let each year's students go.

But I take heart in the knowledge that some of you, perhaps many of you, will carry pieces of the class with you as you travel – that this place, this class, these people, all of this, mattered to you. And I know I'll keep some pieces from your snakeskins – student work, the letters I receive from those who still write from college, and yes, even the old blogs I refuse to delete once each semester ends.

I'll try to remember what you'll end up shedding, try to preserve all that you'll leave behind.

But what I've discovered over the years – so many long, hard years! – is that no matter how much I cared about the person you've been, I'll almost undoubtedly be prouder of the person you become.

We've spent a great deal of time reading about displacement, identity construction, loneliness, fear, and voicelessness. We perhaps have spent too little time on the little things that

make it all worthwhile. Our stories – everything from the ancient *Gilgamesh* and archaic *Inferno* to the abstract and loopy *Slaughterhouse-Five* – document experiences and memories like collections of snakeskins: some fragmented, torn, and broken, others kept virtually intact.

Sounds like your freshman year of high school in a nutshell. Your first years of anything – college, work, friendship, family life – involve many of the same concerns.

I've told you before that you were on the edge of a golden opportunity, an opportunity that never presents itself this readily again: you have the chance to rebuild yourself, to shed the things that you've always wanted to shed during high school, to start anew as the person you've always told yourself you were, or simply wanted to be.

Now the wrecking ball approaches, swinging towards each of you. And when it hits home, when your childhood ends in a flurry of flying mortarboards, it'll be your turn to be surrounded by your wildly cheering friends, swept up in the joy of that single, fleeting moment. They'll be by your side, whether it's for the last time or not, when you finally take that arrow you've spent your whole childhood aiming and let it fly.

So understand: This is less a time for fear and confusion than a time for unbridled excitement. I've always tried to encourage you to be self-aware, creative, reflective, and honest. Now it's time to put everything you've learned into practice.

Yes, you're at a weird point in time. On the one hand, you have the green light to go chase your future. On the other hand, some of you are still reaching for the green light - the other one.

You're losing pieces and picking others up, reaching backward and forward all at once.

If we're picking up the pieces as we leave...what will we build?

And will we recognize our faces in the mirror when we're finished?

-
- + Who is the person you want to create? What will they be like?
 - + What will you keep?
 - + What will you discard?
 - + What will you acquire?
 - + Are you going to be eager to let new people into your life, or will you reflexively push them away?
 - + Are you going to yearn for home, or eagerly seek out a new life for yourself?
 - + And will I recognize you when you visit?

Blog Title: "Picking Up Pieces," Blue October, *Approaching Normal* and "Somebody That I Used to Know," Gotye, *Making Mirrors*

Quotes on the First Page: Counting Crows
