

I have a few things to say / I'll just say what I need to / I have a few years to go / Before I'm / Floating down the river again

Exposing what is mortal and unsure to all that fortune, death, and danger dare, even for an eggshell. Isn't there something in that? Isn't there something in living dangerously?

It could have been, but never was / At least the way you thought it'd be when you grew up / And there's so much of you I love, / But loving you alone isn't enough

The eternal quest of the human being is to shatter his loneliness.

Our sons are born because...well, because they must be born, and when they come to life they take our own life with them. This is the truth. We belong to them but they never belong to us.

But we can still support each other, / All we gotta do's avoid each other... / Nothing's wrong when / a song ends / In a minor key

Floating Down the River

Perhaps one did not want to be loved so much as to be understood.

As you penned your final column, the bookend to the one that started the whole chain of events, you couldn't help but reflect on the year that had passed. Rather than curse yourself for wasting time, you applauded yourself for making the journey. You were going to forge ahead, one eye on your bank account, the other on your word processor, and whatever happened in the end you were going to make sure that you could look yourself in the mirror and say you gave it all you had.

Most days of the year are unremarkable. They begin, and they end, with no lasting memories made in between. Most days have no impact on the course of a life. May 23^d was a Wednesday.

"You will go into the forest, and become a Samana. If you find bliss in the forest, come back and teach it to me. If you find disillusionment, come back, and we shall again offer sacrifices to the gods together. Now go, kiss your mother and tell her where you are going. For me, however, it is time to go to the river and perform the first ablution."

He dropped his hand from his son's shoulder and went out.

1. All That Fortune, Death, and Danger Dare

When I was little, I told my mother – repeatedly – that I wasn't going to move out until I was thirty years old. Why thirty? Beats me. I was seven and had no intention of ever leaving the house I loved, and thirty seemed like it was forever and a day away. (Now I'll be thirty in three months. Weird how that happens.)

Obviously, I didn't follow through: I graduated and left home at eighteen, twelve years before I said I would. And when I went off to school, I went away – I had no car, very little money, etc. I went from a 7,800-person town populated by rural/suburban middle-class white people to a college surrounded by Spanish-language billboards and located just beyond a “Los Angeles City Limits: Population 3,795,800” sign.

Going it alone was far more of a change than I expected. I had no one to ask for advice – the only person I knew who came down to Southern California was an on-again/off-again girlfriend (off-again at the time) with whom I'd shared a Tom/Summer-style courtship – and I wouldn't have known what to ask about anyway. If we're all floating down the river, this was a trip through the rapids; there were a lot of days when I couldn't remember why I had come to Southern California, and a lot of days when I felt I had made a huge mistake.

But I'm stubborn. It was a weird mindset: I simultaneously decided that I was in over my head and that I didn't much care about getting back to the surface. I had made a decision, and I was just going to march forward. I even stopped calling home. I did virtually everything to worsen the separation, even though it was that separation that hurt.

My parents realized I was unhappy. They hated the fact that I was so far away. They didn't like Southern California; they still don't. They could have forced my hand whenever they wanted – pulled the funds they'd been sending me to put me through college. I certainly didn't have enough money to do it alone.

They didn't.

They never wrote to demand, or even suggest, that I come home.

They never called and told me to return.

They left me alone.

2. But They Never Belong to Us

My father and I went on a college-visit road trip during my final semester of high school. I was an apathetic prospie – I didn't want to leave my friends and home – but I decided that since everyone else was leaving, I just needed to fall in somewhere. Not very ambitious.

But every time I asked my father to make a suggestion, every time I hinted that I wanted him to make the decision for me, he refused. He explained to me that it was his duty to draw on his experiences to teach me as I grew up – and that it was also his duty to let me chart my own course, no matter how he felt about my choices. I have to let you make mistakes, he said; they're your mistakes to make. And he said nothing else.

This drove me crazy. I wanted him to tell me that Cal Poly San Luis Obispo was the best choice, that the University of Puget Sound would make me truly happy, that UC Santa Cruz would allow me to grow as a writer – heck, I wanted him to insist that I was making a mistake and demand that I needed to stay home. Anything to plant a target. Anything to point the arrow.

Instead, he went on every tour with me, soaking in the campuses quietly, always observing, never imposing the views he had formed. I chose Occidental – moved four hundred and fifty miles away and never moved back.

When I was older, I asked him if that had been hard for him, if it had been difficult to see me just flopping about like a stranded fish during the college search. He told me that he never doubted I'd find something that made me happy, but that he knew that I had to find my own way, and that he couldn't possibly pick that way for me. It was hard to know I was unhappy, hundreds of miles away, but he trusted my judgment even more than I did, and was willing to let me learn through success or failure.

And when my little sister repeated the “college road trip” four years later...well, so did he. Quietly. Because he loved us enough to know how to let us go.

3. Nothing's Wrong When a Song Ends in a Minor Key

I ended up OK. Occidental became the right place for me over time. I'm pretty sure I wouldn't have gone into teaching had I enrolled elsewhere. I would have led a completely different life, and I don't think it would have measured up to the one I'm leading now. I was lucky enough to have parents who trusted me to do the right thing, even though I wasn't really trying to do it. As fate would have it, I ended up justifying that faith.

In many ways, Siddhartha's father made the same decision as my father, albeit more stubbornly. Both men looked into the eyes of their sons and realized that boys no longer returned their gazes. Both men understood (eventually) that while sons may follow (unconsciously or not) in the footsteps of their fathers – that we bear their hopes and burdens equally – the time had come to pull back. And both allowed their sons to leave the only homes each had ever known, burying the pain that followed.

Siddhartha never speaks with his father again. I'm grateful for the chance to speak with mine, and grateful for the choices he made. His decision to take a hands-off approach to my collegiate departure may not have been the right one for everyone, but it was the right one for his only son: I got to aim before I launched my arrow, and when I finally got to the target, I tore right through – and sailed on to the next one, still looking for myself.

4. Where We Have Found Ourselves

I was looking at her in a way I can just begin to describe. It was as though our entire history together were a deck of cards, usually packed in a box, but just for that moment opened and fanned out, so that every moment was equally visible. I saw her staring down at her book, rubbing one finger along her cheek, her right leg crossed over her left, her right foot moving in a slow circle, and I

saw her doing the same thing in a thousand different rooms, in airports and hotels, on kitchen stools and picnic benches.

And we just floated together, she reading and me watching...mostly unaware that we were floating, the smaller movements of life disguising the gentle, ceaseless current of daily existence, the trip down the river.

She is my other. It is beyond the things that attracted me to her; it is beyond the virtues that made me love her, beyond the flaws that I learned to accept. (Equally: It is beyond the flaws that made me love her, beyond the virtues that I learned to accept.)

It is something beyond; it doesn't have a name. It is like the gift of companionship raised to another level. It is coming to that part of another person that is deeply unknowable, and knowing it anyway.

It does not mean that everything is perfect, that all the disagreements end, that all the disharmonies disappear. We are two imperfect people trying to muddle through, trying to figure it out, trying to strike another bargain that will be more functional than the last bargain. Marriage is work, or it's nothing at all – when they told you different, they lied.

It can lift up your heart. It can make you more than whole. It's just the way things are. It's just where we have found ourselves.

My sister got married a little over a year ago. The groom was once nothing more than a close friend of hers in college. Now he's her husband. (To those of you who feel intensely paranoid about being trapped in the "friendzone": There's hope!)

While I'm admittedly biased, I thought it was a beautiful ceremony, with the late-summer Boston heat and humidity holding themselves in check throughout. The actual proceedings were fairly efficient – two readings, a short sermon, a swift exchange of vows and rings, and a slow walk to and from the head of the venue – and two of the groomsmen saved their toasts until the morning after, when the newlyweds and most of their guests met again for brunch.

The first groomsman, who'd known both my sister and her husband for years, had a nice, heartfelt speech – the kind that inevitably ends with the speaker crying. (When he choked up as he neared the finish line, I swiftly dropped my head and gazed at the table, then peeked up to see virtually every other man in the room doing the same thing, like we were little kids who closed their eyes to avoid seeing the monsters under their beds. I didn't laugh – it would've been deeply inappropriate – but I definitely grinned while staring fixedly at the tabletop.)

The second, also a longtime mutual friend, followed with a slightly more composed bit, and his conclusion hit home for many in the room. He pointed out that the couple at hand had met each other twelve years earlier, but spent most of those twelve years dating other people. And that was fine, he continued – in Judaism, there's a concept that applies to their situation: that two soulmates will meet at an early point in their lives, then go their separate ways before eventually reuniting. The intervening interval is spent living, but that life experience is really just a way of preparing one's soul until it's ready to meet its match. And that, he finished, was clearly what happened here: they'd been preparing.

It's a nice concept, and I'd like to think that it holds true here, because my sister and her husband seem to have a truly beautiful partnership. They seem compatible in a way that makes Tom's "Ehmagerd! She likes the Smiths and Magritte too!" connection with Summer seem just as tenuous as it ultimately proves to be. It is, as Paul puts it, better: it's real.

Before I went to the wedding, several people asked me whether I approved of my sister's husband-to-be. (I like this idea that my approval matters.) And it felt good to be able to say, wholeheartedly, that yes, I approved. He's kind, and honest, and brilliant, just like my sister. I found something I wrote as a sophomore in college that referenced his writing, back when he was nothing more than my sister's friend. (How's that for foreshadowing?) And he complements her well – there's symmetry there.

The seating at the wedding was side-oriented, rather than frontal, which meant that everyone in my family except me faced the groom. I was the one who got to watch my sister beaming at him through the entire thing. I've never seen her so happy, and I've known her my entire life. It was lovely.

Their success, of course, begs another question: if we're to accept the second groomsman's toast at its face value, then how does one go about preparing oneself to be ready for one's soulmate?

After all, it can't simply be a matter of wanting to be with someone. I think we've all seen relationships, and even friendships, fail despite the efforts of the people involved.

They're complicated things, relationships: tough to predict, tougher to cement. Perhaps they're nothing more than that aforementioned series of bargains, each of us negotiating as we go in response to the changing circumstances of our journey down the river.

Yet if you're wired like Tom, you can't treat a relationship that way. Something calls to the romantically-minded among us treat relationships like they matter – to find meaning in these bonds, to assign great cosmic significance to simple earthly events, to feel a rush of excitement when we discover symmetries and commonalities, when we realize that one of the accidental collisions life continually pushes us into is actually going to stick.

Why do we seek those collisions, these binding ties?

Why open ourselves to the possibility of hurt feelings and wrecked intentions?

Why was my sister beaming all day?

And why can't Tom hold his relationship together?

5. The Course of a Life

I met a kid in seventh grade when he sat next to me in our science class. My last name is obviously a weird one, and he seemed interested in my family situation. How did I get the name? Why did I have two?

My parents had divorced two years earlier; his parents remained, and remain, happily married. This fascinated him. What was it like to have divorced parents? Was I OK?

At that point, I hadn't really spoken with anyone about my parents' split; frankly, it wasn't a subject most children found particularly compelling. How do fifth-, sixth-, and seventh-graders talk about something they really can't understand?

To this day, I can't tell you why I felt like I could talk to him. I just could. And I did.

The next day, he sat next to me again. And we talked again, about things that had nothing to do with my family.

Two weeks later, we hung out in the park by campus after classes ended, talking about school (so many teachers to gossip about!), family histories, and the girls who were the subjects of our intense adolescent crushes (and whom neither of us would date very successfully, as it turned out).

At the end of the day, we walked to the local 7-Eleven to spend a couple bucks on junk food. He carried two Sprite caps, each one a "winner" – worth another free Sprite. Unsolicited, he handed one to me.

It was a small, unnecessary gesture of kindness, but it was enough to cement my impression of him: a little weird, but a fundamentally decent guy.

That was fifteen years ago – half a lifetime, literally. We ran with the same crowds, fell for the same girls, drove the same cars (the rickety Oldsmobile I drove for six years? I bought it from him), rooted for the same baseball teams, and helped each other with the same problems. We were always different from each other – very much so – but we bonded over shared history and shared experience.

We graduated in 2003, and went our separate ways: I to SoCal, he to NorCal. Once apart, we changed tremendously. We no longer shared the day-to-day experiences that once defined our friendship.

But the years have been good to us, all in all. I became a teacher; he's a police officer who finished law school and passed the Bar. My cross-country team won two national championships; he's flown on Air Force One. (When the FBI needed to do a background check on him, guess who they interviewed?)

Now that we're adults, we rarely see each other; my work prevents me from going home very frequently, and his prevents him from visiting. But we're still friends. As it so happens, we have the kind of bond that takes no time to fall back into, the kind that can sustain itself even if you only see each other a half-dozen times a year.

He'll be the best man at my wedding someday.

6. It's All About to Change

Gilgamesh doesn't stand out in the first tablet because he's callous (although he is) or a bad king (although he is). No, Gilgamesh's most notable quality is his isolation. He can stand alone in a sea of faces; nobody is like him. Part of this is because he's almost incomprehensibly powerful; his subjects essentially view him as a walking god, and not the kind you can get close to. Part of this is

due to his psychological makeup; everything from the towering walls of his city to his behavior towards new brides seems geared towards keeping himself from engaging with the outside world.

But it's worth remembering that Gilgamesh is lonely because he is *alone*. No one is as strong, no one is as brave, and – ultimately – no one understands his loneliness enough to share his pain.

There's that moment when Gilgamesh meets Enkidu's eyes and realizes he's finally met his match – someone who's neither superior nor inferior, someone who knows what it's like to have real bravery and strength coursing through his veins, and someone who knows what it's like to long for something greater (in Enkidu's case, the company of the animals who cast him out of the equivalent of Eden).

It is the discovery of an oasis in a desert, a safe port in a storm – a discovery made when one had lost all hope of ever making it.

Now, I've seen many people come and go. I am lucky to have kept the ones I have, to have spent a good portion of my life in these oases' shade. I also know how Gilgamesh felt – how it feels to be stranded on an island without knowing how to swim away, or to float down the river alone, unmoored and untethered.

I've come to realize that I've been each of the people Siddhartha's first chapter studies, or at least played their parts to perfection. I've definitely been Govinda, chasing someone along the path to their destiny, if not necessarily my own. I've been the Brahmin, recognizing that I can't follow a person I care about where they're going – and, after a time, coming to terms with that well enough to let them go with something approaching dignity. (Make no mistake: the Brahmin is stuck in a holding pattern, but he never expects to see his son again.) And I've been Siddhartha, putting someone else in the exact same position out of necessity.

In fact, it occurs to me that it's necessary to play all of these parts, at one time or another – that they're all sort of inevitable byproducts of the processes that lead us to form relationships in the first place. And while some people will find that troubling, even to the point where they keep others at a distance, I'm conditioned to feel the opposite way: that people are worth the trouble, even if they leave. Somehow, some way, the mere presence of other people helps us feel more comfortable in our own skin...even (or especially) if those other people are markedly different from us. That's worth the cost.

Both *Siddhartha* and *Gilgamesh* ultimately argue this, and argue it persuasively. Yet I sometimes struggle to explain why this is so. When I've spoken with past classes about friendship and family, it's been hard to define why we seek these associations. It's been difficult to explain why we place such value on them, and why we value certain kinds of relationships differently. Why are we, for example, supposed to love our family members more than our friends when we wouldn't even be friends with our siblings had they been born into another family? (Note: this doesn't apply to me, as my sibs are awesome. But the question remains.)

So I wanted to kick off the blog with a consideration of friendship, family, places, and relationships in general – the ties that bind, for better or for worse; what it means to establish them; what it takes to maintain them; why any of it matters; and what we hope to find, treasure, leave behind, and hold fast as we float on down the river.

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- + What qualities seem to make a person important to you?
 - + Why do we seek out friendship? Why spend the time and energy it takes to maintain a friendship? Why does the presence of another person – someone you trust – make you feel better?
 - + What are the foundations of the friendships you've formed? Can you remember how your best friends became your best friends? (Were your experiences worthy of story and song, or were they more mundane?) Are they more than simple ways to steal happy hours - to spend some time outside of your student-self?
 - + Did your friends seek you out for the same reasons you sought them, or do they look for different things in you than you look for in them?
 - + Think of the friends you no longer see. Have you lost any friends you wish you could recover? How did they (or you) drift away? What threatens the friendships you currently hold?
 - + How hard do you think you'll seek to maintain the friendships you've made once you graduate? Do you hope for a fresh start? What kinds of people do you hope you'll meet – will they be like you? – and how will you try to make friends wherever you're headed next?
 - + Reflect back on your reading of *War*. I used a quote from that story for the second section's title. Having read that story, (and lived in your own skin for seventeen or so years), please explain whether that sentiment is accurate, as well as why.
 - + You haven't left home yet, but Departure Day draws nearer with every passing moment. Will your parents make a decision similar to the one my father – or Siddhartha's – made? Do you run the risk of living in a walled city instead, as Gilgamesh does, resistant to change and new, tenuous, potentially risky connections?
 - + Do you think you could make the same type of decision as the fathers I've discussed when your own children are grown? Will you treat them the way my father treated me, or will you take a different tack? Will you make them stay?
 - + Is Siddhartha's father's decision wise? (Consider your argument carefully.) What about Govinda's decision to leave the village with Siddhartha? He doesn't want to leave the village, and yet he follows Siddhartha. It's an incredible show of loyalty – but is it a wise or healthy decision? Once again, could you see yourself making a similar decision?
 - + Should we admire Siddhartha for his choices? Should we criticize him? If faced with similar circumstances, could you make the same choice? Would you?
 - + Finally, Siddhartha goes in search of...something. Maybe truth...perhaps fulfillment, or a cure for restlessness...even a simple sense of peace. He has very little idea of how to find any of it; he's looking for something, but he doesn't quite understand what he's looking for yet. Gilgamesh is further along – he can name what he seeks – but remains in many ways just as ignorant as Siddhartha. And because he doesn't have a specific idea regarding the nature of what he's looking for, he's just as liable to pass by it unknowingly as he is to stumble upon it.
- Do you know what you're looking for? What might pull you out beyond the walls?

Blog Title: "Floating Down the River," Motion City Soundtrack, *Go*

Section Title #1: *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley

Section Title #2: *War*, Luigi Pirandello

Section Title #3: "Werewolf," Fiona Apple, *The Idler Wheel...*

Section Title #4: *One Fine Day in Gualala*, Jon Carroll

Section Title #5: *(500) Days of Summer*, Scott Neustadter and Michael H. Weber

Section Title #6: "Who Knows? Who Cares?," Local Natives, *Gorilla Manor*

Quotes on the First Page: Motion City Soundtrack, Aldous Huxley, Jimmy Eat World, Norman Cousins, Luigi Pirandello, Fiona Apple, George Orwell, Scott C. Reynolds, Scott Neustadter and Michael H. Weber, Hermann Hesse (trans. Hilda Rosner)
