

*I think the kids are in trouble / Do not know what all the troubles are for
Give them ice for their fevers / You're the only thing I ever want anymore
We live on coffee and flowers / Try not to wonder what the weather will be
I figured out what we're missing / I tell you miserable things after you are asleep*

*Now we'll leave the silver city 'cause all the silver girls / Gave us black dreams
Leave the silver city 'cause all the silver girls / Everything means everything*

*It's a Hollywood summer / You'll never believe the [awful] thoughts I think
Meet our friends out for dinner / When I said what I said, I didn't mean anything
We belong in a movie / Try to hold it together 'til our friends are gone
We should swim in a fountain / Do not want to disappoint anyone*

*Now we'll leave the silver city 'cause all the silver girls / Gave us black dreams
Leave the silver city 'cause all the silver girls / Everything means everything*

Will the Future Blame Us?

*I was afraid
I'd eat your brains
'Cause I'm evil*

*I'm a confident liar / Have my head in the oven so you know where I'll be
I'll try to be more romantic / I want to believe in everything you believe
I was less than amazing / Do not know what all the troubles are for
Fall asleep in your branches / You're the only thing I ever want anymore*

*Now we'll leave the silver city 'cause all the silver girls / Gave us black dreams
Leave the silver city 'cause all the silver girls / Everything means everything*

*I was afraid
I'd eat your brains
'Cause I'm evil*

1.

Do me a favor.

Before you begin working on this post, take a good, hard, long (not longing!) look at your friends. It's easier to do this if you have a Facebook profile, but you can do it alone as well.

I want you to picture all of these people at your twenty-year reunion. Imagine everything that's going to happen to them over the next two decades. Imagine all of their successes and failures, their compromises and risks, the things they'll avoid and the things they'll bring upon themselves.

Now imagine yourself at that same reunion, using the same process I described above.

Which of those people do you suspect will be doing better than you (define that as you will) when you see them at the reunion?

Which of them do you suspect will be doing worse?

You know who they are.

Write those names on a list, and keep it safe – for now.

What *does* determine success? (Certainly not names.) Accidents? Circumstance? Luck? Intelligence? Good looks? Charming manners? Connections?

This is a huge question in the context of our courses. How, for example, can my father earn two degrees on his own, having left home against his parents' will, and end up working in a drugstore for three decades...while his son, at 22, lucks into a job at the highest-performing large public high school in the state – literally the best position possible for someone with his qualifications?

Sometimes, it seems like good people can't catch breaks, while the unimpressive dance their way to glory.

How can the deserving end up losing?

Why does life take those weird turns...and can we do anything to control them?

2.

Control is a central concern in both *Siddhartha's* and *Gilgamesh's* narratives. The texts ask: To what degree can we control our thoughts, desires, and impulses? To what degree can we control our environments or circumstances? To what degree can we control our fates? To what degree can we control each other?

Gilgamesh is capricious, arrogant, selfish, and unwise, both relentlessly obsessed with routine/the past and uninterested in the consequences his actions have on the present and future. Such qualities enable him to build a walled city towering over all other things, the remnants of which persist nearly five thousand years later. But *Floating Down the River* also made clear the isolation and loneliness that results from a life spent not caring about the needs of other people – or of not paying attention to one's own true needs.

Siddhartha, too, is unyielding, perhaps too much so. For while he reaps many successes – he gains all the material wealth one could want, as well as the companionship of a beautiful courtesan and the respect of his new town – he tends to approach every challenge the same way: He'll set his eyes on something, then launch himself like *X-Men's* Juggernaut towards it, ripping through obstacles in order to reach whatever he's chosen to chase. He's not an arrow, gracefully targeted and fired; he just smashes his way through his world until he gets what he wants. He describes himself as a stone sinking through water; one wonders how he ever intends to come up for air.

Yet for all of their warnings about the costs of obsession, *Siddhartha* and *Gilgamesh* argue equally forcefully against a passive existence, one spent waiting for whatever life brings. After all, while Siddhartha certainly suffers, most would rather end up like him than like Govinda, and all would wish to avoid Enkidu's fate. If Gilgamesh and Siddhartha are stones, their counterparts are leaves – fragile, and as subject to the whims and influences of others as the falling leaf is to the swirling wind.

Govinda defines himself as fundamentally lacking something, and searches for that something in others rather than within himself. He drifts through life, pulled in the gravitational wake of men who dare to choose their own path, hoping to find the answers he seeks in the teachings of others. Such an approach has its advantages: it's the path of least resistance. It's safe. You don't upset anyone. In the coin-flip game, your floor is fairly limited; how badly can things go for you when you're continually surrounding yourself with great men? Unfortunately, Hesse argues it's also the path of least fulfillment; if the floor is limited, so, too, is the ceiling. One can only discover so much in a land that's already been mapped; it's more fun when corners of that same map still have **Here There Be Dragons** etched on them.

And Enkidu, while certainly less passive than Govinda, makes the mistake so many make in the name of loyalty: When he cannot persuade his friend to pursue a more rational course, to avoid making an irreversible mistake, he decides to accompany him, to protect him, instead of abandoning him. In doing so, he tethers himself to a ship he already knows is sinking – and pays the ultimate price for sticking with his friend through thick and thin.

Siddhartha and Gilgamesh pair their determination with a decided lack of compassion; they cannot relate to those who share their world, and therefore always stand apart, men divorced from the lives they lead.

Enkidu and Govinda balance the qualities we prize in ourselves (loyalty, curiosity, compassion, kindness) with a refusal to make the difficult choices that could lead to better lives – to flip their coins when success is not assured.

Is it better to be the stone, or the leaf?

Which describes you?

3.

I keep using these images of things hurtling at targets – arrows, stones, etc. – because that's how we tend to see ourselves. We're objects in motion, traveling life's path and eager to see what lies along the way.

What about the things that can knock you off course?

Judging by the posts I've read in the past, most assume that the obstacles between you and your goals are universally negative – fears, weaknesses, cruel tricks of fate and bad strokes of luck.

But what if the obstacle is just another thing you wanted?

What if it's something you *need*?

Do you think your parents became the people they thought they would become at seventeen?

Did they turn out better?

Did they turn out worse?

Would they have answered differently if they'd never become parents?

Midway through both the book and his life, Siddhartha looks at Kamala, his lover and companion:

Weariness was written on Kamala's beautiful face, weariness from continuing along a long path which had no joyous goal, weariness and incipient old age, and concealed and not yet mentioned, perhaps a not yet conscious fear – fear of the autumn of life, fear of old age, fear of death.

Siddhartha's alarmed by this sight – not because Kamala's hideous, but because she provides an unpleasant reminder of the life he's let pass him by, the principles he's abandoned...the part of himself he liked that's now lost.

4.

You're still young; your lives are rolled parchments, years and years' worth of canvas to unroll and scrawl upon. Yet people age without really noticing, falling into routines despite themselves. They lose themselves.

I'm soon going to ask you to consider this possibility – that this sort of slow, prolonged breakdown we see in Kamala, and eventually in Siddhartha, could befall you someday.

Does it frighten you?

Do you feel like you could lose yourself (your identity, not your memory) in similar fashion, or are you confident you'll avoid such a fate?

What steps are you going to take to keep your focus – especially since next week's blog will highlight how easy it is to shunt your own fulfillment to the side for the sake of hitting benchmarks and sticking to routines?

There's a song on The National's fantastic 2010 album *High Violet* called "Conversation 16," in which the singer laments to his wife that he fears parenthood and adult routines have changed them – that they're losing their special bond in the wake of the responsibilities a child brings. The chorus is, incongruously, "I was afraid / I'd eat your brains" – but it makes sense if you recognize his fear that

they're mindlessly succumbing (zombie-like) to the roles and expectations society holds for mothers and fathers rather than pursuing their own goals, their own lives, together.

Listening to the song, one pictures Gilgamesh lurching listlessly through life pre-Enkidu, not to mention dragging himself on his quest post-Enkidu; one pictures Siddhartha, belly swollen from overindulgence, shoulders bowed under the accumulated weight of numberless apathetic days, playing at dice, winning to win and losing to lose. Neither man leads the life he could, or should, because neither possesses specific visions of what that life should be – just vague ideas masquerading as intentions. And because they lose sight of anything resembling a target, they become slaves to the inertial power of life, settling into routines they neither asked for nor enjoy.

How will you avoid becoming “just like everybody else,” especially when many of you will end up trying to fit into the roles your parents currently occupy – roles society established long before your birth, complete with expectations that may not fit you as well as you'd hoped?

How will you remain singular, worthy of being remembered?

How will you preserve the part of yourself that you love most?

+ How much does success cost? How much should the pursuit of our dreams cost? Which valued aspects of yourself are you willing to compromise, violate, or sacrifice in order to get what you want?

+ How much do we cost each other – how much does a worthwhile relationship extract in blood, passion, and fate? Should a friend cost more than a lover? Should a family? Is the price ever right? How can we tell?

+ If the cost of family matches the cost of your dreams – and you can only pay one – which do you pay?

+ Can you think, wait, and fast (symbolically speaking)? Are you unable to focus, unaware of what you want, or unwilling to make your move...or is the future looking bright? Once again, are you the stone, the leaf...or the arrow?

Finally, I want you to refer back to the questions I asked at the beginning of the post about your reunion. What went through your head when I asked those questions? What caused you to separate your friends so easily? Which qualities jumped out at you, as far as predicting future success went? Do you see these same things in yourself?

The above prompts were for your first section. You'll need a little help for your second.

Talk to your parents, your guardians – those who care for you.

Ask them:

+ Have they lived their lives as arrows, leaves, or stones?

+ Were they looking towards the future at your age? Were their situations similar to the ones we witnessed in *War* and “The Brahmin's Son”?

+ Have they fulfilled the goals they had when they were young?

+ Did they have to sacrifice dreams as they grew older, have to prioritize in ways that left some hope-stones unturned?

+ If their seventeen-year-old selves could see how everything would unfold – every triumph, every tragedy, every loss and gain – would the sight have satisfied and excited them?

Was the price right?
