

*Is our secret safe tonight? / And are we out of sight? / Or will our world come tumbling down?  
Will they find our hiding place? / Is this our last embrace? / Or will the walls start caving in?*

*The natural flights of the human mind are not from pleasure to pleasure, but from hope to hope.*

*Man prefers to believe what he prefers to be true.*

*Feb 06 2012 11:09pm*

*Jeremy Lin (NY - PG)*

*+Add*

*Yahoo! Free Agents*

# ***Our Heads Are Spinning Around***

*Leave all your clothes buried in the sand  
Who knows when we'll be coming back again?  
Come on in, man, the water's getting cold!  
See if you sink or swim or float!*

*When the tide came in we tried to act surprised  
What could the ocean want with the things we left behind?  
Swimming back to land and I realize  
It was the only time that year I felt alive*

*We booked a one-way going overseas,  
Feels like I'm living someone else's dream  
I shed my past to keep from turning back  
I'm scared it may have been my better half*

*I'm on the edge, about to choke...*

*And the story ends the same as it began  
I never know when I'll be coming around again  
Starting our descent and I realize  
It was the only time that year that I felt alive*

*Now I'm on the edge  
About to choke  
About to choke  
About to choke*

## 1. I Don't See the Silver Lining

I try to write these blogs as chapters of a larger narrative, with thematic arcs and such running through them. If I'm successful, you'll get to the last one, look back at the first entry, and think, "Oh. So that's what he was getting at." (Returners: If you want to test this, go back to Rivers and Stars 2015 and re-read the first thread, *Floating Down the River*; some stuff that went unnoticed the first time through may jump out at you now.)

George Orwell, a far superior writer to yours truly, structures *1984* in similar fashion, albeit for a very different reason. The novel's first section concerns itself chiefly with the past: with how Winston's world relates to ours (the one he's lost); with whether one can ever regain what one's lost; and with the primal, universal fear of irrelevance – of being forgotten – expressed through the science-fiction construct of vaporization, i.e. total erasure. (Most of us don't fear that governmental bodies will erase us; we fear our friends and families will.)

*Making Islands Where No Islands Should Go* and *Doomsday and the Echo* function as odes to the fading past (hello, paperweight!), as celebrations of the little things we often overlook, and as evaluations of knowledge, resistance, and choice. They're conscious reflections of *1984*'s first section, remixes / reinterpretations of Orwell's ideas processed in a new form. They pose the same questions Winston must face: *Do I dare disturb the universe?* Do I dare live a life I want? Make *this* face? Write *this* thought? Harbor *this* hope? Take *this* chance? Forego *this* fear?

Winston spends the first eight chapters barreling towards a crossroads, which he reaches when he enters Charrington's shop. That the section ends as it does – with the purchase of something delicate and beautiful, and the near-transformation of that object into a murder weapon thanks to Winston's unchecked fears, all of it soundtracked by the fragment of a forgotten song – merely underscores the themes Orwell's explored for his first hundred pages.

Party members have lost the ability to trust and confide. They obsess over the faces they present to others, whether their appearance is appropriately orthodox, whether they're proper in every word and thought. And because deviation from the established norm is dealt with brutally and swiftly – public humiliation at best, exile (erasure) at worst – they avoid deviation by memorizing all the right moves and shouting all the right words. Through it all, they stay alone – not independently, of course (*ownlife* being frowned upon), but in isolation.

This isn't to say that Oceania is like the world's worst high school. It's to note that Orwell leaves us where his characters stand at the end of Part One: wondering whether our risks will pay off, holding our damage in our hearts and the symbol of our fragile hopes in our hands.

And that's part of what makes Part Two so...remarkable.

## 2. Singing to Half-Filled Rooms

*1984* aims high and hits hard. It takes on questions concerning human nature, connection, loneliness, desire, courage, evil, risk, disappointment, sacrifice, perception, responsibilities, and choices. Perhaps most incredibly, it wraps those ideas into a *really* compelling narrative. Indeed, *1984*'s often praised for the uncanny way every detail and plot point eventually comes together at the end – whether you like the end or not.

It's also been criticized, somewhat fairly, for being too blunt and on-the-nose. Orwell is the kind of author who will resort to ALL CAPS when it suits his purposes, particularly in Part Two's ninth chapter. But that chapter is such an anomaly within the larger Winston narrative. In fact, it provides an example of how Orwell *could* have written his novel: just assertions and insights, jammed aggressively into every page.

The temptation to use that blunt-force urgency, to make sure his points came through loud and clear to even the least-perceptive reader, had to be overwhelming, particularly when one considers how badly Orwell's health was failing as he tried finishing the novel. When read in that context, the novel's not just a story: it's one man's race against death, a desperate bid to say everything he could before his lungs burst (which, perhaps coincidentally, is how the author ultimately went out).

That's why I want you to appreciate Orwell's various subtleties: because he spent some of his last days crafting this story into something better than it needed to be. He could've written *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism*, and it probably would've been praised as a classic; we might've taught it, at least for a little while.

Instead, he wrote *1984*. And the world has never forgotten him.

### **3. Wish I Could Write Songs About Anything Other Than Death**

If it hasn't already been written, someone needs to publish a paper examining the big ideas animating each of *1984*'s sections as they pertain to the human life cycle.

Part One is about recognizing rules – recognizing inflexible, dogmatic **boundaries** – and learning to live life “correctly” within them. As The Graduate allude to in the song that opens this blog, Winston's standing on the edge of those various boundaries – not only the edge of nonconformity, but the edge of the line dividing past from present, the edge where hope and fear collide. And we worry that he doesn't have the guts; we worry that he's going to make the wrong move; we're terrified that he's about to choke.

Part One, in short, is adolescence. All the diary-writing and cafeteria meals give it away.

Part Three is about realizing you're doomed, and that the end is coming far faster than you anticipated (even though you always knew it was coming, on some abstract level). It's about struggling to maintain your dignity and nobility in the face of those final impossible odds – the woman shielding her child, writ large across the last few chapters.

But if Part One is about surviving adolescence, and Part Three is about facing oblivion (to future viewers of *The Fountain*: facing the place where there is no darkness?), Part Two is about living, about rejecting a society dominated by cynicism, fear, jingoism, greed, hatred, violence, and deprivation in order to dare to enjoy what you've always wanted.

For a few chapters, at least, Winston allows himself some quiet moments of joy and solace. He allows himself to believe Julia, which is remarkable in and of itself. After all, what proof does he really have that she's *not* a member of the Thought Police? Consider that Charrington's disguise (as the owner of a shop full of relics) is just as “corrupt” as anything Julia does or claims to believe.)

That Winston chooses to believe her – that he chooses, in fact, to let himself *need* her – calls attention to one of the fundamental contradictions at the heart of his character. Winston is simultaneously far more skeptical of what he experiences than anyone else he knows and desperate to completely, unreservedly believe in something. Whether this yearning is a byproduct of his work (even as he hunts for the past, he destroys and rewrites it with such ease; how could someone like him ever trust anything?), the result of his horrible familial situation, the consequence of a life spent accepting lies and denying one's nature, or some combination of the three, it's at the heart of who Winston is.

In Part One, that hopefulness is consistently tempered and checked by fear, skepticism, or doubt.

In Part Two, Winston sheds his skepticism. He trusts in Julia. He lets himself love her, in his own damaged way.

It's beautiful.

So how are we to react to what happens to him?

#### **4. After All That We've Been Through...Still Believe in Magic?**

Believe it or not, this blog entry is one of the toughest pieces I've ever written for this course – tougher to finish than *Searching for a Former Clarity*, than *I Never Wanted...*, than *...And Just 'Cause He's Gone*. I drafted and drafted it for weeks the first time I attempted it, leaving the kids with four blog-less weeks in the process. It wouldn't come together.

During that same stretch of time, I was engaged in a long-running, fairly circular, and frustratingly inconclusive discussion/debate with one of my friends about the value of trust. We'd each endured our share of relationship failures and the like over the years, and had been scarred and shaped by them in different ways.

I'm of two minds when it comes to trust and skepticism. I buy into people far more easily than I buy into, say, a trend or phenomenon. I remained decidedly skeptical of Tim Tebow, for example. (Admittedly, that statement took way more guts to write when I first crafted this piece.) My basic attitude with people is to trust them until they lose my trust.

My friend disagreed, strongly. She saw trust as dangerous, and thus without value. (Since the people you trust are supposed to provide you with safety, the dangerous act of trust becomes a paradoxical exercise.) She reasoned that even if she missed out on the good stuff, the high points, the moments of joy and happiness, she'd rather keep her guard up...because while being hurt by someone you distrust just makes them a terrible person, being hurt by someone you trust makes *you* complicit. **You** let your guard down. **You**, therefore, allowed yourself to become a victim.

And you only did so because you were too weak to do things yourself; you weren't strong enough to make it without somebody. You felt like you needed someone. And if you'd only been stronger, strong enough to avoid letting your guard down, you would have avoided getting hurt. What happens to you, in other words, is preventable: if you never trust others, they can't take advantage of you. You're always in control, so they can't win.

Except Orwell argues strongly against a life spent divided against yourself, against an attitude that requires you to fear everyone else.

It's easy to look at what happens to people in the Ministry of Love and say "See? That's what you can't trust anyone! They shall betray you!!!" But that's the point! The Party behaves in an *inhuman* fashion; what's the argument against trusting *humans*? Julia betrays Winston, sure...after being coerced in the most dramatic way possible. So what? She wasn't a human being anymore. When she was one, she was loyal.

And the same holds true for Winston. Look at the number on the room O'Brien forces him to enter again – and yes, I know that I'm teaching in Room (D)101. (I promise I didn't choose the room number intentionally.) 1 goes into the room. 1 comes out of the room. In between? Nothing at all. The being that enters Room 101 may have held onto a shred of his old self, but he wasn't a person anymore by the time he left it – just a body, just a shell.

If Part Three truly is about death, then Winston's ordeal represents what we all have to do eventually: confront that stark realization that the irresistible, irreversible end is coming. Simultaneously, we have to realize that there's no way to outsmart it, fool it, or hide from it; no amount of begging, pleading, cajoling, or negotiating will move the forces that claim us. And no one can tell for certain whether they're strong enough to stay true to their convictions when they face those forces down, when they're more frightened and hurt and *alone* than they've ever been.

If you're lucky, you can draw on something for strength in those darkest of times. If you're a believer, religion can help. If someone loves you, and you love them back...that can help, too.

If anything, Orwell's arguing that, while you shouldn't trust blindly, withholding that trust from everyone in your life is just as blind, and leaves you equally damaged. It leaves you like Winston in the book's beginning, rotting alone in an alcove as you cower from the telescreen's watchful glare, desperately preserving a life you don't even love leading. It leaves you like Winston in the book's conclusion, forgotten by those who knew you and ignored by the rest, sucking in oxygen and regular gin with no purpose beyond subsistence.

And you never get to know that life can be any better. You never find your Golden Country. You never find your paperweight. You never marvel at the secrets you can share with another person. But at least you're "safe."

What is danger, after all? A change in conditions that's unfavorable to your immediate and future prospects.

You know what's unfavorable to your prospects? Just about everything that you do in life. Education is risky. Eating is risky. Love is risky. Work is risky. Driving is risky. Sleeping is risky – that's when you are vulnerable to your enemies!

You know what's unfavorable to your prospects? Time.

In the end, Robert Charles Wilson had it right: *we all fall, and we all land somewhere.*

By refusing to trust anyone, you're guaranteeing that you'll land alone.

Within months, my friend had cut all of us out of her life. I haven't heard from her in years.

## 5. Thrown Like a Stone in the Water

In Part Three, Winston fights a lonely battle against forces that wish to change and control him. In some ways, Winston is always fighting by himself; in other ways, Winston always has someone to rely on (the hope for O'Brien in Part One, his love for Julia in Part Two, and his odd conflation of the two in Part Three).

There's always someone that Winston can at least briefly believe feels the same way he feels, someone to give him some sort of comfort. By believing in them, he can't be alone...which is why O'Brien targets his beliefs once he's been captured. It's the most effective way to "break" him. If O'Brien – and, by extension, the Party – can force Winston to accept a non-reality, it wins. For Winston, defeat lies in believing (not just saying) that there are  $x$  number of fingers instead of  $y$ , or that  $2 + 2 = 5$ .

Some readers feel frustrated with Winston, particularly with his inability to fight back against O'Brien's perverse mind games. The prevailing wisdom seems to be that Winston knows the truth, and he should be able to hold on to what he knows while resisting his tormentors. While this view doesn't take the amount of time that elapses for Winston into account (he spends *months* in Miniluv), it also exists because it seems like Winston should be able to trust his own mind – to refuse to believe he is insane while everyone keeps telling him he is.

Anyone who's really thought about memory – say, someone reading Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, as some of you did last year, or someone who really threw themselves into *Down the Memory Hole* – knows that memories themselves are often distorted. If you tell a story about a remembered event over and over to a bunch of people, you remember the story...but do you really remember the event, or simply believe you know something you've created as a substitute?

Moreover, you can know the substance of something without necessarily knowing something. For example, human beings understand pain, but we can't remember the sensation of it. You can't physically remember what a papercut feels like – you'll just remember it feels bad! What you remember as "pain" is an empty placeholder, one that will be replaced during another painful experience and returned as soon as that experience passes.

Winston instinctively understands that things are not the way they should be. He even has dim memories – or memories of memories, or invented memories – of a time before the Party ruled with such an iron grasp. But he has no way to prove these things are real! All of his beliefs stem from a central concept – that his thoughts and experiences are real, and that his perspective makes sense. We demand that Winston hold fast to his faith in this concept, but that's irrational. Winston could very well be wrong! He has no physical evidence to support himself, and he's exhausted.

Let's use the concept of pain again as our example. Winston believes pain is bad. Why? Because his mind instinctively screams that it is. His perspective is rooted in simple truths, such as "pain is bad."

What if he's wrong?

What if – and please bear with me here, as this is a theoretical exercise – pain is actually *good*, even something that human beings should aspire to receive, and Winston's instincts, like a sociopath's, are completely backwards?

The only way the sociopath can realize his instincts are wrong is if someone can convince him of that fact. That's exactly what the Party does with Winston. It tries to reorient his thinking in a way that forces him to ignore and erase everything he once thought he knew. If you're re-educating someone, the approach makes sense, because we center our entire existences around the perspectives we construct – the way we think.

If you wear sunglasses your entire life, you'll see the world colored with a certain tint. If you never wear them, you can't really conceive of the way the world looks through them.

Now let's imagine that you were wearing sunglasses your entire life and never noticed. Everything you see is refracted through that lens, and you were never aware your lens was artificial. Suddenly, you open your eyes to find out that they're gone – the whole world looks brighter and harsher. You've never seen it this way; for all you know, something's gone horribly wrong with your vision. You blink a few times, and nothing changes. What's your reaction – to quickly accept the new sight as the truth, or to deny that reality, close your eyes, and open them again in hopes that your vision has "normalized"?

It's human nature to retreat to the familiar, to initially deny information that contradicts our previously-held beliefs and experiences. Even Plato, in his *Allegory of the Cave*, understood this in more ancient times. But if I force you to stare at the new, brighter world, and if I insist you were looking at the world through sunglasses – and if I never let you test that accusation, never let you see the glasses, never give you relief – how would you react? Would you still believe that your view of the world was true...or would you begin to worry you'd gone crazy, or even that you'd been wrong all along?

Put yourself in Winston's shoes: if someone keeps telling you over and over that you're crazy, and you receive no support or verification that anything you've thought or experienced is even remotely sane, wouldn't it be stupid to keep believing in your own rationality? If people keep telling you that you're wrong, wrong, wrong – and no one supports you – do you begin to doubt yourself?

And when someone begins playing on your greatest fears, will you resist with greater strength...or will you weaken?

## **6. Bright as Fallen Snow**

One of the things that gave me a lot of trouble when I first tried writing this blog was, believe it or not, Jeremy Lin. Here's what I was writing to a friend about him while everyone else was feeling excited, at the height of Linsanity all those years ago:

*I was fond of him when the Warriors picked him up, but just thought he'd be a D-Leaguer for us. It didn't surprise me at ALL when they dropped him immediately after the season, and I actually got a little bit of schaudenfreude out of it – I still liked him, but had grown really sick of the "Jeremy Lin is our future OMGZZZ" brigade on the blogs. When the Rockets cut him too, I was like, "See? He wasn't all that special. Just a nice story." I figured he was destined for a ten-year career spent pingponging between the upper echelon of the D-League and the end of the bench for different NBA teams. I did not think he would ever score 20 points in a game. I didn't even just pick him up [for the fantasy basketball league] because of those two games – I really almost picked up someone else.*

*And while I'm enjoying the ride just as much as anyone – my alumni watching that Knicks/Lakers game made my NewsFeed amazing, as I'm sure I indicated to you via text – I have zero long-term expectations. I fear the wheels will come off. He's a turnover machine; he gets surprisingly few assists; when Melo and Amar'e are both playing and healthy, how often will he really be controlling the ball?; this stuff's already going to his head, and not in a good way (going 8 for 24 – 8 for 24??? – against Minnesota is a red flag - why is Jeremy Lin taking 24 shots, let alone missing sixteen?); etc., etc. You're fine to remain skeptical and on the sidelines, just as long as you're fine with missing out on the high parts of the ride. I missed out on the Tim Tebow highs, but that meant not having an existential crisis after the Patriots made him their personal chew toy twice in the span of five weeks. I'm willing to buy in for as long as it allows me to chase after the leader in my fantasy league. But that's it.*

Then, yes, the wheels came off. He got hurt. He's come back, signed with the Rockets, been decent, gotten traded to the Lakers, been *less than decent*, wandered his way onto the Hornets...and no one really cares anymore. He's just a player now.

I was right. I didn't have to believe in something, then have it disappoint me. I avoided the comedown. Woo-hoo!

What did I win?

The ability to *not* take part in Linsanity. To scoff at it instead of revel in it.

I missed out on the highs so I could skip the disappointment. And in doing so, I, massive sports fan that I am, stood detached on the sidelines for one of the great sporting stories of my lifetime. That, in retrospect, seems more foolish than buying in.

I didn't buy in because I figured his run wouldn't last, that it would be temporary.

Of course it was temporary.

Should we only believe in the permanent?

## **7. Write Our Names Across the Galaxy**

How do we live in the here and now?

That's really the thorniest question *1984* asks. It's a hard one to answer.

We're smart enough to know that neither extreme hedonism nor extreme deprivation is the answer – especially if we've read *Siddhartha*. But how far away from either of those ends of the spectrum does the answer lie?

We hold out, we hold back, we buy in. We close our eyes, we open them. We blink without telling ourselves the world might be different when we open our eyes because it's too scary to realize that's when every change has ever happened. Someone has been blinking at the moment when every war ever started, when every volcano erupted, when every new life has entered the world...somewhere, someone closed their eyes, and opened them to a completely new, wholly reshaped reality.

And that's the fear, really. That our actions will not simply have unanticipated consequences, but that we won't be able to react in the moment to them – that we won't be able to stop our hearts from breaking or rumors from spreading or threats from approaching. And, worst of all, it will be because we *allowed* it to happen. We closed our eyes. We let our guard down.

But you can't live a hyper-vigilant life. You can't lead an Oceanian existence.

There is a push and a pull to the ways in which we allow our hearts to process hope. For the reason we call it hope is that we know our dreams of success carry at least an equal probability of failure. If they didn't, we wouldn't call them hopes: we'd call them expectations, great or not.

How do we live in the here and now? Knowing that death could come for us? Without being terrible to each other?

How do we live in the here and now? Knowing that failure could lie around the corner? Without being terrible to our futures?

How do we live in the here and now? Knowing that our actions have impacts we can't always foresee, that we leave impressions we can't always control, that we place our hopes in things that sometimes elude our influence?

We live in the here and now by rejecting Winston's mantra.

We are **not** the dead.

We are the living.

And in doing so, we must dare to live – for if *1984* teaches us nothing else, it is that the being with the greatest power to damage you is yourself.

We should not destroy our own choices, destroy our own dreams.

We should let people get close enough to hurt us because that's the only way they'll ever get close enough to help us, or to love us.

And perhaps it's best to believe before disbelieving...for we'll miss out on less that way.

After all, you'll never know if you'll sink or swim or float until you're willing to take the plunge.

- 
- + Are you the type of person who can generally step out of his or her comfort zone? Can you take more than a step – actually make long-lasting changes, whether by choice or out of necessity – or do you tend to revert to the familiar?
  - + If you're in Winston's position, how would you react to O'Brien's words? When faced with people like him, do you maintain faith in yourself, in the truthfulness of your beliefs – or do you crumble and surrender to your doubts and fears?
  - + Do you feel like you are susceptible to manipulation - do you notice when it's happening, and can it be used effectively against you? Can you stand up to those who try to manipulate you?
  - + Will you keep fighting the good fight if you know you have no hope of winning?
  - + Must beliefs have some basis in reality in order to be important? (In other words, can a belief in something fictional still be important?)
  - + Do you prefer that people are more honest, less honest, or just as honest with you as you are with them? Why?

Before answering, picture this well-worn moral dilemma: Your significant other is unfaithful, and your best friend knows. Do you want them to tell you, even if you enjoy the relationship?

Let's say the shoe is on the other foot, and you discover that your best friend's partner has betrayed him/her. Do you tell him/her the truth, **especially** if he/she enjoys the relationship? This is not a matter of whether you would want to – it's a matter of whether you would. (Like I said, this is a well-worn scenario, but it's exceptionally good at highlighting the flexibility of seemingly rigid moral systems.)

+ Now that you've finished the book, it's easier to ask you to put yourself in an Oceanian's shoes. Who would you rather be – an Inner Party member, an Outer Party worker, or a prole? Would you quietly rebel? Would you openly resist control? Would you conform for your own safety? Would you accept doublethink and orthodoxy? Could you bring yourself to love Big Brother? Assess yourself honestly.

+ Oceania's society and culture are built on contradiction. This may be most clearly apparent in the way that the dominant Party tries to force everyone into the same mold, yet prevents people from making any sort of connection based on their similarities. Could you survive in this world – a world where the very concept of "friend" has been perverted beyond recognition, a place where you are simultaneously constantly monitored yet always alone? *Do you need human connections and relationships in order to survive?*

+ Are you, at this moment, wishing you could change something – that you could blink and open your eyes to that aforementioned reshaped reality, changed in some specific way? Or are you afraid that you'll close your eyes without realizing it's the last time you'll see \_\_\_\_\_, believe \_\_\_\_\_, or enjoy life as a \_\_\_\_\_?

---

Blog Title: "Make Believe," The Graduate, *Only Every Time*

Section Title #1: "So They Left Me at a Gas Station," Marietta, *Summer Death*

Section Title #2: "Cherry," Moose Blood, *I'll Keep You in Mind, From Time to Time*

Section Title #3: "Sprained Ankle," Julien Baker, *Sprained Ankle*

Section Title #4: "Magic," Coldplay, *Ghost Stories*

Section Title #5: "In the Water," Head North, *A Will Away/Head North Split*

Section Title #6: "Erase," Copeland, *Ixora*

Section Title #7: "Meteor Flower," July for Kings, *Swim*

Quotes on the First Page: Muse, Samuel Johnson, Francis Bacon, Michael Feraco-Eberle's Surprisingly Decent 2012-Era Fantasy Basketball Team, The Graduate

---