

The Arena

Mike Citarella / Don Citarella

"What does it mean?"

The incident occurred six months ago, just after September's shock of the new semester died down and made way for innocent October. As a professor of English literature at Western Michigan University, I've rarely looked forward to the awkwardness of trying to become acquainted to new students and often wished that I was past the "putting names with faces" bit so that my hour and a half of squeezing blood from books could begin earlier in the semester.

I folded over the new page of the calendar, and, putting *Macbeth* aside for the moment, doodled a frowning Jack-o-lantern at the top of the page. My mind wandered on the edge of the plain of boredom and jumped off into a memory.

Will used to set his goofy, lopsided, pumpkins out on the deck of the apartment, only he didn't carve them, he massacred them. I would joke about them, saying, "Well, at least no one will smash this one on the road. They'll figure the poor guy's been through enough." He'd laugh.

"Why do you carve'm anyway, Will? I mean, do you realize how crazy a tradition it is?" I never did understand the purpose of it. Where did making faces on vegetables come to be a custom?

Will said, "It's just tradition, Katie. That's all. Holidays come and go leaving a little seasonal spirit with them. I feel like I have to go on it, you know, act."

"You're right about the acting. You can really ham it up." He attempted a smile. I knew he wasn't acting. Will was always into that sort of thing. I admired his eagerness and, to this day, have graced my porch steps with a massacred pumpkin creation of my own.

I met Will in high school and we became good friends. We were pretty excited when we received our acceptances to Western and we, as luck would have it, were thrown into the same dorm. By our senior year, we got an apartment together and attended several of the same classes. It was September, 1971. I got a job at the university bookstore and he waited tables, so the rent wasn't too tough. Deciding our majors was a simple task, and soon, that was all we would talk about. *Dramatics*. Drama was our lives. I really enjoyed those days, but Will always seemed so much more into it than I. I could easily see the adventure and the fanaticism that he found when he slipped into a role or recited some colorful narrative. His eyes would widen with excitement. Oh, he loved it. Every minute of it. And he was good at it too.

When he'd read the character, he became the character. It wasn't like Will was an actor personifying some *Joe* in a school play, but he had devoured the part so much it was like the piece was written about Will. I admired this about him too. He said it *was* his life. I believed so, and would fear that he may pursue this life, and leave me, Katie Givens, female thespian of some unknown college in the Midwest.

For the time, life wasn't cruel and kept us together through these "best years of our lives." We heard some renowned director and his group, *The Soothsayers*, was coming from the East Coast to put our city in awe with his production of *Macbeth*. It was to be the greatest interpretation of the Bard's bloodiest work in all of 1971. So, my path crossed with the infamous script, for the first of many times, each compelling me to fall deeper in love with it. Now, 24 years later, it would reappear in the form of tomorrow morning's lecture. Anyway, Will came back with the audition dates and it didn't surprise me that he was going to try for the lead role.

One night, I went to pick up Will at his restaurant after work. His tables were clean and set, save for the noisy party of six in the corner. The night had wrestled him to a rag doll, and I could tell he just wanted to get home. I sat down with him at the front table and he gave me a Coke to entertain my thirst while we both waited for this loud group of rude diners to leave. One of his co-workers approached us at the apex of our conversation and overheard us mentioning the upcoming show.

"Oh, you're an actor, Will? I'llbedamned, I would've never thought y'had it in you." This guy had been working with Will for a little bit and I think he was in our Drama Theory class as well. Either way, you need a touch of acting to deal with some of the customers that this restaurant opened its doors to, so the Server must've already known that Will liked to act. The guy seemed like a jerk. He, as some actors do, had this tendency to rapidly switch dialects in his discourse. It made conversations with him a deciphering game and would probably stifle his career as an actor. He did say something that intrigued me, though. And of course it intrigued Will more.

"I knew this guy. Who was an actor. What did that pig-shit call himself? I reckon his name was Will!" He burst out laughing.

I didn't find it so funny. "You're an ass."

Once his musing subsided, he continued the story that nearly lost all my attention and interest.

"Seriously,....uh....Floyd! Floyd Lochaber. He was in the drama class before you, and liked to act, like yourself. He used to go out to this place over on Vincent Road, by the brick church." The fellow Server licked his lips. I rolled my eyes, and acted uninterested. "Floyd called this place *The Arena*," he continued, "I drove down Vincent Road frequently and used to see Floyd's silhouette reenacting some famous piece. It was night time and old Floyd Lochaber was so addicted to his *Arena* that even the sun wouldn't wait for him to go home before closing up shop.

"We liked to make fun of the guy. The class would have been boring without stories of 'what show is Floyd in tonight?', or 'who saw Floyd reciting what last night?'. It was innocent and didn't hurt a soul, so we carried on volunteering to listen in on The Arena.

"One morning, Floyd turned up dead in the heart of this stone circle. It was eerie. He had suffered a stab wound through the chest and no one knew why, how, or who. The reason I know so much about him was that it was my turn to spread the latest word, and, yea, I was there, out by *The Arena* that night. I watched in on Floyd. He was amidst a piece and fell to his knees in tears. He held his head in his hands like it was a fragile child and then began beating about his face as if a rabid dog had grabbed on and wouldn't let go. He shouted about how he wanted some part in Julius Caesar and he...couldn't...get into character, or get the lines right, I don't remember. He was extremely frustrated with his abilities, and-

The story paused for the Server to lick his lips again. Will was suspended in the tale and was brazenly eager to find out why Floyd-

"-held out his arms in a revolting summons toward the sky. The man's body was erect in a sharp Egyptian pose, his fingers extended like switchblade knives from each his hands. His eyes were huge and white. He pleaded with the world, 'let me FEEL it! LET ME FEEL THE CHARACTER! GOD DAMMIT LET ME FEEL IT!' Floyd cried out." The noisy six-top ceased their gibbering temporarily to glance at the Server's shouting. Will bade him to continue on.

"I split the scene because, God, this stuff was getting too weird for me. I headed towards my car. I already had something to tell the gang and didn't think there was any reason to stick around. Guess ol' Floyd thought he was summoning some dark spirit to possess him with the character. He was psycho and I couldn't wait to tell the rest of the class what I saw. Then next morning was when the body was found and the whole class attended the funeral the day after. What I saw, it just wasn't worth mentioning to the rest of the class. I promised myself I'd never mention it to any--" The Server looked at us wildly, and desperately tried to finish his thought, but left it trembling in his mind. His glassy stare was broken when somewhere a bowl came crashing down to the floor. We all whirred around simultaneously to see a boy, red-faced, inching away from a mosaic of ceramic bits and vegetable beef components.

The Server slowly continued, "I don't know what he did, but I think somehow he got his wish. He must've felt the blade of Brutus come crashing through his heart and put on the most glorious death scene the field would ever witness. I believe--"

The Server retired the tale from his mind, but let it live on stronger, in Will's. "Get out of here, Will. Go home with your girlfriend. I'll see that your table is taken care of," he threw over his shoulder.

We didn't say much on the way home. We both asked ourselves the same questions, thought about the same things. The silence hung thick between us. He unlocked the apartment door, threw his apron to the chair, brushed his teeth in serenity, and slipped into bed. I did the same, and stared at the ceiling for a minute or two spending my last few minutes of consciousness with thoughts of *The Arena*.

When I awoke to the 10:15 shuttle, Will had already left for his English Cinema course. The train, for me served two purposes: One, to take me back from the campus after my later classes when the darkness choked away thoughts of walking. The other, to bring me back in the morning from the fantasies and dreams that occur when the darkness pumps in it's magic. I flipped on the television and clumsily walked towards the bathroom to begin my morning rituals. *The Arena* lay strong in my mind similar to the aftertaste in my mouth as shards of nightmares always do in the morning. I grabbed for the Listerine.

By 11:45, I had begun my morning jog to campus with my books in one hand and a *Fern's E-Z Towing* thermos brimming with java in the other. Between our apartment downtown and my obligatory Human Development course, lies the culture spot of our city. Cathedrals, playhouses, and parks reside in a lonely square dappled with sunlight. Diehard Frost, Dickinson, and Shakespeare fans harmonized with the finches and wrens.

"...that but this blow might be the be-all and the end-all here..." Semblances of a Floyd I created in the night danced in my head and intertwined with the students before me. I continued on through the park and stopped only when I reached Western's outer limits to sip from black surges of caffeine. Electric eels of energy rebounded through my veins and my legs took on a numb aura. I walked towards Western's directory, a Rosetta Stone for freshmen, to see what news had surfaced. Audition dates and flyers for lost pets or services requested collaged the triangular post. I immediately thought of Will. Pull-off tabs relating phone numbers and addresses for those auditions were missing from the bottoms of all the forms and my wager was that he had more than half of them.

Henry V and Hamlet at the Campus Theatre-in-the-round and downtown Arena Playhouse stuck out in my mind. Midsip, my steaming pick-me-up tasted gritty and sour. *Arena*. Floyd had more than likely pulled tabs a semester before. I screwed the cap back on my coffee and walked towards Human Development.

I had agreed to meet Will after class and now proceeded down the steps towards the courtyard. What little notes I got that day were, I remember, glazed with pencil sketches of *The Arena* that my mind concocted and faces of a Floyd that never existed as he now did. I had originally said to meet Will at 4:30 leaving me a half hour to gather my things and transport myself to the *Water Street Cafe*, our campus diner. I decided halfway through class and midway through a sketch of the stony core of my concentration to go to the media center to research the newspapers' interpretations of what was puzzling me now and had eaten my dreams like an epidemic during the night. Maybe the Server had lied and done all this to weigh down Will's buoyant dreams of acting. Could Floyd have been a story, imaginative and transparent as any two-way mirror? I didn't think it to be too naive to overlook that possibility, but I concentrated on its integrity.

In both the gazette and the campus newsletter were the stories. An obituary of the police blotter info appeared in the paper where an in-depth look in the mind of Floyd was "attempted" by a freshman journalism student:

"...a deep rebellious nature and unstable family life led Floyd to a suicidal high. His carelessness to be out on the streets at this time ushered the unsolved murder of..."

"Bullshit," I murmured as I switched the microfiches. Now I sat staring at the gazette's dart on Floyd's death, which stuck substantially closer to the center. There stood a young-looking man, hair flopped over his eyes, staring through the film as if looking from darkness into life. Floyd.

The machine's whirring insides sent a light to burn the final sentences of the first paragraph into my mind.

"Police say no weapon was found and have no evidence supporting its classification. They haven't entirely ruled out suicide, but the events are still unknown."

I flipped off the screen and left for *Water Street*. I walked a couple blocks past the freshman dorms to the offices at the far end of campus. There, I had to cut through the tennis courts and soccer fields to the small lots offered for student amusement. The red, soft base of the exterior tennis complex was patched with puddles from the misty October weather. I made my way across the intersection and found the cafe sitting obtusely on the corner. There in front, Will was leaning against the schedule box that posted upcoming events. He was reading some notes he wrote from a wet sheet of paper and looked up to greet me.

"Ay, womun, I wuss a-waiting ere-a twenty fiva minutes fo ju. You gah somma nerva making me wait!" His smile was cute, it folded me up.

"Bobby, bobby! Ima busy girl-a!" My Italian accent needed a little work but it won another smile from Will. He gave me a hug.

Will told me he didn't have any intention of spending a couple hours at the cafe and had something else in mind for the evening. We waited ten minutes for the shuttle to pull up and rode it another ten minutes out of campus. All the while, Will shared with me the daydream that made up the greater part of his classes that day. While his professor had carried on and on rambling about how barbarian and incisive the crowds were at the Globe Theatre in the early 1600's, Will had drifted to what he called "an incredible tale of a husband and wife team of thieves who got their money knocking off fancy restaurants.

"I figure they got fifteen, twenty-dollar plates of clams, they got to be making a bundle, so the wife, Crystal, would run around table to table collecting wallets, jewelry, even silverware, while Dave, her husband, would keep the situation under control and they would get away clean with an easy five hundred a pop." The story flowed on and on like the gallant raising of a sailboat's sail and with it climbed Will's enthusiasm for what he dreamt. When the shuttle stopped at the edge of a giant field, he nodded to the driver and we slipped out all the while still wrapped up in this story. Will had said that one of the jobs had gone bad and while Dave and Crystal were taking off, two of the employees of the restaurant got a couple of shots out on them. They ended up back at a junkyard where their getaway car came to a crashing halt amidst the rest of the torn up cars and blended in beautifully as if it had finally come home to be with its family.

"The two figures had crawled out of the sizzling mass and fell upon each other on the sharp gravel beneath them. Crystal had taken an awkward grazing to her left elbow which bled more freakishly than the wound actually developed. Even the body believes in false advertising," Will joked. I let out a nasal laugh while Will continued, "but Dave hadn't gotten off as easy. You see, he endured three shots, each in fatal arteries of his chest and neck and was screaming horribly in a violent, intense pain." Will's eyes were wide, wider than I've ever seen them, and as he spoke, they seemed to nod, aiding his mouth as it told the story. "As they rocked in the now-red stony mattress, their eyes poured, as did their noses, and streams from their wounds all ran together in a splash of red that creaked with the scraping of the sharp rocks on his back."

Will pulled me across the field. I could feel my jeans soak up the moisture from the tall grass but I continued on to the heart of the land, maintaining my eye contact with Will as his story enveloped me and himself. A strong trust was the only fuel that kept us persisting through the damp weeds; a trust that Will created in me to share what he felt, this awesome, awesome feeling of drama. I flicked a tear of unbelievable rapture towards our destination and fell to my knees to behold a horror that all at once stopped my heart. Will let go of my hand and danced up ten feet closer than I was, separating us *three*. Will stood arms resting on his head like an Olympic runner after hours of training, standing motionlessly but e-motionful, standing, tall and proud on a plain of precise consciousness, standing with dignity but reluctance and apprehension between myself...and *The Arena*.

I jumped. Coke spilled onto my yellow afghan blanket that was wrapped around me. I was startled with this memory, something that had taken hold of my life 24 years before, still had the strength to give me a little jump in 1996. I glanced around at the apartment. It was all so quiet, save for the pocket alarm clock across the room on the corner table. I've always done my reading at this desk, with this very same blanket on my lap and that very same alarm clock ticking away on corner table, but never once had I taken a memory this convincingly. I patted the Coke spot dry with a couple of tissues and settled back in, *Macbeth* in hand, hoping to get through Act III by the end of the night. I let out a long breath and focused on the page. Unwillingly, my mind refocused on *The Arena*.

"Katie?"

"Will, you gotta be kidding me! What the heck are we--I mean--Well, Will, good God!"

"Yea, exactly as he described it. Unbelievable, isn't it Kate."

It was a twenty foot circle of sharp grey rocks laid dead center of a field to the west of the cathedral. The circle resided in a larger square of grass supporting angled benches at three of the corners and oak trees at all four. Beyond the trees was a path made of the same rocks surrounded in turn by twelve brick gravesites, three at each end, respectively. Embedded in the brick of the gravesites were tarnished brass plaques that splashed orange across the headstones where the sunlight could avoid the trees and reach them. It was exactly as the Server had said.

With hesitation, I submitted to Will's efforts to get me to my feet but made a mental vow not to get too close to this thing. Will never let the smile dissolve from his face as he went into a huge explanation for why we ended up here.

"Katie, you got to listen to me for just one minute." He brought me closer to *The Arena*. I internally yelled at myself for breaking my promise. "I don't know for sure what is going to happen tonight, I mean, for all we know it's just a circle of rocks where people out walking their dogs in the field can sit and rest their tired bones."

"What do you mean, 'what's going to happen tonight?'" Will, we are standing out in the middle of a meadow, it's after 5 and I'm getting a bit hungry." I gave every reason not to be here. It was my weak attempt to hide the fact that I was scared and didn't want any part of this place. I didn't want to even know of *The Arena* and lastly, I wished I had never heard of--

"Floyd gave one hell of a performance here, long ago. Katie, like I said, I really need you to just listen to me." His smile had gone away. His eyebrows raised as a concerned friend's would and he stared into my eyes with a chain-link look of

faith. It was the only thing I could have done. Listened. "I think when Floyd entered that circle and toppled to his knees in some sick seance, he evoked a power that he shouldn't have ever tampered with. That power had given his body an awareness that Julius Caesar possessed. The thing that bugs me though is how could Floyd have been so obsessed with this performance that he didn't stop. Didn't he feel the tip of the dagger? Could he--"

"Will, listen to yourself!" I had to stop him, but he believed too strongly. "It wasn't a dagger, he wasn't possessed. He was murdered!"

Will slowly turned in realization. His face still glimmered with anticipation. "You're right. It *was* murder." I breathed a sigh of comfort. Will was making sense, or at least abandoning all supernatural pipe dreams. "And we're going to find out whatever it is that shoved that dagger into him." My comfort wisped away with the gnats and moths around our heads. In a second, Will's feet touched the sides of the ring and he held a hand back for me. I didn't take it. "Please, Kate. Please help me?"

"Help you what? Get yourself killed?" A silence as wide as the span between his hand and mine incurred.

"You do believe." There was no denying it. Yes, I did. Will always had a way to make me believe. If all of a sudden he said he was a giraffe, I would have a hard time doubting it from the look in his eye and the way he confessed. Now, I wanted nothing more than to be with him. To know that as long as I was holding his hand, he couldn't go anywhere I wasn't and nothing would happen to him that wouldn't happen to me. If he were to vanish, I would too; not leaving me behind in a life of hell without him. Seconds after the silence span was broken, so was the distance between our fingertips. I joined him on the edge of the ring and gazed at the mosaic of grey. Holding his hand like a vice, I looked towards the origin of his voice.

"I have a feeling we need to complete the scene, Katie, no matter what happens. If we don't, I--" His voice quivered. I wanted to scream, to envelop myself in a million quilts and forget it all. Will continued, "Don't stop until it's over. Please, Katie, don't leave the circle. Lastly--"

--Will, I--" My throat throbbed and my desire scorched. I needed to tell him my thoughts, but couldn't.

--Please! Katie, feel it. I need you to forget everything real and absorb yourself into the part."

"What part, Will, what do I do? What do I say?"

"I'll take my cue off you." Will smiled at me. For the third time, he had convinced me everything was going to be all right. I tried to smile back. His warm eyes read mine. I turned away with vulnerability and focused on the circle. I could feel him reading through my temples into my eye sockets. Tears welled up in my eyes and blurred the ring. "Katie?" With a short delay, I looked once again at his face, avoiding the eyes and concentrating on his lips. "Break a leg," he whispered.

We stepped into the center. Recalling now, I don't remember hearing the rocks below our feet. They pulsed back only the sounds that a carpet would make; rhythmic, silent abrasion. My mind fluctuated on ideas for the scene. Shakespeare? Poe? No. It must be original or we may have to stop for a line and, as Will said, any interruption could be fatal. As abruptly as the idea came, I grabbed Will and threw him to the earth below. Descending towards the rocks beside him, I began speaking too.

"Dave? They got you good. Look at'cha. Ya bleedin' all ova the place. Dave!"

"Yeah, Crystal, I hear ya. Stop yer shoutin'. Listen. You gotta go. Leave me. Take da loot. Go make a real life for yourself and leave all dis...dis runnin' behind. You need to--"

"Shut the hell up, Dave. You're talkin' crazy!" I spouted lines with certitude and conviction, but felt only a superficial pain. Will started to shake. "Dammit! Don't you leave me Dave! What the hell am I supposed to do, uh? Live like Miss Eliza-freakin' Doolittle while you get off easy. Forget all dis grief, all dis pain, all dis love I got for you?" A fire began to glow deep in my chest. *Dave* started to shake some more. "I tell you dis right now, Dave. You die, now, and I dump both barrels of dis shotgun down my throat. You want to kill me? Eh? You want to be responsible for my brains and my teeth splattered all over dis here junkyard. You want to go to your mutha-freakin' grave, and to hell, knowin' that you was the reason I weigh tree-fourths of what I did before due to lack of a head? Eh?" A shudder of fear distorted my spine as I clutched the rocks below. Gazing about me, I saw the mystical skeletons of millions of retired vehicles, Dave's--OUR getaway car to my left. Beneath me, a fountain of blood streamed from Dave's lips and three ominous openings appeared in his chest. I was touched by sheer horror. The rigid rocks in my hand were now the smooth cold cylinder of a Smith and Wessen Special Double Barrel sawed-off shotgun. The veins in my throat swelled and made the blood in them fight for access. Intertwined in them was a lump that moved steadily south as realization hit me. Above, the sky bore no twinkling, but revealed only a desolate black. The stars were gone. Dave coughed and gasped for air. His breath sounded like someone breathing through a water-stricken snorkel.

"Crystal, eh, you gotta lis-s... Come closer, I need to tell you I...Crystal. I love yuz. I, I need you to know that, eh? Y-y-ya gotta believe dat you are everyting. An-an-and we's gonna have us a houz-z with a big yard so's we can run-around-like, be free. An da sky . . . oh, it's so big, Crystal."

"I don' wanna hear about no freakin' sky, Dave, tell me yer okay. Dammit, Dave, yer bleedin' all over the--"

"God, da sky stretches in'every way fa ever. Ever...an' ever ever," his words hollowed out, like an echo with no source. A tear splashed down onto his forehead and I clung tight to him. So tight. "The sky's so big, Crystal. Y-y-you'd swear---" His

eyes rolled back in his head and his pinkish teeth held chunks of blood clots. "y'saw heaven." His jaw made a dozen more stabs at audible coherency, but resulted in slurred panic. Then he bolted tight in a stretcher-like fashion and lolled still.

"Dave you weak, stupid..." I stammered between adjectives and choked on my own fluids, "...selfish bastard! I need ya too, dammit! And I'm coming wit' cha!" Without reason or control, I fumbled the Smith and Wessen and shoved it into my mouth. The trigger was cold and heavy. I pulled the gun and felt a jerk. Then, I was in solitude and colder than I'd ever been before. It was like no Michigan winter I had ever experienced, but I felt complete.

From behind a wall of cotton yards thick, I heard him calling. My completeness, uninterrupted, drew me to pulling the pieces of reality back together and the haze of my solitude to slowly wash away. There was Will. His face, once rilled with blood, was now caressed by sweat and excitement. The heaviness of reality slowly set in and I looked about. We were outside the ring. He was holding and rocking me as we sat on a tuft of weed outlining a gravesite.

"You were fantastic!" He articulated each word as if punctuating levels of appreciation. "I didn't, I couldn't stop you. It was magic and you..." He stopped, again staring into my eyes, which probably bore a horrid return of question and euphoria. "I guess it must've been a little too real, huh?" He notioned towards my jeans which were unquestionably damp. I slowly glanced from him to my seat, and back, relaying a half-hearted grin. I was wiped out and could tell he too had nothing left.

There we slept under stars that seemed to have never moved. The sounds of the universe sang us a song as we held each other and left *The Arena* behind for dusk. We had done what Floyd had not. The sheer act of completing the scene won us back our reality and dismissed all that occurred inside. For that, we learned, was its only rule. The show must always go on.

My eyelids each wrung a tear out of my mind which was now weighed heavy in thought but darted lightly from image to image. I checked the alarm clock to see that it was now 1:15 A.M. I was still at the desk and for some reason, I was having difficulty convincing myself that in these quick two hours of captivity I had remained sitting at this desk and never carried myself off into a past that seemed now so real. My hands ached and bore red indentations from having gripped each other so hard. My heart was ping-ponging across my chest. I remember it doing the same those twenty-four years ago as I clung to Dave. And when he died, so did my heart. It laid still, giving me absolute silence and total tranquillity so that I could--Oh my God. I tried to kill myself. I *did* kill myself. I put a gun into my mouth and confidently pulled the trigger. I had never realized the intensity of my actions and was struck only now with the depth of what I did that night. Dave had died too. I had to go on since the scene had to go on. If it hadn't, if I had simply stopped. If I was reluctant in shooting myself, given myself the slightest bit of apprehension, the scene would have stopped. I believe that since Floyd tried to get out of the circle before the scene was up,

the situation of within became a reality without. He must've quit. Floyd must've quit, and it was those second thoughts that halted the scene which became Floyd Lochaber's--or rather Julius Caesar's--last moments alive. Therefore, if I had let go then, Crystal would've survived leaving just me with a bruised elbow outside the Arena, but Dave's situation within, would've become a reality without... Will would have never left the circle.

A quick glance at the clock told me this was going to be another long night of preparing. Lifting my sweaty arm off of the 1996 calendar, I found my unprofessional attempt at a jack-o-lantern was smeared. I walked over to the fridge in my slipper socks and grabbed another Coke. A letter from Will, while he was with *The Soothsayers* still hung behind a Prudential magnet on the door to the freezer-half, only now, it appeared to be painted in a yellowish-beige pigment called age. Closing the fridge, I walked over to bathroom and stared into the mirror. Will always said I have an actor's figure: strong, flexible, and undefined. I exhaled briefly and deeply through my nose and tried to smile. For some reason I felt heavy and overweight. I guess we all do when we're depressed.

In three minutes, I was back in the den, this time on the couch, *Macbeth* in hand, continuing my analysis for the in-class lecture on ambition I would bore the class with tomorrow. Will's entrance into my mind would not let me continue. I stifled a burp and put *Mac*'aside once again to drift off into *Water Street*.

Lady Macbeth said, "They met me in the day of success; and I have learned by the perfect'st report they have more in them than mortal knowledge." It now seems ironic to me, walking through the *Cafe's* glass doors, that Will planned to meet me here with knowledge of the same importance, and that he, too, was experiencing a day of success.

He didn't see me walk in the door so I snuck up before his table, his forehead just peaking over a copy of a gazette. "Great Glamis, Worthy Cawdor!" I whispered to his face, the newspaper separating our eye contact.

"Katie?" leapt at the back of my ears from across the eatery. Glancing over my shoulder, I shot a smile back in the direction of the inquirer, not acknowledging the face, and returned my head towards Will's corner chair. The paper had been let down and there, behind it, stood the face of a stranger. I had lit a fuse to surprise Will, but my face had to extinguish its gesture and replaced it with shock and apology.

"I'm sorry, sir," I spat, while throwing a glimpse back towards a laughing Will, "I really thought you were my friend, Will. Please excuse my interruption. I hope the rest of your meal is an enjoyable one, and that shortly you will disremember the situation that just occurred."

I don't know where all of that came from but I satisfied my embarrassment on Will's arm.

"Ouch!" he laughed.

"You deceived me! I just humiliated myself. How could you pretend to be someone else?"

"I don't know this woman!" he blurted to the rest of the diners. His laughing was obnoxious. "'hope your meal is an enjoyable one?' Where did you get that from?"

Our conversation wound down, interrupted by "I hate college kids" looks from the man with the newspaper. Will told me about his day: he tripped over something in the campus court, some lady threw up in his English Cinema class, and that he got the lead in *The Soothsayer's* production of *Macbeth*.

"What?"

"Yea, here it is." He showed me the cast listing. Billions of counterpoints threw themselves at me at lightspeed.

"How will you have time to study? You'd have to quit waiting tables to make all the rehearsals! Do you realize how much of a commitment a show like this IS?"

"It doesn't open till the end of January, which means I just gotta get through November, and a week in December. Then there'll be Winter break and a week of finals in January. I won't reschedule for class the following semester. I already called into work. They don't mind me taking some time off for the show. And yes, I know about the commitment. I'm welcoming it!"

I rattled off a new list of reasons, to each Will had an instant compromise, but the truth was, I feared I would never see Will again.

We walked home together, each with swirling convictions in our minds--his of excitement and anticipation, mine of frustration. He started the practices with infinite enthusiasm and it just built up from there. I watched our relationship grow more and more strained and became positive that its corrosion was irreversible. I spent Christmas morning with him and didn't bring up my unhappiness. Christmas night, Will informed me that *The Soothsayers* were offered 20 performances in some huge city on the west coast, and that the director chose to cancel its local show dates and move them there. I saw his plane off on New Year's Day, and burst into tears. Three security guards had to help my bawling body to an isolated seat in the airport's waiting

area. Will was out of my life. I couldn't drive home, I couldn't think, I couldn't stop crying. I fell asleep right there, in the terminal's soft, orangy plastic seats, my head on the armrest, my tears streaming down it.

I woke the following morning under two blankets of comfort: the first in the form of an afghan, the second, the safety of being 24 years away from the emotions of abandonment and loss I felt that night at the airport. Class would start in 20 minutes and I doubted I'd have a problem B.S.ing my lecture on ambition, but in all honesty, both my mind and my blood repelled the thought of going to work that day. Instead, *Macbeth* in hand, I went to the diner at the edge of campus.

So many nights had Will washed these tables and refilled these ketchup bottles. My mind must've felt betrayed by my body by returning here to lament, despite the current sensitivity of the situation. I scribbled on a napkin a little rhyme Will had written once, long ago, which was how we both came to remember *The Arena's* only consequence:

*Enter The Arena, all Yee without doubt;
or the situation within becomes a reality without...*

A server, likely a student, politely interrupted my grief with his scratchpad and 'good morning, ma'am, is there something in mind I can start your day with?' which was undoubtedly a pre-written suggested greeting by some big-whig manager in the backroom counting his money.

"I'm sorry. I have no right to be rude to you," I confessed after realizing that my verbal thoughts had come like a shot in the dark and caught the innocent kid by surprise. "Just a coffee at the moment, please."

My mind felt swollen with images of Will, heavy with memories popping up from every corner of my short life with him, and clouded with false countenances representing what he may have looked like had he had the opportunity to experience old age. *The Soothsayers* sent all of his belongings back to our address near campus. I was struck hard with the news, almost as severe as when he walked out of my life, but I already felt desensitized from any and all emotion, so it was dampered. I never thought it was possible to hurt a numb portion of your body, and at this time, my entire body was already numb and shaken, but pain found its way on top of the existing hurt and I cried for what felt like three straight days.

The letter came at the same time as the box of his stuff, so I assumed it was a package from Mom: homemade oatmeal raisin cookies, some clothes detergent, and the like...the letter was probably a petty check of support from back home.

When I opened the box and saw his scripts, I knew right away that something had happened. The letter read, "Miss Katherine Givens. It is with considerable grief and extreme sympathy that I humbly offer so that I may inform you of the loss we've all recently experienced. The hurt I feel is deeper and more substantial than I ever imagined my heart could bare, so I couldn't even possibly conceive the incredible pain you must be enduring now. Please know that Will was the greatest actor I have ever encountered." It went on and said that he didn't see it proper to describe the details of Will's death, but I found it out later. After a show, the cast was headed down the highway a couple exits to a bar/cafe to celebrate. Will was sitting in the passenger seat when the car lost control and collided with the concrete guard rail. The vehicle was totaled, and the others survived with a couple of broken bones, but Will felt the target of the impact.

I took the next semester off and got a job at the Barnes & Noble bookstore in the plaza. My whole life felt jounced and everything I saw offset a memory of him and triggered more tears. I received plenty more letters from those who knew us saying pretty much the same thing as Will's director, and none of them seemed to help dissipate the hollow ache. I spent eternity with my insides in knots, my eyes plastered red and sore at the colors that darkness projected through my room.

After nights of torture, I focused more and more of my concentration on repressing my old college life and went back to school this time to delve into what English literature meant to me and its fans. Reading scripts became an obsession to me because it helped subside the eager memories and allowed me to keep my mind from wandering and trapped it in somebody else's feelings. I got my masters from Western fifteen years ago and a job there the same semester. I've been doing that ever since, and I've prided myself in the sense of adventure I give to students and the sense of life I give to the Lit I teach.

I've given every lesson with absolute dedication to making stories as authentic and vivid as Will showed me, and have probably earned a couple nicknames from the other teachers who don't understand how incredibly pure the passion can be. The class will sometimes catch a glimpse of Will in me although none of them ever had the privilege of meeting him. I've even hung a sign above the door that bares Will's little rhyme. Oh, I get comments all the time asking what it means: "Miss Givens. I'm not really sure what you mean by *the situation within*." No one could understand, and if they pretended to, it was often used against me. After a while, I started making stuff up so that life would treat me gentler. I'd say, "think of a pizza, kid, and it will all make sense in time." God only knows what that means, at least it got them off my back.

"Father Time has been so kind." I looked up to find a man probably in his late 40s smiling at me. He had an expression I felt familiar to but was uncomfortable not responding to his compliment. "You don't remember me, do you?" I had to admit it, I didn't. In my mind, I began searching for who this could be: an anonymous student from the classes I taught recently, maybe it was a parent of one, or a fellow teacher....nothing.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Come to think of it, I don't think Will ever properly introduced the two of us." The server licked his lips, and instantly behind all those wrinkles, the young man's face became clear.

"I do remember you. You took his last table for him that night so that he could leave early with me. I never got a chance to thank you."

"Will is a good man. I'd do it again any time for the guy and that ain't no joke."

The "is" stuck in my head, but I figured he didn't hear the news about Will. "So, what are you still doing here...uh..."

"Don. Well, heh, my first name's Donald, but Don works just as well. Yea, that's what the rest of the guys here call me."

"Nice to meet you, Don."

"Directly after school, the manager retired and he must have liked me a lot. He gave me his job, so I've been working here awhile, but, you know, working with kids keeps you young. I only hire the ones in school because I know how they can all use a little extra--"

My mind dwelled on his words, and fell harshly on the *working with kids* part. I probably could never agree with him. The kids I teach just look at me dumbly, like dogs, as if to ask, "Lady, what the hell are you doing up there. You're making a fool of yourself, pretending like a book has life, and when you ask if I understand... what the hell do you think? I only nod because YOU'RE the one with the red pen."

"--thought for sure the two of you were gonna get married, always hanging around each other. Whatever happened between--"

"Well, you know the way life works." I didn't mean to cut him off. Telling Don about Will's death would just dig up too much inside, and I couldn't start thinking about him again right before class. "Do you know what time it is?"

If I could only get through to those kids. I could teach them so much...how to not just live but to exist. To breathe life, not air, and when they open a storybook or fall into a theatre seat to let every pore open up wide and welcome the glorious words. "Sure, I'll have another coffee." God, I'm so tired of trying so damn hard. The files and files of books I own just sit there on the shelves before a whole mob of closed minds. I look at the books and I see oceans of colors, shooting out of the pages, sunbeams filling up the room and they see black and white paper cuts. I'm so frustrated and sitting down with another book doesn't get rid of the hopelessness long enough to let me grow old and die. I decided I wasn't going in to class that day. They'll have to wait for *ambition* to be some other time.

Don left for some more coffee and I glanced around the place wiping my forehead and eyes. I felt ashamed to be so restless and emotional. I picked up my coffee cup and swirled around the separating liquid at the bottom. There was a ring on the table where the cup had been.

The thing that bugged me is that they cared about anything BUT what I was saying. They'd open their ears long enough to hear what pages they had to read and how to respond, but after that point, I might as well let them go home.

A group at the six-top down the aisle from me were celebrating an anniversary and Don along with the rest of the staff all had to sing "Happy Anniversary Crystal and whomever" three times to please them. I don't know how Will survived here, I'd be sick of this place in seconds. My waiter returned a bit later. Don must've told him to fill up my coffee, so he did and left, and I sat staring at the grain of the table. I had begun to pick at a bit of food that hardened on the wood when Don came back and sat down across from me. I looked up at him and I'm sure he saw how red my eyes were, so I felt like looking away. Honestly, I didn't care. I didn't want to be treated like anybody or respected by anybody, I just figured if I was left alone I could rot alone.

"You know. One of the nights I was closing with Will, he began to talk about you." I couldn't understand why he was saying this, what he was trying to do to me? "I don't know too much about the two of you but I know that he wasn't about to let anyone take you away from him. He told me about the way he could barely wait till he saw you at *Water Street* each day and how he was even considering asking you to apply to work here so that he could see you more often. He talked a lot, and when he talked, it was always about you, Katie.

"He also said, now you guys've probably already talked about this, that he felt...well...that you didn't understand how much he liked you. He kept bringing it up. That's why I never forgot it. It was as if you believed that he was an amazing person but that, and, you know, I don't mean to offend you in any way... God, you know, I couldn't do that. If I ever.."

"It's okay. Don, you were saying he didn't know how much I liked him back. Uh--"

--Yes, well, he heard you say it, but your eyes told him that you, yourself, couldn't see him and you together."

"I loved him so much, Don. Not even I could imagine how strong the feelings I felt for him were. I had trouble proving to myself that an actor actually stops acting and that when he holds my hand, it isn't because of some blocking a director gave him."

"That's what he hoped. He said that when he was doing shows and stuff, like... someone would forget a line or screw up an entrance or something, the set could even **fall** over on top of him and he'd be okay. But he'd only lose character when a thought of you entered his mind." I smiled, yea, that was Will. "I thought it was kind of cool because, you know, he did a lot of school shows and stuff..." I began picking at the dried food scrap again. "...I don't think the set ever fell down on him but he sure

was..." The coffee tasted good and its smell blocked out any thoughts of having to teach those classes today with its reminder of enjoying the morning. "Yea, I wouldn't have remembered any of this, but when I saw you come in, it was like..." Coffee has a way of even letting the value of time adjust itself to satisfy you. Letting the steam wash your face and convince you that it is YOUR day, go ahead and enjoy it. "The things he used to say all of a sudden started to pop up like he told me five minutes ago or whatever. Always talking. About..." The anniversary party was still being obnoxious and I switched legs which were crossed beneath the table trying to get a bit more comfortable. My eyes wandered past the table to the fountain drinks and art on the walls. The moments crept like leisurely clouds across a big-- "About the sky too. Yea, he mentioned he loved to be on the stage and..."

"I'm sorry what did you say?" Our eyes met and he looked almost apologetic.

"The sky. He said that on days he couldn't be with you, he could see you in the sky." I winced. "All the way around him, smiling back down." He paused to see if what he said was wrong and whether or not he should continue. I nodded in interest, to which he proceeded. "You know, a majestic, like, trying to be with you, I guess. He said the sky would, uh--"

--"Stretch on forever?" Don nodded this time. I whispered to myself, "In every direction."

"Then he said he could swear... he saw heaven."

My coffee splashed down and swallowed the table. Don immediately jumped up to avoid any flowing onto him and so did I and jerked my head towards the door. I was so confused but everything was so clear. My thoughts were bouncing across the room and back and in between laughs and cries I asked Don if I could please pay for the coffee the next time I came in.

I spun around and tripped over my own feet trying to get to the door, catching myself so I wouldn't fall. Don took a step towards me, trying to help, but I pushed farther to the door. He handed me *Macbeth* which I must've left at the table and again apologized for anything he might have said that could've upset me. I told him he didn't say anything wrong and asked him to please call up Western's English department and ask for the Lit 222 class to meet at the big field by the old church at the north end of the city. He said he would, so I scrambled to my car, threw the book to the passenger seat and headed back to a place to which I vowed never to return.

My mind sped through the past like my Ford through Kalamazoo and Will was everywhere. It was as if a rash had spread through my entire memory leaving behind a mess of humorous anecdotes and emotion-packed excursions. In sparks of pure, concentrated desire, he beat with my heart. His semblance unlaced my tight guard against the world and left me feeling open and vulnerable, again. Guided by the orange sun, which rose steadily through the passenger side window, I proceeded to Floyd's resting place. My hands kneaded the naugahyde wrap on the steering wheel, my eyes burned forward in this

vulnerability, and my body perspired beneath a sweater and a pair of jeans that felt like constricting burlap. My lips, which raced as well, now did so at an independently audible level, "Enter *The Arena*, all yee without doubt; or the situation within becomes a reality without enter *The Arena*, all yee without doubt..." It repeated and repeated on its own with my mind oblivious to it. As I pulled around a turn to the right, a blaring beam of sunlight threw me back.

"How do I love thee?" His hair flopped forward over his eyes and he reflexively tossed it back. A winter's sun shown through the apartment window, filtered through the ornament-adorned tree, and landed on my white and blue striped pajamas. "Let me count the ways:" Will was in performance mode, now. I could tell because his gestures became defined and his facial expression broader. He was sitting across from me on the carpet, my Christmas gift, *The Complete Works of Shakespeare (abridged)* on his lap. He wore a plaid pair of American Eagle boxers and a Western Theatre T-shirt. "I love you more than the moor did Desdemona." I began to smile, which, as you know, is hard for me before my morning coffee. "I love you more than Antony did Cleopatra." My smile became a chuckle. "I love you more than Demetrius did Hermia." My chuckle a ferocious laugh, pleading for breath. "I love you more than--"

"Don Claudio did Hero" I barreled between sobs, as I rolled on the carpet. Now it was Will's turn to smile. He began again.

"I love you more than --"

"Romeo did Juliet!" I belted back.

"No!" he stopped. Abruptly, he pulled himself over to me. He dropped his performance faster than I dropped my laughter. "Not R and J, Katie," He was above me on his hands and knees. He held my hands down over my head and brought his face within an inch of mine. Will whispered, "Romeo was on the rebound. Juliet was having a girlish crush. This is real, Kate. This is..." His eyes were now glazed over as he stared into my eyes. Slowly, his gaze drifted southward, stopping at my lips. "I love you." His lips met mine. It was true, right? He meant it! I couldn't have mistaken that. He dropped it. He dropped all character completely. He was speaking for himself. About me, not Desdemona or Cleopatra! My mind raced behind my closed eyes.

"I love you," I tried to say. Though it was muffled, it was heard. And I did. Every word. I loved him completely, that was for sure. My entirety belonged to him; my heart, my mind, my--

I opened my eyes. Will had stopped kissing me and he was looking at me.

"Do you?" A chord of longing reverberated in me.

"Of course." How could, why, I mean...could he sense my unsurity of *his* love? Did he see the tension in my heart hidden deep behind my skin? The pit of vulnerability that formed in me hit me hard and I flinched back into reality, past Will. Without recognition of the past ten minutes of driving, I regained my perspective behind the wheel and focused on the end of the church's drive. After a deep breath, I proceeded on to the foot of *The Arena*.

Burying *Macbeth* in my back pocket, I stepped out of the car, wobbling on legs of jelly. I reluctantly followed the sharp stone path towards the core of the place. The last I had seen it was when Will took me here decades before. It had taken the beatings of time, nature, and teenagers. Names were etched in the trees' trunks and leaves confettied the center. As an ancient bent by time, the trees leaned towards The Arena's middle. The crude geometrical structure resembled a handless clock, with each hour chiming another evenly-spaced gravesite; their plaques no longer showered specks of gold reflection, now completely tarnished. It was just as I remembered it, and I was just as scared. I stood on the edge with a fear stuck deep in me.

See, Will owned me. He knew that. He had given his being to me and I, more willingly, to him. Every breath I had taken was devoted to him. So it should be expected that when the owner leaves, it takes its possessions with him. It was the Egyptian way of thinking. The concubines, the jewels, even the housecats, they all went with a pharaoh after death. It was *my* way of thinking. And I was ready. My passions for teaching dwindled with uncaring kids and colleagues muttering "burnout." My passions for learning had descended from my reach when I found *Water Street* was too painful to now bring a book. My passions for life dangled on Will's smile and have surely left me stranded. I wanted to hear a knell, Death's calling. In a desperacy to end that aforementioned "hurt," I thought of all the possibilities and left only one. I wanted to bring the situation within, without. I wanted to pull a Floyd and to cross the barrier of The Arena for the last time. I had no intention on carrying myself back out. I wanted to break character, purposely. I wanted death.

And that's why *The Arena* was the key. I could settle all my passions in one fell swoop. I could answer those innocent freshmen's inquiries about my sign on the door. I could answer my necessity to learn if the legend of The Arena holds water. I could answer the pain with the most undeniable, irregrettable, and irreversible solution. I could answer Death.

With a whirlpool of thoughts in my mind, *The Arena*, of course, at the center, I tried to retain rational thinking in this moment. Rational thinking. Rational. *Rationa?* What was I talking about? Some teacher I was, justifying suicide with rational thought. Yes, that's what it was, all right. Suicide. Since I knew what I was doing and I was the one in control, I needed no Kevorkian to end this clock. It was time. The hour had come and the knell was ringing. It was loveless misery against a painless finish and the latter was my choice. I couldn't give myself another twenty-some years, much less a day. I needed to answer my passions!

As my toes tickled the rim, I held my arms out in a diver's balance. My mind's fluctuation, which felt like a slot machine was on its last quarter and had already pulled up two lilies. It was now or never. I was ready. It was clear. I--

A soundless scream shrieked through the morning causing me to draw my arms inward. On the edge, I felt a surge and an intangible push sucked me into the center. I landed abruptly, striking the rocks with my forehead. A dull pain shot through my skull and shocked my fingertips. I lay inside, in a fetal position, staring at the rocks, which seemed to melt into a black ooze. Remembering how a junkyard and shotgun formed only after we got in character last time, I wondered why, now, the transition was instant. A clear, bitter aroma caught my nose and I slid my head towards its origin. Gasoline. I suddenly knew the answer to my question. The Arena needed not to wait for character to be derived since I *was* the character. Not a Caesar, not a Crystal. Just me. Katie Givens, suicidal literature teacher, alienated, lonely, and neurotic to colleagues.

Before me was a wreck. *The wreck. Will's wreck.* The one I had seen so many times, yet never in actuality. The mangled remains of a car embraced the interstate's concrete guardrail. The car had struck relatively soon after the driver had lost control since the skid marks, which trailed back to where I now laid, were short. The impact must have occurred before even the driver realized it. Yet, now, no one could be seen in the car. They must've run when they saw the gasoline, fearing an explosion. I knew, though, Will was in that car. I knew he was in there.

I gathered my strength and forced my arms under me. As I tried to hoist myself up, my neck gave in, tormented by a spasm apparently caused by the gash on my forehead. A warm stream of blood flowed down the side of my nose, to my lips; its thin steam rising to leave a metallic smell. Again I tried to get up, this time victorious. I was shaking all over, more from the fear than the light-headedness. I stumbled over to the body of the car and around what was the front. The rocks that had once cut into the earth with my every footstep now bore the sheen of gas-soaked pavement. The orange sun in the east, and now a dim white light cast its chill down from above. Craters covered where the solar flares once burned and the cloudless morning was now a star-infected night. Toppling over the guard rail, I worked my way to the side of the car that was most impaled. The hood had fused itself with the front passenger door, which in turn fused itself to the rail. Cubes of glass were everywhere and steam rose up from the middle. I was peering into a well of anxiety that was nearly filled to the brim with nausea. There was Will. His beautiful face was emotionless, lying in a collapsed, crumbled bucket seat. His body looked fractureless, but surely lacked its life. I turned away, cupping my hand over my mouth. Though I was standing outside beyond the shoulder of a wide open stretch of highway, claustrophobia set in and my head started to gyrate. I grabbed the rail for support and worked my way, slowly, towards the back of the car. I again stepped over the rail, cradling my arms, bearing a shuddering jaw.

"That's not my Will, that's not my...He's not dead. I mean, he couldn't be him. He's not Will!" I stuttered. "I mean, how could you be *you*, Will? After all we were, how could you leave?" The gasoline again enticed my nose. "You were my life! You were my friend, goddammit! You were my only reason for being here! You were everything. How could you go? How could you fuckin' leave me? Like this? Alone?" I turned towards the car, now even with its left back wheel. Both the left side doors were ajar. "You can't do this to a girl. You can't be completely dependent on her, and her on you, just to go off and get yourself killed! You can't just--" I stopped, staring at the car. Its rear was smoking a warning. I stared at the bucket seat, broken down at the waist toward the back. In it was the one thing that made me anything. And how I longed to be something again. To have purpose and meaning. To have desire. To want to live. To want to be. To just plain *want*, again, something more than just to slip away.

Inside me, something broke, and I ran towards the car. Clutching the left back door handle, I swung the door open wider. Propelling myself into the car and onto Will, I hugged him with all my soul, weaved my fingers with his, and wrapped all my being around him. I pressed my lips to his, smearing my bleeding head to his unblemished face, and focused a bottled passion I no longer cared for, into him. My head was now numb and my heart now empty. I was weary with life and death and wanted to cease existence in either state. I closed my eyes, murmured a silent prayer, and quickly began to lose consciousness. At that point, I saw the pavement ignite and the car become covered by the dancing orange glow. As the flame of my reasoning was smothered, I felt a contention, a peace, and knew that I had come home to sleep forever. Will was by my side and it was over. I began to let go. Before, I wondered how it was possible to hurt a numb portion of the body, but now, I felt no pain. Through slivers of vision, under heavy lids, I watched the upholstery catch the fire, join in its rhythmic song, and I smiled. As the slivers became thinner and thinner, and the glare was just an orange pinstripe, a long-forgotten urge was abruptly awakened deep inside. As the pinstripe disappeared, leaving darkness, a desire which I never expected, set aflame new light, but within me. Suddenly, by this force I was confused and scared. In that brief instant before I lost coherence, I felt a radiance seep through my sealed eyelids. The warmth, as I feared, was something far worse than afterlife coming to pay its respects. The heat, as I prayed, was something far worse than a lick of the flames around me. No, upon my face, in the dead of this fiery night, I found the glow of the morning sun in the situation without. I had broken character.

I guess I can't tell you as to what went on from that point. For the most part I was *dead*. I had chosen, in *The Arena*, a final act. Needless to say, things did not go as I thought they would. Otherwise, I wouldn't be here with you.

What I can say is that the students had shown up that morning. A rumor had started about "Miss Givens cashing in her chips and forgoing sanity." The students, who learned nothing from my courses, decided to go for a bit of humor and a bit of lunacy. What they got was inevitably something greater. I've managed to piece together the swatches of stories I heard from the students last semester, from the ones who would talk, that is. It seems that the group had seen me acting in the middle, alone, heard me screaming and swearing. They gathered in a tight ring around the Arena's center, not one daring to enter (for fear of embarrassing themselves by being asked to join, not fear of The Arena itself). They saw me embracing a being that wasn't there and passing out in its translucent arms. Someone said that at that point they were laughing.

One of the students explained what happened next as being a wind, possibly an autumn El Nino or a freak storm. Another said I did it myself. The majority of the group, though, refused to say that they saw what lifted me and carried me to the edge of the circle that morning. Or what forced the ring of students to part. Or what lowered me safely to the stones on the outside edge. Or what knelt down on the inside rim of the circle to kiss me on the cheek while I slept deep. The majority of the group didn't mention and hasn't mentioned what has happened to even each other. And so they'll probably take that secret to their graves.

Me, I know it was Will. A blackened, burned copy of *Macbeth* proves so. It has become perfectly clear to me once that scene began that every inch of my body wanted to die there beside Will. And amidst all that direful determination, while the flames' needles pricked at my shoulders and chin, my mutinous heart was able to slip in a silly thought. Not consisting of some titanic battle strategy, or a cracked code beyond rows and rows of binaries, but a "maybe" described in the only way I could have ever seen it—silly. No flashing lights, no triumphant drones, it was there like a heartbeat and came like a butterfly in December. I must have realized I could have lived without him.

It was that silly notion that condemned me to the situation within and locked me permanently inside that scene, worse yet, inside that flaming car. The truth that *I had broken character* echoed like a banshee as I lost consciousness and the book wouldn't have been the only thing charred had not my body been carried out of the gauntlet.

Now, I have the strength to live on. I have the endurance to continue teaching and strive to learn, myself. My passion for life has returned and is even stronger that it was before. Why? Because I know he is with me. I know he wants me to go on living and to recognize how far behind me the past really is. I understand, now, that The Arena is just a magnifying glass to what

we call life and reality, and that the situation within can only be the situation without if *within* is in your heart, and *without* is what you do. The difference, though, between the world outside the circle and the world inside, is aspiration without proof. It's blind desire. It's dream. By faith alone, I know that outside The Arena, there is more power than the inside ever held. Will knew that. That's what lured him. He realized it that night and that is why he left. He held it inside, and it dared him to follow. It pulled him onward just as it pulls me now. It forced him to live. To excel. To become whatever he wanted. By making faith just a little less blind, though, The Arena became dangerous and can still be dangerous.

What does it mean, you ask? It means that we can't depend on an *arena* to make things crystal clear, to make us see, to force us to change. We can't count on others to pull us up or to keep us going. Yeah, I loved Will, and I'll always love him. But I have to move on.

I have no intentions of visiting the spot where The Arena resides. I'm sure it wouldn't work for me now. Now, that I know the power was never there, but is inside us, where it has always been. The situation within *is* the situation without because we make it that way. And with that knowledge, life, love, anything that we place faith in can never be blind. That's what it means.