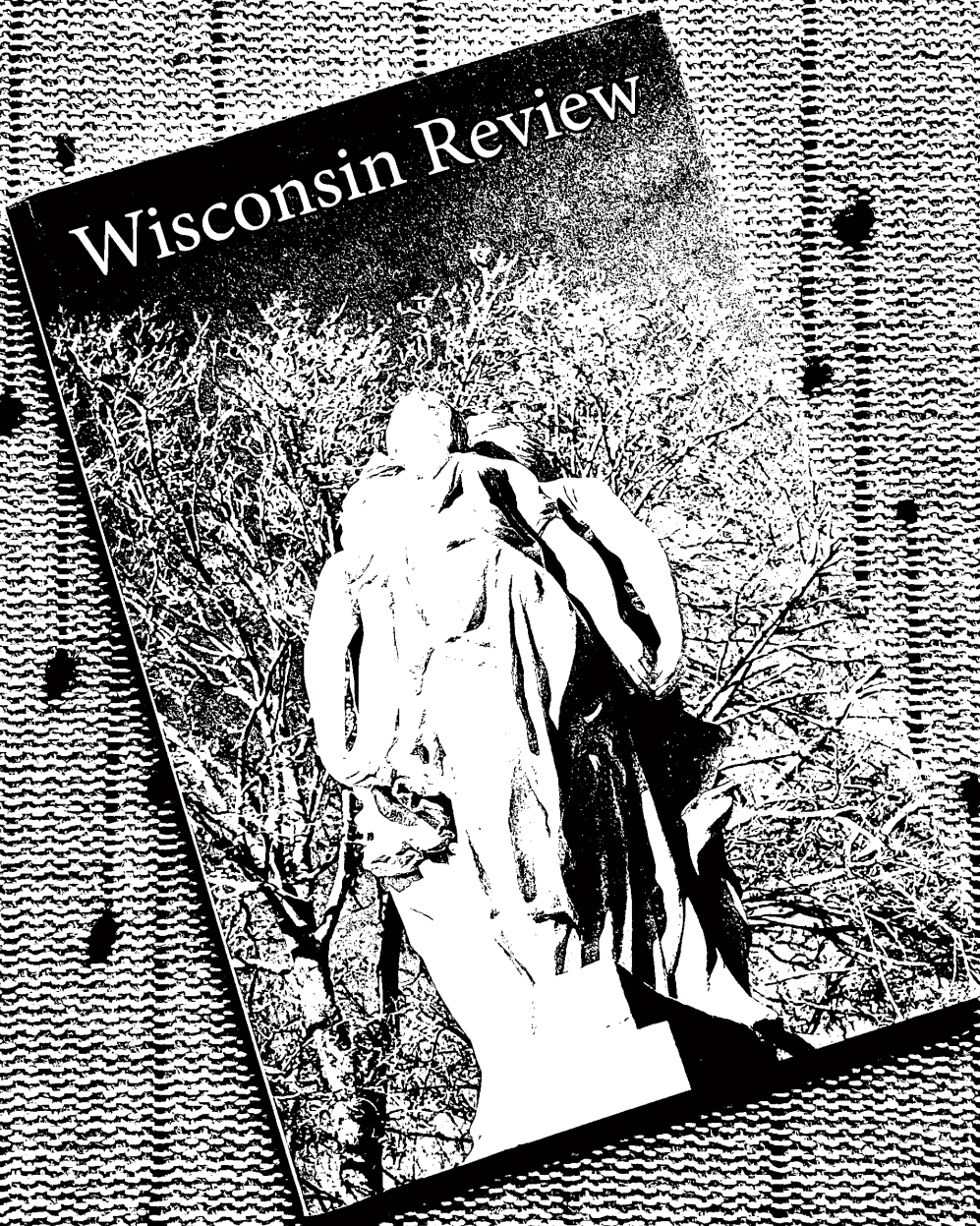


Wisconsin Review



Bloomability by Brittany Ackerman

My favorite memory of David is from a fourth grade class field trip to Milton, FL. We took a nine-hour bus drive to a campsite called Adventures Unlimited and spent two nights and three days sleeping in bunk beds in cabins, eating in the mess hall, canoeing in the river. I was embarrassed because David was in love with me and I didn't want anyone in our class to think I reciprocated the love.

But David and I were put in every single group activity together. He was with me on the ropes course, he sat across from me at meals, we made lanyards side by side, he shooed others away so he could be next to me at the camp fire. He was relentless, unavoidable. And I started to see things in him I hadn't before. In school where he was annoying and crass, the field trip made me aware of his sense of humor. He was not afraid to poke fun at himself and make a joke at his own expense. He had humility; he was giving, letting me sit on his jacket so I wouldn't get my jeans dirty. He let me have four quarters so I could call my mom from a pay phone outside the general store and even stood guard for me in case I got caught. I grew to like him. I thought maybe I could even love him.

On the last night of the trip, our group leader walked us out to the middle of the forest in the pitch black and gave everyone Wint-O-Green flavored Life Savers. We were told to put them in our mouths and chew and see what happens. I told David I hated mints, so he took mine and ate both of ours, opening his mouth to reveal the sparks that came to life when he chewed. His mouth lit up bright blue as he kept chewing. For a moment, I wanted him to kiss me, to seal whatever this feeling was up forever.

Other kids started to gather around David's mouth. The immense light from two candies created a scene. Everyone oohed and ahed. People started handing over their mints to David so he could create even bigger flashes of light. David opened his mouth wider and the sparks continued to fly. He was the center of attention—shit, he was truly the center of our world for that brief moment.

The name David is of Hebrew origin. It means "beloved." I met David in fourth grade when I moved from New York to Florida because my mom wanted us to have a fresh start after her mom passed away. David had fallen in love with me and become obsessed with me. He followed me around school, begging that I pay attention to him. He

was chubby and wore glasses and the kids at school called him "Piggy," like in *Lord of the Flies*. None of us had read that book yet, but someone's brother had and the name stuck like glue. But David didn't care about his bullies. He never let anyone or anything get him down. If you asked him, he would have told you he was the most popular boy in school. He would say he was glad everyone talked about him because he wanted to be talked about.

David was the first one to learn all the words to every new rap song. He knew so much about music, about musicians, about what cars the rappers were driving in music videos and about what fashion the girls were wearing in magazines. I was repelled by him, but also drawn to him. He was like a magnet: one side grotesque and the other—charming. He had loved my best friend Emily before he loved me, although Emily and I seemed like perfect opposites: her, a tomboy, me a girly girl; Emily, good at sports, me, good at English; Emily, never brushing her white blonde hair for school and me, slicking back my brunette ponytail and tucking in my uniform skirts every single day. Despite our differences, Emily befriended me and offered to "kick David's ass" if he was giving me trouble. After a few weeks of enduring his gaze, I obliged, called her over at recess and told her, "Okay, do it, kick his ass."

Emily punched David in the stomach and both of them were called to the Principal's office. Neither of them said my name, mentioned me in any way, shape or form. It was the one grace they gave me in our friendship, perhaps, the one time they left me out of the drama. Emily was suspended for a day and David went to the nurse and was sent home. Emily told me that even though she'd gotten in trouble, the Principal, a woman we called Mrs. Sally, had winked at her before sending her off on her way.

Our fifth grade teacher assigns us a book to read over spring break called *Bloomability*. On the surface, it seems like a book about coming-of-age, but it's also about a young girl nicknamed Dinnie who is "kidnapped" by her Aunt and Uncle and taken out of the country, forced to attend a boarding school and finds herself in all sorts of trials and tribulations ranging from mischievous to life-threatening. The back of the book asks readers if Dinnie will be able to adapt to her new situation or if it'd be easier to close herself off, wondering if she might "never realize all the 'bloomabilities' that are possible."

Our assignment is to write a book report and present it to the class upon our return to school. My favorite parts of the book are Dinnie's

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diary entries because I love having that clear window into her mind, the deepest intricacies of her thoughts and fears. I'm still adjusting to my new school, to the move, to living in a place without changing leaves and seasons. In a way, I, too, feel like I was kidnapped, taken from my home and brought to a new place without having any say in the decision. I, too, keep a journal and write and think and overthink and wonder who I am, who I might become in this new phase of my life. For my project, I plan to make an imitation of the book's cover: pictures of my spring break travels with clippings from various adventures. My mom buys poster board and ribbon and glue and prints out the blue image of a passport, just like the one from the book.

When I was placed in Honors English, I was separated from my friends. Emily and David stayed in the Regulars class and I was left out of inside jokes. I was ashamed of this, of moving ahead while they stayed behind. I had already started to feel different than my friends, using my free time to look up boys' numbers in the school directory and dial them on my house phone. And I loved school. I loved learning and reading and writing. Emily and David couldn't see me in the classroom, the way I'd raise my hand and take notes as if my life depended on it. On weekends, I would rush to get my work done before seeing them, before once again pretending that I was procrastinating and leaving my assignments disregarded.

During spring break the three of us hangout every day. We go to my country club's pool, rollerblade around Emily's neighborhood, take trips to the mall and buy CDs and new body wash from Bath and Body Works. David helps us pick out music and tells us which scents go best with our personalities. David lives 30 minutes away in Lighthouse Point and our parents all agree that he's allowed to sleepover at my house to make things easier. He's no longer in love with me, or Emily, so we feel no threat, no awkwardness. We want him around because he's funny. We laugh when he tries to hangout with my brother and gets the door slammed right in his face. He laughs too.

My mom suggests that the three of us walk over to my neighborhood's lake and take a group photo for my book report. "You can pretend the lake is somewhere far away," she says. In the photo, David stands in the middle and has his arms around both Emily and me. Our pants are rolled up to our knees and for the next week, the three of us itch our legs like crazy, some kind of lake bacteria getting the best of our skin. The photo graces the cover of my book report, on which I receive an A+. The photo migrates to my corkboard wall for years to come until it is eventually lost to time. If I could get it back, I'm not sure that I would.

For my twelfth birthday, I'm allowed to bring two friends for dinner at Benihana in Fort Lauderdale. I invite Emily and David. In the beginning of our sixth grade year, when we all got our schedules, we were dismayed to see we had no classes together except lunch. "We'll always have lunch," Emily had offered.

David still walks with me to class between third and fourth period since we are in the same building. On our walks, David talks shit about kids in our grade who piss him off, kids he thinks are stupid, kids who deserve to be beat up. I could use my time between class to study or review course material, but instead I listen to David and laugh when I'm supposed to laugh, agree when I'm supposed to agree. If I fail to comply, David will abandon me; he will stomp off and walk ahead leaving me in the dust. He will tell Emily via text message that I'm being a bitch, which Emily will show me when we finally meet up at lunchtime and roll her eyes, annoyed.

Lunch is a time for us girls to talk about our periods: who has them, who doesn't, what hurts, what's growing, what our bodies are doing, what we are doing to our bodies, what we want our bodies to do. The boys are always getting in trouble for throwing food or wearing their pants too low or hitting each other or spitting across the tables or using foul language or whatever else boys do during lunch.

Emily got her period earlier in the year and I'm still waiting on mine, but neither of us have kissed a boy and we plot to practice on David on my birthday. Emily and I have crushes on other boys in our grade and it has become understood that David is not someone either of us will ever date. Sometimes he says he wants to marry me, how he could see spending the rest of his life with me rather than Emily. And sometimes I wish it were Emily that was chosen to fit this image instead.

David is no longer allowed to sleepover. Somehow it was okay at age eleven, but at twelve it feels different. We don't question our parents because we know they're right. But still, David comes over an hour before we leave for Benihana and we immediately lock my bedroom door and tell him our plan. It's decided that I should go first, since it's my birthday. David tells us that he's kissed so many girls and that he's a pro, the perfect person to transform us into good kissers. David often stretches the truth, emphasizes stories to make himself sound a certain way. But we are so desperate to practice that we choose to believe him, stretching our own version of truth to get what we want. We feel that he can help us, so we let him.

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The first kiss feels so wrong to me: David opens his mouth and his tongue feels like a fish swimming inside my own mouth. We are both minty fresh from Orbit gum. David moves to Emily next and as I watch, I wonder if she's more natural at kissing than me, if she's better. "Weird," she says when their faces detach. We go back and forth, David and me, David and Emily, increasing the time per kiss in ten-second increments, until it's time to leave for dinner.

The drive to Fort Lauderdale takes forty-five minutes and my mom let the three of us sit in the back of her car as she drives. She plays the music loud and we take turns again bending forward in our seats, leaning over and kissing, hoping my mom won't notice, and she doesn't.

There's a strange power that comes from kissing, from kissing and being kissed, from lips and tongues and the open space of someone else's body that becomes a place for you to seek and play. It feels like our friendship can never go back after we all kiss, like our days of Bloomability are long behind us, too far gone.

At the end of the year, I win the English award, the Social Studies award, and the Latin award. I'm so embarrassed each time my name is called in the school auditorium. I hide each certificate in my backpack.

During high school, there are many firsts for us. Emily leaves the country for the first time traveling on a school field trip to China. David smokes weed and drinks alcohol, shows us porn for the first time on his big screen TV at his parent's house. I let a guy go to third base on a trip to Turks and Caicos and fall in love with someone else on a different trip to the Bahamas.

David leaves our school and attends a high school closer to home. Emily moves away from Boca but doesn't change schools. She's no longer basically my neighbor and instead lives closer to David. There are still random times the three of us will get together, but something always goes awry. When Jackass is released in theaters, the three of us smoke a huge blunt in the movie theater parking lot and are still too high to drive by the time the movie is over.

I listen to Californication while I read Of Mice and Men. I listen to Neil Young when I read The Scarlet Letter. My senior year English teacher assigns us Grendel and I write a long report on how I relate to the narrator, an anti-hero.

Emily stays in Florida for college. I go to Indiana. David moves to Fort Lauderdale and skips out on college altogether.

The three of us reunite the summer after we all turn twenty-one. I have one more year of college left, and I'm unsure of my next steps. Most of my friends have jobs lined up, internships, or at least know what city they'd like to end up in when we graduate. But I feel torn between returning to Florida or trying out the West Coast like I've always dreamed of. David got his GED from a community school in South Florida and is doing real estate or selling insurance or DJing part time at some nightclubs. I can't keep track of his Facebook updates and his ever-changing profile pictures.

I study English in school and will most likely declare it as my major. I also have enough credits to declare Latin as a minor. But my favorite part of college has nothing to do with learning. I love my walks to and from class, especially the latter. I've taken to foregoing the bus and setting off to school on foot. My campus in Bloomington, Indiana is beautiful at every turn of the year: red, orange, gold in the fall; the silvery white winters; the greenest green in spring. Sometimes on these walks I call Emily. We joke back and forth and occasionally I'll say something to which Emily will reply, "You should write a story about that."

I write little bits and pieces of things at my desk at night. I try to deal with family matters inside my head by putting them into a fresh Word document. I never send Emily, or anyone, anything I write, but I keep everything organized on my computer. Still, Emily knows I'm a writer. She knows it's the thing I was born to do.

Emily drives home almost every other weekend to visit her family and occasionally will hangout with David. They seem to have fostered a new friendship that takes place outside of the confines of school and one that exists in adult life. I have to remind myself that they were, in fact, friends first. It was David and Emily before I ever entered the picture. They were a duo, a two-some, happily content with each other, and then I came forth.

We meet at David's apartment in Las Olas, a street known for its plethora of restaurants and ample nightclubs. When I think of Las Olas, I think of the time Emily and I went there with our families in fifth grade. I remember how we all ate dinner together and then went for a stroll popping into various art galleries and cutesy stores. I was jealous when Emily's mom bought her a bright green maxi skirt with frills and she was jealous when my mom bought me a piece of art: a small tea cup filled with fake tea and a little heart-shaped cookie on its plate.

David lives in a big Emily. David's birthday get him as a belated gift. I let her pick it like a fist with blue liquid up in the elevator, I have brought anything gifts, for the way I'm sure I want to. I miss David who I felt could be unknown to me in so

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David lives in a high rise and I take the elevator up to meet him and Emily. David's birthday has recently passed and I was unsure what to get him as a belated gift. My mom, who works at Macy's, suggested cologne. I let her pick it out and she chose one from Diesel that's shaped like a fist with blue liquid inside. She gets it giftwrapped and as I carry it up in the elevator, I feel like it's wrong. I feel like maybe I shouldn't have brought anything at all. I wonder if we're too old for birthday gifts, for the way I'm forcing myself to see David even though I'm not sure I want to. I miss him, but I miss the David of my childhood, the David who I felt could protect me. This David is someone new and unknown to me in so many ways.

David looks different without his glasses. He's lost weight too, a lot, and he's shirtless when I enter his apartment. We hug and I give him his gift, which he opens right away. He says it's great and puts some on his wrists and neck right away. I always thought that things would be easier when David finally came out, easier for him to feel at ease if he was being true to himself. But David only grows more self-centered, more combative. He was never afraid to say what's on his mind, but now it seems he must be the absolute center of attention and can never be questioned or proven wrong. He is the end all be all, and I am afraid of him.

I realize this as I stand in his apartment, which is all dark blues and black. There are handcuffs spilling out of his bedside drawer and the apartment smells like a department store. I wear a black and white dress and David pulls me on his bed to simulate sex with me. I laugh to cover how uncomfortable I am. David is rough and my dress comes up above my thighs, revealing my yellow thong that feels childish in this very adult room, this very adult building in this very adult city.

Emily uses her new camera phone to take pictures and laughs along as David spans me. Looking back I think they must have been using me to relieve some tension in their own lives, using me as an object, like a toy in some game they were playing. I try not to hold it against them, even now, the power play that it all was, that this is what kids do to each other when they're young and dumb and confused. And what was I looking for anyway by showing up, again and again? What was I saying by not saying anything at all?

I pull my dress back down when I exit the bed and I say I have to leave, that I'm not feeling well. They know it's a lie. David looks at me and says, "Come on, live a little." I want to get in my car and go home. There is so much more to life than forcing myself to be friends with people who no longer love me, people who don't have my best interest at heart. I feel so far away from mine and Emily's phone calls back

at college, our friendship that has stood the test of time and distance, and I wonder who she is now, someone who is on David's side and not mine.

But instead of leaving, I stay. I walk arm-in-arm with David and Emily as we go to dinner on Las Olas and order drinks with our food. David barely eats, Emily drinks too much and sleeps over at David's, and I have one cocktail that makes me woozy and I drive home anyway.

Later that summer, Emily and I fight over a guy. Even though it's complicated, David takes her side, so not only do I have to deal with Emily's anger, but I also am beholden to David's wrath. David will call me nonstop for hours a day leaving voicemails telling me I am a horrible friend. It is the summer that my mom is diagnosed with Lupus and the summer my brother goes missing, both of which David uses against me. I sometimes worry that he will post the photos of us in bed, the ones where he made me act like we were having sex for some reason—a reason I have come to understand as that he wanted power over me. But didn't he know he had it? Did he just want to see that power in action? How far I would go and what I would do to keep the peace?

I have to remind myself of similar instances in our childhood, times when David went mad on me and I was struck with fear. I had been grounded before his birthday dinner in sixth grade at Buca di Beppo and had to call him and tell him that I couldn't go. He called me over and over again to yell at me and tell me he was going to start a rumor about me unless I found a way to come to his party. I remember looking at the Polaroid picture on my wall of the three of us in the lake as he yelled at me. I wished and hoped that I could teleport back to that moment when everything was good and right. He said to make up a lie, sneak out, do something, anything.

I think after how hard I cried, my mom must have felt sorry for me and ended up letting me go, saying that my punishment could start after David's birthday after all.

There was our eighth grade field trip to Washington D.C. where David was mad at me for not sitting near him on the bus because Emily and I wanted to sit near a kid we had a crush on and he got mad at me and not Emily. The rage felt so unfair. I asked Emily why David was only mad at me when both of us chose to be near someone else, but she had no answer. Eventually she made David act civil to me, the same way she'd punched him in the stomach in fourth grade, and he behaved for the rest of the trip.

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David called my house phone and told my mom he was glad she was sick, glad that my brother had been poisoned with addiction. I begged my mom to stop answering the calls but I walked in on her once talking to David. "After all I've done for you," my mom said, crying. My mom always loved and accepted David, even when his own parents wouldn't, didn't know how. Our home was always his safety net, and so quickly he turned.

The last time I see David, I am supposed to meet Emily for dinner. I'm twenty-four and about to enter my first semester of graduate school for creative writing. I schedule the dinner instead of going to an orientation meeting because ever since my disagreement with Emily all those years back about a boy, the only way to have her on my side is to jump when she says jump. I never told Emily about the calls between David and me, David and my mom. I think I was afraid to seem weak, that if Emily had received those kinds of calls, she would have done something about it. I had just wanted them to go away, to stop. I thought if I looked the other way, David would eventually disappear.

As I walk up to the pizza place where we're supposed to meet, Emily and David both round the corner together. When I get close enough, I can see their eyes are bright red, both of them completely stoned out of their minds. I try to act happy to see David, but I am terrified. David is so thin and pale and Emily laughs at everything he says and does. I try to make it through dinner, but David keeps insulting me and making jokes at my expense. I'm not hungry because of how nervous I am, so I barely eat my food.

"Emily told me you had an eating disorder, but you can at least take a bite to be kind," David says.

I want to ask David what he means by kindness. I want to ask if he can recall a time since we were kids that he's ever been kind to me. Instead, I excuse myself to the bathroom and do what I should have done long ago—leave.

I drive to my new campus and make it only a few minutes late for the orientation. I go to the bathroom and put cold water on my face. I call my mom and tell her what happened and she says to go make new friends now, to leave the past behind me.

Emily sends me an email with a new last name. She explains that she's married now. She writes to let me know that David has passed away. She attended his service and says, "...it was really sad, as you can imagine." She wanted to reach out and check in. She hopes I am okay

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and that everything is going well. I debate writing her back, but eventually I do. Emily had reached out years ago when things got really bad with my brother. We had started talking again, mostly just online with a few FaceTime phone calls, but I stopped responding eventually because I feared she might be using our conversations to get information on me, to use my life as ammunition against me via David and his power. I had told her about my mom, my brother, my eating problems. I had told her things in confidence that made their way to David and then back to me in the form of painful blows.

But now David is gone. In my research from social media, I find that David had a drug problem. I'm still unsure if this was the cause of his death, but it seems that the problem got bad around our junior year of college and bled into every facet of his life. He switched jobs, moved a lot, made new friends, and rejected old ones. It seems he kept in contact with Emily and some other people from our school, but I never heard from him again after that dinner. And now it's almost a decade later. He would be thirty-two, like me, like Emily. It is odd to say that with his death I feel at once a deep sadness and a small relief. What power can someone have over you in death? How do you mourn the loss of a bully? It was really sad, as you can imagine.

Emily and I begin exchanging emails again and we create a healthy boundary of communication. We will share with each other when we feel like it. There will be no pressure, only love. I learn about her newborn son, she learns about my wedding. We swap photos and add each other on social media. Our friendship is the one old made anew. Maybe this is something David could give us, has given us. Am I sad that he's gone? I'm not sure. I'm definitely sad that he was in pain and didn't know how to handle it. I'm sad that I too am often in pain and could really use a friend to talk to about it. I'm sad that maybe we could have been each other's anchors, but then again, maybe not.

David has a big Bar-Mitzvah party for this thirteenth birthday. It's funny to say he's "becoming a man" when all the boys our age look so young and silly in their formal wear. David has so many friends and the party is huge. Both Emily and my parents are invited and we all dance and celebrate his big day.

When it comes time for the candle lighting ceremony, David calls Emily and I up for a turn. There are thirteen candles, and each candle has an honoree that will come up and light the candle, say a prayer, and smile for a photo. Emily and I are called up together and Emily giggles,

uncertain and awkward since she's not Jewish, but I know how serious it is to hold this candle for David, to be by his side and be chosen among all the kids here at this party. We say our blessing and each give David a hug and I want to hold him longer, tighter. I want to make sure he knows how much he means to me. I want to tell him thank you for choosing me, then and now. But the photographer positions Emily and me so that we are both kissing David on opposite cheeks.

"What a ladies man!" the photographer shouts and David smiles. The camera flashes and blinds me momentarily. But then my eyes adjust and I see all the faces of family and friends of David. Here, David is beloved. Here, everyone cheers and glows.

Here, the possibilities of our lives open up before us.