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California Fiction

Abstract

In a busy cafe, a young university student eats lunch whilst reflecting on the lives of his American peers on a study abroad exchange programme. He finds it hard to comprehend the dissonance between their days of unrelenting, repetitive work and his own, unfulfilling life. Such comparison only amplifies his quiet grief at the last year of his life. Sitting alone amongst a room full of bustle, his internal narrative lays bare confusing feelings of loss, hesitation and inertia from the first year of study at university. A central focal point around which his emotions stir is a photo of his ex-girlfriend, in which he does not recognise the last pillar of his old self before he went to university. Yet this painful acceptance of their loss of ties becomes a vehicle for the first steps of his own repair.

Recommended Citation

Phillips, Archie. "California Fiction." *Text & Type*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2025. CSU Open Journals. Available at: <https://journals.calstate.edu/textandtype/issue/view/558>

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ARCHIE PHILLIPS

California Fiction

“Sorry, we’d love to,” said Nathan, one of the exchange students on his program, with genuine sincerity. Nathan was the closest to him on the program, probably because they both got talking about films after the ‘Introduce Yourself’ portion of the first session. “We all have work this evening though. I have to take the hours while I can get them.”

“Oh sure, what about tomorrow?” he replies.

“I can do straight after class, but it depends what you have in mind because I pick my sister up at 7 and my mum up at 9 on Thursdays.” Nathan laughs, but it sounds more tired than amused.

He thinks about their position later that day as he pulls out the heavily lacquered cafe chair and sits down with the sandwich, macaroni salad and coffee he’s just bought. He reflects on months of the past year, his first at university, when it felt like he hadn’t contacted his family for days, having either been occupied with last minute reading for classes, washing up saucepans he’d just eaten out of, or various unsuccessful efforts to penetrate the small, secret societies of friends that surrounded him.

How can these people his age fit in a job, perhaps two, on top of this? The absurdity. Maybe they didn’t have friends, he considers, or they see them so rarely as to barely constitute a friendship in the way he would. His own past year was a series of mistakes. He knew it well, and had to wear it as a heavy medallion pulling down on the nape of his neck when he returned home periodically to his more successful friends and family getting by. His terms were loose strings of weeks where whole days were spent hungover with the tinny noises of anxiety wearing him out. If he stopped for a second, he could feel this sensation again right here, just as he could feel the roughness of his jeans he’d pull on early in bitter, dark mornings to make the bus for classes at the last possible second. Yet it seemed as though these students didn’t have time for the mistakes he made, for the stagnancy he’d become accustomed to. They talked about being first-generation, about being providers for their family, with an energy that was the distinct pulse of pioneering beating within them.

Idly glancing at his phone, he bites into the sandwich, his eyes surveying the condiments on the table to rescue these otherwise bland mouthfuls. He reaches for the orange, lurid one. A sinus-clearing sear of what was evidently mustard makes him drop his phone as he hurries to reach for the coffee in front of him. The walls of this diner house vibrant conversation taking place all around him at shared tables and in the long queue for the counter. How it throws the British reserve into light! He can’t imagine a place in England where people drift and converse in such a way, untethered and unashamed. A lethargy overcomes him as he finishes the last of the salad and refreshes his social media feed, pulling down the top of the screen like a lever on a slot machine. A post from a friend of his ex-girlfriend comes up. It features her, and it occurs to him it is the first photo he’s seen of her since their breakup. The quiescence of his nervous system—slumped on the chair, closed off from the people around

him—is at once wiped away. It’s an indescribable feeling, except for the shock and offence he takes at her beauty.

She is wearing white clothing he’s never seen, and a smile that had changed, emblazoned with the excitement and liberty of a new life. Her friends rotate around her in the photo.

He looks back on his own memories of friendship over the past year and sees an observer, viewing the new world unfolding around him in third person. It hits him brutally (though he already sort of knew it) that he hasn’t cracked the codes of interaction at university so far. The people around him have university legacies preserved like flies in amber, which they all renew with careless, expectant, easy smiles from the moment they arrive.

Holding down the app’s icon to delete it, his left hand runs through the oils of his hair, and he adjusts his back to see a slant in the mirror ahead. Stark and harsh, shining light on walls that now have a sterility about them, the bulbs above illuminating the weakness of his eyes. He groans quietly, and the man in the boxy shirt opposite looks up. He considers the heaviness of the word: nineteen. It feels too serious, and he laments the loss of his childishness, before the thought-worn years of aspirations and graft marched to his bedroom door.

The smiling waiter interrupts his musing—“Are you finished?”

“Yes, thank you sir”, he replies, relaxing his expression. His gaze follows the waiter as he turns back to the kitchen, and more bustle out as he goes in. What a culture of rush! All of it so artificial. He wonders what is beneath the polished gleam of these servers. What if they, too, get so caught up in a glimmering array of tasks and ambitions that they stumble at nothing on most days? If they, too, are held at the same, slow march towards nondescript goals by a frustrating sense of remoteness? If they, too, are mourning parts of their old self that make it hard to recognise the current owner of their bodies? Maybe, it occurs to him, this is the reality of the students like Nathan as well, hiding underneath their unwavering affability and generosity. Whatever the reality was, it spoke quieter than their upright drive; brimming with gratitude and a keen awareness of their opportunity. This was the life that lay before them, and they weren’t to let it slip away.

He bites down on a piece of chewing gum he buys at the counter on the way out and slows his stride. It is too hot outside to hurry back to where he was staying, so he sits in the sun and writes in his journal. Tucked inside the pages of his last entry there is a muddled to-do list. Dozens of scribbled words and tick boxes had stared at him uncompleted for the past 2 months. Having always been chasing lost time and never quite catching up, he had become accustomed to giving himself so much to do upon a day that he almost always fell short at nothing. The day after he would then try to complete that day’s tasks, plus the previous outstanding ones. Yet here, in a rare moment of silence, thousands of miles from life at home, the exhaustion of his mind finally becomes apparent to him. Relaxing his brow after a few seconds of trying to decipher the note he wrote for himself at the top dated from last week, he crumples the paper softly in his hand. Looking at the page, he picks up the pen on his lap and writes the date, before throwing the crumpled sheet in the bin next to him.