Nathan Bickel
Dr. Brown and Dr. Bolt
SCHC 400
26 May 2023
Response to Prompt #8
Open topic and genre with either London or Dublin as the setting for your work.

Euston Church

I've never been the outsider.
Instead of being the person with a different accent
sitting by themselves trying not to look too disoriented
copying the people nearest them
in a mixed dance of familiar and alien social conventions,
I've been the one watching them from across the room
happy they're there and vaguely curious who they are
but not, of course, talking to them.
They must have a good reason for sitting alone
and what if I say something that offends them?
I'm being considerate, not afraid of my own discomfort.

But when I was the cultural outsider at Euston Church in London,
I was relieved that not everyone acted like me.
I didn't mind when Isaac, the nice thirty-something
who called me over and invited me to sit by him
later introduced me as from North Carolina rather than South,
or when the local students didn't quite understand
the details of my study abroad program when I explained them.
It mattered that they cared.
I like observing because it's easier, but church isn't really about observation.
I was able to participate because they wanted me to be included,
and they did something about it.

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Response to Prompt #7
Write an ode to a work of art or an artefact that you see at the British Museum or one of the National Galleries in either London or Dublin. Or write a short story inspired directly by the work of art or artefact. Or write a personal memoir about your experience as a museum goer.

The Lewis Chessmen

At the beginning of the twelfth century, a merchant ship crashed on the shore of the Isle of Lewis in Scotland. In it were nearly a hundred ornate and high-quality chess pieces from a number of different sets, which were on their way from Norway to be sold to noblemen in Ireland. The pieces were made out of the ivory from walrus tusks, an extremely valuable material that would have been available to only the most wealthy. As a result, the game was associated with the elite—chess was an important feature of royal courts, viewed as a noble art and used to train knights in strategy and tactical skills. Throughout the centuries, the game changed quite a bit, and so did the stories we told about it. Some of the basic rules changed: for instance, the queen was introduced as only being able to move one square diagonally, and it wouldn't be until 1500 before it attained its modern ability to move anywhere in a straight line or diagonally. The game became faster and more dynamic in part because of such changes, and in part because it became more accessible to a greater number of people, who contributed to its body of knowledge. The game also started to lose its reputation of being a refined passtime and began to draw criticism from religious institutions, eventually being banned by the church.

In 1831, when the lost chess pieces (now known as the Lewis chessmen) were discovered in a subterranean chamber where the ship crashed, competitive organized chess was just emerging on a larger scale. In fact, just three years later, Louis-Charles Mahé de La Bourdonnais of France and Alexander McDonnell of Ireland played in what is sometimes considered the first

world chess championship. The match took place in the Westminster chess club in London, which met only blocks away from where the Lewis chessmen are now displayed in the British Museum.

In the summer of 2023, just weeks after grandmaster Ding Liren became the first Chinese world chess champion, I got to see the Lewis pieces at the museum. Later that day, I decided to go to a tournament at the Greater London chess club, which happened to have a team from the same Westminster chess club that de La Bourdonnais and McDonnell played in. I'm usually neither a huge museum person nor a walk-into-a-club-where-I-know-nobody person, but getting to see the reverberations of chess across time and space in this way was really moving and reminded me why I enjoy the game.

I should probably first explain what possessed me to spend an evening in London playing chess with strangers. I first learned how to play when I was six or seven and my dad taught me, and I got interested and read a couple of books about it. But I was an only child, and in the words of Ron Weasley, no offense or anything, but neither of my parents are that good at chess. So without anyone to play with very often, I lost interest and didn't play much until a few years ago. But in 2020, two of my friends got interested in chess, and we started playing a lot together. We weren't seeing each other in person for obvious reasons, so we used playing chess online as an excuse to talk. We talked about the games sometimes, but we also talked about our stresses, our relationships, our pasts, our hopes, our frustrations with living through a global pandemic, and whatever else came to mind. We opened up more to each other than what would have felt natural on a normal phone call, and though I went months at a time without seeing them in person, I got to know them better that year than I ever had. It was the same way in college—I met and got to know a couple of my closest friends there playing chess. Every relationship needs a third thing to

spark it and to continue it, like a shared interest to talk about or do together or shared experiences and memories. With my mix of social anxiety and generally reserved personality, something calm like chess with natural pauses to think works well as a third thing. I enjoy playing people online and studying and discovering new facets about the game (there's a surprising amount one can learn), but I keep doing it because of the community I've found through it.

This isn't to say I don't have problems with chess or its broader community. For one, there's a strange connection made between intelligence and being good at chess that I simply haven't seen to be the case. Some of the smartest people I know, much smarter than I am, aren't particularly good at chess, and some of the best people I know at chess are… not all that intelligent. I've waxed poetic in a couple interviews and things I've written about how playing chess somewhat obsessively has made me a better problem-solver and critical thinker, and maybe that's marginally true, but I think mostly what it's made me better at is winning chess games. The link between chess and intelligence is just another story we're telling about the game, and I don't find it much more compelling than the church's story centuries ago that playing chess is indulging in revelry and violence. I think it's particularly problematic because while the chess community is getting more diverse (it's better than the 1960s world depicted in Queen's Gambit, for instance), it still has a long ways to go. I've been to a number of tournaments where all of the players are men, including the chess club meeting I went to in London, and all 50 or so of the rated, over-the-board games I've played have been against men. I've heard prominent women in the chess world and friends discuss being harassed, or more commonly not being taken seriously, which is obviously upsetting and makes me more hesitant to identify as a member of the community. One of the beauties of chess is that anyone with any

identity can excel at it (I've lost to young children at tournaments, for instance), so it's sad and a little disheartening that some of the elitism and exclusion from the twelfth century is still present.

But even so, I find something so compelling and comforting about chess. When I walked up to the display in the British museum with the Lewis chessmen set up on a board, they felt familiar in a way nothing else in the museum did. I've certainly never played with pieces as ornate or decorative as these, but as I looked at the set, I habitually visualized the pieces moving in the openings I play most often and could picture playing a game with them. While I know very little about the people that might have used these pieces, I could picture them sitting using this set. Maybe they were playing casually with a friend, thinking about the game but also enjoying the comfort of the contours and turns of a conversation and being with company. Maybe they were playing a more serious game, feeling anxious that they were overlooking opportunities or threats from their opponents, but also interested to see where the game would go and who would see into the future more accurately. Chess has changed since when they would have used these pieces, but the core is still the same. There is no luck, and both players have all the information, and the only resources one has is their mind and planning ability. There's something about the controlled and objective environment, nothing like the messiness of real life where it's questions with either no answers or messy ones, that I find helpful and soothing to my stress and anxiety in life. I have to imagine this was true of people playing in the twelfth century, as well as the people I met in the London chess club in the twenty-first. At the club, I was struggling to think of something to talk about with my opponent, but once we started playing, it felt easier. He played the London system, and I asked him if he had seen the recent world championship match where Ding Liren surprised commentators by playing the London. We talked about when we first learned how to play chess, and by then we felt more comfortable to

talk a bit about our lives. He was from Milton Keynes. He was an accountant, and he and his mates had started coming here in December for something to do together. The pauses in conversation felt natural, and I left feeling I knew my opponent to some extent. We didn't have a lot in common, but it was enough. I felt connected across space and time in London through chess this week, and it was lovely. The community isn't perfect, far from it, but it's mine.

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Response to Prompt #21
Walk through Phoenix Park and write a personal essay that engages with the park's rich history. Or people-watch in the park and pick out at least one real-life person there to fictionalize and write a short story about.

John and Micayla

John opens his eyes and winces. A week ago he would have soaked in the sun permeating through the trees in Phoenix Park. He would have thought how thoroughly comfortable the bench he's sitting on is with a light breeze playing on his face, but now it feels like a mockery. Sleep has been his most reliable respite from the grief the last week, and he resents the children playing on the other side of the path for waking him. The ache in his chest has been there since he got the call, sometimes incapacitating him, today making him feel a little nauseous but mostly just exhausted. With an effort he brushes his long hair out of his eyes—he couldn't bring himself to go to his haircut appointment yesterday—and his unshaven face sinks into his hands.

They are burying her tomorrow. He has asked to give a eulogy, but he is at a complete loss for what to say. He had hoped that coming here would give him some inspiration, perhaps a glimmer of calm or maybe even hope. But as he got off the bus and walked through the gates, the memory of walking here with her overtook him. It had been a day just like this; the sun illuminating the trees out to the horizon without getting in one's eyes, and the chirping of birds mixing with the distant noise from the zoo. They had felt so completely comfortable walking side-by-side, talking about nothing in particular, gently laughing at each other from time to time, reminiscing about the past. They had texted later that day saying that seeing each other was nice, but of course John hadn't known how desperately he would long to return to that day, to be able to take time together for granted, and goddammit how was he to go on without her? He collapsed

on the nearest bench, feeling a panic attack oncoming, and out of habit took out his phone to text her before remembering. He almost did anyway, but then thought better of it and let his phone slip through his fingers onto the grass beneath him. Suppressing a dry sob, he closed his eyes and counted his breaths until he fell asleep.

But he is awake now, and he supposes he should walk. He weakly pushes himself to his feet, and starts down the path again. How could he describe his friendship with Micayla tomorrow to her family that barely knows him? Explaining why or how they are- were friends didn't make sense. It was one of the fundamental facts of his life—he was best friends with Micayla because they loved each other, and they loved each other because they loved each other. He feels like he should clarify in the eulogy that his love for her was platonic, but doesn't adding qualifiers to love cheapen it? He cared about her more than anyone he had dated, with the fierceness and recklessness of one who hasn't yet experienced real loss. She was his person, the one he trusted to be there when he was anxious or needed a shoulder to cry on, to listen without judgment even at his worst moments. He has his other friends and family, of course, but the walk through this park with them wouldn't be the same. When Micayla had taken the pills on Tuesday evening and her heart stopped half an hour later, part of him died with her. She brought out something in him that no one else will be able to, and he can never get that part back.

He hasn't read the envelope left by her bed with his name on it. He will read it eventually, but he can't bring himself to yet. He has played the scenario of her suicide out in his head before; she was always very open about her struggles with depression, and he had always known it was a possibility. Micayla was his best friend, and she was also a person who had depression. He doesn't blame her for her death more than if she had died of cancer, but he couldn't ignore the indescribable waste of her death. She had walked with him by this fountain just months ago,

fitter than him, pointing out things in the park he hadn't noticed, her long dark hair framing her face and blowing behind her as she walked, and now she was gone. He doesn't know if he can bear to look at her body in the casket tomorrow. She should have had so much time left.

A dozen descriptions of Micayla occur to him that he could use in the eulogy as he continues walking down the shaded path, the trees stretching out as far as he can see. She had an astonishing mind. She was a gifted doctor. She was the most driven person he has ever known. She was deeply authentic. She was an advocate for the marginalized. She was funny and never gave up on loving her friends, even when she couldn't love herself. The world will be less without her. He will miss her more than he can express. All the descriptions were true, but they can't adequately describe his view of her. His concept of her will only ever be fully known to him, and it is of course incomplete, like everyone else's concepts of her. Everyone has a different collection of pictures of her, and now there will never be any more. Her complexity, her agency, her hopes, her dreams are frozen in time and static now. His grief for that loss—her loss and also his—not only defies language, it destroys it. He had imagined growing old together, and now she will always be the same age. He will think about her every year on the day that used to be her birthday, but now she will never have another one. He had looked it up, and they had known each other for 3,179 days. It isn't even close to enough.

He still doesn't know what to say in the eulogy. Someday, perhaps, this will feel easier, but he can't imagine that moment any more than he can see the end of this park. Brushing bitter tears from his eyes, he turns around and starts walking back. He should get home before dark. He will go on because he must, but he doesn't know how. It is too soon to start healing.

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Response to Prompt #1
Like Oscar Wilde in "The Harlot's House," write about the inside of a building or a home, etc. from the perspective of someone standing outside on the street.

Two Windows

How are we to reconcile the infinite depth of every stranger we pass?
Our brains and experiences the most complex phenomena in our observable universe
except of course for those of the other eight billion people.
Standing in a window eating Thai takeaway,
we watch a group of four sitting in the Italian restaurant across the street.
We speculate about their relationships. Are they two married couples?
Perhaps four old friends, or perhaps (we joke) a throuple with a fourth wheel.
Are they visitors to Dublin like us, or have they lived here their whole lives
and have eaten at this restaurant together since they were our age
with a detailed map in their heads that they used to get there?
What wounds and pain lie beneath the bodies we can see,
eating and engaging in the dance of social custom?

They get their drinks and toast one another.
Perhaps they are celebrating an anniversary, or good news, or simply each other.
We will never know.
Unless they are very lucky or we unlucky, they will all pass before us
and we will not know, nor probably will those at other tables in that restaurant.
How many years do they have left?
Their four dense and sparkling webs have tendrils linked together
and as one of the men looks out the window
and our eyes connect through their window and ours before he turns back again,
for an instant our webs brush together.