



WHAT GODS Would Be Theirs?

A NOVEL

Colin
SHANAFELT

Texas is still part Wild West. Cowboy boots are ubiquitous all over the state, and it's not uncommon to hear the jingle of spurs as a ranch hand walks by in a restaurant or a mall. There are places in Texas where a Skoal ring worn into the back of a pair of Wranglers is considered high fashion, and almost everyone in the state knows the old adage, "Turn your felt to straw at Easter." In West Texas towns like San Angelo, Midland, and Abilene, it's not unusual to see pickup trucks with racks of guns in their rear windows. In Texas, 150,000 people are licensed to carry concealed handguns, and the gun lobby is now pushing for an "open carry" law. There are more guns in Texas than in the entire European Union. In Texas, there are twice as many guns as there are people. Mexico has always smuggled drugs to Texas. Now Texans smuggle guns to Mexico.

The Lone Star State is also home to more evangelical Christians than any other state in the nation. More than half of all Texans report to have had a "born again" experience (including Governors George W. Bush and Rick Perry). Some of the largest megachurches and many of the finest seminary schools are located in Texas. Subsequently, almost 40% of Texans believe that dinosaurs and humans lived at the same time. And with that in mind, one might also note that only a quarter of Texans hold a college degree.

On election night, nearly every county in Texas votes Republican, except for a few counties along the Rio Grande and one or two notable exceptions. But when it's all done, the political

(Continued on back flap)

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Colin Shanafelt



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Teaching is doing.

For Wendy

1



Resonance

And that is when I first began to hear the faint rhythmic hum of the universe. Through the garbled static of the invisible electric life, a soft and barely perceptible vibration began to emerge. I cupped the headphones tighter to my ears and leaned into the receiver. I had sought a voice, but I had found a rhythm, a cadence, a pattern—some measure of regularity amid the absurdity and chaos of noise from which it had emerged. Like the low dawdling mantra of some great Buddhist master, the drone of that transcendent presence faded in and out at the very edges of my perception. It began to weaken and crackle and diminish and flee, as if it were aware of my presence and was unwilling to be discovered, so I reached into the bowels of the radio and tweaked a tiny potentiometer, chasing the god-like signal into a hiss of cosmic trash. I closed my eyes and pressed the earphones even tighter to my ears. But the sound phased and flagged and faded and finally disappeared.

Then, through the haze of artifice and static, the garbled bumble of an unwelcome electric voice began to wave and

warble its way to life like the dissonant tone of some phantom ghost riding in the din of white noise.

“Doub...ee...ret...op...” the fragmentary transmission diminished into the electromagnetic chatter.

I opened my eyes and scowled at the massive array of radios and test equipment before me.

“But that was...” I whispered softly, “that was like...” my thoughts trailed off, and I shook my furrowed brow in confusion and astonishment. It was as if I had just heard the forbidden sound of some secret mechanism at the heart of all things.

“Eee...te...ret...ree...” the intruding voice senselessly resounded in my ears again goading me back to life.

Unhappily, I pulled the transmitter microphone to the edge of my desk, and the boathouse lights dimmed around me as I keyed the mic.

“KT09Z EME signal weak and unreadable. Over.”

“Fiv...marg...how...” the distant voice distorted through the static.

The lights dimmed once again, “KT09Z EME contact...”

“So that’s what you’re doing up here,” a delicate female voice resonated from behind as I smashed my knee against the desk in shock.

“God!” I exclaimed looking over my right shoulder.

There in the entryway of my boathouse apartment stood Kipley Faulkner. Her long tan body was wet and nearly naked save a small straining bikini, which seemed to reveal and accent more than it actually covered. Her sumptuous hips and breasts bulged and curved into a spectacularly perfect female figure. She stood dripping a puddle of lake water onto the floor and began to struggle with one of her contact lenses.

“We’re all down there waiting for you,” she said.

“I know, but just then...it was like...” I knew anything I said at that moment would fall dreadfully short, so I shifted to a more palatable explanation. “I mean...this guy in Switzerland...see...the moon...”

“Now?” she stressed, arching one perfectly shaped eyebrow in high disapproval.

“But it’s off the moon for Christ’s sake—a moon-bounce,” I said in the same playful tone a boy might use to bullshit his mother.

Kipley retracted her wet sensuous lips into a semi-frown and began fumbling through her tiny purse. “All I know...” she retrieved a tiny glass vial and deftly sniffed a small heap of white powder into her nose, “is that...” she inhaled through her nose fluttering her thumb and forefinger beneath her nostrils. “All I know is that this is our last day of summer before our last year in high school, and we’re all down there partying our asses off, but you...you’re up here—what—playing with *moonbeams*?”

I switched off the main power to my radio console and turned to face her fully.

She offered up the little glass vial with an inquiring smirk.

“I’m good,” I said lifting my clattering glass of scotch.

I stood up and walked to a shore-side window to look down upon my family’s empire. Our palatial estate stretched out to the waterline of Lake Travis where the warm, clear water lapped against the stony shore and ticked away the slow days of my privileged life. Lordling over the great green sloping lawn—spotted here and there by giant oaks around which an arcadia of pastel-colored flowers bloomed and died with the seasons—our colossal French eclectic château loomed in the northern sky. With its steeply pitched roofs, with its lofty sides adorned frequently by balconies and great leaded glass windows, with

its towers capped with conical roofs, and with its ivy-covered walls, my friends called my home a “mansion.” It was a cliché term, a distasteful term, a term I dismissed entirely.

At the shoreline, a walkway of wooden planks led some fifty yards into the lake where our slips and boathouse resided. It had been two full seasons since I had moved into the boathouse full-time. My little apartment afforded great privacy. It meant that I could come and go as I pleased, but it also provided an ideal hangout for my small group of upper-crust friends on days when we chose to remain ashore.

I took another sip of my scotch and walked to a lakeside window. At the furthestmost left-hand side of the dock, my father’s thirty-seven-foot Beneteau Oceanis sailing yacht, *The Ion*, bobbed and glistened in the Texas sun. Below me, in two garage-like boat slips, I could just imagine our Mastercraft powerboat hoisted unhappily into the dry air as it creaked and swayed in the shaded breeze, and I could almost see the two cork-like wave runners jostling against each other in the neighboring berth. On the furthestmost right-hand wing of the dock, I looked down to see a line of three bikini-clad girls dangling their feet in the water and cheerfully sipping away at their perspiring wine coolers. Just below them, several admiring boys floated and wrestled in the water, periodically glancing up at the twenty-first-century Graces shining above.

“Come on,” Kipley said. “It’s a beautiful day. The sun is out. Bryce and those other idiots are due any minute. And Waverly...you know she’s totally into you, right?”

“I don’t know, Kip. You and I...we’re the same. We’ve come up together. But...”

“But what?” she said in her softest, most nurturing voice.

“D’you ever feel like...” I fumbled for the right words to

describe a bone-deep feeling that had been dogging me for the last several months. “Don’t you . . .” I squinted in contemplation and spilled a little scotch as I crossed my arms. “Don’t you ever feel like there’s something missing?”

Kipley slowly moved her seductive frame to the imposing array of radios and test equipment that dominated one corner of the apartment. She reached down and disturbed a short stack of books at the edge of my desk.

“The *Tao Te Ching*?” she inquired accusingly, pronouncing the title with all Ts.

I took another sip of my drink.

“This stuff . . .” she said looking up at the radios. “This stuff is super nerdy, you know?” She arched her eyebrow in disapproval again. “Can’t you at least get—I don’t know—something newer, something smaller, something less . . . less uugh?” She oscillated her open palms at the radios.

“I could, but with those little Japanese rice-boxes, you can’t really . . . I mean . . . with my stuff, there’s no gaps there. You see? UHF, VHF, short wave, no gaps. It’s all pirate stuff really.”

“How dangerous of you,” she chided with a sly smile and moved to put her hand on my shoulder. I could tell now that the drainage had begun to work at the back of her throat by the way she swallowed and breathed. “What are you looking for with all that stuff? Who do you talk to? What do you say?”

I looked through the window again.

“But we’re right here,” she continued. “At least we’re real people.”

I was half conscious of filling my lungs to respond when a sudden voice blared from the boathouse balcony.

“Buenos días shitheads!”

I looked through the balcony door to see the massive

muscular bulk of Cory Hoffman—quarterback of the Northlake Spartans—hanging precariously on the far side of the railing.

“Blue—thirty-two—hut-hut!” he barked and flipped backwards into the water fifteen feet below.

I smiled and handed Kipley my drink.

“You’re right!” I said and ran through the balcony door to dive into the lake below. But just as I surfaced, I began to perceive the ever-increasing Doppler whine of a marine engine roaring in the near distance.

“They’re here,” Heather Braden—head cheerleader squealed in delight and ran to a cache of supplies near the boathouse wall.

I made my way to the edge of the dock, and looked up to find Waverly’s petite, sexy frame standing over me. She smirked in that peculiarly seductive way that was all her own and offered me her hand.

“This should be good,” she said pulling me onto the dock and falling on her butt in the process. She giggled excitedly and ran away to join the girls.

“Ha! Ha! It’s the fuckin’ Southlake Wild Cunts!” Bronwyn announced lowering a cell phone from her ear as she and her two compatriots began to unfold a water balloon slingshot and position bags of supplies around the dock.

The roar of the approaching engine whined higher and higher until a crimson powerboat exploded into view as if it had been belched from the mouth of Satan himself. The boat was all festooned with crimson flames snaking and curling their painted way along the freeboard from bow to stern. And upon this fire-laden conflagration of a frigate, I could already see two demonic figures seizing and cavorting to the ever-increasing psychopathic wail of Rob Zombie whose savage voice blared from the boat’s artillery-like speakers. The fiend shape at

the wheel had painted his entire body red, all except for an obscene ejaculating penis that ornamented the entire diagonal breadth of his hairless chest. His face was obscured by the grotesque mask of some red-skinned demon—all horns and jowls and wild eyes with a screaming nose and bloody teeth. But covering his chin and neck and trailing beautifully behind, this wild heathen captain had adorned himself with the pristine lily-white wimple of the Catholic sisterhood.

Meanwhile, his lone passenger strutted and gesticulated his way up and down the starboard side of the vessel. He was waving unseemly gestures and yammering in some wild unintelligible tongue from beneath a mask of stitched human skin. The tastelessness of his white floral board shorts with a jock strap worn on the outside only served to heighten the garish indecency of the decked-out body armor he wore from waist to chin. His chest and abdomen appeared to be corseted by some sort of a breastplate, but its dark features were mostly concealed beneath a huge orange life vest where a set of pasty tassels dangled lewdly from the breasts. His hands and arms were fully protected with red martial arts padding, and his neck was secured with a motocross-style neck brace. And beyond that he wore an oversized polka-dot bowtie and a long fleur-de-lis scarf waving astern. This macabre Leatherfaced knight raised his horrific visage to the sky and screeched in a high, lascivious, and pedophilic squeal as he pumped his padded fist to the grisly White Zombie beat.

“Dear Lord!” Kiple said standing now at the base of the boathouse steps.

“Say hello to my little friend,” Cory rasped as he loaded a raw biscuit into the barrel of a tee-shirt cannon.

“Let’s see how they like this,” Nick said, removing a

paintball gun from his bag.

Waverly giggled in dark amusement and took up one end of the water balloon slingshot.

The boat veered in our direction and sped directly toward the dock at full throttle. Then, when the savage crew came into range, Nick screamed and released his first rapid-fire salvo of paintballs, which dotted the windshield and the bow of the boat as its occupants ducked for cover. The girls let loose their first water balloon, which missed far and to the right. And Cory aimed his biscuit cannon with soldier-like anticipation. But at the last moment, the driver cut hard to port and fishtailed a virtual tsunami of water on us, knocking two of the girls completely off their feet.

“Bastards!” someone screamed.

Then, just on the other side of that massive wave, as my eyes cleared and focused again, I perceived all at once the nightmare image of Leatherface bearing down upon me with a broken bag of flour in each hand. The bags exploded in violent plumes on the dock as the boat began to circle before us. Then, from within the wild pandemonium of that writhing cloud of smoke and mist and flour, I heard the furious *tat-tat-tat* of Nick’s paintball gun, the periodic hollow *thunk* of Cory’s tee-shirt cannon, and the cannibalistic squeal of the girls as they heaved balloons and rotten eggs and finally full cups of beer into the faces of the fiend-mariners before us. And somewhere within that commotion, I felt a peculiar wet slap against my bare chest and paused to find its source, but my search was interrupted by the sound of a second marine engine just becoming audible over the noise of battle. So the devil-boat flew away at top-speed, plastered now with and a hundred dots of blue paint, rotten eggs, flour, and raw biscuits sticking to the

sides. Finally, the dust around us cleared to reveal a carnage of white bloodstained bodies and a dock littered with pig's feet, beef livers, a cow's tongue, and a dead cat.

"Uh...uh...uh..." Heather—Head Cheerleader and staunch vegetarian—began to grunt as she walked stiffly to the edge of the dock and toppled into the water.

"You oughta see the other guy," Cory laughed stumbling into view with little bits of hamburger stuck to his face.

Kipley, far beyond taking part in such an outrage, buried her face in her hands still clean and dry in the safe distance. But the rest of us combatants dove into the lake, and like Henry David Thoreau bathing in Walden Pond or like pilgrims in the gentle hands of John the Baptist, we purified our bodies in the warm lake water and scrubbed away the unctuous defilement left behind by Leatherface and his demon lackey. I pulled myself onto the dock and began to kick away the scattered butchery lying about. Someone retrieved a high-pressure hose from the boathouse wall, and within a minute, all signs of the *mêlée* had been expunged.

Now the devil ship and the new arrival circled each other in the distance like two angry wolves. At the helm of the new boat was our friend Mike Graham who had forgone the pageantry of the day and dressed in his usual board shorts with a backwards Texas Longhorns hat. On the other side of the craft, however, a dark wraith-like figure moved his phantom body beneath a full black Kendo Bogu. His face was completely veiled within the shadows of the wire helmet, while a black ankle-length dress obscured the motion of his lower half. I knew this dark figure to be my best friend, Bryce Eten Harte. He stretched out his padded arm toward the demon ship and crinkled his fingers into a fist like Darth Vader plotting to take over the galaxy.

Leatherface retorted by raising a long padded lance into the air and donning a lacrosse helmet. The battle was on.

“What are they playing for?” Kiplely asked twisting open a fresh wine cooler.

“Nothing...” I said. “Pride.” I thought about it more. “Because they can.”

The boats sped to face each other with about fifty yards of water between their bows. Each of the two armored combatants threw one leg over the gunwale of their vessel and raised a long medieval-style lance into the ready position. The engines screamed to life, and the boats accelerated toward each other on what seemed like a collision course. The jousters slowly lowered their padded lances to aim, but at the last moment, Leatherface raised some sort of shield and deflected Bryce’s lance, scoring a direct hit and throwing Bryce violently aft.

“Ahhh!” I gasped turning my head.

“Just more boys playing with their ding-a-lings,” Heather scoffed.

“Never trust a Wild Cunt,” Bronwyn slurred.

“But it’s the first in the water, right?” Waverly asked.

Before anyone could answer, Bronwyn leaned over and whispered something to the other girls. Waverly giggled, and all but Kiplely stood up to form a line at the edge of the dock.

“We need a diversion,” Bronwyn smiled deviously.

Bryce—now flailing in anger—retrieved his floating lance, and the boats positioned for another pass. But just as they engaged their throttles, the three girls pulled open their bikini tops and exposed their young breasts to the warm summer sun. Leatherface lost his concentration just long enough for Bryce to make contact with his lance. The lascivious warrior exploded in a yard-sale puff of lance, scarf, and tassel but still

clung precariously to the side of his vessel with only his lower half submerged.

We erupted in laughter, and Cory, cackling with delight, ran to scale the boathouse wall to the balcony again.

Leatherface pulled himself back aboard and recovered his lance. Soon the boats accelerated again. The three girls flashed, and Cory—now completely naked and standing on the top of the balcony railing—swung his shorts above his head screaming and gyrating his hips. This time, however, the diversion failed. Leatherface found his aim, and Bryce was blown into the water by an accurate hit. The victor screamed and raised his lance in triumph as his boat sped away and disappeared beyond the bend.

Bryce's limp body floated face down in the water while Mike fumbled to restart the boat's engine. Cory abandoned his shorts and dove from the balcony rail. Soon after, he shot from beneath the boathouse on one of our wave runners in a streak of naked fluorescence.

Mike and Cory reached Bryce at about the same time and pulled him onto the boat's rear platform. They removed his helmet, and Bryce slowly awoke to see Cory's naked commando-like body crouching above him.

Bryce coughed, and a slow smile crept across his face. "Son," he said with a contrived Texas drawl, "you've lost your damn britches."

2



Gavin McBride

And just like that, one more endless summer...ended. Then it came time to play another game, an even older game—a game of backpacks, pencils, and loose-leaf binders—a game of books, which (if stacked together) weighed more than many of the wide-eyed, shell-shocked freshmen crowding the halls of Northlake High School. It was a difficult game for me because, you see, I already knew everything. I was insulted, astonished even, that there were actually politicians who required me—at the penalty of law—to attend that farce of an institution where I already knew more than the teachers, most of whom were (as I’d heard my country friends say) “All hat and no cattle.”

Nonetheless, the sound of my flip-flops—all but completely worn through to the ground—echoed in the hall on that first day of the 2005/2006 school year. I strolled into my second-period class carrying only a pencil and my ever-present Blackberry phone.

“Your hair has gotten so long!” exclaimed a junior girl whose name I had forgotten. She reached up to touch my sandy-blond hair, which at that time had grown down to my

shoulders where it ornamented my favorite “Keep Austin Weird” tee shirt.

I sat down and scanned around the room for any familiar faces, but Mr. McBride’s class was a junior-level course, American Literature. In keeping with my overall apathetic scheme of life at the time, I had opted to take as few classes as possible during my senior year. I had always intended to go to college, so in defiance of the all-knowing, morally-perfect, bread-eating Benjamin Franklin, I supposed it would have been silly to do then what could just as easily have been put off until later. Therefore, I ended up with two study halls—a condition which apparently broke some cardinal rule at Northlake. So, either by random chance or by divine meddling, I was to be Mr. McBride’s student aide, a position generally comprised of scoring quizzes, filing papers, and making copies. Mr. McBride was new that year, so I wasn’t quite sure what to expect, but I knew it would be far better than taking another class. I sat down where his aides were obviously meant to sit, the bell rang, and Gavin McBride strode to the front of the room and turned to face us.

“The function of literature is social change,” he said.

He clasped his hands behind his back and began to pace slowly back and forth behind his heavy oaken podium, which by all appearances he had built himself with much exactness and precision. A blue and white star-printed tie bounced and swayed with his every step as his eyes gazed thoughtfully upon floor at his feet.

He certainly wasn’t handsome by most acceptable standards. His dark rugged skin was deeply tanned—not as in the “too much sun on the links at Barton Creek” sort of way, but as in the “too much sun laying asphalt on Highway 71” sort of way. His eyes seemed sunken in his head, and his fat

nose seemed to protrude from his face just enough to divert attention from the rigidity of his high angular cheekbones. But the most dominant feature of his proletarian face was a long scar that extended from his left temple down to his jaw line.

His bony hulk stood only about 5' 8" inches tall, making his task of seeing over the students in the hallway nearly impossible. But he looked tough. With his thick craggy skin and his rugged bony frame, he resembled some washed-up bull rider who, after taking too many kicks to the head, finally had to give up the dream of the buckle and enter normal life.

He turned toward us again, and his eyes flashed from student to student as he sized us up. Then the muscles of his face slowly contorted into that smile we would all come to know so well. It was not the happy smile of some absent brother who had just come home for the holidays, and it was not the malicious smile of some smooth-faced salesman about to fill the world with shit. It was the supremely confident smile of a boxer before the first blow of his title bout. It was the smile of a suicide bomber before he pulls the bomb-belt cord. It was a smile of ultimate assurance. It was a smile that said, "You're mine." But then his cheeks fell into an expression of stern intensity, and he began to speak.

"You can judge the people of any society by the books they read—or by the books they don't read. The Nazis burned books. The Taliban outlawed them. But why? You have to ask yourself, 'why?' Every year libraries receive countless challenges from people who want to have certain books taken off the shelves. So what are they afraid of? Books are just pretty words, right? Just stories?" He held up a non-descript hardback volume for all to see.

“But if they are just words, why would they need to be burned? Why would they need to be banned? No. There must be more to them than just words. Isn’t there something dangerous kept there? Something precious? Something powerful? People have been tortured and people have been killed for what they’ve written in books. Imagine that. Imagine Galileo.” He raised the book into the air again.

“But look here,” he said motioning to a row of portraits just above his whiteboard (Hawthorne, Dickinson, Melville, Twain, Emerson, Poe). “What do all these people have in common?” There was an awkward silence. “They all had something to say, didn’t they? They all had something to say that they thought was so important—so important that the whole damned world needed to hear it. And writing’s not easy. It’s hard. It’s one of the hardest things a person can do. You try it sometime and you’ll see. But these folks labored their way through the harsh and lonely drudgery of it like . . . like diamond slaves knee-deep in the mud, like Lawrence of Arabia lumbering his way across the desert, just so you, students,” he pointed to the class, “and you world,” he pointed through the window toward Austin, “and you McBride . . .” he struck his chest with a deep, resounding thud, “just so you would hear what they had to say.

“I believe in books. I believe in words. I believe in education.” He clinched his teeth and shook his head slightly. “I believe in it like . . .” he hesitated, “like a Christian believes in God. Every book you read is a new voice. And the more voices you have, people . . . the more voices you have, the more you see, the more you know, and the more you understand.

“But these guys just wrote ‘stories’ right?” he motioned back to the row of authors. “And those stories are ‘not real.’

They are ‘somewhere else.’ They ‘could not have happened.’ Right?

“No.” He leaned over his podium, crossed his arms, and partially covered his mouth with one hand. His voice softened, his pace slowed, his tempo relaxed.

“No...*god* no. What they wrote is true. What they wrote is truer than true. It’s realer than real. It’s alive, man. It’s more alive than life itself. These books aren’t just dry dusty relics from some distant time—dead words on a page. They’re life. True life. Real life. They’re *pure* life. And that is why they’re so dangerous.” He paused for a moment to look around the room. “Because that’s why we’re all here isn’t it? To live? To struggle? To learn? To feel? So what could be more important? What other subject can teach you what it feels like to be alive? Why people kill each other? Why people betray each other? What it feels like to be in love? What it feels like to hate? What other subject can expose the human soul, man? Split it wide open and lay it out before you right there on the table, naked, with all its glories and imperfections, exposed for your eager contemplation? What other subject can drag you down into the darkest pits of hell and then pull you back up into the loftiest beautiful sunlight again? What other subject can serve up raw humanity? Compressed life in an easy pop-top can? Can Science do that? Math? Business? Accounting? No. I think not. But books can. That’s what they do. With books, with great literature, all you have to do is pop open the top of that can and take a giant drink. Just open a book. The problem of the universe awaits.”

I think that’s when I first began to realize that Gavin McBride wasn’t like the other teachers I had known. Confidence seethed from the man, and he was no longer ugly

to me. I would not have been able to explain it then even if I had tried, but there was something compelling about him, something powerful, something enchanting. He seemed enlightened, as if he had just crawled out of some secret world and would now whisper all its forbidden knowledge in our ears. He was Newton after the apple, Dylan after the crossroads, Einstein after his numbers. He was Buddha after the tree.

“But,” he went on, “what about all those who say that books don’t mean anything, that they can’t change anything? What about all those pessimists who say that life, that humanity, that evil simply is? They say we’re too dumb—humanity’s too young. We don’t learn from our mistakes. Books can’t change that, they say. We are doomed. Passion and interest rule the day, not Whitman and Fitzgerald. What about them? What about the ones who have given up on their own species, on their own brothers and sisters, on their own race?”

He paused and paced back and forth for a moment.

“You know...the world once came within the blink of an eye—just the bat of an eyelash—from an all-out nuclear exchange? This world, *this entire world*, damn near blew up because a few arrogant, trigger-happy bastards said, ‘I want more.’ But there was one guy...Kennedy. All the fear-mongering hawks in his administration, the Joint Chiefs, urged him—pleaded, prodded, poked, and ultimately tried to provoke him into pushing that big red button. ‘Invade Cuba. Match might for might,’ they said. And had Kennedy done so, this world—at least this world as we know it—would have ended. Millions and millions of people would have died, and our civilization would have been set back thousands of years—maybe more, maybe completely annihilated.

“But, Kennedy...he was a reader. He’d read books. And he hadn’t just passed his eyes over the words. He understood what they meant—what they really meant, beneath the text. He had a lot of voices up there in that mind of his. He had peered into the human heart and soul, and because of that, he saved the world.

“That’s what books can do. That’s what words and ideas can do. They can save the world. And that’s what you can do, if you try. You can save the world. But most of us, like me, can only change little things, little bits at a time. So let’s begin.”

Thirty sets of glazed eyes stared back at Mr. McBride. I’m not sure how much of what he said that day any of us truly embraced. But we understood his tone, and we knew he believed. He believed in books. He believed in education. He believed in himself. He believed in humanity. But most importantly, he believed in us. And maybe that’s all we ever really needed, just someone who believed.

(Continued from front flap)

map of Texas looks like a crimson banner attesting to the unshakable might of the GOP. But rising from that desert of conservative values is perhaps one of the last liberal bastions of the south, Austin, an oasis of liberal-minded, well-educated Texans. Therefore, one has to view the events of this narrative in light of the remarkable tension created by that clash of worldviews. A story like this is not only possible in Austin but likely, and it is especially likely in the Lake Travis area where wealthy conservatives have taken root and mixed with the Volvo-driving liberals of Austin.

— Colin Shanafelt



COLIN SHANAFELT is a Professor of English and Humanities in Austin, Texas. He is a veteran of the United States Air Force and a former high school English teacher.

Preston Wiley is a spoiled rich kid with a boathouse and a sailing yacht. But amid the outrageous parties and fast-paced life of his senior year, he awakes into a new world of ideas and free expression and is forced to choose between the opposing viewpoints of two powerful mentors.

Teachers are not supposed to have feelings and opinions. But Laird Hardin is a thirty-three-year-old ex-fighter jock who is struggling at the breaking point in his self-sacrificial roles of father, teacher, and husband. From deep within the throes of a midlife crisis, he tries to reignite his youth with drugs, prostitutes, and ultimately with the most forbidden fruit of all. Meanwhile, Gavin McBride is a former Peace Corps worker who is just settling into his first stateside teaching position. Gavin is a twenty-six-year-old antitheist on a mission to save the world with a series of YouTube monologues that take on the government and organized religion. But when he offends his community's political and religious elite, powerful forces align against him.

What Gods Would Be Theirs? is a literary novel that takes place on the northern shore of Lake Travis in a wealthy suburb of Austin, Texas. It is a fast-moving story about love, loss, the human appetite, and the search for meaning in a chaotic world.



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