



# THE MERCURY

THE STUDENT ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

---

Year 2010

Article 17

---

1-1-2010

## Picking Sides

James Z. Taylor  
Gettysburg College  
Class of 2012

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

**Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.**

---

Taylor, James Z. (2015) "Picking Sides," *The Mercury*: Year 2010, Article 17.  
Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2010/iss1/17>

This open access fiction is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact [cupola@gettysburg.edu](mailto:cupola@gettysburg.edu).

---

# Picking Sides

**Keywords**

creative writing, fiction

**Author Bio**

James Z. Taylor III is a sophomore, majoring in Economics and hopefully English. His story was originally written for English 308: Experiment and Tradition.

# *James Z. Taylor III*

## *Picking Sides*

Is it solipsism that asks if the world is the structure of our thoughts? I would like to ask someone who I think would know, but who knows; there is no point in knowing. More importantly, my teeth hurt, and I imagine everyone's teeth hurt, because we all share the same bathroom, and it doesn't look like their brushes are getting any more use than mine.

I'd like to tell a story, but there are no honest stories to tell. Anything I say, think, at a deeper level, will be upended by my own thoughts and innermost desires. Even the most pure thought on the nature of being will be destroyed by my own desires to exist, or at times, not exist. Am I alive?

The man across from me, my friend Alex, sips his water and recoils. He fingers his teeth. We are sharing a bag of M&M's; they are delicious and beautiful. Every single one is measured and colored; they do not deviate except in the ways planned for them to deviate. His favorites are blue; I eat handfuls and don't consider it. I think it's beautiful, creating preference from nothing.

In another example, he likes simple porn. He took me to a strip club where I stood, pretty tired, against a rack of sex toys. It was quiet, and so the bouncer, also the cashier, and the one stripper on duty, I suppose on duty is the phrase, tried to chat with me. Could I ask them about solipsism, but look! Please look. This is previous to my comment about solipsism, this event, so look, look, I am altering it! I am altering the way the stripper smiles while my stomach bulges from my coat now; now her eyes are full of pity and regret, where once they were full of hope and idealism. She once was confident in herself; she once was content in every choice she made in life. I have changed her, and I will never see her again. I will never see her and her pride, dancing; I will never see her pull Alex into the back room as he begins to pull more dollars from the secret pocket he cut into his coat. I will now see a girl I once knew in high school, now down on her luck, earning money just to survive, where once there was just a woman.

That girl makes more than I do, I am sure of it, and now I can feel myself beginning to hate her for everything, for that longing to be out of her own situation.

"You had the chance," I would say, "Why wouldn't you take it?" wanting to know every detail of her life, why she would give up those perfect grades and now I realize I know nothing about her and somehow

I want her dead and out of my life forever, but really, I mean, she is. I would be the questioner who would save her, if it ran on in my head.

Alex eats more M&Ms. He drums his fingers. The doctors say he's got some sort of disease, some lesser form of OCD. When Alex was a kid, he'd drink beer in the shower and spit it up, mostly darker lagers, and then he'd yell that he was throwing up. His mom would come running in because his dad worked early. In a few years his dad would be dead, and he'd spit that beer everywhere and as his mom ran in he'd throw the bottle into the trash and cram his fingers down his throat so he'd vomit in front of her. She and his not dead father drank enough where the alcohol smell was residual and gave just the right hue to the watery morning spew on the floor to make it look like he was sick and coughing up mucus or his liver or something.

It got him out of class a lot of times, so he was real happy with himself. I think I'm telling that that truthfully. I mean, somewhere deep, he probably wasn't happy with himself for doing that, especially because when his dad died the amount of beer bottles stayed the same, you know, so it wasn't probably that hard to fool Mrs. Liebowitz anyway. I'm just assuming that part, so I make it aware and subject to interpretation as either being a facet of the truth or my own imagination, so when it is dissected later there is some question of validity of the narrator and of the mother and her child.

Alex said once to me that he believed those mornings were the closest things to birth he'd ever experience again. He said he'd be covered in bodily fluids, there'd be the smell of alcohol, though in birth he supposed it'd be isopropyl, in a white room with his mother crying and not together enough to take care of him and the doctor standing there smiling at the good fortune of the mother for caring despite the massive amount of drugs pumped into her. Doctor was his word; I would probably just say father if it was my past, but then again, it wasn't.

I don't feel like anything I'm saying is too revelatory. I can give revelatory. I mean, about myself. Alex is a scapegoat for my own feelings. My father used to sit at restaurants and take pills out of his jacket and joke about them. See, in this context, it sounds mean. It wasn't. It was terrific. He'd take out this handful of pills, and he'd say to us, in order of who was killing him the fastest, "This one's for you, and this one's for you," moving down the line of us sitting around a table. When he had more pills than we numbered, he would point at the waitress if she couldn't do her job, or he'd point at someone gorging himself, or he'd point at someone is what it boils down to, someone he just felt like he should point to. Then he'd swallow all the pills at once. They were medicine. They helped him.

Alex and my dad get along great. They love each other, I think. I wish they could just be together; that's not wrong. It's just Alex would enjoy it. I think my dad would. I grew up thinking my dad was gay. I am altering that; I can already know I am altering that. I grew up constantly realizing I thought my dad was gay, which is wholly different than realizing my dad is

gay. When I'm just realizing my own thoughts, it is simply me picking and choosing moments from the past to synthesize into a conclusion. Were I to wake up one day, and think to myself, I bet dad would hate that porn store and would want to talk to that stripper, and then to realize, oh, it's because he's homosexual, well that'd just be a realization. Here, you know, I'm cherry picking. I'm trying to support my own thoughts.

It's the way he never kissed Mom the way I would kiss a girl, the way I never had to knock before entering their room, the way Steve Markowitz still always sends a Christmas card and he doesn't have any kids and all his wives keep leaving him. Those moments may have happened, but that doesn't mean anything. He kept straight porn at the house too. He fucked his secretary, and he fucked his boss to get her to fire the secretary, and then well he got promoted somehow and he fired his old boss. I mean, that's manipulative and kind of a primal-sexual-dominance type thing, isn't it? I mean, I'm straight, but I don't think it's wrong to say that sometimes it's cruel to be straight, if I'm assuming a dominant role only out of biological necessity. I don't really know what that means, but I mean, isn't it dominant to be straight?

Mostly though, I wish my dad and Alex would be together, if only so I could have a brother I like, and so my dad would be happy. He loves my mom, I am sure and without any thought of that, and I love my mom, it's just they've lost that part of their relationship. I want him with Alex. He loves Alex and Alex likes him. Neither is homosexual though, and I suppose that's the sticking point.

I don't mean to display sexual undercurrents of thought. We're all sexual, high school psychology told me that, but it's hard to say sometimes. It comes back to that solipsism question, of whether I have the correct definition. If this world is a, I suppose the word is solipsistic, if this world is a solipsistic world created in my own head, does the definition even matter? Let's say I spend my whole life asking others about their knowledge of solipsism and let's say it turns out when I die this whole world was my creation. Does it even matter then? I mean, it'd be ironic I guess. My father used to tell me that ironic meant whatever happened in an episode of *The Twilight Zone*. I think it's a correct definition.

More importantly, my teeth hurt, as I said they would. I drink some water to wash away the coating of M&M shells and chocolate, but it only irritates the nerves and gums; one day my mouth will glow red like the shells I have been eating, and on that day I will pay a dentist to carve my mouth open and replace it with fake teeth and coat the gums in fake enamel while in a fake sleep. I might even mention it all to him, those feelings, and my dentist, he's a good dentist, he'd say, "Well the bill should bring you back to reality", and I'd smile real wide.

Alex is leaving me, but I really mean leaving the table. He will leave one day. Is this correct, is this fate? Is there fate in solipsism? It's just such a



question. Alex proposed this scenario to me one day about the nature of that line of thinking:

"See, we'll buy a gun. We'll buy two guns, cause I mean, it'd be nice if we both had a gun. We could go shooting, go hunting or something. I mean, shit, we'd have guns. We got the money right? So I'd give you a gun, and you'd go on in the bathroom, and you'd start thinking, this won't hurt. This won't hurt at all. And outside I'll be thinking he's going to start screaming. And you know, you'll just like, you'll shoot your foot. I mean, we'll keep the police on speed dial, and I mean, suicide attempt, at worst, means some nice pills. We could have pill parties and shit. Best case scenario, you're an idiot with a hunting story.

"I just mean, like, we got to snap you out of this. We're literally going to blow that line of thinking away. Then you'll go on about some subconscious idea like, well, in your physics it hurts to get shot in the foot, and I suggest this because I am a creation of your world, and so by suggesting this I am your inner most desire to blow yourself away. So it won't matter. But like, think about it. Every time you mention that word, you'll feel all the shattered bones in your foot rattling, and it won't matter. You still fucked yourself over even if you made the world. So what's the point in thinking everything will be great if you start thinking positive?"

I bought a gun, after that, just to own a gun. I've started tape recording conversations so I don't lose track of them. That was the first one I taped. It is a transcript, with spelling and grammar assumed and a drunken slur removed. It makes a lot of sense, even with these edits brought into play. He's wrong, you know, the only way to know is to die. The only way to know anything about life is to die, I think, because you're nothing or you're something, and either way, at least you know the answers as part of the eternal being of the universe, or you just kind of don't care because you're nothing.

So it doesn't matter, please look, it just doesn't matter. I am self-contained; I have moved very few muscles in this attempt to tell you an honest story. I feel like every single thought here is a past-life. I will never hold the same thoughts and situations again. If there is any argument for solipsism, it is only on the basis that every moment is new, and so a world is created by the self because the self is ever-changing and ever-moving.

Were I to write a suicide note, I would tell my dad I love him, and to take care of Alex. I would write Alex that I love him, and to take care of dad. I'd tell mom she did a good job. I'd tell my siblings that I tried, and I'm sorry it doesn't look like it. I would scratch out a quote from someone so it looked like I had been thinking about this for a while but I didn't want it to look tacky to have a quote from or somebody tacked onto the bottom. I would sign my name, and, for flare, I would literally pin it to my skin. It'd be terrific. It'd be like the Christmas cards I never know how to write, except it'd be honest. I'd need to write it on cardstock too. Definitely cardstock.

I probably wouldn't end up killing myself though. I'd probably just be standing in the shower with a note pinned to my chest, looking like a jackass. That's the best I could hope for. It would prove something though; it'd prove I had control over my world, even if it wasn't mine. It'd end all the undercurrents. I'd just sit there thinking clearly.

One day I was in the shower, and I tried to play Alex's game. I was drinking some dark Octoberfest brew because it's pretty calming to drink in the shower, and I thought, let's try it. So I swallowed up a good mouthful and I spit it everywhere, and I threw the beer in the trash and it spit everywhere, and I started yelling for Alex with my index finger trying to tickle my epiglottis. I did it wrong though, and I forgot to leave the door unlocked, so here I am naked and choking on vomit while Alex is pounding, and I am gagging, and I fall. I fall heavy to the floor.

The pounding got worse, because now my head, internally, was joining Alex's hand in striking. Is this the correct memory? Maybe he was just pounding harder and I knew, or I thought then and I measured later to know, that if he kicked the door in the bottom would slice my face wide open. I puked under the door, and the pounding stopped. It was quiet for a moment. Alex started laughing real loud. He just wouldn't stop laughing, and it made me laugh, and I started gagging again but it was worth it. He just yelled some curses and left me lay for a while.

I could see my dad doing that, and I guess that is when I decided my dad would be perfect for him. I could see him doing that pretty easy. He'd get a kick out of it at least. It's not to say my dad's cruel, but he'd realize a trick like that and wait for my laughter before cursing me out. I don't remember if Alex waited. I said he waited, but I don't remember. I hope he did; I believe he did. I don't know though. I don't know anything.

Alex says he leaves when I'm down on myself. He says it'll give me time to reflect on my misfortune until I don't want to reflect anymore. I wish he'd stay. I wish to God he'd stay. I wish to Me he'd stay.

It doesn't stop, when I think about it. It just doesn't stop. I wish my head would stop. I am still immobile. I cannot get up. My dad said I'm too young for these thoughts. I believe in him wholeheartedly.