



# THE MERCURY

THE STUDENT ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

---

Year 2009

Article 23

---

1-1-2009

## A Platform in Reality

Matthew W. Barrett

Gettysburg College, barrma04@cnav.gettysburg.edu

Class of 2011

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



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

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

---

Barrett, Matthew W. (2015) "A Platform in Reality," *The Mercury*: Year 2009, Article 23.

Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2009/iss1/23>

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).

---

# A Platform in Reality

**Keywords**

creative writing, fiction

**Author Bio**

Matt Barrett grew up in Doylestown, PA with his sister, Kelsey, and brother, Zeke. In 2007 he graduated from Central Bucks West High School and is currently pursuing English at Gettysburg College. He is a member of the Sigma Chi fraternity, a captain of intramural basketball and soccer teams, and a co-host of WZBT's radio show, The Sobriety Check. This is his first time appearing in The Mercury.

## A Platform in Reality

I returned to Manderley before they ever found his body. Two teenage stoners discovered what they thought to be a Neanderthal and reported their findings to a high school paper. They claimed the Neanderthal was frozen and preserved for millions of years, a hunter of rodents and deer and mammoths with wooly hair. The authorities weren't informed until after the boys became semi-celebrities, and after several days of determining which display case to use in a museum did they even consider he wasn't a Neanderthal at all. An autopsy later revealed the true nature of the body, and before an increasingly discouraged crowd, the doctor announced that the teenage boys did not discover ancient remains, but rather the body of Gerald Brown.

None of this, as you'd imagine, was of any interest to me—seldom news with such little substance ever is. It was delivered to me by a source I didn't trust and by a man I hardly knew. I received the paper in early January, still in the plastic. It was rolled up and neat. Fresh. On my door step in the falling snow.

I moved to Manderley two nights before the solstice. Not long after Gerald went missing. It was my way of trying to escape Midnight's chill. To avoid the frost and cold. Manderley was to be a shelter in the storm. I was told not unlike a sanctuary.

But the lust of Manderley has since faded and dulled, the lure of an inexplicable something that slowly becomes the remains of disregard. With every passing storm, I've sought a new place to stay. The Manderley I once read is not the Manderley I found. I have since moved only to hear its landowners were buried in soil.

I tried to contact Gerald's family, but mail comes rarely and travels mainly by foot. I have received no word from Mrs. Brown, but I recently obtained an article similar to the newspaper I first saw. It's a two-paragraph blurb about his life that ended, "In Loving Memory of Gerald Brown." Gerald's story lives on. In memory and in mind. You can hold these words with all truth, like the night that chills its morning with a cold and bitter feeling.

In the early winds of October, Gerald posed for his picture with the school's clock tower in back. He got his picture taken outside because he missed his appointment in the studio. He was dressed in his father's sport coat, a tie, and khaki pants he'd worn the night before. When the cameraman told him to smile, he pretended to sneeze and wiped his nose on his sleeve.

"You know the most beautiful two-words in the English language?" he asked the cameraman. "'Cellar door.' But if you ask me, I don't see what all the fuss is about. I mean, you got so many good words out there, it's a shame you gotta show favorites."

In the wind, Gerald's hair was blown to the side, and he adjusted his collar. "Now I got a good phrase for you," he said, but before he could finish, the cameraman dismissed him for lunch, and he arrived much later than the others.

As the saying goes, "his mind was like a sponge." Gerald's mind was a rock. If we're supposed to think like a sponge, Gerald would cork his pores.

I told him good poetry is supposed to make you think, and he said, "There's something poetic about bad writing."

Once upon a time, there was a giant elm tree where the Native Americans and William Penn signed a peace treaty. Gerald found out about it and asked me to go. So after school one day, we went to the site of the tree—which, if you consider the distance in time from Native-America to Modern-America, the tree, as you'd suspect, is no longer living.

"The bastards," Gerald said. "They tore it down."

In place of the elm tree, there's a park. It's called Penn Treaty Park. And it's along the Delaware, in the exact place where the tree once stood.

"I could write a book about this place," he said. "I'd call it A Farewell to Elms."

Gerald had been writing a book for years, but hadn't gotten a sentence published.

He was a good writer, but he wrote for himself, and for those who didn't know him, none of it made any sense.

He said, "There are two ways to write a book. The first is to fight a bull and beat it. The second is to let the bull beat you."

When I told him I didn't understand, he said, "Nobody ever lives their life all the way up except bull-fighters." Which, at least to me, made the least sense of all.

Gerald would write a story about Penn Treaty Park that he titled, One Flew over the Giant Elm Tree. His first sentence was "Atticus always told me it's a sin to kill an elm tree." He showed his teacher the first couple of pages, and she wrote, "Your originality is lacking. For next time, why don't you copy and paste The Great Gatsby and tell me it's by F. Scott Fitz-GERALD."

"Talk about unoriginal," Gerald said. "I don't even like The Great Gatsby."

Gerald's stories were mostly fragmented thoughts, where character development was the reader's responsibility, and plot construction was ruled clichéd. Each sentence followed the one before it, which he later determined made his work unoriginal.

"I'm a good writer, but I lack new ideas," he said. "I need to stop reading so many goddamn books."

For hours, the two of us would read his manuscripts, only to repay me by having Mindy come along. "You really like Mindy, don't you?" he said. "I can tell you like Mindy."

Mindy was one of Gerald's friends who he'd met on a sail boating accident when they were seven. Or rather, she was seven. He was eleven. At eighteen-years-old, Gerald would invite his fourteen-year-old friend to come read his manuscripts with another eighteen-year-old late into the evening.

She'd always have good suggestions, but Gerald never liked criticism.

"Don't you think it would be better if this character survives?" she asked.

"Frankly, my dear, I don't really give a crap."

Beyond the park, there's a playground that reaches the river. If a storm hits really hard, the slide dips down to the water and the base is all covered in mud. By daytime, the place is a swarm of kids. By night, it catches its cold.

Gerald's father used to take him to the place as a child, but he hadn't been there for years. After visiting the spot of the elm tree, he decided to go back to the Delaware and read books beneath the monkey bars.

It was late at night and cold. Falling leaves turned to snow. By November, all the orange was brown.

"I invited Mindy," Gerald said. "I figured it would be more fun."

When the three of us drove together, we parked behind the playground and made

our way through the back woods. We carried flashlights and a copy of Gulliver's Travels, and in Mindy's hand, a bottle of wine.

Books are best read with an open mind, he said.

As we approached the playground, there was an orange glow that flickered and then went out. We could hear the voices of teenage boys and girls, laughing and coughing like mischief was a funny joke. Mindy asked if we could all go back, but Gerald told her it would be all right. "They're just having a little fun is all."

When we turned on the light to read, one of the guys came toward us. Gerald lifted the flashlight and pointed it toward him. We knew some of the kids who would go there late at night, so he called a couple of names and waited for an answer. As the guy got closer, his face was not young like a boy's but tired and gray with age. He put his hands in the air like he was being arrested and joked, "Don't shoot, I'm innocent." Laughing like he was coughing.

The old man told Mindy she was pretty. "Young meat," he said. "You guys done well for yourselves."

We said nothing. The man liked sound, not silence.

"What's that book?" he asked. "The Holy Grail?"

"The holy grail of all books," Gerald said.

"I meant the Bible."

Next to Mindy there was an open spot on the bench so the man took a seat.

"Care for a smoke?" he asked. We said nothing. Crickets chirped like the sound of nighttime birds.

"Do you hear that sound Mindy?" Gerald asked. "Do you hear the 'poo-tee-weet?'"

"What's the 'poo-tee-weet?'" she said.

"That's the sound the birds are making. 'Poo-tee-weet.'"

"Did you come up with that?" I asked.

"If you listen real hard, you'll hear it too."

Most mysteries are left unsolved. Or, rather, most mysteries are best left unsolved. Whether most of them are actually left unsolved is still up to debate.

The man on the park bench moved his hand toward Mindy's knee, while Gerald opened his book to Part II. "What's your name?" the old man asked. "Sugar?"

Gerald and I said nothing. We sat there, pretending to flip through the pages of our book. "This is when Gulliver goes to Brobdingnag," Gerald said. "I don't think it's a real place at all."

The old man lit up a cigarette and asked us to smoke. "Come on. Have a light," he said.

On the park bench, Gerald displaced his book. He got up, telling the man that he doesn't smoke. Cupping the bottle of wine to use for a later date.

Although I remember most, my memory recedes me in the moments just after. But when the three of us got back to Gerald's truck, he couldn't find his book. How he forgot it, I'm not sure. It wasn't like Gerald to misplace a book, let alone the words of Jonathan Swift. Anyway, he went running back to the bench, and there was the man and all his friends. The book was still there, left idle and untouched. The man had nothing to do with moving it.

Whether Gerald should have gone back for the book, Mindy thought not. All the men standing there, huddled in a circle—at the sight of Gerald, the old man chirped 'poo-tee-weet.'

"The boy reads the bible," he continued. "He's reading the bible of all bibles. A

real reader this one.”

On a platform in reality, Gerald had no basis. Books could be burned and tortured, yet their words would always live on. The blood from Hemingway’s typewriter could be dabbed with a towel and wrung out in the washbasin. The Jazz Age could lose its Gatsby and Pencey Prep torn to the ground.

Remove thought from purpose, one line still follows the next.

Later that night, Gerald went missing and no one ever heard from him again. It sounds like the end of a bad mystery novel, I know. It’s like poetry that makes you think— it’s like the bad writing that no one ever cares to read.

On a cold and bitter morning, a couple of teenagers found his body by the great elm tree. They found him with his knees bent inward and his hands clenched together like he was praying. They saw his face tilted toward the sky.

At least that’s what they told us. They were probably making it up so it sounds like a better story.

For the most part, that’s all that happened. The next week an article was published in the high school paper and everyone got a copy. Across the top it said, “Frozen Neanderthal: Two Teenage Boys Let Their Minds Run Wild.”

Of course, Gerald wouldn’t think this is much of a story. He’d want to know why he disappeared and how Mindy tried to cope. But it’s not up to me to write this part. I’ve heard a rumor that if you stay outside in the freezing cold, a part of you is preserved for the moments you’re not there. Like when it snows and you press your weight into the ground, your imprint remains when you go inside. It’s the same sort of thing. I don’t know why it happens. Maybe light travels slower when it’s cold.

The morning after Gerald disappeared, a thick ice froze over the Delaware. It became so cold that the teenagers who found his body were asked, ‘Aren’t you afraid of frostbite?’ before they even mentioned the body. Anyway, Gerald’s book was frozen to the bench so none of the men could take it. A little part of him remained even after he left.

Occasionally Mindy goes back to the park to watch the kids all play on the monkey bars. I think she often joins them.

Me: I kept the book. After it thawed out I took it with me. I started reading it a little while ago, and I’ve gotten to the part about Brobdingnag.

Brobdingnag. All the people there are as tall as church steeples.

I don’t think it’s a real place at all.