Surrounded by the river in the middle of Richmond, Virginia, across the water from the old Tredegar Iron Works and Hollywood cemetery where Jefferson Davis lies alongside James Monroe and John Tyler, Belle Isle is locked at night. Graffiti marks the footbridge out both before and after the gate. All day long, an empty police car sits next to the dirt path circling the island. A bike rack sticks up from its trunk, and the two officers ride their 10-speeds easily among college students wandering out to the flat stones in the riverbed. Keeping an eye out for open containers and spray-paint—for anyone walking alone—they pass the hollow shells of Confederate ammunition bunkers and a defunct hydroelectric plant.

Richmond is a city of contradictions. Since growing up in suburban Short Pump, a half-hour from my downtown high school, I’ve never been able to separate myself or my writing from The River City. In my senior honors thesis, a long work of fiction, I hope to capture a piece of Richmond through Sam, a 20-year-old with plenty of inconsistencies in his own right. Fourth in his high-school class, he dropped out of UVA after freshman year and works at an REI in the West End, the lavish suburb where he grew up. He’s lived with his parents on their cul-de-sac for a year now, hoping to move into a flat downtown at summer’s end. Most nights, the neighbors can hear his loud voice carrying to their windows from the street, bottles clinking, lighter ficking. But it’s not just him. The fall after Sam jumped ship, Robbie came home in October, apparently just to cling to Sam’s side. After that came James and Ryan, and lately, that Katie girl’s been hanging around a lot, too. Or maybe it’s Kathy. At this point, all the neighborhood’s hope is on Andrew, Sam’s estranged roommate, the only one who’s made it to junior year.
But this story isn’t about the neighbors, and it’s not an attack on or defense of higher education. It’s about Richmond and Sam—a city that feels like it’s just being born but can’t escape its history, a boy who can’t get away from admiration and isn’t entirely sure he wants to. Above all, it’s about a refusal to confront conflicts of identity: Sam’s, the dropouts’, and the city’s.

The summer before freshman year, I dove headfirst into a novella and came up realizing I should’ve filled the pool first. I took Professor Chibka’s fiction workshop and tried again the following summer, only to flop once more. The next year I declared a Creative Writing Concentration and took Professor Graver’s advanced fiction workshop. That summer, instead of a longer work, I wrote a short story a week, focusing on honing a natural narrative voice marked by understated prose, escalating tension, and frequent dialogue. Two of my stories won first and third prize for the Cushing Award, and six have appeared in Stylus. This year, I’m the magazine’s Editor-in-Chief. In my past attempts at long works, I rushed to finish half-formed ideas while my writing was still quickly changing. Now, my writing’s more secure, and this idea has been developing for over a year: from its three parts, narrated by Andrew, Katie, and Robbie, to its progression toward a climax at Belle Isle. I know I can handle the discipline of long fiction—if there’s anything my previous attempts, Stylus involvement, and double major in English and Political Science have taught me, it’s hard work. This thesis will challenge me for different reasons: its closeness to my life, its shifting voices, the very fact that I’ve been waiting to write it for so long. But I can hardly express my excitement to spend a year writing and editing this story. I can’t bear leaving it untold much longer.