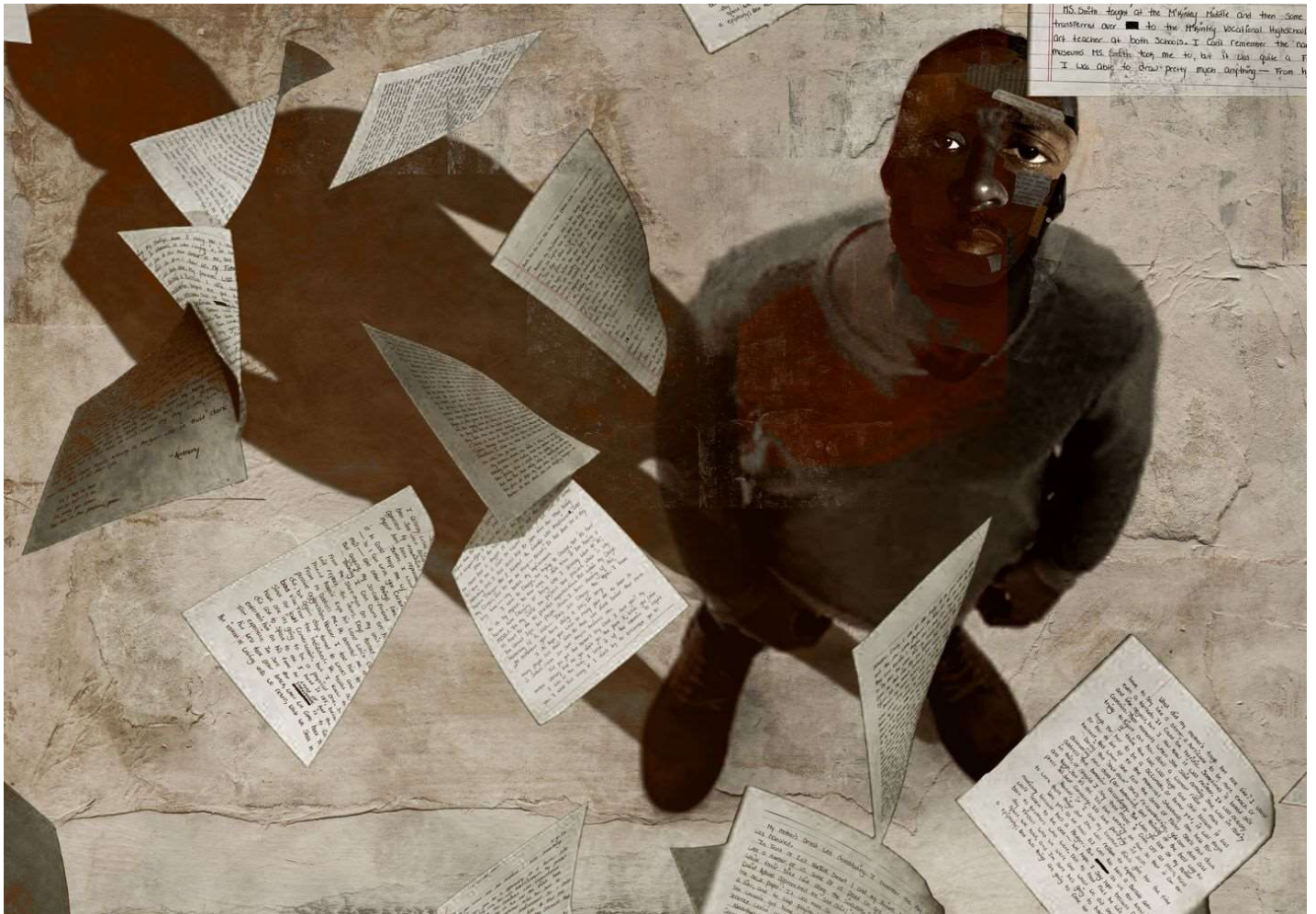


Under the wheel

This is the story of Anthony Pledger and his mother, of Anthony's lives and deaths, of Anthony and me.

By **Evan Allen** Globe Staff, Updated December 30, 2021, 7:40 a.m.



ANTONELLO SILVERINI FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

He thinks he was maybe 15 years old. He remembers that it was cold outside where he had been wandering, and dark in the dusty hallway of his mother's apartment.

He tried to be quiet. But his mother appeared from a doorway, startled and angry, and ordered him back out. They had been fighting. He can't remember why anymore; they were always fighting. All he wanted was to sleep, to get warm, and she was blocking his way. But he wasn't leaving. Not tonight.

He raised the .22 Ruger and pointed it at his mother's face.

The gun was light and warm in his hands. He remembers thinking his mother's face looked beautiful.

A long moment, the bottom of an exhale, silence, the barrel of the weapon like the bow of a ship plunging forward into uncharted waters.

"You gonna shoot your mother?" he remembers she asked him icily.

She stared back at him. He remembers the smell of the gun, metal and burnt gunpowder. A car went by on the street outside. He kept the gun trained on her face.

"Get ya ass in the house," she told him at last. He lowered the gun. He remembers she walked back into her bedroom and shut the door.

Some time passed, not much. He couldn't sleep. He went to her door and tried the knob but it was locked. He remembers that he pressed his ear to the wood and heard her sobbing. He remembers that he backed up shaking, slid down against the wall, and sobbed, too.

Anthony Pledger buried that memory. He never spoke of it and tried not to think of it. But it didn't disappear because nothing disappears.

He locked it in the darkest part of himself, where it haunted him. After that night, he believed, he was condemned. From that point forward, he was merciless. In his own words, he became Death.

Now, two decades later, it was morning in the gloom of his federal prison cell, and he was writing, his pen a searchlight seeking the origin of the violence that lived inside him, putting everything down in a letter to me.

In prison, Anthony writes novels brimming with brutality and sorrow. He writes children's stories about love. He writes me letters, and I write to him. Hundreds of pages, across almost three years. I slide every page into plastic sleeves and clip them into three-ring binders, and I read and reread them looking for clues.

Anthony didn't seek me out. I sought him. I had gone searching for what the Boston police used to call "Dynasty Families" — families that seemed to pass violence like an heirloom from one generation to the next. Anthony's great-uncle killed his best friend. His mother went to prison for robbing a bank. His father was a gang member and a drug dealer. Two of his brothers were serving life for murder, another had been murdered while awaiting trial on gun charges, and a fourth had been shot but lived. Anthony himself was a dangerous and brutal man a little more than halfway through a 15-year stint in federal prison.

I had wondered about dynasty families for a long time before I went looking for one. For years, I was the morning cops reporter, traveling from one murder to the next on the crackling waves of the police radio. The kind of murder scenes where I most often found myself were gang murders, and they were chaotic — flashing lights, wailing relatives, orange evidence markers trying to impose order on the wreckage. They happened in the same neighborhoods over and over again, to victims with mothers and fathers who often seemed to tell the same stories: My child dreamed of a better life. My child was trying to get out.

I started to imagine murdered young men in the days before they died, walking down the sidewalk in the sunshine, not knowing what was waiting for them, each step bringing them closer to it. What force had pulled them into the war on the street, with its roundelays of gunfire and grief? Why couldn't they stop?

For a lot of reporters, crime coverage is a steppingstone to something else — a beat you suffer through and move on from. But I stayed and made it my career. I have always been drawn to stories

about people who try to escape — escape their neighborhoods, their families, their histories — and who instead become what they were running from.

I'm running, too. I was about 5 when my grandfather, whom I adored, looked down at me and told me gravely that negative numbers aren't real, that people might tell me they are but that I shouldn't trust those people. I nodded, but I didn't understand. He used to retreat to the basement to revise Baudelaire and stop his car in the middle of the road to fling open the doors and "let the spirits out." His mother, in a fit of mania, once bought a Cadillac and paid a dentist to remove all her teeth, then drove home drugged and beaming a terrifying new smile.

My own mother sank into a near-fatal depression in college and whittled her body down to 75 pounds. She tried to protect me from the DNA she had given me. She quit her job to make sure I was raised with all her love and watchfulness, and explained when I was still a kid the concepts of manic depression and depression and anorexia. She reminded me all the time that I could always talk to her, no matter what. It didn't work, because you can't protect someone from what lives inside them. I was 10 when I first stopped eating, 13 when depression struck, 15 when I was hospitalized for the first time, 16 when I became afraid that I could hear someone yelling in the basement at night.

I sent Anthony my first letter in February of 2019. I had just had a baby, and at night when I cradled her in my scarred arms I wondered what she would become.

In writing, Anthony is devastatingly direct. His handwriting is neat, and though his letters go on for pages, there are almost no scribbles or cross-outs. His language has a hurtling kind of poetry, the inventive cadence of a man who has taught himself to write by reading and looking things up. He is smart and self-reflective. If anyone might have been able to escape the cycle of violence on wits alone, it was him. Yet here he was, in a federal prison cell in California, surrounded by desert and ghosts.

I wanted to know if this was inevitable.

Anthony wrote back to me again and again because he wanted me to help him understand himself and what he had become. I wrote to him because I was angry at fate and afraid of the wheel of the

past and the way it rolls forward, forward, no matter what power we think we have to stop it. To have a child, I staked everything on the hope that the wheel can be stopped. Holding my child, I felt her smallness, and the enormity of my gamble.



ANTONELLO SILVERINI FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

When Anthony stands at the window of his cell, he can see the inmates out in the yard, and what he must look like when he is out there. Faceless and strange and interchangeable with other bad men.

I don't know every crime that Anthony committed. He's never been charged with murder, but I wouldn't be surprised if he has killed. He calls himself "Death," but he's careful to say that is only a metaphor and that he has never murdered anyone. The prison staff monitors our correspondence.

His record of violence starts at just 7 years old. Court documents tell a staccato story of his childhood and teenage years. He was in and out of DYS custody for robbery, assaults, threats, destruction of property, shooting his little brothers repeatedly with a BB gun, and carrying a real gun, sneering at the officer who arrested him, "Hell yeah my gun is real. I got beef out there."

He told me about other, uncharged teenage robberies and drug dealing, about stabbing one boy in elementary school and choking out another. His best friend was shot to death and died in his arms when he was 18, and Anthony spoke of retaliation. As an adult, he was arrested for threatening his girlfriend with a gun, assault, crack, carrying a gun, and for shooting a gun across Blue Hill Avenue. Sometimes he was found guilty; sometimes he got off. Prosecutors say he was a gunman for a violent street gang, which was connected to a run of murders and shootings during the time he was a member. Anthony himself was shot in the neck and died on the operating table before doctors brought him back to life. His ferocity made him feared, and it made him a target. He used to drive the streets of Boston with his gun on his lap, aiming it just under his window whenever a car pulled up beside him.

The crime that sent him to federal prison horrifies me to think about. He wrote to me and said he knows how the world sees him: "A low-down loathed man who is dangerous to man and woman."



Anthony sent me a picture of himself at about 7, a creased computer printout with streaks in the ink and him at the center, skinny in oversized clothes with his ears sticking out and a dutiful smile on his face. I studied the picture and tried to imagine the little boy in it committing Anthony's crimes. It felt impossible, but the past tricks us that way — it looks innocent or sinister, depending on what you want to see. In the picture, the sun blazes bright white. The sweetest memories of his life live in those days.

He lived then with his mother, Cleopatra; his grandmother; and his two younger brothers, Nicco and Dartanyan, in the Old Colony housing development in South Boston. There he was, licking oatmeal raisin cookie batter off his grandmother's mixers while she baked in the kitchen. There he was, sitting with her on a long lazy Saturday afternoon learning to play backgammon, eating the cheese and crackers and cold cuts and grapes she'd arranged for him like a bouquet. There he was rushing to meet her after school, graded math test in his hand, impatient to tell her his high score and watch

her reach into her pocket for a piece of Bazooka Joe bubble gum, to read the tiny folded comic that left sugar dust on his fingers.

But Old Colony was not a safe place for a Black family. It was segregated until the late 1980s when the federal government intervened, and by the early '90s, it was still mostly white. Its squat brick buildings hunched inward over little courtyards, backs to the surrounding city, as if to hide what happened within. "Man beaten in Southie describes racial attack," reads one headline from the time. "Bullets fired into door of black family," reads another. Roving packs of white teens accosted Black children playing and Black adults walking home late; windows were broken in the night; at least one car was torched.

Anthony felt the crush of constant fear. When he stepped outside his family's little apartment, his heartbeat sped up. He was chased off the playground. In the mornings, before he walked to school, he cried because he was afraid the white kids might kill him. Once, his family ordered a pizza and it arrived crawling with maggots. Once, Anthony found spent shotgun shells outside their apartment door.

One day, Anthony's mother sent him to the store with his little brother Nicco. They were walking home, swinging a bag of groceries. A gang of white boys on 10-speed bikes pumped their legs behind them, catching up. Nicco was 4 or 5. Anthony was 6 or 7. The white boys were bigger. They surrounded Anthony and Nicco.

Anthony can't remember exactly what the white boys said. He can't remember how he replied, or what he was thinking. This memory exists for him not in words, but in his body, in his fingertips and his breath.

There was a brick on the sidewalk. He picked it up. It was so heavy he needed two hands. One of the white boys was straddling his bike directly in front of him, and Anthony hurled it.

The brick smashed the boy's leg. The boy screamed and fell off his bike. His friends scattered. Anthony moved in, picked the brick up again, and stood over the boy, raising it high over his head.

He looked into the boy's eyes below him on the ground. For just a second, they were connected, a diver and a lake.

Anthony was about to hit the boy again when he heard an adult voice shouting "Stop!"

He dropped the brick and ran, suddenly loose-limbed, liberated.

Later, at home, he considered this new pleasure, his heart steady now in his chest, his breathing even. Something astonishing had happened to him out there on that patch of sidewalk, with the brick in the air and his eyes locked on the terrified boy.

"That there was the first time I shared my pain and felt the soothing pleasure in inflicting it," he wrote to me. "Violence became ventilation."



"I remember running home after hitting that kid with the brick and being surprised at how wonderful it felt to see the fear in the boy's eyes, and the pain in his face more so surprise at how I reacted."

Anthony Pledger

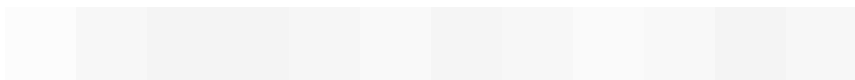
Not long after that, he stabbed a boy with a steak knife. Then, one afternoon, as he balanced dreamily atop a wooden fence outside his family's apartment looking up at the sky, the pack of white boys came for him again. He didn't hear them until they had him surrounded. This time, he wasn't so afraid.

He jumped down off the fence, vaguely aware of jeering coming from other apartments. Windows and doors were opening and white faces appearing, shouting obscenities, egging the white boys on. Anthony picked up a beer bottle. He moved fast, with purpose. He swung the bottle like a bat across the face of one of the boys. Blood everywhere. Anthony saw his mother coming out their door, and he could see that she was proud.

Someone called the police. When officers arrived, they charged Anthony with assault and battery with a dangerous weapon.

Afterward, Anthony asked his mother why the white people had called him that awful word. She told him she didn't know. He said, "I wish that I would die."

Anthony told me he saw these first moments of finding pleasure in violence as awakenings of something that was already inside him. I saw a terrified child who finally fought back. I told Anthony the little boy he used to be didn't sound like the man he became, but he told me the little boy just didn't know what he was yet.



By then, we had been writing to each other for months, and our letters had begun to take the shape of that argument, about whether Anthony was born with violence already in him just waiting for the moment to express itself, or whether it was created by the world in which he lived.

Sometimes, he seemed to consider the idea that life drilled the violence into him. But in his answers to my long, probing letters, he came back again and again to the notion that his inflictions of pain, which grew more cruel and calculated with every passing year, were not creations but revelations, each turning back another cloak shrouding the truth of what he already was. "A birthmark," he wrote to me. When I wrote my replies, often at 3 or 4 in the morning, staring into the pale moonglow of my computer while my daughter slept, I found myself taking the opposite side. The side I wanted to believe in.



ANTONELLO SILVERINI FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Because of the charge against Anthony, his family was forced out of Old Colony. Cleopatra found them an apartment in a three-decker on a narrow Dorchester street by a set of train tracks.

Money was short. They got their food from pantries and everything else from secondhand stores. Cleopatra took temp jobs, office work mostly, answering phones and filing paper. At night, she dragged Anthony and Nicco, by bus or on foot, to her GED classes at Roxbury Community College. Sometimes, a passerby took pity on a mother and her little boys trudging through the rain or snow, and they could rest in the warmth of a stranger's car. When Anthony complained about these trips, his mother told him fiercely that he had to see how important an education was.

Anthony was studying Cleopatra. She was fiery and mercurial, and in Anthony's mind, somehow infinite. In her, he sensed the possibility of magic, of an unseen world bigger and better than the one he lived in, and it pulled at him like a tide.

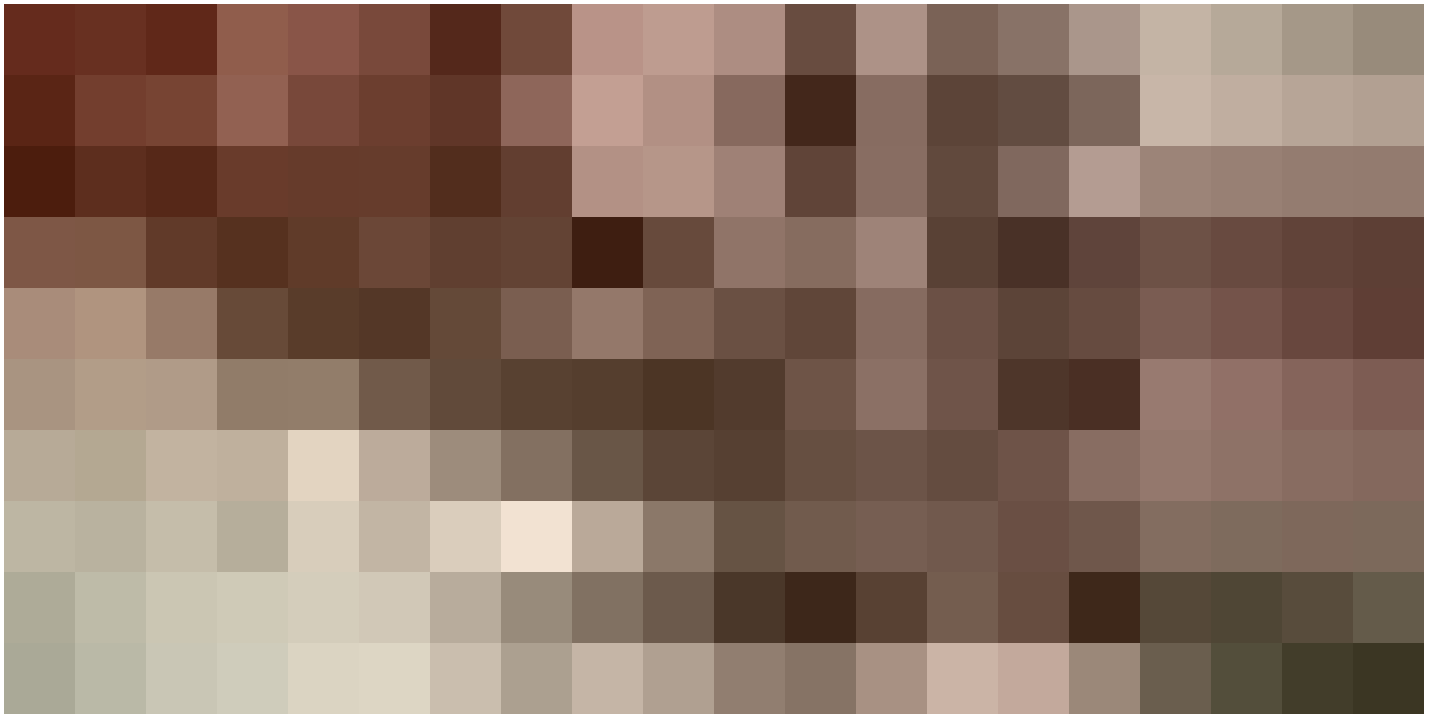
"My mother's dreams," he said in one letter. "How vivid."

He remembers coming up behind her one day as she sat on the couch and seeing over her shoulder that she was drawing. "Ma, what is that!" he blurted, and she looked back at him and smiled. "A dress I designed for my clothing line," she said, and she flipped the pages, fluttering sketches of dress after beautiful dress. As though there really was a clothing line, as though that and all it implied were as real as the fact that she was sitting there.

Another day, in a half-second flash, Anthony caught a glimpse of her in her bedroom before she could shut the door. Years later she would deny it, but he was certain he saw her dumping a duffle bag full of cash out onto the bed.

There were the strange and wonderful mysteries of her evenings. The apartment would fill with her friends, beautiful women who teased Anthony about being handsome and grown. His mother would disappear with them out the front door in high heels and perfume that smelled like sweet fruit.

And then there was something else, too, another dimension of her that Anthony mentioned only obliquely in his letters, but that court and police records made more plain. The records are a chronicle of physical fights between them. She hit him with a belt. He repeatedly ran away, at least once to escape a beating. He accused her of pulling a knife on him. Later on, when he was a teenager, he pressed his finger into her forehead during an argument and she wrestled with him to try and cut the finger off.



ANTONELLO SILVERINI FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The vacant lot next to the three-decker where they now lived was Anthony's jungle. It was filled with tires and rocks and weeds and crack pipes and trash, and Anthony and his brothers spent hours playing there.

He stalked among the tangled vines and piles of rotting wood, searching for garden snakes. He learned to step lightly, to avoid the snap of a stick that would startle the snakes or stir up the bees. He learned to wait patiently and silently. To strike.

He kept the snakes he found in a sneaker box in his backpack. He took them everywhere. When he took a shower, the backpack sat on the bathroom floor. When he slept, it waited at the foot of his bed. He studied his snakes. When he dangled his fingers near them they opened their mouths. They would snap at his fingers even when he tried to feed them. He admired this about them. They were pure instinct. He liked walking around with his backpack zipped closed, his snakes close and quiet.

In the lot, when it rained, Anthony swore he could smell the snakes — a sourness, a wildness rising from the dirt.



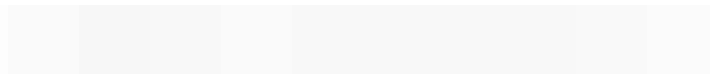
Anthony was playing with two cousins outside his great-grandmother's house when a car pulled up to the curb. The man inside didn't get out. He just rolled down his window, like anything and anyone he wanted would come to him. He was Seaward Brown, a legend on the streets. Anthony's father.

Anthony's mother started hanging out with Seaward when she was 15 or 16. She thought he was funny and handsome and a little dangerous, dressed in Polo and Calvin Klein, with cigarettes and a Jheri curl. She didn't love him — she didn't even really like him — but he could hush a whole street with a word, and that she respected. Anthony was born when she was 17. Seaward was in prison then, and hadn't been around much since, but Anthony had heard the stories about him. Now, Anthony raced to the car window to see him.

But his cousins were racing, too, and they were bigger and stronger. They beat him to his father and blocked his view. He tried to shove one of them out of his way. His cousin shoved back, and then they were on the ground.

What Anthony remembers is his father watching silently from his car as he fought in the dirt and lost. "You'll get him next time," Seaward said through the window and drove away.

Anthony waited to cry until his father was out of sight.



One day at school when Anthony was a little older, a boy tripped him in a stairwell and made him bump his leg. Anthony was irate, but he didn't instantly react. He waited until after school, when his classmates were all distracted, watching for their buses.

Anthony snuck up behind the boy, put his arm around his neck, and jerked tight. He held the boy's throat until his nose started bleeding and he went limp.

“What I find in inflicting pain is company in my dark place,” he wrote. “I needed for the victims to feel how it feel to hurt.”

“Ayo, you know your moms is in the newspaper?”

Anthony’s friend David had ridden up on his bike with a smirk on his face.

It was September 1998. Anthony was 11. His father had disappeared into federal prison without even saying goodbye. Anthony was hanging out with a group of friends that called themselves the Wolf Pack. Their bikes were scattered across the sidewalk.

Back at home, Anthony had a new baby brother, LaCroix, and the apartment was crowded and loud. He shared his bed; he shared his blanket; he shared his toys; he shared his mother.

Anthony did not know that his mother was in the newspaper. She hadn’t come home the night before, but that wasn’t unusual.

“You’re a liar,” he spat back. “Stop playing.”

David rode his bike to the convenience store and stole a paper. He pedaled back and shook it open.

“Suspects in Bank Heist Nabbed,” blared the headline. David read the story aloud while Anthony’s friends snickered: Two men and his mother, a starter pistol, a bag filled with \$20,000 that fluttered out onto the street as they tried to escape, the suspects jamming bills into their pockets. His mother, the getaway driver, speeding away in a red Oldsmobile only to crash a mile down the road.

His mother on the front page. His beautiful mother.

When Anthony told me about this, I went to the library and pulled the newspaper archive microfilm. I wanted to read what Anthony had heard. I wanted to feel the shock of the collision.



“At ten years old I understood
my mother to be my salvation.”

Anthony Pledger

The story treated the robbery as a caper. It noted that one of the robbers, after the getaway car crashed, had tried to carjack a young woman, but she had laughed at him because his fly was down and punched him in the face.

I imagined Anthony, stunned and humiliated. Enough time had passed for a newspaper to publish a story, but no one had told him. His mother had phoned his grandmother from the police station to ask her to take care of her boys, but Anthony didn't know that. He still didn't quite believe any of it.

He snatched the paper and tore home. It was less than a mile, but it felt like it took days to get there. He dumped his bike and pounded up the stairs, yanked open the door, and ran inside.

He can still feel that terrible moment of understanding, shimmering like heated glass in the long light of late summer. His mother was gone.

It was sometime after his mother had gone to prison. Anthony was living with his grandmother. He was 11 or 12. He had a gun. He was watching for someone to rob. He was fearless. His body hummed with anticipation. He found his victim and he stepped out to meet him. He wanted more than the gold chain around his victim's neck. He had a script.

“Do you want your life to go back to normal?”

This was always his first question.

It took several letters back and forth before Anthony agreed to explain the robberies to me in detail. They were crimes he was never caught for, he said, and he didn't want to be criminally charged now. But the robberies were a bridge between Anthony the child and Anthony the man, and we both wanted to know if the bridge could be crossed back. He thought for a while and then said yes.

Anthony called his victims “marks.” He would raise his gun and ask his question and watch the terrible realization dawn in his mark's eyes. “At that moment and with that casual question the target realize that life has no favorites, and his safety is determine on whether or not the robber want to return it,” he wrote.

Anthony would say: “Hand me your chain.” Or, your sneakers, or your scooter, or your drugs. The object didn't really matter. He was watching his mark's reaction and judging their character. He cataloged every hesitation, every drawn breath, every plea for mercy, and tried to decode their meanings, a taxonomy of fear.

If a mark refused to hand over a chain, Anthony said, he knew the mark was proud, and so it was his pride that Anthony wanted. He would force the mark to remove the chain himself and place it in his palm.

If, instead, a mark handed over his chain too fast, well then, Anthony knew he was a coward, and what he loved was his life. A mark who loves his life too much will give anything to keep it. “Strip,” Anthony would say then. “Get down on your knees and beg.”

Cash, food, coats, hats, gloves, sneakers, bikes, and jewelry — he stole these things, but they weren't the point, not by themselves. “I took from the mark what they couldn't get back,” he wrote

to me.

I read through the details of the robberies over and over, trying to plot their choreography and retrace Anthony's footsteps, but every explanation I considered seemed too simple. Was he a lonely, angry boy intent on teaching the world the same lesson he had been forced to learn? Was he stripping his "marks" of the humanity that he himself was trying to shed, so that he wouldn't feel the pain of his abandonment? Was he a sociopath?

Anthony himself didn't know. When he tried to describe his motivations to me, it was as if he was standing at the bottom of an enormous cliff and looking up, unable to see where the rock ended and the sky began. All he could articulate was the scale of the feeling. With each crime, he said, he felt like he was growing larger. He felt it in his chest.

When I closed my eyes, I could see him out there on the street, small for his age and slender, all his rage and longing concentrated in the black hole at the tip of the barrel of his gun. I could see him searching, and getting closer with every step to the dark night in his mother's dusty hallway when he would raise his gun and point it at her face. I wished I could reach through time and pull him back, but soon he would learn the name of the thing he was becoming.





ANTONELLO SILVERINI FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

One night that summer, a friend of Anthony's long-gone father, Seaward, saw Anthony walking home and pulled up beside him in his car.

"Lil 'Ward!" the man called out, using the nickname Anthony inherited from his father. The man offered him a ride. Anthony pulled open the door and got in.

"Why are you always hanging out in Norfolk Terrace?" the man asked as he drove. What he meant was, why was Anthony in foreign territory? Anthony's father had belonged to a gang on Thetford Avenue, which, though only a block away, was, in the cartography of the neighborhood, another nation. Anthony didn't answer. He only half-understood. Until now, his friends were his friends and his street was the place he lived.

Anthony knew his father did robberies. Anthony knew people were afraid of his father. Anthony knew his father went to federal prison for drugs and guns. But that was really all. Mostly, his father was an idea, an invisible force, like gravity. In his letters to me, Anthony called Seaward both "God" and "nothing." He had known for a long time that his father was a member of the Thetford Avenue Buffalos, but what the man was saying now was something new, something important. Anthony

could feel it. The man was saying his father wasn't just in the gang, he made the gang. His father was somebody, so Anthony was somebody.

"You're like a prince," the man told him. "You're supposed to be on Thetford. You're from Thetford."

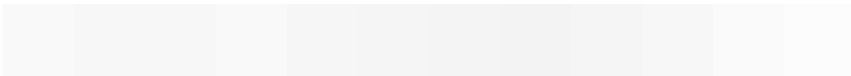
And suddenly, everything inside Anthony made sense to him: He was his father's son, and so he had his father's spirit. It wasn't darkness or evil that moved inside him when he committed his robberies. When fury rose, unbidden, inside his chest. Those feelings weren't wrong. They were his birthright. They were evidence that his father had claimed him, after all.

A member of the Thetford Avenue Buffalos had to be cold, secretive, violent, unafraid. A Buffalo took what he wanted. A Buffalo never hesitated. A Buffalo never felt remorse. And now Anthony knew: He was a Buffalo. He was 12 years old, and he believed he finally had the language to describe what lived in him. He gazed out the window of the car up at the stars.

Anthony wrote to me that after that night, when he looked in the mirror, he didn't see himself alone anymore. He saw three faces: his father's, his mother's, and his own.

Cleopatra got out of jail, eventually pleading guilty to helping to rob the bank. She had her fifth son on Jan. 1, 2000. She named him Myssiah Christ-King. Anthony and his brothers bounced together and separately from Cleopatra's custody, to their grandmother's, to their great-grandmother's, and back again.

At some point, Anthony got the gun, the Ruger .22 that he would pull on his mother. He told me that he took it off of another kid. I wondered what happened to that other kid.



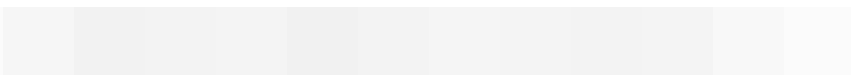
It was the act of drawing the gun and pointing it at his mother that he believes damned him. Anthony's life was full of violence on either side of this moment, and yet, it was this action, in which no one was physically injured, that was, he said, the worst thing he'd ever done.

Afterward, he wrote to me, he entered a kind of exile, in which he could never be loved, and all he could do was inflict pain. He had no choice, he said: He owed it to his mother.

His friends nicknamed him Tony Starks, a play on the Iron Man character's name, because they said he was not a man but metal. He carried a gun in his hand even in his own home. He got a .45 pistol tattooed on his forearm, and when he looked at it, its dark lines on his warm skin, he felt the contradiction of his existence.

"My mind is death," he wrote. "My flesh and bones is the vessel — the iron, the gun — the instrument of death."

When it seemed that death had finally come for him at 26, and he was shot in the neck as he sat in a parked car, what he felt was not fear or anger or surprise, but relief. Death, to him, was life, and he had yearned for it.



In our letters, Anthony and I talked about writing. There was so much hurt in our correspondence; our discussions of craft and the work of other writers were an oasis. He sent me passages from

Eldridge Cleaver and the Buddhist scriptures. I sent him W.H. Auden and Sylvia Plath. We read each other's favorite books. But we didn't talk much about what he wrote.

I knew he had written four novels in prison, and that he was working on another. But he hadn't volunteered more than that, and I hadn't asked. Even as we explored his most hidden thoughts, his manuscripts seemed to me almost too private. And then, one day, he mentioned he was reading about self-publishing, and I asked if he'd be willing to share any of what he'd written. He sent me his entire fifth novel.

When it arrived, I lay on the floor of my office and turned the handwritten pages carefully. By now, I had known Anthony for more than two years, and I don't know what I thought I would find in his fiction. Maybe a gentler version of himself, the boy I thought he must once have been. Maybe hope. Whatever I expected, the book was not that.

I got through 10 pages before I had to put it down and walk away. It was viciously, wantonly, violent, with a graphic rape scene that ran for pages. I felt sick. At least, I told myself, the book takes the side of the victim. But when I picked it back up and tried to plow ahead, my dread only deepened.

It wasn't the fact of the violence. It was that, in the moral universe of the story, the violence was not always wrong — sometimes, it was pure and just and true. One character shook me deeply. A pimp named Cold-Play. Cold-Play savagely beats one of his prostitutes and forces another to watch then clean up the blood. He doesn't love anyone or anything. He follows a code. In the logic of the book, he is a good man.

Cold-Play talked like Anthony, he taught lessons about honesty and loyalty that Anthony held as gospel. He sounded to me a lot like Anthony describing himself, and elevating his violence to something noble, which forced me to confront a fact I knew about Anthony but had allowed myself to avoid: the crime that sent him to prison.

In the fall of 2013, according to court papers I had looked up before I wrote Anthony my first letter, he took a 15-year-old and a 16-year old girl to Rhode Island to sell them for sex. He was 26 at the time. He had sex with the 15-year-old, according to the records, though federal prosecutors

characterized it as consensual and did not charge him for it. Police arrested Anthony before he could sell the girls to anyone, but they were damaged anyway. At his sentencing in federal court, the judge addressed him directly. "You have hurt people almost beyond calculation."

In the course of our correspondence, I had let my repugnance at that crime fade. I had come to respect Anthony. I had started to like him. Now, I was horrified. I stopped writing to him.



"In my 32 years of living I noticed something: people hate the truth. The truth is ugly."

Anthony Pledger

But I eventually came back to the book lying open on the floor of my office. I had to know how it ended — if the world inside Anthony was, ultimately, evil. I took it in 25-page increments because that was all I could bear. As I read, I had the feeling of drawing closer to an answer I wasn't sure I wanted.

The book is narrated by a teenage girl named Sarah, who wants only to be loved. Instead, she is torturously abused by a parade of heartless men, starting with her father. Cold-Play is portrayed as her protector.

And I started to see something. The character of Sarah began to seem to me a better rendering of Anthony. "For all my life a curse hovered above me," she says, early in the book. "Could I change?" she asks later. "Do I even know how to change?"

At the end of the book, Sarah murders her father, goes to jail, and discovers she is pregnant. She cannot conjure a single reason to bring a baby into the world. She kills herself. Her suicide is both the tragic end of a doomed character and her annihilation of the warped, perverted world she inhabited.

Which is the real Anthony, I wondered? Cold-Play, or Sarah? I wondered if Anthony even knew.

He told me once that the worst part of himself, the death-seeking Tony Starks, was killed the night that Anthony was shot and almost died. He said that had allowed the better part of him, the Anthony that I knew, to emerge. But later, he told me he had been flipping through the pages of an interior design magazine in prison when he came upon a picture of a two-faced figure in a painting. The page caught his eye because at the top, in bold print, was the word “Stark.”

As he studied the page, he said, he realized that one side of the face was Anthony Pledger and the other side was Tony Starks.

He tore the page out of the magazine and hung it on his cell wall.

To understand Anthony — what made him, and what might unmake him — I had to understand the night that he believed damned him. I asked him everything I could think of, and he answered all my questions one by one. But still its meaning eluded me.

I needed another way to look at it, a side door in. I needed Cleopatra. I drove out to her house in an early-spring snowstorm and knocked on her door.

“I want to ask you about something difficult,” I said, and I saw uncertainty flicker across her face.

Cleopatra and I were sitting across from each other in the living room of her little Holyoke apartment, my notebook open between us. In person, Cleopatra is a disarming combination of serene and unpredictable. During pauses in our conversation, or when she’s listening, she smiles a

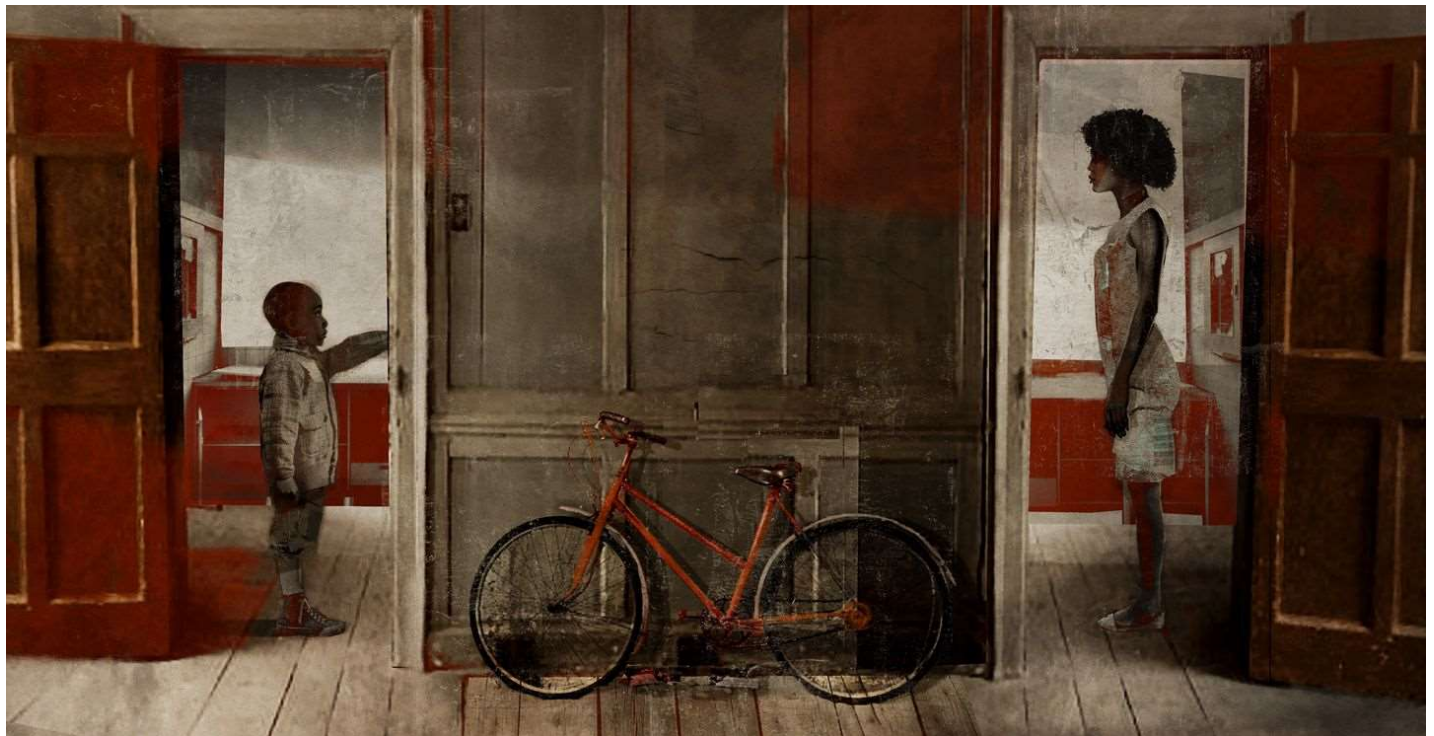
little closed-mouth smile — expectant, encouraging, polite. But her eyes are intense. She's not looking at you, she's watching you.

“Anthony told me about the night he pulled his gun on you,” I said, and she looked startled at first, then very far away, like she'd slipped into the current of a fast-moving river and was disappearing around the bend. She exhaled slowly.

“He decided that was the day he was gonna stand up to me,” she said.

I waited. Here, I thought, finally, I would find clarity.

But the story Cleopatra recounted as the wind outside hushed all other noise was different than the one Anthony told me. As I listened, I felt the plot dancing away from me.



ANTONELLO SILVERINI FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

In Cleopatra's memory, Anthony was younger than he thought he was — 14, maybe 13. She remembers how slight he was, and how self-conscious it made him. She doesn't think she kicked

him out of the house, as he remembers it. Or that he snuck inside. In her recollection, the fight began and ended in a few minutes.

She knows she hit him and he walked away. And she knows he came back while she was trying to eat dinner, with the gun in his hand.

She was still holding her fork as she stood up. She remembers hate on Anthony's face. She thought he might really do it, he might really kill her. She kept her eyes locked on his. If he pulled the trigger, she wanted her face as he did it to be etched forever into his memory.

"Are you gonna shoot your mother?" she remembers asking him. "What are you waiting for? You pull a gun out on anybody, you better be ready to use it."

And then, as she told it, the spell was broken. Cleopatra lunged at Anthony, thrusting the fork in her hand. She remembers that Anthony panicked and ran, and she shouted after him, "Don't bring your ass back!" He fled the apartment and didn't return for days.

Cleopatra told the story wearily, succinctly. Anthony never came to her door that night, she said. She didn't cry and neither did he. They never spoke of it again. She said she didn't know why Anthony remembered it differently.

I was gathering my things to leave and she stopped me. "Tell Anthony I love him."



I wrote to Anthony to tell him what his mother said and ask him what it meant, but he didn't write back. It was the only letter I ever wrote him that he didn't answer.

I thought about Anthony's silence. Silence, the mirror of speech, the things we can't say more powerful than the things we can. I thought of the way Cleopatra told me she loved him, like she had been waiting to say it, maybe for a long time.

And I thought about what Anthony wrote to me when I pressed him for more about his mother's violence toward him.

"What did my mother's tough love look like? I would have to say like a storm; a hurricane to be more exact. Or even a tornado," he wrote. "It could be horrific. Sometimes it looked still and like neglect, but now I know it was neither. It's love working on love so that it can express itself correctly. It's love purifying itself."

I don't know whose version of that night is the truth. I don't think the literal truth matters. Anthony is telling one story and Cleopatra is telling another. They are stories about silence, about the things they can't say.

Cleopatra saw her son that night as a child, exploding with fury, running in fear, in need of protection. She kept his secret, she told no one. Her silence was love.

Anthony saw himself as a young man seizing power, acting deliberately and coldly, and in doing so losing what little humanity he had left. His grief and regret — his sobbing in the hallway — went unheard. So he found another way to speak it to his mother. "My mother mean the world to me, but yet I pointed my pistol at her," he had written to me. "So when I aimed it again, and again, and again, I did it because I felt like I owed it to her."

It was strange, and it was terrifying, but it was also love. The Ruger .22 was light and warm and fast in his teenage hands.





ANTONELLO SILVERINI FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Anthony has been back to Boston just once since he went to federal prison. It was about a year into our correspondence, and he was shipped east from California to Nashua Street Jail because prosecutors wanted him to testify at a murder trial. He refused.

But while he was here, Cleopatra drove in from Holyoke to visit him. She doesn't like to come into Boston anymore. She prefers the mountains. The city swallowed up her sons. After Anthony went away, Nicco and Dartanyan shot a man to death while he smoked a cigarette outside a party and they were sentenced to life with the possibility of parole. LaCroix was shot in the stomach and survived, he went to jail, got out, and kept picking up charges. Myssiah, born after his mother's release from prison and named for a promise that Cleopatra made to God, was shot to death just after Christmas 2018 on a little hook of a side street in Dorchester, a few days shy of his 19th birthday. His murder barely made the news.

There is just one Pledger boy left. DJ: the youngest, the sweetest, the last. Cleopatra took him with her to visit Anthony. He was 8 years old.

The visiting area at the jail is a tight white cinderblock box of a room with a single stool and plexiglass that separates prisoners from their families. To get inside, you put all your belongings in a

locker, then pass through a metal detector and a series of doors that unlock one at a time with clanging metallic buzzes. It all scared DJ. When the boy saw Anthony he started to cry.

Anthony looked at his brother, who was a year older than Anthony had been when he smashed the bottle across the white boy's face in Old Colony, and he felt a blast of fury in his chest. DJ was a Pledger, and a Pledger man does not cry. A Pledger man is hard and secret and silent, he grieves alone in the dark where no one hears him. And now DJ was falling onto his knees on the tile. Anthony's shoulders tensed. He couldn't allow it.

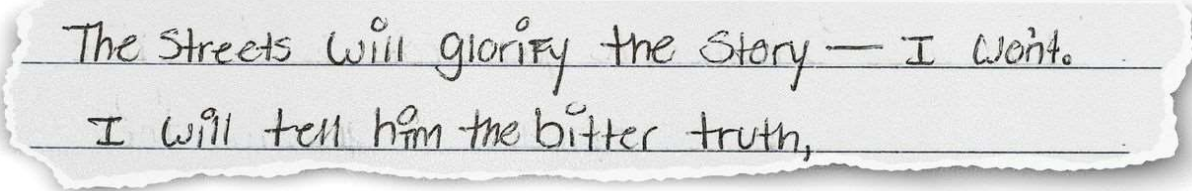
"DJ, get off the floor!" Anthony barked. But DJ didn't get up. He just sobbed.

"I want my blankie," he cried.

Anthony clenched his fists, twitching to lunge forward and yank his brother roughly up. To administer a lesson that he had learned, much younger.

But then, he hesitated.

When I think of this moment, which Anthony and Cleopatra told me about afterwards, I pause it here in my mind. It's a small pocket of time, and from the outside it doesn't look like anything at all, but I have returned to it again and again for the two years since it happened because it feels different from every other story Anthony has told me. Something new lives here.



The Streets will glorify the story — I won't.
I will tell him the bitter truth,

In my mind, Anthony is looking down at DJ but seeing himself, and he is reaching for something just over some internal horizon that is only now coming into view. Something he has been looking for for a long time. In all our letters, he and I have been examining Anthony, holding him up to the light and turning him this way and that, looking for some objective truth, a formula that will tell us how he became what he is and whether he can ever be something else. Every question we ask leads us

deeper into a tangle of other questions, every answer is a trap door. But in the jail the fluorescent bulbs shine and the white room waits and his brother cries and what Anthony sees is so simple. He sees that he is a part of the wheel, and he sees his littlest brother in his path. He sees that he can see, and because he can see he can choose.

I unpause the moment and the scene doesn't look any different. Anthony is still there, sitting in the white room.

But everything is different. In Anthony's account of that moment, he relaxes his shoulders. He unclenches his fists. "He's different than you," he tells himself. "Let him be. Let him be." Anthony doesn't say anything out loud. He's still. He's a Pledger.

But while DJ cries, Anthony is there with him.



There are no answers, only stories we tell. I have my own story about the night Anthony pulled the gun on his mother. In my version, Cleopatra represents the wheel of the past, and Anthony's drawn gun represents a battle we all fight, in one way or another.

In my version, am I Anthony or am I Cleopatra?

I think of all the things that I hope for my daughter. She's 3 now. She's perfect. She has my long fingers and my giggle and my overbite, and when I look in her huge blue eyes it feels like looking into my own. I imagine all kinds of futures for her. She loves her little medical kit, she loves to read, she's enchanted by horses — so a doctor, a writer, a free woman riding fast through a field? Anything, as long as she doesn't inherit what I did. I'm always looking for signs, but I don't really know what to look for. Like me, she's a terrible sleeper. Every night, she crashes into my room crying about a monster she sees in her nightmares. She calls it "the shadow." She sees the shadow everywhere, she says. In our car, at her day care, in the living room. I know this is just what toddlers do, and I

know I'm always making metaphors out of the mundane. But I'm watching for the shadow, too. Just like my own mother must have done with me.

I worked so hard to put those memories away. But they have come back to me now that I have a little girl. I can feel them again, circling. Starving hurts. It's not passive at all. I had to keep moving. I had to pace and pace and pace. I was awake for days at a time. Every night, by 3 or 4 a.m., I'd be frantic, my thoughts racing and spinning. I had to drag a box cutter up and down my arms and legs just to feel the purity of a single point of pain. My mom would hear me ghosting around the kitchen and come downstairs, four, five times a night to check on me and order me to bed, and I'm sure that in between, she lay in her own bedroom awake and waiting. For what? A scream? A thud? What does it sound like, your daughter's footsteps on the path you carved? I'm listening, I'm straining to hear it.

When Anthony squared off with his mother in that hallway, he found he couldn't pull the trigger. He couldn't destroy the past and so he became the past — the worst version of all the things he had felt climbing in him for years. This was a kind of death, because the past is a dead thing. But you can't escape the past and you can't live in the past. The wheel crushes you or you learn to run alongside it.

Anthony let DJ cry, and he went back to his cell in California to sleep under the watchful eyes of his two-faced painting. The shadow wakes my daughter up, and she comes running, and I catch her.



What do you consider a good person?

Do you think I'm a good person?

Anthony Pledger

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