

The last line read, “As he buckled the swollen belt, suddenly my groin felt the chill of death.” It took me two years to unlock what that concluding sentence from E.B. White’s personal essay, *Once More to the Lake*, meant.

I have been fascinated with *Once More to the Lake* since I read it at an academic summer camp where I was taking a course on personal essay writing. Back then I could only grasp the facts; White and his son went back to a lake where he used to visit as a child with his own father. The lake, according to White, had not changed. Throughout his stay, White experienced flashes of the past when he views his son doing the same things he did as a child, like sneaking away in the morning to take the boat out alone. “Everywhere I went I had trouble making out which was I, the one walking at my side, the one walking in my pants,” he wrote.

But what was the deeper point of the essay? Maybe White was simply recounting an event, and I was trying to unlock meaning out of something that didn’t have a key hole. And why did he *feel the chill of death in his groin* as his son changed into a pair cold, dripping trunks? Maybe the water was frigid and he wanted to find a good metaphor for its icy grip on his son’s body. Still, that conclusion seemed too simple. My answers didn’t satisfy me, but I had no other ideas at the time.

As the camp ended, the anthology that the essay was located in became tucked away in a bookshelf, where it towered over a row of forgotten, yellowing Goosebumps and Animorphs books. Over the next two years, I would periodically pull out the anthology and browse through it. Each time I would read *Once More to the Lake*, scratch my head, and wonder what that last line meant. But before I could unlock anything, I would become distracted by something more pressing, like a school project. As a result, the anthology would be put back on the bookshelf and shuffled away into a distant corner of my mind.

This summer, I went looking for inspiration in the anthology while brainstorming personal essay ideas for my college applications. As I read the last line of White’s essay again, it hit me. The answer was right in front of my eyes; the point wasn’t that the lake had or hadn’t changed – it was that *White* had changed. When White watched his son pull up his shorts, he realized that he could no longer dwell in the past and pretend that it was himself in his boy’s shoes. Instead, he realized the inevitability of his own death; the cycle that brought White and his father to the lake years ago and the one that brought White and his son to the lake in the present will bring White’s son back to the lake with his own children in the future.

This same cycle is taking place right now as I am writing this essay. Generations of students have been in the exact same situation in the past, and generations of students will continue to be in the exact same situation in the future.