

WHEN THE ATHEIST PRAY

Nineteen configurations of the same being stand in line awaiting the trial of their public murder. The youngest of them find residence left of the centralized platform, and as one walks rightward down the narrowly lit stage, numbers glowing red in a faint opacity hoist above each character's head and increase by the count of one per unit, quantifying each member. Each being is to be known and called upon as "Player", followed by the number that follows them around. I am facing the music for you tonight as Player 19; Nineteen for short. I am also Keeper. Keeper is the highest decree of authority, the government, the law maker, and the only contemporary. Behind them is a timer spanning the width of the room which counts down from one year and resets at the end of 365 days. When the timer resets, the next Keeper assumes control.

There is no solar or lunar penetration inside this confided space. Imagination can illuminate the walls of the arena, but no living man has ever dared to look inside. That is a task no mere mortal has the capacity or bandwidth to reckon. The players co-exist on a raised platform, some of which are more intellectually capable than others. On the surface, the progression of player capacities runs similar to aging. For example, Player 14 knows himself for which he stands, where he's been, and his capabilities - but he also knows the playing field in which all of his younger counterparts operate in. Fourteen is privy to the secret quarrels and misfortunes of One through Thirteen, but the catch is, if Fourteen neglects to coddle Player Five for an extended period, Five will tread thinner and thinner until his radiant shines no more and the experiences and lessons derived from the plight of Five drift into the void that surrounds everybody. This process is represented by the emission of light and opacity. The rules of this game are simple, the most actively participating members glow the brightest in this space, but the players do not glow on their own accord. Only Keeper can indicate who glows and when. However, each individual has command over Keeper's propensity to invest in their luminosity.

Time as an agent works to diminish the luminosity of a player, but this constant can be combatted by deliberate reiteration. This reiteration comes through modes of stimulation: auditory, visual, contextual, sensational, emotional, or likewise any means of making Keeper privy to player significance, achievement, and especially hardship.

As the music works on me now, I am Player 19, but I am also a collection of players 1-18. My insights have compounded, and my perspicacity calls upon new responsibilities since having confronted unprecedented highs. The timer on the wall indicates there are 275 days left.¹ My partners frenzy in a mad quest to increase their lumen output. Some of us are helplessly burning out, some of us will stand our ground for what seems like a lifetime, and then there's me, the Keeper of all ages. Although horizontally I reside on the furthestmost right-side of the playing field, vertically, I am pulling from the energy reserves, pumping light into 14, 15, and 16, and balancing my own authority with my obligations to succeed. Despite seniority, in some ways, Player 15 is stronger than Player 19 in lieu of the fact that I encompass 15. This syntax suggests more than just a mental framework, because in 275 days, when the timer strikes zero, and 20 becomes the new Keeper in our space, ten members from the ages of One through Nineteen must die. We all know each other because we are the same consciousness representing different years; but in due time some of us will pass on to make space for the next set of players to enter. Those who shine the brightest will rightfully remain, and falling from the median quartile echelon will mean certain departure. There are no innate characteristics that warrant a lumen investment from Keeper, however predictive modeling could accurately depict who art worthy from he who is not. And as the timer dwindles down, each player resides in their respective parcel, praying for triumph over their

¹ Gibson's began drafting when he was 275 days to his 20th birthday.

perspective criticalities, for each player does not grapple with the same telos under similar intensity; and despite this, an unfortunate selection of players will find that their most pressing matters will cease to exist, as their light drifts into a taint and disappears.

Finding your groove in a demanding industry or discipline imperatively requires an acclimation period and a definitive process. Commence the day a competitive athlete takes their field. They will show up hours early, they will relax the body and mind, they will nourish the temple, they will prepare mentally, physically, and spiritually, and they will envision themselves doing what needs to be done.

This shall be known as a level one contender.

But before any of the aforementioned will take place, let us go back months, years, sometimes even decades in time, to the zygote. The crusade of an athletes work and the telos behind why they do what they do: this is the starting point. For it is here, as Keeper rises to the occasion and unleashes the pent-up, fustigaring inertia produced by strategic, but sometimes unintentional, investment in his Players, that he finds poise in the steps he takes. A function of serious consequence will never be conquered on the operation date. No matter your craft, you will find that it takes an extended period of time and relentless stoic devotion to practice before you become the helm wielding Keeper that your dreams necessitate.

Here resides the level two contenders.

Similarly to level one, the engagement with your craft begins and ends with the self. When the going gets tough, level one and level two contenders will turn nowhere but the mirror for reassurance and positive affirmation.

To progress from here means partaking in equally as important and crucial investigative work engaging the other side of the line. At the next level, the man across from you will put forth just as influential a demonstration, for as the stakes of competition go up, so will preparation across the board. But let us not focalize on they who comes to our arena and are easily defeated, for a few proper installments and mental frameworks should suffice to prevail over said rudimentary opposition. Let us cogitate on the duel of two Grand Stallions in the quest of all quests. The two opponents who reign parallel in preparation and ability, those who are identically competent in their respective fields; whereas if one player is faster, the other shall be stronger, and they shall employ these advantages in the time of desolation and absolute desperation, always. The concern shall rest upon they who hoist a mind frame that thrives upon the faintest sight of weakness. He who can sense hunger in the smell of food. Because it is here, in the hare paced moment in which the competition delineates from the highest decree of intensity, that he shall ascend the ladder of inference and overtake his opponent; and no matter how comparatively comparable they shall be, the final bat will be won via purchase over the mind. An acquisition to be made as headlines run blaring through the neo-cortex and across the frontal lobe that exclaim, "I will not stop until I win." It is only when competition transitions

from that of self, to that of self and all those who dare to challenge me, that you become a level three contender.

But alas, you will always find one last opponent. Rarest to find two persons equally determined in willing their triumph into existence. And since the earth cannot sustain one man to hold all intestinal fortitude, there is always a counterpart: your true equal. In dubious battle, these two will not stop until they both succeed at their endeavor. And the plight of such competitors will find they have more an acquaintance than an enemy, as to find another similarly obligated in their pursuit and willingness to push upon the upmost boundaries of the mind, is a means not to be forfeited. And when the taxation of said exercise ascertains the taxpayer, he will call upon the strenuous effort of his younger self. Herein lies the death of level three, and the commencement of level four contention. As you find your grip on success loosening, he who calls upon his formerly exhausted and mentally decimated self will find that his greatest woes have all been in preparation. Level four contention is where you'll find that if your Players with heart wrenching circumstances and devastating conditions hoist a grand enough lumen investment, and the moments that constitute these struggles linger brightly in your arena, the greatest Keepers can pry upon said hardship in search of forming an obligation to succeed. And as testament by which said strategy is employed, we shall all find that emergence from the deepest pains will reign victorious over any competitor. It is here, in this realm of contest, that merit is predicated on hardship and will afford victory to those who have suffered

the most in life. The people who have awoken in agony and found sleep their greatest means of escape. This is the precursor to the thing your competition hates. For when success is awarded to those who need it - necessitation as a construction of absolute desire and the absence of alternative means: victory shan't be awarded on the basis of privilege, daddy's money, or substandard efforts.² In these endeavors, success as a characteristic will only be distributed to those willing to match their efforts to that of their need, and when the need is great, and the desire is great, is where we will find true champions.

Since given the words to reckon with competition, it's feasible to project who will survive from those who will not. Player 15 and Player 16 are level four contenders; their survival will meet no opposition, as none dare to test their luck against these Mandinka³. Back on the platform chaos has ensued. Endless motion occurs on the wall spanning timer as days pass unapologetically, seemingly to make time the only constant. 255 days remain until ten Players find refuge in the afterlife. Player 16 volunteers himself, submitting a formal resignation from the platform and becoming the first nominated for deliberation day. Keeper won't let 16 go at this time. The hurt 16 feels is too valuable to forfeit: a common lace connecting the

² Gibson was open about his distaste for meritocracy frameworks, as seen in the essay *Memorial 207* (2024).

³ Mandinka, referring to Mandinka Warriors of West African origination and depicted by Kunta Kinte in the film *Roots* (2016), as previously mentioned in Gibson's first work, *The Gibstory* (2023).

perception of life by the eldest teenagers, for 16's emotions are understood and employed by all those who come after him.

Keeper rescinds 16's proposed nomination, and as this display characterizes the volatility of 16 that Keeper knows all too well, he has no choice but to safeguard 16's existence. "You are a pinnacle to this team" Keeper begins "and I cannot afford to lose you just yet." 16 is majorly confused and all his requests for an appeal are denied. 16 begs for permission to ascend, not knowing that his fate is one of grand success. "Please." 16 begins "I have known rejection and repentance for two years far too long. I have ascertained remedies for this unsatiable desire to be loved, and those too have worn exhausted. Each day I gear, hopelessly enticed by the prospect of a relationship, and as the day wears and night falls, I find promise in drowning out my frustrations with instrumentals of melancholy and scolding hot water that graces my back as I sit in the shower of an impenetrable darkness. I am not asking for help in a way that promotes my disturbance, or solicits empathy, I am simply asking for liberation in the easiest way I know how. Let me volunteer, for if I cannot, I shall ascend on my own accord, before the timer runs dry."

Upon hearing this most humble request, Keeper is stint with emotion since knowing the trials of 16 to be formerly his own. He must tread lightly, understanding the drive of a man fueled by said impenetrable darkness and consider 16's threat of self-execution with great caution.

After all, Keeper knows July 25, 2021.⁴ Ridding his note of construction did not truncate the ink, and a lively 16 very well might be primed to try again.

Keeper takes 16 at face value, hearing no deeper than what meets the ear. With zero error in judgment concerning the fragility of his strongest warrior, 16 becomes a protected asset. This express role comes with a new set of authoritative command. 16 can inform the decision-making process and elect to safeguard two fellow Players in the arena. No matter the length of his neglect, his luminosity will not falter; for his contribution to the status quo is too grand.

So, commence a new era of tribulations. As the wall spanning timer dwindles toward an infinitesimal value, time warrants a receding propensity to invest; nothing will threaten his survival. For in every leader like Keeper, he who embodies precariousness is an invaluable asset, availing level four contention for years to come. As we reflect on 16, we shall only recall the worst of times. And in that moment of travel, when Keeper finds himself to be fully immersed in the life of 16: he shall feel frost-bitten fingers tips as we lift in the freezing garage, candy red knuckles as we box the brick walls home is made of, and decimating workouts following a thirteen-hour shift in Lewisville, Texas.⁵

⁴ July 25, 2021, refers to the date of Gibson's suicide attempt, as mentioned in his memoir, *Use Your X* (2024)

⁵ Gibson worked weekends at Spring Creek Barbecue as a dishwasher and busboy from April 2021 to April 2022.

And although Keeper knows we will survive, 16 does not. And those who follow 16 find him the most deserving of heroes. 17, 18, and 19, relish the opportunity to chat with their most critically stoic self. As 16 finds his way up to his new post, a standing ovation ensues from this trilogy of war veterans. “I hope I can stay strong.” 17 remarks. “Study for your IB English exam.” 18 advises.⁶ “Everything will be okay.” 19 assures. And low and behold 16 will find compromise in the ascension to his new podium. As what was once a time where all hope was lost, 16 will live on in the mind of his elders as an illuminating presence and a pillar of Keepers level 4 contention.

⁶ Gibson is known to have failed the IB English Exam in high school.