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Spider's Soliloquy

December 13, 2017

This year's **All-Community Read**, *Never Let Me Go* by Nobel Prize-winning author Kazuo Ishiguro, follows the lives of students at a fictional English boarding school where the students are bred for one purpose: To provide healthy internal organs for others. Social engagement artist and curator Peter Bruun believes the dystopian novel is more true-to-life than it might initially appear. He contends that the work illuminates the gap between the everyday lives of the book's students, who act with normalcy, bravado, humor and the typical jockeying of high school social expectations, and their deep inner sense of inadequacy.

In a unique and striking semester-long project this fall, Bruun initiated meaningful discussions around mental distress and substance abuse with Brooks students during classroom visits through talks about *Never Let Me Go* and the works in his **Robert Lehman Art Center** exhibit, "**Spider's Soliloquy: Case Study of a Girl.**"



This drawing is part of the "Spider's Soliloquy" exhibit in the Lehman gallery. Click for [a preview of the exhibit](#) with a sampling of the striking works and commentary on each by Bruun.

His interest in the effects that mental distress and the veil of expectations have on young people is deeply personal. Bruun's daughter Elisif, a high-achieving student and talented artist, slid into substance abuse and died of a heroin overdose at age 24.

Bruun believes that Elisif suffered in a way that is mirrored in *Never Let Me Go*: Although she appeared happy, healthy and in sight of her goals, she lived in a hidden world of discomfort and insecurity, one where substance abuse initially provided a balm, but then proved a problem. He saw an avenue to use the All-Community Read as a way to help Brookians open up in constructive dialogue about similar challenges they might face.



Elisif Bruun photographed in high school, made-up for a performance art piece.

Bruun's time at Brooks culminated with the November 30 opening reception of "Spider's Soliloquy," which shows Elisif's paintings and drawings, and follows her descent into addiction and ultimate death.

See the Lehman Art Center page for the 2017-2018 exhibit schedule, including visiting and faculty artists.

The event was memorable and effective. Bruun partnered with the student organization Students for Mental Health Awareness to stage a series of student performances that explored and shared issues of youthful vulnerability. The gallery was packed, suggesting a broad student interest in the conversation Bruun began.

Student performances segued into an open and enthusiastic dialogue on how the Brooks community could most effectively lend its support to those who felt separate from it. The goal was to normalize conversations around a topic that many consider taboo, in the hopes of creating a healthier community.

Lami Zhang '19, a co-head of Students for Mental Health Awareness, is thrilled that the Brooks community engaged in a frank discussion of teenage mental distress and community support. "When Mr. Bruun first came to my English class, I went up to him afterwards and thanked him for doing this," she said. "These are issues that we should talk about more. I think this is a great start. Students for Mental Health Awareness will continue to discuss these issues, and we'll continue to try to get the community involved."

Director of Psychological Counseling Judith Werner attended the Lehman event. She said these issues are "absolutely present in our community today." Werner says that, even when students choose not to use her office's extensive and readily available counseling services, the Brooks community is structured in a way that assists its members in finding help and support. She points, for example to the close relationships between students and their advisors and other adults on campus.

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"This is a community that prides itself on that," she says. "If you need an adult with whom you can have a close relationship, that exists here. Notably, that's what the students highlighted during the discussion Peter [Bruun] generated."

On the morning of the exhibit opening, Bruun spoke to the assembled students and faculty at Chapel. "I want to say something about ... how important it is to talk aloud about what ails us, and to share our distress openly," he said. "I want to explore what we as a community can do and ought to do better to make the world less judgmental and fearful, and more compassionate, understanding and safer for all."

Bruun shared his family's story, and Elisif's story, through photos, video and voice recordings. "If you feel alone, I want you to know you're not alone. If you feel ashamed, I want you to know there is no shame. If you're fearful of being judged, then think about how we all might find greater freedom from judgment," Bruun concluded at Chapel. "In sharing Elisif's story, in speaking aloud about what too often is whispered in cryptic code ... I hope to bring you some truths. What Elisif felt was not all that unusual, but Elisif's fate need not be anyone in this room's fate, and the best bet to getting us there is for each of us to feel safe enough to speak out loud in a community of greater compassion and fewer secrets."

Bruun was drawn to Brooks because, he said, he saw the opportunity "to inspire innovation and proactive leadership" around these issues. "I've had the opportunity to get to know students and develop something," he explained. "I want the students to feel comfortable talking about depression and attraction to substances, be it in themselves or concern for another."

*This story will also appear in **The Brooks Bulletin**, which chronicles the Brooks School experience — from on-campus current events to the lives and accomplishments of Brooks alumni. The upcoming fall Bulletin is scheduled to hit mailboxes in early January. The issue includes a feature profile on renowned climate scientist and previous Distinguished Brooksian award recipient Peter deMenocal '78, as well as a discussion on the importance of financial aid and the push to provide for financial aid through The Campaign for Brooks. It also includes a rundown of the boys 1st soccer championship season and other news from campus.*

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