

The Last Few Days at Black Mountain College

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David Silver

In early 1956, Ebbe Borregaard was finishing his service on an army base in Newport News, Virginia and considering going to college. He grew up on Long Island, raised by a creative family—his mother was a writer, his father was a vaudevillian-turned-adman. Ebbe was interested in writing, had heard about Black Mountain College, and wrote a letter to inquire about admission.¹

BLACK MOUNTAIN COLLEGE
BLACK MOUNTAIN, NORTH CAROLINA

APPLICATION FOR ADMISSION TO THE COLLEGE

This application will not be considered unless it is filled out in full and unless it is accompanied by a non-refundable application fee of five dollars (\$5.00).

Please print names and addresses.

Name: ^{Mr.} ~~Mrs.~~ ~~Miss~~ BORREGAARD, EBBE Date 1/8/56
Last Name First Name Middle Name

Present address 577 T.CO. (A.T.)
FT. EUSTIS, VIRGINIA
Until 9/23/56

Permanent address 31 ROBBINS AVE.
BABYLON, N.Y.

Date of birth 11/29/33 Age 23

Place of birth NEW YORK, N.Y.

Date you desire to enter 9/27/56

Secondary schools and colleges attended with addresses Dates Certificates

1. THE PUTNEY SCHOOL PUTNEY VERMONT 9/49 to DIPLOMA



Figure 1: Ebbe Borregaard's student application to Black Mountain College, January 8, 1956, Western Regional Archives.

The fact that the college replied was practically a miracle. By 1956, the college's student recruitment program had collapsed and the last registrar, Connie Spencer, had left both the college and her common law husband Charles Olson. Fortunately, student Eloise Mixon spent a few hours a week reading and sometimes replying to student inquiries. Eloise replied to Ebbe and included a faux brochure that the college had created in their desperate attempt to regain GI status. "It was a marvelous thing," Ebbe recalled, "a list of courses and how they were supposed to work." He applied, got in, packed his meager belongings, hitchhiked from Virginia to Black Mountain, and arrived at the college in late September 1956.²

Although fall classes had not yet begun, Ebbe got involved immediately with college activities. On his first full day, he accompanied some students to town, where they taught Ebbe how to steal food from the A&P. On his first night, he joined students and faculty at Ma Peek's, the local bar located just outside the town of Black Mountain. On his third or fourth day, he attended what would be college's last theatrical production—*Medea*, written and directed by Robert Duncan, and featuring every member of the college community. It is entirely probable that Ebbe was one of the only audience members of the college's last theatrical performance. Compared to his years in the army, Black Mountain College, with its utter lack of rules and regulations, felt like freedom. "The place," Ebbe remembered, "was such a mind blower."³

The place, Ebbe also discovered, was in ruins. Across campus, weeds were neck-high. When a rare visitor showed up, they had to be literally guided through campus. "Grass and shrubs had not been cut for months," recalled Robert Moore, a local high school student in 1954, "so we followed the students as they wound their way along paths through the trees and deep grass." Kudzu grew up, around, and over both lodges and all the faculty cabins. Campus buildings were unkept and battered. The Studies Building, Black Mountain College's greatest architectural achievement, was a disaster. The foundation was shaky, the coal bin had caved in, and broken windows were replaced with cardboard and tape. Inside, students stacked their trash in mounds that grew six feet tall. When the mounds took over their studies, the students simply moved to a new study. The library, once a jewel among the always under-resourced

college, was mercilessly pilfered. The pot shop was padlocked. The print shop was barely functional. The wood shop was leased to student Don Mixon, who seldom used it and never paid rent for it. The Science Building was abandoned. The farm was all but forgotten. The farmhouse, whose roof was raised a decade earlier by Molly Gregory, was vacant. Even the college's last remaining washing machine, the one that had been faltering for years, finally collapsed. Above the machine, someone posted a sign that read, in all caps: FUCKT.⁴



Figure 2: The all but forgotten farm, Lake Eden campus, circa 1955. Photograph by Jorge Fick, Jorge Fick Collection, Project Papers, Black Mountain College Collection, Western Regional Archives, Asheville, NC.

Financially, the college was *beyond* ruin. For the last two years, all fundraising efforts failed. They applied for grants and gifts to the Guggenheim Museum, Duke Foundation, and Mellon Foundation, but all of them were soundly rejected. Olson took multiple trips to New York, Washington DC, Boston, and Chicago, looking for and finding no new donors. Loan applications to the Bank of New York, Farmers Federation Bank, and Northwestern Bank of Black Mountain were rejected. The college established an Advisory Council, which included such notables as Albert Einstein and William Carlos Williams, that boosted credibility but did nothing to boost credit. A faculty committee composed of music professor Stefan Wolpe and writing professor Robert Hellman was established to explore ways to develop the campus lake into “a financial asset.” A week later, committee members reported back with precisely zero ideas. A week after that, the committee collapsed. Olson wrote a passionate letter to alumni in hopes of raising \$25,000. It yielded \$250. For weeks, Wolpe and poet professor Robert Creeley co-wrote personal letters to Wolpe’s expansive network of artists and musicians begging for money. They received nothing. “Our actual progress,” recalled Creeley, “was one long slow plunge into despair.”⁵

On day five or six of Ebbe’s first—and only—week at Black Mountain College, he, along with all other students, faculty, and hangers-on, was summoned to Olson’s cottage, the Jalo House. It was nighttime and the cottage was lit with candles, since by then electricity was turned off due to unpaid bills. Tea, no doubt made with recycled tea bags, was served. Eventually, Olson, a mountain of a man, stood up and announced: “The college is closing.”⁶

Olson took in the shocked faces in the candlelit room. “We need students,” Olson explained. (*What about us?* I imagine the assembled students responding, offended.) “We need *paying* students.” (The students were silent.) “We can’t pay ourselves,” Olson explained and added with a poet’s precision: “We’ve got no money, no money’s coming in, nobody’ll send us money.” One student and then another offered to “write to grandma” to secure some money. With a wave of his hand, Olson dismissed such suggestions. “The college is closing.”⁷

Soon, beer appeared and a low-key party began. At some point, someone, almost certainly Dita Frauenglass, took a photograph. And then another one.



Figure 3. Community gathering to announce the closing of Black Mountain College, Jalowetz House, Black Mountain College, early October, 1956. Photographer unknown. Front (left to right): Eric Weinberger, Dan Rice, Basil King, Betty Olson, Charles Olson, Harvey Frauenglass, Dita Frauenglass, Joe Fiore, Ebbe Borregaard. Back (left to right): Wes Huss, unidentified man, Eloise Mixon, Don Mixon, Ann Simone, Robert Hawley, unidentified woman. Photograph previously published in Mary Emma Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College*, p. 241.



Figure 4: Community gathering to announce the closing of Black Mountain College, early October, 1956. Photographer unknown but likely Dita Frauenglass. Photograph includes the same people as Figure 3 except Dita Frauenglass. Photograph previously published in Eugen Blume, Catherine Nichols, Matilda Felix, and Gabriele Knapstein, editors, *Black Mountain: An Interdisciplinary Experiment 1933–1957*, pp. 442-3.

Olson offered a few hazy details. In order to pay off debts and contingency salaries, the farm and upper campus would be sold. (Remember: by this time, the lower campus was already sold.) To prepare the campus for sale, Olson would remain to clean up the place. (*You?* I imagine a student asking bewilderingly, considering Olson's distaste for the Work Program.)⁸

Wes Huss shared his plans to move to San Francisco to join Robert Duncan, his partner Jess, and others to continue working on the *Medea* trilogy. They would also reconnect with Black Mountain College students and graduates like Paul Alexander, Tom Field, and Michael Rumaker, and collaborate with poets and writers like Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, whose work was featured in the seventh and last issue of the *Black Mountain College Review*. Some discussed moving to New York; others

talked about Chicago. As it got late, one by one, the students and faculty returned to their cottages. By night's end, the college had closed.⁹

The following day or perhaps the day after that, Ebbe Borregaard decided to join forces with the San Francisco crew. He packed his meager belongings, threw them in the trunk, and jumped into the backseat of one of the cars heading to San Francisco. As they departed, Ebbe turned around to see Olson, on all fours, frantically pulling weeds from the road that used to lead to Black Mountain College.¹⁰

¹ Ebbe Borregaard, "Interview by Mary Emma Harris," December 29, 1971, 2-4, Western Regional Archives.

² Borregaard, "Interview," 12; Don and Eloise Mixon, "Interview by Mary Emma Harris," July 4, 1968, 11, Western Regional Archives.

³ Borregaard, "Interview," 3, 5, 6.

⁴ Tom Clark, *Charles Olson: The Allegory of a Poet's Life* (W.W. Norton, 1991): 238-9; Robert S. Moore, "Untitled memoir sent to Mary Emma Harris," May 19, 2009, 1, Western Regional Archives; Ann Charters, "Introduction," in *Charles Olson: The Special View of History* (Oyez, 1970): 7; Elizabeth "Betty" Baker, "Interview by Mary Emma Harris and Geraldine Berg," October 29, 1970, 9, Western Regional Archives.

⁵ Baker, "Interview," 1, 3-4; Charles Olson, "On Black Mountain," in George F. Butterick, editor, *Charles Olson Muthologos: The Collected Lectures & Interviews* (Four Seasons Foundation, 1978): 66; Austin Clarkson, editor, *Recollections of Stefan Wolpe by former students and friends*, 28. Fundraising activities gleaned primarily from Faculty and Board Minutes, especially from the following meetings: July 20, July 27, August 24 and 31, October 1, 26, and 28, November 2, 9, and 30, December 14, 1954; and July 28, 1955, all from Western Regional Archives.

⁶ Borregaard, "Interview," 7; Christopher Wagstaff, editor, *Tom Field: On Painting at Black Mountain and in San Francisco* (Rose Books, 2006): 10; Basil and Martha King, "Interview by Martin Duberman" (Interview B), November 15, 1970, 28-29, 69, Western Regional Archives.

⁷ Clark, *Charles Olson*, 260; Basil and Martha King, "Interview by Martin Duberman" (Interview A), 40-41, Western Regional Archives.

⁸ Clark, *Charles Olson*, 260.

⁹ Ibid, 260; Martin Duberman, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* (Northwestern University Press, 1972): 437-9; Mary Emma Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College* (MIT Press, 1987): 240.

¹⁰ Borregaard, "Interview," 4-5; Duberman, 437-8; Christopher Wagstaff, editor, *A Poet's Mind: Collected Interviews with Robert Duncan, 1960-1985* (North Atlantic Books, 2012): 243; Martha King, *Outside/Inside ... Just Outside the Art World's Inside* (Blazevox Books, 2018): 45.