



# Talking Leaves

2021





## **Talking Leaves 2021**

### **Volume 24**

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#### **Policy and Purpose**

Talking Leaves accepts original works of prose, poetry, and art from students at Indiana University-Purdue University Columbus. Each anonymous submission is reviewed by the IUPUC Division of Liberal Arts Talking Leaves Design Team and judged solely on artistic merit. ©Copyright 2021 by the Trustees of Indiana University. Upon publication, copyright reverts to the author/artist. We retain the right to archive all issues electronically and to publish all issues for posterity and the general public. *Talking Leaves* is published almost annually by the Talking Leaves IUPUC Division of Liberal Arts Editorial Board. Find us on the web at [www.iupuc.edu/liberal-arts/talking-leaves](http://www.iupuc.edu/liberal-arts/talking-leaves)

## **From the Managing Editor**

After a trying year and a half of being away from campus, it is exciting for us all to be back at IUPUC. As we re-collect ourselves and try to return to a sense of normalcy and unity, it is important to reflect back on our time apart, the thoughts we had during the dark days of the pandemic, and the growth we all experienced from such a daunting time.

Therefore, it is with the utmost pleasure that the team here at Talking Leaves presents the 24th edition of the magazine, an edition filled with art created during the pandemic and put together and edited by our invaluable team of editors and me. The creation of this issue has faced many challenges; then again, we have all faced what we once believed insurmountable during the outbreak of COVID-19. In that spirit, I see the presence of darker subject material present in the early stages of this work, much like the early months of the pandemic. It is my hope that as we all grow and find light in the darkness, you might see the growth of these works, from the dire and pessimistic to the uplifted and persevering.

Thank you, so very much, to the editing team that helped with this edition, to the artists and writers who contributed, and to you for reading and viewing these works. Here's hoping you enjoy, and I look forward to seeing more student content in the future!

Managing Editor,  
Christian Litsey

## From the Faculty Sponsor

In these confusing pandemic times, we have adapted, overcome, and continue to thrive, and IUPUC maintains its commitment to support student voices and creativity as we adapt onward.

This year's *Talking Leaves* showcases efforts from four new editors. We appreciate the support of all the faculty and staff who encourage student creativity and submission of work. We are especially grateful for poetry editing advice from Jay Lesandrini, and we are perennially thankful for Vicki Kruse's work to manage submissions to ensure anonymity in our blind review process.

On behalf of the Division of Liberal Arts, I remind readers that *Talking Leaves* is a student literary magazine which encourages IUPUC students to find empowerment through self-expression. As such, we have kept copyediting to a minimum in order to preserve unique voices, personae, and ideas.

While we have been in a constant state of flux, the commitment from IUPUC leadership to fund this publication in both digital and print forms has not waned, which speaks volumes about its pledge to support student success.

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Colors of Spring by Alexa Boyd.....Cover Image





**Alone (in the style of Gertrude Stein)**

One heart. jagged. yearn for two hearts. Desire for both not. To be  
alone. all alone. By  
the glares. and stares. of others. alone.  
Alone. by expectation. Conventions connected. Alone.  
Falling. alone. One. heart. alone. with a! heart.

that is. itself. Monogamy. is lonely. they hate. Monogamy now. one  
heart. alone.

Monogamy. alone. Always. alone.

One.  
of two hearts. Alone; one heart is alone. The other of two. again.  
alone.

**Clayton Ham**

**(Paw)sitively in Love with Winter**



**Alexa Boyd**

## Cold

I feel cold, as if there's no warmth available in the sky.  
I feel cold, as if there was no love from my family's heart.  
I feel cold, as a winter night with no fire, or warmth from anything  
or anyone.

Therefore, I am cold.  
I am cold to the person who said "hi"  
"who were they"  
It doesn't matter for I no longer see their faces.  
I am cold and there is no warmth around me, no love, no reason to  
care.

The only warmth is red,  
I feel it coming out of my arms, stomach and legs.  
It is pain, but that pain is warm.

I am cold and I want time to freeze, or no longer exist.  
The only time I feel free from the cold is when I am asleep,  
"I wish this could last forever"  
I feel the pain as all the warmth leaves me.

**Mary Webster**

## **Grieving a Constant Companion**

It's hard to describe the emptiness in me  
The assumed, daily expectation  
That I will see her again in casual passing

But her dusty belongings argue otherwise.  
Her things so entangled with mine;  
I'm not sure I know what to claim as my own

And that's a fitting representation of our souls  
Intertwined for eternity but now  
Disjointed for this lifetime,

I miss her.  
But I know she is with me  
Always

**Zoe Lawless**

## Say Her Name

Child of the Falls City,  
Of the last days of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,  
On the end of history and the beginning of tragedy.  
Yet you saw something splendid in it.  
You saw hope.  
You saw change.  
You saw people needing help.  
You heeded the call.  
You put in the hours.  
You saved lives.

Say Her Name.

You knew the poverty around the decaying city.  
You saw the worst, that city cannot hide its failures:  
Towers crumbling beneath hooves,  
People destitute in vice and violence,  
Somehow, you made it through.  
You grew and prospered.

Say Her Name.

The city sent cloaked agents to your front door,  
32 greetings,  
Primed for no reason,  
Unleashed with no remorse.  
Each knock rippled through crowded spaces.  
Tearing through the reality of poverty, race, power.  
Blasting holes in the night. Your sunshine bled out.

Say Her Name!

As you left that city,  
Grime and crime fading away,  
Something was left behind in your wake.  
Outrage and distrust.  
Loss and suffering burned.  
You donned the martyr's cloak.

Say Their Names!

The streets flooded with molten hot hate,  
Boiling blood filled the gutters, the bridges, the highways.  
Sanguine rage flowed.  
Armored assassins saw to that.  
Blows, bullets, blasphemy against righteous force.  
Yet the people gathered.  
For you, they gathered.  
More were gunned down in River City.  
They gathered.  
When justice seemed lost in the poison fog dispersed in the streets,  
They still gathered for you.

Say Her Name.

The wheels of justice are slow moving,  
Rusted works, unable to crank out fairness.  
Now they embrace the slimy grease of fortune.  
No charges, all heartless, only darkness.  
The evidence was as clear as their intent.

Push gentrification, sweep corpses aside, tear down, build up  
The shattered lives and dashed buildings left behind.

Say Her Name.

Where is your justice, Breonna?  
Where is the retribution for your death?  
Why are the cowards who butchered you free men?  
Was life's worth only valuable as the millions traded for its taking?  
I think not. Your life was priceless.

Say Her Name.

I'm angry, because you were a daughter of my home, a sister to me.  
Because you had a good life.  
Because you had a good job.  
You were making it.  
But that didn't matter.  
Bullets with systemic hate behind them don't care what they strike.

Say Her Name.

People try to forget you.  
Another year, new problems, and your body stays in place,  
Cold, gone, forgotten.  
But I will not forget you.  
I will tell anyone who will listen.  
And I'll yell it at those who won't!  
Breonna Taylor!

Say Her Name!

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Say Her Name.  
Say Her Name –

**Christian Litsey**



## Heartbreak Plane

Imagine a fresh sheet of college-ruled paper, freshly plucked from a notebook and ready to be folded by a bored girl in home-room during her junior year of high school. A sort of muscle memory at this point, I've been folding paper airplanes since first grade, and I've only gotten better.

I was sitting there in the band room with my lonely little plane, and he casually walked over and pulled me into a friendly game of sending it back and forth. My plane became less lonely as it now had a chance to soar through the sky. This boy who I had known since kindergarten, but never got close to me before our sophomore year. He pulled me into this game, and it was fun at first sending the plane back and forth to try and catch it. The boy would be silly and act overdramatic when he didn't catch the plane, and it put a smile on my face. Though I thought the game would end when we left the band room, I was pleasantly surprised when he continued our little game. It wasn't long until the game evolved, and we started writing little silly notes and drawing pictures on the plane before we would send it to each other. He once drew a picture of our shoes as a little inside joke, one of his shoes and one of mine together. Our little plane turned into a vessel for messages, only to be exchanged when something significant happened. It tethered us together, this flimsy form of transportation.

I would await a response every time I wrote something, and he would always respond. I felt these small puddle-like feelings welling up inside me when I saw him. He made it seem like we felt the same way, always responding to my sad attempts at flirting for the first time. He would text me, hang out with me, and we even had a few inside jokes just between us. Those puddle-like feelings turned out to be as deep as an ocean, though, winter was coming,

and my little ocean would be frozen with no hope of thawing out again. The airplane kept flying between us. Now, with the heavy baggage that was my feelings, it made fewer trips. The poor paper contraption took its time after I sent it to return. He was pulling away.

I wasn't ready to tell him how deep the puddle was, so I kept everything light. I still invited him places, and it seemed like he was genuinely sad when he said had to cancel. He was close with a girl one grade above us, and I asked if there was anything between them. They would talk to each other and would sit together during certain band events. Both parties assured people that they were just close friends, and I had no reason to believe they would lie to me. So, I continued trying to become close, happy that this misunderstanding was cleared in my mind. We went out to eat, went out to movies, and we even went to each other's houses to hang out, but there were always other friends around. But one day he invited me over to play one of his favorite games at his house. It was just the two of us and he started opening up, telling me why he loved this game and the nice memories playing it brought back to him. *This is it!* I was starting to think *Maybe he really does like me, and he'll ask me to be his girlfriend soon!* I kept thinking these silly thoughts for another year. Throughout that year, I thought we got closer. He chose to sit with me on the bus trips from our guard competitions, chose to sit near me in classes, and chose to text me first occasionally. All this while that little airplane stopped coming my way. He kept it with him and had yet to give it back. I thought nothing of it but was happy that he talked to me, and we seemed to be getting closer.

One magical night after going to the movies with one of our other friends, we sat in my car as we waited for the other friend's parents to come pick her up. He reached over and held my hand and

we stayed like that until the other friend left. Alas, he had to leave as well and get home to his family, but before he left, he leaned down and placed a kiss on the back of my hand. “Goodnight, my lady.” Well, if my heart didn’t just do a turn inside my chest. I loved this boy, and this had to be him telling me that he felt the same. He left after that, and I sat there blushing with a goofy grin plastered on my face. It was a dream come true, this knight-like boy now my prince charming. I felt that the romantic side of me had finally gotten what it had longed for all my seventeen years of life. This lovable goofball of a boy had stolen my heart and I was glad to give it to him.

He pulled away. While I was planning how to break out of my shell and tell the first boy I ever loved how I felt, he was building a shell of his own. Invitations were brushed away with excuses, he texted less, conversations became surface level, and the paper plane that I made was never going to come back to me. My friends told me how I was blind and didn’t see how he was pining after someone else. I refused to see it at first, I mean they always say love is blind and I was beginning to see the truth in that. I saw the way they interacted, how he only talked to me now when she wasn’t around. I felt like a replacement, second best. There was a new puddle forming, this one was filled with tears, knowing that he would never feel the same. This puddle was as deep as the last, but this water was bitter and salty. I was angry, infuriated. I felt he led me on, lied to me, treated me kindly – only to kick me once I let my guard down. What made these gross feelings more intense was seeing the two of them become closer. Whenever I would talk to him, her name always came up. I saw them hug each other and saw that he looked at her the same way I looked at him.

I never got the paper plane back; he hijacked and stole it. All those feelings I sent, he never talked about them with me. I buried everything, never confessed, started to build a new shell from the

wreckage of the old shell. I started picking up the broken pieces and putting them back together, reinforcing them to protect my heart from any more hazards. I distanced myself from him and talked to him less. We aren't close anymore, though every now and then we will text one another, but I'm always the first to text. Never talking about what was, not acknowledging the hurt, or what might have been. The puddles are still there, one frozen, one with enough salt content to rival the Dead Sea. They will always be there, reminders of the past. But now I have accepted them and made room for more puddles. As for the plane, he told me he still has it.

**Paige Wilson**

## Gothic Ideals



**David Walby**

## Who The Hell Is Phineas Gage?

“Nice job, Martha Stewart.”

I sauntered over to the fridge, containing all the essentials: A (formerly) twenty-four pack of Sol, half a container of white rice from Express, and a squeeze bottle of brown mustard. Reaching for a bottle of the Sol, I asked: “So, you’re still here?”

She replied immediately, almost as if she were countering a punch I’d thrown at her. “I just thought I’d make us breakfast. I’m sorry, your stove just cooks things way too fast. You should really have Harvey come look at it.”

I popped the cap of the bottle off with the cleanest steak knife from my sink and took a sip.

“You gonna clean that up?” I said, indicating the cracked eggshells and breadcrumbs speckling the counter.

She sighed, seemingly in pain, and looked around at the rest of the room, before scooping her breakfast-mess onto the pile protruding from the trash can. Some eggshells rolled down the pile, falling right next to the floor on the can.

“Close enough.”

The aging blonde went to sit down before I swiftly reminded her, “Don’t you have a class to teach later? Best not get too comfortable.”

Twenty minutes later, my house was peaceful again. I checked the calendar for the first time in a while, just to check to see how long I’d have to fill my waking minutes with things to do. Today was the fourth of April, in the year twenty-nineteen, which translated into about two and a half months of killing time. I hadn’t marked the days since January, because at some point it just becomes tedious, like counting the specs of dust on your wedding ring. Not that I’d be privy to the exact day it’d all end, I just had a rough

time span of about two weeks in June. I checked my phone, for any idea on what I might be doing tonight. The time read 12:12. Another groveling text from Dr. Curtis, Mad Dawg asking me if I wanted a re-fill, The Bank badgering me about one of my loans, and some cute little brunette trying to play seductress for some Crown Royal. The first and third were promptly ignored, I kept the second in mind for later, which made texter number four the (Lucky?) winner. I humored little miss clever, knowing full well she was one of the easy ones. I should know, I taught her all the perks of being easy: Free dinners at the LeBlanc, the favor of an over-twenty-one, and an "A" in intro astronomy. Not that she couldn't have gotten an A on her own, but it's not like she needed to know that. I agreed to meet her in the CVS parking lot with the stuff around nine and reminded her of the oft-true adage "The more, the merrier."

1:19 P.M. and I'm clogging my arteries with dollar chicken-mayo sandwiches made by underpaid teenagers. For a brief moment, the relatively newfound tightness around my waist bothers me, before I'm once again seduced by the sweet, greasy kiss of the McChicken. Bliss. The low roar of the fast-food joint is another relatively new, but enjoyable, comfort. My eyes briefly glance out the window, watching a man clad in a slim-fit suit walking with urgency towards the nearby train station. He glances down at his Vincero watch before increasing his brisk pace. What a fucking sucker. People like him scurried around like insects trying to escape being crushed by a behemoth's foot. Eventually, the scurrer passed out of sight, leaving me to enjoy my chicken sandwiches in peace again. Poor things didn't last more than a couple of minutes, before the only trace of them was five empty wrappers and a sweet little burn in my chest.

3:56 P.M. and I'm half-watching an episode of *The X-Files* I've seen only about ten times before. Supposedly one of the most dramatic and terrifying episodes, too. I probably felt something the first couple of times I watched it as an undergrad, but proximity and repetition tends to make the supernatural feel like the self-important natural. Seriously, if you've met one ugly space monster, you've met them all, and met their bloated egos by extension. It's like they're just trying to make up for having six eyes or tentacles or whatever. Then again, I suppose it's pretty human-centric to assume we're the universe's gold standard for beauty. Point being aliens are generally pretty annoying. The worst part is not being able to seriously vent about it with anyone besides Gavin, but he gets hysterical every time I bring it up. I realized the credits were rolling, and I was somehow even less excited about what was up next. I stood up and examined my living room for the sixth time in six weeks. My stack of fascinating dissertations and publications about the stars had graduated to the more important task of holding my empty beer cans that doubled as ashtrays (I was a thrifty sort, y'know?). My carpet, composed of old shirts and candy wrappers, obscured the hardwood underneath (Good thing too, I hated the hardwood, but Amy had insisted upon it.). My couch smells faintly of sweat and dollar store perfume, but that's ok, not like it ever deterred anyone from sleeping or staying up all night on it. My foot was suddenly attacked, a painful slice from a particularly vindictive piece of paper propelled by a draft. I picked up the culprit to tear it to shreds, but the contents gave me momentary pause:

"Dr. Hawthorne, myself and the rest of the faculty at UCFC are saddened to hear of your decision to resign from your tenure-track position in the Department of Astronomy. We understand you have been the subject of some nasty rumors and accusations as of late, and we hope that this was not the deciding factor in your decision



to step down. I would ask that you wait until you have administered your final exams for AST 110 and AST 345, on December 15th and December 16th, respectively, to clean out your office. Your health insurance through the University..." blah blah blah, my health and dental get axed. "It is with the utmost sincerity that I express our regret in losing such a valued member of our faculty, but we wish you the best of luck in pursuing whatever future goals you have. Sincerely, Dr. William Royce, President UCFC."

The letter was dated November 15 of last year.

3:12 A.M. and I've taken major damage to my nose, jaw, and right eye. Surprise, little miss clever had a boyfriend. The neon lights of the strip blurred my vision like a kaleidoscope, not dissimilar to what I had seen back in September. My next attempt to look up was met with another meaty fist to my face, causing the asphalt to give me a sudden pat on the back. My nose and mouth felt warm, and the ground seemed to offer some reprieve from the heroic eight-second battle I'd attempted against two hundred and ten pounds of pissed off Undergrad. He said something to me, but the ringing in my ears was screaming louder than he possibly could have. I just stared at him for a moment before I saw him lift his foot and plant it on my chest. Of course, he had to be wearing boots.

"Easy there." I managed to spit out, the warmth dripping from my mouth to my chin. His gaze intensified for a moment, but he stopped talking. I continued, "She didn't mention you, hoss, so you should re-evaluate..." I didn't have time to develop this thought, because his other boot collided with the left side of my trunk. A bit more warmth decorated the ground now.

"I'm just saying, I didn't know a damn thing, alright?"

"Bullshit."

"Listen here, heavy hitter, I'm a bachelor, I wasn't cheating on anyone. Sam -"

“Keep her name out of your fucking mouth before I wire it shut.”

“I won’t call the cops if you just let me go.”

His face shifted from that of a brave warrior to a kid who just got caught watching Skinemax after bedtime, but he went right back to playing tough guy.

“You better not call the cops, or I’ll fucking kill you, Dr. Cradle Robber.”

I stifled a chuckle and played the part of “Scared middle-aged man.”

“Yeah, of course. Not a word. You won’t see me around here anymore.” With his best war face, he just nodded, and walked away, watching me. I sat for a moment, looking out into the bustle of High Street. The first time I’d stood here, I was a freshman undergrad, fresh from out under Mommy’s thumb, with a fake I.D. and way too much swagger for a virgin from Oregon, who could only pay tuition because of a youth group fundraiser on his behalf. Did I have swagger at eighteen? No, I reasoned, I must have had more modesty then. The swagger might have been on the inside, but I doubted its existence in the external. The lights seemed like they went on forever, and that anything was possible in this fantasy land of big-city college life. Now they were poignant reminders of the cycle I’d fallen into, and up until recently, the cycle I shared with most of those around me. I watched big boy turn his flannelled black on me, head held high, as if beating up a middle-aged alcoholic somehow changed the fact that he had just gotten cucked by a man a head and a half shorter and twice his age. I smiled a bit, realizing that he reminded me of a guy I used to know, Larry Bergmayer. Good guy, Larry, linebacker for our high school football team, mowed old folks’ lawns in the summers, drove me home from youth group on Wednesdays.

I fucking hated Larry Bergmayer.

The cold steel slid comfortably out of my boot, and the safety didn't object. I took one last look at big boy and pumped two shots into his back. I expected him to fall a bit harder than he did.

It's 2010, and I don't want to let this moment slip away, ever. We've been married for two years, but I still get butterflies in my stomach when she looks at me, with those mischievous green eyes. I never thought the girl from my Calc. III class who idolized the Dead Kennedys and protested George W. Bush would be my forever, but I wouldn't have it any other way. Half-asleep under blankets, she takes what little room is left on the couch and presses her back into my chest. I tighten my grip on her frame, to make sure no space was left. Amy had never ceased to impress me: in the eight or so years we'd known each other, and the seven we'd been together, never once did she half-ass any task she took upon herself. Papers? Wrote three drafts, minimum. Job interviews? Twenty minutes early, dressed to impress. Proposing to me? Hired a violinist to serenade and timed it perfectly to make sure most of my family was visiting. Just the sheer fact that she had the guts to propose to me was almost enough to make me say yes. I still remember our embarrassing nicknames from college: "Spock" and "Purple," respectively. She didn't have the amethystine hair anymore, but she still had the passion and love for life she did at twenty. I watched her slowly become more than half asleep, until her snoring drowned out the noise of the TV. I leaned into her ear "Baby?" I whispered delicately.

An exhausted, slightly grumpy "Hmmm?" was her only response, her eyes still closed.

"We should go upstairs, you fell asleep."

"Ghhhhmmmmmm," an eloquent response. I couldn't stop myself from laughing at this point.

“That’s how it is, then, huh?” Freeing myself from the tangle of limbs and hair, I (making sure to lift with my legs, not my back) scooped up 145 pounds of weakly protesting wife. After staging an ineffective resistance for a whole five seconds, she planted a quick kiss on my lips, marking a truce. As I carried her up the stairs, she squeezed one of my biceps and giggled like I imagine she must have back in her teens. “Shush you now, we’ve both got early mornings tomorrow,” I responded playfully.

“You’re right,” she said with exaggerated disappointment.

“Hey, come on, I’ll be here all week.” I finally ascended the last step.

She smiled. “I hope you’re here a lot longer than that, Danny.”

I laughed in response. “Darling, I’ll be here a lot longer than anyone wants me to.” She laughed back. I guess neither of us knew that I was right.

5:12 P.M. and Gavin’s convinced his wife he had to stay late at UCFC. That wasn’t entirely true, nor entirely false. I had asked him if he wanted to go get a beer or some wings, but he said this was the only cover he had. I guess I don’t blame Shannon for forbidding Gavin to see me. I would too if I was a gullible bitch who believed everything bitter ex-wives told me.

“You realize,” Gavin hesitated, averted my gaze briefly, and turned to face me again. “You realize that you’ve just literally told me you killed a man, right?” I couldn’t help but chuckle at the size of his eyes at that moment.

“No shit, Einstein,” I responded, with a smirk. Gavin sat there, his mouth slightly agape, before collecting himself again.

“Dan, even putting aside the abhorrent evil of what you did, this is the kind of shit that’s going to make...” He paused, looked out at the window, towards the sky. “Them. It’s going to make them decide we’re too dangerous to be allowed to walk around knowing the

fate of man. They're going to think we're too hot-headed or lack any form of discretion."

"I mean, that's not exactly a false statement."

"It's not a false statement about you, Dan. I've been lying low, serving my time until the cosmic hangman comes for our helpless little planet."

"You want a cookie, brother?" I began to light a cigarette.

Gavin instinctively put his hand over my lighter.

"For fuck's sake, you used to work here, I know even you can't have put enough of Columbia up your nose by now to forget simple shit like that."

I put my lighter and smokes away without much of a fight.

"Sorry."

A few tense moments followed, until Gavin opened one of his drawers and pulled out a little container of Nicorette. He first popped one into his mouth, then offered the little container to me, "They're not exactly Marlboros, but they get me through the day."

I graciously accepted and popped one of the little pieces into my mouth.

"Gavin, man." I hesitated for a moment. "It's alright if you're scared. I don't see the point of freaking out, but..."

"Oh, no, Dan, I'm not scared of the space monster with a space monster army that keeps tabs on us 24/7. Not at all. How are you not freaking out? I just hope they don't axe us for what YOU did."

"Not like it'll matter, it's just a couple of month's difference." I wadded up a piece of paper and shot it clean into the waste bin. Kobe.

"That's a couple of months I could spend with Kiki and Greg, not like they'll ever grow old or anything." His eyes began to mist, "but god damn it, I want their last memories of me to be positive, I want my kids to die knowing that Daddy loves them."

“For the love of god, man, don’t go pussy on me now.”

Gavin stood up quickly, knocking over some pictures on his desk.

“Is this a fucking game to you? I know you’re always doped up or drunk or whatever, but you’ve got to realize that this is a real situation, Dan. We’re all going to die, and you can’t be bothered to stop fucking teenagers long enough to face the music.” I attempted to speak, but I was cut off by more of Gavin’s teary-eyed temper-tantrum. “I don’t even know you anymore, Dan. I don’t know how you go from running half-marathons, regularly appearing on *Cosmos* and having a picture-perfect marriage to being a fat, degenerate piece of dog shit!” He slammed his fists down on his desk and continued his tirade.

“I swear to god; my best friend is Phineas fucking Gage.”

“Who?”

He sighed, “Don’t worry about it.”

Silence flooded the room. Still sitting, I reached a hand down to pick up the picture he had knocked off. It was a picture of my brother-from-another-mother and I at our hooding, brandishing our shiny new PhDs like swords. Amy and Shannon were there next to us, laughing about God knows what.

“Sorry.” I replied and put the picture back. Gavin sniffled a bit.

“I love you, Dan. Like a brother.”

“I know.”

“Seriously. I shouldn’t have gone off –”

“It’s whatever.”

Gavin just nodded and became very interested in his leather dress shoes suddenly. We sat in silence for a while before my phone beeped.

“I gotta run.” Gavin just nodded and motioned vaguely towards the door.

“It’s open.”

I grabbed my jacket and took one last look at Gavin. He was tall, dressed in a suit, chiseled CrossFit bod, and a wedding ring that had way too little dust on it. Two-point-five kids, a wife, a picket dog, and a golden retriever fence. I could tell he was thinking about what it meant for his kids from that September night last year, a lifetime ago. That night, so much like a dream, when Shul-Nebbar, the closest thing to God I’d ever met, informed the two nosy astronomers that had caught a glimpse of his scouts, that earth was to be consumed on the summer solstice of the next year. The reward for our silence would be painless deaths in our sleep, for ourselves and our families before the apocalypse. Always about the kids and the wife and the fence. Can’t say he ever stopped being my favorite person, even if he was a sucker.

My phone vibrated again; redhead was getting impatient. I closed the door and began walking to my car. Redhead reminded me that it was the 5th of April. Why the hell would I need her to tell me that?

It’s 2007, and all of my hard work is about to pay some serious dividends. I had recently been accepted to a postdoc at my undergrad alma mater back in Cali. The same program as the one and only Gavin Alexopoulos. These few years at George Mason had been hellish at times, long nights spent in the library, conference calls with other over-stressed, over-caffeinated would-be astronomy PhDs. There was the distance, too. Amy had stayed at UCFC to get her master’s, so we became long-distance for nine months out of the year. In the summer, we never left each other’s side and fucked like rabbits until it was time for me to sigh all the way back to

Virginia. Four years of this had taken its toll, but it was damn near over.

Waiting outside of the set of double doors near the Johnson Center, I was wondering what world-ending disaster could cause Gavin “Too cool for your bullshit,” “Live a little bit, bro” Alexopoulos to take time out of his day to come see me. I mean, as best friends went, we were the “Talk mostly online and meet once a week for Sunday brunch” kind; we were simply too busy to be anything else. I heard him before I saw him, size-thirteen Chucks smacking against the pavement. I turned around.

“Hey stranger, what’s good?”

“Oh, you know, everything and nothing,” the gentle giant responded. I laughed a bit, before clearing my throat, and looking into his soul. He looked calm, unless you knew him well enough to know where to look. “Seriously, man. What’s wrong?”

His jovial facade collapsed.

“Man, I’m not sure anything is wrong, just...” He looked off into the sinking evening star for a moment. “Things are gonna really change for me, here real soon. I think I’ve bent my last bender, friend.” He then faced me again, as if waiting for me to inquire further.

I took the bait, “Dude, you’re not making any sense, what’s going on?”

He sighed his typical Gavin-style sigh. “Shannon’s period is almost two weeks late now. We’re pretty damn sure that this isn’t just a scare.”

I was nearly knocked off my feet and put an arm around his broad shoulders, for his sake, or mine, I didn’t even know.

“Dude, it’ll be ok.” He remained silent. “Hey, we’ll be hooded before it’s born, right? At least you’ll have the degree. You’ll be alright, man.” He just nodded, and looked me over, before wrapping



both of his arms around me. The few moments of silence that followed were somehow not awkward.

We pulled apart, and he finally responded with, "Actually, I'm not sad in the least. Truth be told, part of me was overjoyed when I found out. I'm just scared. Scared shitless." I nodded, despite not exactly being able to relate. He continued, "I don't know how to be a dad, Dan. I'm not nearly as disciplined as a twenty-five-year-old man should be, and I've never been great with kids. Shit, I still drive a two-seater." We both laughed the kind of laugh that soldiers do before charging a Panzer division.

I put my hand on his shoulder again. "Gavin, look at me," I insisted, "you're going to be a great dad because I know you're not going to let yourself be anything but. You got this, man." He beamed and perked up a bit.

"Thanks, man. I think you're gonna be a great dad when your time comes, Dan. I've never met a harder-working, more thoughtful, more compassionate motherfucker than you. Plus, you always seem to know what to say to get someone off their ass." A more genuine laugh than the last followed.

"Maybe, I don't know," I admitted.

Gavin nudged his head in the direction of the graduate housing, and we began walking, side by side. We walked in silence for a few minutes, and I looked him over a bit. He was twenty-five and six-foot-five, but his sense of dress didn't match. Clad in black skinny jeans and a Blink-182 shirt, his swoopy, straightened haircut went over one eye. He wouldn't exactly look out of place at an MCR concert. My thoughts were interrupted by a statement that threw me more than a little off.

"I'm gonna name it after you. Daniel for a boy, Danielle for a girl."

I laughed, “Don’t do that, man. It’s a bit much. Besides, I always hated being a ‘Dan’. Don’t put it on another poor soul.”

We walked a few more paces. Without looking at me, he responded, “Okay, fine. Let’s compromise, then. What’s your middle name?”

“Gregory.” I answered automatically.

“There it is, then.”

“You’re not serious.”

In response, he flashed me his normal shit-eating grin. “Dead serious, Danny boy.”

**Zeke Raymer**

## **Nothing for Me Here**

Staring down distraught at the loss of my love.  
Meters beeping loud and coming to rest.  
The line and my heart drop as one.  
My wife! Oh, the woman that I love, taken from me at such a time!  
What am I to do alone in this world, without a one to caress?  
I stand there weeping, as her body lies growing cold.  
No more is the woman I loved present in this world,  
But in the next waiting so, for me to come in time.  
And there soon I shall be, there's nothing left for me here.

**David Walby**

## ***Memento Mori***

### *Day 1:*

He stirred from his slumber as if it were any other day down in the bunker. It was never easy for him to sleep in the absolute quiet this shelter provided. These containment units were scattered across the country, each supporting different lifestyles and capacities. This metal box he now lived in along with his wife and baby daughter sometimes felt more like a prison than a new home, but it was better than what lay beyond that great trapdoor at the end of the hall.

The outside world was broken, a miasma had taken it by storm. The science behind how it spreads or what causes its symptoms to those afflicted is highly unknown, so many view it as more of a curse, that the presence of a higher power has finally arrived and has made its judgment. Besides physical deterioration, it also heavily affects the brain, causing forgetfulness of varying degrees, from minor amnesia to total insanity. It was commonly referred to as “the blight.” Being highly contagious, it spread across the world within days. Perhaps the most terrifying thing about it was how suddenly it made its impact.

He was often the first one up between the three of them, so he quietly made breakfast, but that did not prevent the baby girl from stirring, her head poking out from the top of the cradle. He made a funny face at her, and she rewarded him with a short giggle. She did not often make much noise, which he found strange, but if it meant less crying, then he was happy for it. He walked to his wife’s end of the bed to wake her for breakfast, surprised the delicious aroma was not enough to get her up. He softly placed his hand on her shoulder, but she did not so much as twitch. Now that he thought of it, she usually snored rather loudly (which helped him

sleep in his new home), but he had not heard a peep from her while he was making breakfast. It was when he jokingly lowered his head to her chest to hear her heartbeat that he realized something was horribly wrong.

His wife was not breathing.

He stepped back in shock, the smell of the meal he made was suddenly sickening. He dropped the plate and rushed to his child, as if she too could die in a moment's notice. She had a confused look on her face but did not cry. He held her tight to his chest while questioning how this could have happened. Surely the only explanation was that the blight had managed to find an opening into the bunker, but how did she succumb to this while he and their daughter felt fine? This thought made him wonder about the condition of the rest of the bunker. Either way, he could not stay here forever and watch the love of his life he spent years upon years with grow cold, this must be reported.

He opened the door, daughter in his arms, and immediately noted something was off. At the end of the hall was a ray of light, natural light. Someone had opened the trapdoor. The lack of any kind of noise unsettled him, surely someone else had awakened by now and would have alarmed the others of this. The next fifteen or so minutes were spent going room to room, hoping to find anyone who was still alive.

Not another soul remained.

He and his daughter were the only two still alive in the entire bunker. Was this a nightmare? He had no idea what to think, the only thing he knew was that he could not stay here. He went into the storage room right by the ladder to the trapdoor and set the baby down so he could grab some supplies. A duffel bag, some clothes and shoes, and some sealed foods were all he figured he could feasibly carry along with his daughter, but then he wondered

if there was a map somewhere. Maybe he could use it to find another bunker that would take them in. Unfortunately, he could not seem to find one, but he did stumble upon a little notebook with contents regarding aspects of this blight. With that, he was ready to leave, accepting the fact he would have to find another bunker on his own. He looked over to where he placed the baby and almost screamed when he saw she was no longer there. This sudden panic subsided when he heard the squishy sounds of flesh slapping the hard floor from the hall. He peered out to see his daughter crawling toward their room on the other end of the hall. He began to cup his hands to call her over to him and hesitated.

He had forgotten the name of his own daughter.

*Day 2:*

Despite the grimness of the situation, he found this walk across forgotten, open land entrancing. The rhythm of his footsteps, the long-missed song of the birds, time eluded him occasionally as he searched for a vehicle along the road. He looked down to see the head of his baby from the unzipped part of the bag, sleeping soundly, as if nothing was different. He slung the duffel bag over himself, so it hung in front of him resting at his stomach, doubling as a sort of makeshift sleeping bag and kangaroo pouch for the child. He thought the convenience of being able to check her at a moment's notice was worth the awkwardness of the setup.

Eventually his travels led to a campground within a forest. He had been walking for many hours now, so he decided this would be a good place to rest for a bit. He took off the duffel bag and sat down on a mossy stump, the soreness of his legs finally catching up to him. He let the baby out and played with her for a little bit, this baby that was his own, yet her name was lost to him. Her pale eyes were beautiful, but they also seemed to stare into your soul, reading your

every thought. His game with her, that loosely resembled Patty Cake, also brought the most wonderful smile to her face. Her smile was to be indulged in, with a warmth that would melt entire glaciers. She was capable of expressing other emotions than positive ones, but it was mostly just sulks or frowns, the only time she ever cried was...

Had she ever cried? Had he lost that memory too?

Once he wore her out again, he pulled out the notebook on the blight and began to read more about it. It seemed that the blight could in fact travel by air, but most of it died with the victim, meaning it was largely no longer contagious postmortem, like it existed only to threaten and kill off humanity. Apparently, the blight did not kill off memory completely, more like it formed a haze, and studies showed that this haze cleared away when the victim was in a critical condition, or perhaps this overwhelming return of data to the brain caused the victim to die soon after. Either way, it was terrible how cruel nature could be. Not only memories could be forgotten, but basic bodily functions could also be lost to the blight, causing paralysis or suffocation. Had everyone in the bunker died as quick as they did because they had literally forgotten how to breathe?

When he closed the book and looked out into the campground a faint glimmer of metal caught his eye. At first his hopes soared with the belief that he had found another bunker already, but he soon realized it was a vehicle. He figured it was worth investigating on the off chance it still had its key. When he walked over to it, he noticed the tents set up nearby and felt knots in his stomach. More people chosen by the blight, likely unaware of the pandemic that would have threatened their vacation. He hesitated with the thought of taking the car keys from a corpse; somehow that humanized the situation much more when compared to just taking a car with the keys left inside, but he had to for the sake of his child. At

least he knew they would probably not speed up his deterioration now. As he opened the tent, the stench revolted him and made him dry heave. They had been dead for some time now. After a moment, he pinched his nose and went back in. There were two adult bodies and an open suitcase. One had appeared to be sleeping, the other looked more like they had fallen down, perhaps they were packing to leave when the blight had cut their mortal coil. Avoiding looking at their rotting faces, he searched their pockets, to no avail. After being disgusted with himself for doing this, he looked inside the suitcase. Only after he closed the suitcase did he find the pair of keys laying on the cloth floor of the tent a few feet away. Relieved that this was not done in vain, he grabbed it and prepared to move everything into the vehicle. For the first time since waking up yesterday in the bunker, things were starting to look up.

*Day 8:*

The only thing he felt upon looking at the city in ruins before him was melancholy. Once a place bristling with activity and filled with life, now a field of hollow monoliths, like titanic tombstones in a graveyard worthy of a god. Only the unfortunate or the insane roam outside the bunkers now. He was starting to become unsure of which group he belonged to.

He was back to walking with the duffel bag at his stomach, he was able to siphon gas whenever he saw an abandoned car on the road, but it was too infrequent to rely on, and he had no choice but to leave it when fuel had run dry a few days ago. He gazed around the barren streets, looking anywhere for a place not completely ransacked. He couldn't help but feel saddened when his eyes fell on a small park with a playground. He imagined it full of playing children and looked down at his daughter, who was gazing back up at him from the duffel bag with a blank expression on her face. Would



she ever get to play on a playground in her lifetime, would she even be able to play with kids her age at all?

This wandering continued for a while until he started to hear a voice around the corner. Happiness and fear both welled up in him, at long last he had confirmation they were not the only living humans above the earth. When he turned the corner, he saw a disheveled older man with his back turned to him, rummaging through a pile of —

Food! He had plenty, and some of it was packaged and safe to eat. If he could have even a small portion of what this old man had, he could ration out food for himself and his daughter for weeks to come. It had been so long since he was able to talk to anyone, he was worried maybe he had forgotten to speak by now, but luckily he had not.

“Hello sir! Is there any way we—”

The old man practically leapt out of his skin, he turned around quickly and spread his arms out, as to guard his stockpile. The man wore a mask covering his mouth and nose and stared at him like it was indecent to leave those facial parts naked. A sound came out from the man’s mask, but that was it, just a sound. No recognizable words, just a tone of hostility. Maybe he could still understand words, just not say them, it had to be tried.

“Sorry if I scared you, but I need your help. Me and my daughter have been traveling for days and are running out of food. I see you have a lot behind you there, could we just have some of the packaged food to get by a little longer?”

The old man grunted and shook his head. Was there any humanity left in this man? He had enough food to get him by for months but would not fork over even a morsel of it to help another human being, not even a child. Maybe he wanted a deal, he wouldn’t give his food away without getting something in return. It was not-

ed that the old man's clothes were quite tattered, he must've been very cold at night.

"What about this?" He reached into the duffel bag, alarming the old man for a moment but seeing what had been pulled out sparked curiosity. "How about we make a trade? If I give you this sweater and jeans, would you give us some of your food?"

The man looked hungrier for the clothes than he had for his food, that's when he knew the deal would ring true. The man made a few more grunts and reluctantly scooped up a decent pile of packaged food and set it a few feet away. The clothes were also set on the ground and the deal was struck. The food was stuffed into the bag, the baby laughed and played with the crinkly packaging like he had given her a bunch of new toys, and the old man immediately donned the sweater, visibly thankful to have something covering his patches of bare skin. The two men parted, both better for this rare interaction.

After a while longer of roaming empty streets, he concluded that there was probably no bunker stationed at this city. It was time to make his way out. It was a peaceful walk until he passed by a particular alley, where a hardened yet feminine voice called out to him.

"Hey! What's in the bag?"

He turned toward the sound cautiously, suddenly concerned for his child. The person he now had his eyes on was a woman, at least half a foot taller than him. She wore no mask, which marked her as a savage if the old man's look at him had taught him anything.

"C'mon now, what's inside? That's not even how you're supposed to carry those, dumbass! You forget how already? Better give it to me then!"

"You don't understand, I can't —"

"You can and you will, unless you forget how this works, too."

She pulled out a switchblade from her pocket, brandishing it at him. He saw the only way out of this was to run, and so he took no time in bolting away. She took off after him, about twenty yards behind, so it might have been possible to shake her off around a corner. The next corner he turned on, he was met with more voices. His heart sank until he heard their tone of voice.

“Quick, over here! We’ll cover your exit!”

He was so shocked by the sudden sound of kindness that he instantly found himself going their way, even if it was a trap. They were a man and a woman, wearing masks with the symbol of an arrow pointing upwards, a design that matched their uniform as well. What was this, a vigilante group? There was no time to ponder this, however. He did get a quick word in while passing them through the alley.

“Thank you!”

“We saw how you helped that old man, the world needs more kindness like that,” the woman replied as she extended her baton, ready to take on the unmasked mugger, who had now caught up.

“Now go! We’ve got this”

He vowed to make sure he did not allow himself to forget their kindness, nor their symbol if he ever needed help again. He looked down at his daughter, who smiled back at him, and fled the city.

#### *Day 41:*

He no longer knew how many days it had been since he had set out from that bunker; he lost track a few weeks in. He had found and left a couple more vehicles, the last one he left when he realized he was losing his ability to drive. He had nothing in his life now except for this child, his child, the child whose name was lost to him. He couldn’t bring himself to give her a new name to call her by,

feeling it would be an insult to his wife's legacy to just start calling her something else. That was another thing that was scaring him — he was beginning to lose recognition of his wife's facial features.

Later that day, he was walking through a field. It had started to rain, which did start to dampen his spirits, as well as his clothes. The baby had a rare expression on her face, a frown. He supposed she must've not liked rain. He was inclined to agree, the ground became soft underneath him, sinking his feet with every step, begging him to stay put and let the earth take him.

The rhythm of the raindrops transitioned into a cacophony, and the pounding drums of thunder soon followed, no longer allowing him to think. He was now soaked and cold and had to zip up most of the duffel bag to make sure his daughter did not have to be as well. He left a small opening as to not suffocate her, but it also meant that he could hardly see her anymore. Soon every step forward took Herculean effort, and even seeing what was ahead became difficult with the rain and wind working in tandem to attack his eyes. Suddenly he felt his chances of keeping them alive had been whisked away. His strength drained from him, ebbing away with each drip of water falling from his body. He fell to his knees, ready to succumb to the fate of which he was chosen. Somehow, through all the noise of thunder and rain, he was able to clearly hear a sob from within the bag at his stomach.

His daughter was weeping.

It was a shock to his system, he immediately opened the duffel bag back up, allowing the faint amount of light left outside to reveal its contents. It held a notebook (he could no longer read or remember its contents), a couple of provisions, and a child who was no longer sobbing, now grateful to once again look up at her father who had done so much to protect her. A flash of lightning illuminated her face, letting him once again take in her pale eyes, slowly

growing radiant hair, and something he felt he was experiencing for the very first time again.

Her perfect smile.

Suddenly there were aspects of the storm he didn't quite notice before, now getting his attention. While the rain was cold, the breeze in the air was warm, and the sky was painted bright with strokes of lighting, beautiful sight, regardless of the rain in his eyes. He found newfound resolve to push forward, for a smile that needed to live on. He took in these new emotions and let them fuel his legs to stand again. He began to walk again, not unhindered by the soft, consuming ground but also no longer stopped by it.

*Day 63:*

The duffel bag had finally been worn out; he was carrying this child by hand now. It seemed yesterday was about as far as his memory went now. The mere act of walking had become a challenge. Whatever the name of this plague was, it was beginning to take its hold on him, a hold he feared he could no longer resist.

He found himself in a small town sluggishly walking on the road, though the location mattered little to him, he no longer knew what he was trying to find, only that it was to help this girl. He no longer even knew for sure if this child was his own, how could someone with such wonderful features and personality have been birthed in part by his own genes? The child was looking around with curious eyes when his left leg gave out on him. It took everything he had to not drop the child as he fell onto the asphalt. He screamed in pain and panicked, now was not the time, he still needed to find a place for her.

He was literally dragging himself forward now, one arm cradling the child, the other reaching out to help pull him along. He heard voices in the distance, someone out there must have heard

his scream. His strength was waning, he stopped moving and sat up, holding the child in both arms in what might be their last moments together. Soon he heard the footsteps and looked up. It was a group of people wearing matching masks and uniforms with an arrow symbol he did not recognize. One spoke when they got close.

“Oh my God, are you alright?”

He tried to respond, but no words formed.

“He’s almost gone, I don’t think there’s anything we can do.”

“Wait look! He has a child!”

“What? How?”

“We can figure that out later, let’s take them to the base first, maybe we can find a way to figure out what happened before he goes.”

The strongest looking one picked him up, a woman tried to take the child, but he strongly resisted that idea, so they left her with him. Soon they were in front of a large metal trapdoor. That was when it happened.

Everything came rushing back to him.

His wife, everything about her, their lives before the blight. He remembered that this was his hometown, and this bunker was the very same one where his journey started. These people, he now remembered, were part of the same group that helped him in the city, with the rising arrow as their symbol, and he realized with relief he was in good hands. He remembered his daughter, this young soul he held in his hands now, he did not fail her after all. He remembered all the time they spent playing and bonding, even on this trip, all the love he had for her, and best of all, he could finally recall her name.

His precious Faith.

He also remembered that the blight also cleared one’s memory before the victim dies.

“Faith ...”

The last thing he said, she looked up at him with a surprised look. It seems she remembered her name, too. He raised her to the woman who tried taking her before. She said nothing but slowly accepted her, wide eyed. Once she had her, he let his arms go limp, and closed his eyes, finding peace in the knowledge that his goal was reached.

*A New Day:*

“Faith! We’ve got a report, c’mon there’s no time to waste!”

Her partner dashed from her door to the ladder at the end of the hall. She had just woken up, always the late riser, but nothing got her more excited than a new report. It was another chance to get out there and help get the world back on its feet. She scarfed down a food packet, got new clothes on, and she was on her way.

Faith walked out from the trapdoor and donned her arrowed mask, there was work to be done.

**Ethan Montgomery**

### **The Man with the Suicide Wish**

Once upon a too-long time ago  
I knew a man, barely one-hundred and twenty  
Seasons in their entirety  
Who wished that he would die  
Even now, I regret in not asking why  
Did the pills not make it harder to breathe?  
Was the rope not painful?  
Have the drinks not made the organs heave?  
Wasn't inhaling water dreadful?  
Nothing he did got him what he wanted  
His femme features contorted so delightfully,  
I'd watch him moon-dazed  
Unable to kill himself, not really  
I wonder if he'd have  
Cared to live if I'd confessed  
I lament at my grave  
That he might've said yes

**Dakota Mullikin**



**Cardinal at BCSP**



**Breana England**

## The Red Hat (Excerpts)

### I: Paralysis

*Tick, tick, tick*, my chest grows tighter with every passing minute. The bone seemingly growing closer to piercing my flesh with each breath. My vision becomes spotty as I break out into a cold sweat. I am unable to move now as the darkness swirls around me. I try to scream, my throat dry and raw, but no sound comes out. Long fingers come out of the darkness and curl themselves around my neck, my heart beats faster as my eyes dart from side to side. *It's okay, it's just a dream.* I have never been a religious man myself, but at this point, I prayed. I prayed that perhaps the god only my ex-wife had believed in would come to my rescue. The fingers, now clenched fists, tighten their grip; my airway almost completely blocked off. I looked toward the foot of my king-sized bed, why my sister had put a mirror there I will never know. What I saw when I peered down at that mirror did not enlighten me one bit. What met my gaze was not my reflection, but a familiarly uncomfortable face. All I could make out on the menacing silhouette were the rows of jagged teeth that stretched from ear to ear. A violent feeling of dread swept over me as the thing tipped its bright red misshapen hat. Reaching one long gangly arm over its shoulder, the slender black monster slowly climbed out of the mirror. The way its body jerked and writhed as it moved disturbed me more than anything, like something out of one of those straight to DVD horror films. I could feel its hot breath blast into my face. It burned my nostrils as the creature's horrifyingly featureless face grew closer to my cheek. A long snake-like pink tongue wriggled out of it, flapping around like a kite in the wind.

“Long time no see, Randy boy; did you miss me?” The thing whispered in a devilish tone. It had been about three months since this creature had invaded my subconscious. For years this thing, that I affectionately referred to in therapy as the “Red Hat,” haunted me. My first paralytic episode occurred when I was merely fifteen years old, and they became more frequent as time went on. The doctors had told my father that it was most likely a result of the trauma I had endured. My father, who was always stubborn as an ox, called it a bunch of “bolognas.”

*“The boy is fine doc, just going through a tough time right now. He’s not messed up in the head or anythin’, just had a nightmare that’s all.”*

*“Sir, what your son has described leads me to believe he is suffering from sleep paralysis, a very scary and emotionally destructive occurrence. I urge you to please cooperate with us on this matter.”*

*“The boy is suffering a loss!”*

*“I understand and I am very sorry about the circumstances I am meeting you under. Please take this prescription and get it filled. If not for my sake, for your son’s? I would like to see you both weekly for the next couple of months, to help you through this process.”*

I remember my father held off on giving me the medication. I did not quite understand why I needed it either. I had always suffered from nightmares, and the only traumatic event that occurred was my family getting into a car accident. One my sister recovered from fully, in record time, too. Doctors said they had never seen anything like it, her neck was never the same though. She always held her head off to the side, almost like it had a permanent dent. Unlike her Ford which had been totaled after my father plowed it into a tree.

I did not understand why the Red Hat appeared as he did. He was frequently present but not all the time. At first, he meant me no harm. He would often sit cross-legged in the corner of my room, just watching me. Sometimes he would give a small wave, or a ghastly grin would reveal his sparkling fangs. I was never afraid of him. It was not until I began taking the medication that he became violent. The Red Hat always knew how to make me aware of the power he had over me. For years, I let this creature rip my mind to shreds with horrible visions and reminders of my missteps.

His visits became a nightly occurrence. I was a victim of my own psyche. I had not been for a long time, thinking of Stephanie seemed to keep him at bay. When I would dream of her or my sister, he could not reach me. Almost as if he were stuck behind a locked door. He could see inside, but not interfere with my happiness. I could tell this infuriated the Red Hat, when he could not tear down this mental block he would often act like a caged animal. I could hear his muffled howls and screams as he tried to break through, almost as if he were scratching against my brain. A feeling of contentment would wash over me, and I could feel a smile creep across my sleeping face. Those days were gone now, Stephanie had left me, and I now lived as an alcoholic bastard, just like my father. I believe that is why the Red Hat has been away for so long, my attempt at sobering up allowed him to slither back into my brain like unwanted vermin in the wintertime. He gave off a putrid smell, one that had unlocked a core memory I deemed long forgotten.

## II: The Deer

I was never much into hunting, the idea of taking something's life made my stomach churn. A wormy smell filled my nose as I trudged behind my father in the overgrown field behind our old

farmhouse. The grass had long died, it had become yellow and dry. My father berated me each time the grass crunched underneath my thick brown boots.

“What did I tell ya 'bout makin' all that noise,” he said in a harsh whisper.

My father was an intimidating man. His cold blue eyes and dark demeanor made it hard to find him friendly. I do not know if I had ever seen that man smile. How could you tell with the fat black rat living on his upper lip? If he ever did his teeth would be brown with Tobacco stains; he chewed the stuff like it was going out of style.

“I'm sorry, dad — I —”

“Sorry isn't gonna keep the deer from runnin' away. I swear, boy, I'd have better luck bringin' yer sister out here.”

I turned my head down to my feet, carefully planning my next move. My father's red cap flashed, as the sharp snap of a twig echoed in the distance. His eyes narrowed and filled with a flame. An inhuman thirst for the hunt. I turned my head to try and pinpoint what he was looking at. What caught my eye was breathtaking. A long slender chocolate brown deer stood in the golden field. Its magnificent antlers towered over its head like a crown. What I saw as a majestic piece of natural art, my father saw as a trophy to hang on his mantle.

“Get down, boy, that there's a six-pointer. The boys at the lodge are gonna get a kick out of this,” my father said collapsing to the ground.

“I'm gonna give this one to you, Randall.”

I looked at my father in shock. That was the first time I could remember him calling me something other than “boy” or any other swear he could come up with. He handed me the large rifle. My father never let anyone hold his gun, let alone shoot it. I adjusted my-

self and peered through the magnifier. The deer's head shot up as I cocked the rifle. My heart sank to my stomach when I caught sight of those deep brown eyes. They were full of innocence and fear, almost as if it knew what was coming. The gun trembled in my hands, that look of pride in my father's eyes was quickly fading.

"What are you doin', dumbass? Shoot it. SHOOT IT!"

I quickly pulled the trigger, the blast that was ringing in my ears seemed to echo around the world. I watched, mouth open wide, as the deer fell to the ground.

"Atta boy, Randy, good shot!"

I stood above the victim as my father field dressed it. I stared into its cold lifeless eyes. I took a life, and part of me died with it. The ride home was a silent one. The pale-yellow headlights of my dad's old Chevy illuminated the path in front of us. The heat had made the carcass smell, the foul stench filled my nose as we sped home. The smell of death was one that always made my gut hurt. The smell of rotting meat reminded me of the dried blood on my father's boots. I watched as the now blackened leather pushed down on the gas pedal, my father was smiling and singing along to the radio. He ripped a piece of deer jerky with his brown fangs, grease and crumbs stuck in his beard.

"Ya know, I was worried 'bout you, Randy. Thought you were gonna end up bein' some sissy, with all that drawin' and writin' shit ya do. Surprised me out there today, boy, I'm proud of ya," he rested one of his massive paws on my shoulder. That was the first time my father had ever said he was proud of me.

"You became a man today, Randy."

I did not feel like a man though. If stopping something's heart meant I was a man, then maybe I would rather be a boy. I did not feel any more masculine. Watching my father slice open an animal's belly did not give me chest hair or a beard, instead, it made me feel

hollow. I felt ashamed, the stiff rancid appearance of death is one that would haunt me forever. It is one that would make me physically ill each time I walked into my living room and had to face those slick beady eyes hanging over the fireplace. It is what made me turn to vegetarianism for the next three years. The deer remained a constant symbol in my dreams and in therapy.

*"What happens exactly?"*

*"There's this beautiful golden field, and I'm standing in it. Then there's this deer, and it looks at me like it knows what I'm thinking. A twig snaps and it starts to leap, and leap, and leap and then BANG."*

*I stared up at the ceiling, quietly. The dream replaying in my head, my hands trembling. I could see the pity in the therapist's eyes, the sympathy he felt for me.*

It pissed me off. As an edgy teen who just wanted to be left alone with a pencil and paper, anyone offering me the slightest semblance of help was belittling me. *"Oh, poor little Randy. Can't handle shooting some dumb old deer. He just wants his daddy to love him."* Fuck you, Freud, I would often think. The shrink boiled it down to being a result of PTSD from my shitshow of a childhood. I think it is a load of crap.

## VI: You Couldn't Save Her

The creature was now stabbing its claws into my chest. I could feel its long fingers around my heart.

*"You couldn't save her, could you?"*

*Wha?*

Images of Lorelai flashed through my head. Images of her playing volleyball, images of her driving, images showcasing the beauty and simplicity that she brought to our lives. They grew darker, more vivid. I could see how she flailed about that night. The

loud snap of her bones made my blood run cold. The way the blood splattered on the windshield when her forehead crashed through it replayed in my mind.

*"Just like you couldn't save your marriage."*

I thought of Stephanie's beautiful sleeping face. The way her hair fell perfectly without any effort. I remembered how soft her skin was, how smooth her cheeks were. I thought of her beautiful eyes, how they sparkled when she first woke up. I remembered how perfect her smile was on our wedding day. How not even a mental snapshot captured her true beauty. I remembered the fight we had right before she left.

*"Randy, what are talking about? You're acting crazy!"*

*"What do you mean I'm acting crazy, Steph. Lorelai has always understood me, she's my sister, she knows me better than anyone."*

*"She can't Randy, she can't understand."*

*"Why, why can't she understand?"*

*Stephanie ran her hands through her wild mane, the conversation was exhausting her.*

*"Randy, look at me. Look at me, and listen to me," she said clasping my hands in hers.*

*"You don't talk to Lorelai. You don't see Lorelai. Lorelai did not put that mirror at the foot of the bed, I did. I did, Randy, me."*

*"What are you talking about, Steph?"*

*"Randy, she's gone, Lorelai is gone. I know you miss her, but you have to accept that."*

*"Just like you couldn't save yourself."*

My eyes shot open as the creature thrust his wrist out of my chest cavity, the steaming drops of drool turned into a viscous red liquid. I stared at the hole in my chest. My eyes followed the string of arteries and tendons that lead to the pulsating object in the Red Hat's hand. He let out a low, chuckle.



“You are a foolish, pathetic man. You feel so sorry for yourself when you should feel sorry for those around you. You are the reason she is gone, remember? Lorelai, Stephanie, both victims of your toxic, selfish, personality. Like father, like son, I suppose.”

The Red Hat squeezed the organ, causing me to scream.

“You killed her, remember?”

“What? No. She’s not dead.”

“Awe, poor Randy boy believed the lie.”

I could barely breathe. Short gasps are all that escaped my mouth. Lorelai was not dead. The Red Hat was fooling me, trying to trick me.

“Come on, Randy, you remember, don’t ya?”

*“Dad, Randy is a little boy. You are fucking him up. You! He does not need to be out hunting and killing animals.”*

*“I was younger than him when I shot my first buck. Who the hell are you? What made you turn into some bleeding-heart liberal bitch?”*

*“I guess I learned it from watching my piece of shit father, who doesn’t care about anyone but himself!”*

*“You shut your mouth; you have no right to talk to me that way. What would your mother say?”*

*“I don’t know, Dad, what would my mother say? I don’t even have a mom. She left me, just like she left your good-for-nothing hillbilly ass.”*

*“Maybe it was her bitch of a daughter, who has to have everything her goddamn way!”*

*There was complete silence.*

*“When we get home, I’m taking Randy and I’m leaving.”*

*“You sure as hell ain’t, he’s my son, not yours. You’re not an adult, Lorelai Jones.”*

*“I’m more of a fucking adult than you are!”*

*"Guys, stop it!"*

*Lorelai stopped and looked in the back seat, my dad peered at me from the rearview mirror.*

*"I don't want to live with either one of you! I hate you both! All you do is fight; you act like you want to kill each other. If you want to leave Lorelai, then just leave."*

*"Randy, I..."*

*"Leave!"*

*"Stop the car."*

*"What? We are on the interstate, no."*

*"Stop the damn car," Lorelai said, reaching for the door handle.*

*"Lorelai, are you goddamn crazy —"*

*The car screeched as we spun off the pavement.*

I watched as the Red Hat raised his hand to what I can only assume was his nose. He sniffed, and his snake of a tongue slapped across his face. I could feel myself fading, powerless. My mind drifted back to Stephanie.

*"Randy, I can't do this anymore, but I don't know how to tell you without breaking your heart."*

The Red Hat's mouth began to open, drool dripping from his lips.

*"What is it?"*

*"Randy, we've been lying to you. Your father told me that they said you'd grow out of it, but you never did."*

The creature's massive fangs gleamed in the moonlight, draining in through my blinds. His claws squeezing the oozing goo into his mouth.

*"Randy, that night did not end how you think it did. There was a horrible accident, and you were lucky to have survived at all, any of*

*you. The only reason that you and your father were okay was because you were in the back, and he was buckled in."*

*"What are you saying?"*

*"It wasn't your fault, Randy, none of it was, it was just an accident."*

The creature bit down and my body shook. I could not move, I could not scream, I could not even cry. Instead, I watched. Watched as the creature ripped my heart to pieces like a rabid animal.

*"That can't be true, Steph, it can't be. She made a full recovery, the doctors said so. The only thing that was wrong was that she had a crick in her neck."*

*"Randy, you made that up. You made that all up, none of it was real. You were seeing things. You have PTSD, it was a horrible crash."*

*"I just talked to her yesterday."*

*"No, Randy, you didn't. I'm so sorry that you had to find out this way."*

*I sank down onto our thin couch. My entire life flashed before my eyes. Lorelai was not at my graduation. My art teacher submitted my work to the Denver art program. I was resolving my issues on my own.*

The eyes of the deer flashed before me once more. The same lifeless look that I saw in the field that day now plagued my sister's beautiful yet mangled face. Lorelai Jones died on May 26th, 1995, and part of me died with her.

**Lexi York**

**Zuluban**



**David Walby**

## Madness and Temptation

God, I am tired; I am so tired. My legs are like stone, fatigued and unmovable. I feel the stress of my life slowly tearing away at what little bit of my sanity is left and calcifying on my skin, hardening more until I turn to stone. Every little thing, everything that turns into a new issue, every call, every assignment, every expectation, is weighing me down. I'm going to drown, and I am not even underwater.

Of course, there is a way to fix this, but I can't go there — I won't go there. I have to stand up, get out of this room. Perhaps some sunlight will help? Something to get me moving at least. I'll work on my project when I get back. That's a lie, but ehh. No one is going to do anything. I am already failing the class, and no one seems to give a damn. All my life, no one has ever once given a single fuck, but I guess that is just my life.

You would think that for someone who spends all of their time talking about how tired they are, they might try taking a nap or something. I've tried that — bad idea. For some sick reason, nature decided to leave out a few things from my brain. Every time I sleep, I dream of the same madness.

*A dark horned nightmare rides forward from the shadows, and I am locked inside my own body. It comes closer and breathes into my face. The stench of corpse rot and coagulated blood enters my lungs. I feel myself heave, as if to retch, but I don't move.*

*Before I can recover the nightmare grabs me by the skull and probes its fingers into my mind, "Crimson Lies on crimson tides, tear you from the black."*

*It casts me back and I fall onto the blackened, charcoal-like, soil. The words repeat in my head, slowly rising in volume and speed,*

*until my head is utterly filled with cacophonous screams. Just as I feel I might die, I don't.*

I opened my eyes and shook my head. "I must've just drifted off," I say to no one in particular.

It is amazing how often you find yourself blacking out when you only sleep a few hours a night — the nightmares keep to that. I have been thrown out of more than a few classes because of that. It turns out that teachers do not seem to like it when you can't stay awake in class.

"I'm sorry, Teach, I just can't seem to stay awake. I like your topic, I really do."

"For the last time, *I am not* Teach, call me by my proper title or get out."

"Fine, Professor Orson, take your title and choke on it. I hope you choke on it."

"Get out of here, now!"

"Gladly."

Okay, maybe the reason my teachers don't like me is for more than just the fact I can't stay awake. Whatever, you try being nice when you're this exhausted. I can feel your eyes judging me, stop before I tear them out.

Anyhow, back to what I was talking about: my dreams, well more like nightmares. You would think that they were limited to when I was just asleep, but that isn't the case. The doctor tells me that I've got some kind of gear loose in my head and wants me to take a bucket worth of pills morning and night. Crazy right? I've got better things to do than to eat chemical candy. Besides, if I want some chems I've got better people for that! But even I have my limits.

I've got a certain aversion to putting chemicals in my body. Francis doesn't seem to like it, last time I tried to put a pill in my

mouth, he wouldn't stop screaming until I spit it out. Why are you looking at me like that? Oh, that makes sense, I should probably explain who the hell Francis is. Alright, but cut the language, usually teachers and the Shadows are the only ones who curse at me. Then again, it can be hard to tell which is which at times — oh insomnia, how I love you!

Anyhow, right. Francis is the only one of my dream people that I actually like. He is with me most of the time. He swears that his name is Lucien, but I disagree. He seems to like to try to screw with me a lot. Good thing I'm a genius, whether my professors will acknowledge that or not. He is a nice guy, for the most part. There are times, however, when he can be a bit of a pain. For example, I have never seen a guy get so offended by a church. He never quite explained that, but it makes sense, I don't like those extended rants either — my parents made damn sure I got my fill of those.

You know, that brings me back to the first time I met Francis. It was just after my parents had died. I was still wiping the blood off of myself when he appea —

“You can close your mouth now. It wasn't their blood, you idiot!”

It was a car wreck. I managed to roll out of the SUV onto the side of the country road that we ran off. Sixteen-year-old me got out of the car and looked at my parents — dead, definitely dead. I remembered thinking just how pretty they looked. Most people look their finest right after death, but they don't keep their color for long, it's a shame really. I looked at them for a moment but ended up turning away. The watering in my mouth was getting unbearable and I didn't want to lose control. Sure, meat is meat, but even I don't want to destroy that masterpiece. Only people who are truly mad destroy art.

Francis came to me like an ebon-winged angel whenever I was rolling around in the grass trying to get the blood off. He introduced himself and mentioned how he thought my arm was broken.

“You look awfully strange for a guardian angel,” I mentioned.

“Name’s Lucien, I’m surprised you caught on that I’m your angel, good eye. I think you’ve got a bit of an issue with your arm there, bud.”

“Ehh, I’m fine. Just got out of a crash with my parents. They’re over there, dead — at least last time I checked. Come to think of it, I guess my arm is a little floppy, but I am mainly worried about all of this blood. I want to get it off of me, not a big fan of red.”

*The angel smiled, “Come here, I’ll fix that arm for you.”*

*I walked over to him, his dark black wings shining in the sunlight. He was a creature of utter beauty. The wings, the horns, the hooves ... complete perfection. With a pulse of magic, my arm was wrapped in dark-colored energy as my flesh healed itself.*

“Good,” I point over to the crashed SUV, “They may be absolutely gorgeous right now, but I don’t particularly feel like being pretty.”

As I finished saying this, a car pulled off the side of the road. A group of people exited the vehicle, and I heard a few screaming. “Oh God, what is happening?!” and all that crap. You would’ve thought somebody just died. Well, I guess they did, I digress. A few minutes later, an ambulance arrived, and I was taken to a medical facility. They were bound and determined to put my arm in a cast, even though I told them it was fine, I decided to humor them. At least they let me get the blood off.

That was the first time I ever met Francis, but he has been around quite often ever since. He tells me things about the people around me and helps keep me safe from both the meat enemies and



the dream ones. He has claimed me and tells me that he will protect my soul forever. He is the best friend — the only one really — that I have ever had. I've tried to share him with others, but no one else can see him.

“Nope, I am yours, *all yours.*”

Francis is a bit stubborn, and eventually I agreed to stop trying to introduce him to people. Besides, people were starting to think I was crazy or something. A particularly idiotic fellow attempted to give me a cross and a Bible. “The power of Christ compels you!” and all of that malarkey. Needless to say, Francis did not like that. I eventually convinced him to leave the fool to his madness, but it wasn't easy. I really think that Francis just wanted to make him look pretty, but there are times and places for that, and it was not one of those. We walked away, but the priest continued staring, looking quite cross I might add.

Francis was right, I needed to stop trying to share him, and they don't deserve him anyways. Besides, what is it about Christians and being scared to death of goats? Normal ones are fine, but by God if they stand up, it's horrible. I really have to shake my head at these people. You would think that people that want to get into heaven so badly would be used to that kind of thing. Francis says that heaven is full of two-legged goat people like him. They are a type of angel. Francis tells me all about heaven and promises me that I can come with him there and be with him forever.

I don't have many memories of my parents, but I can tell you this: absolutely none of them are pleasant. Sending me from one hospital to the next, and, by God, the number of exorcisms I have gone through is ungodly. No matter how many times I told them there is nothing wrong with me, they just would not listen.

*My mother looked into my eyes forlornly; “We'll get you fixed, honey.”*

*“There is nothing to be fixed! Please, mom, don’t let them take me again.”*

*The priests grabbed me by the arms and began to pull me away. “Mom!”*

*“Mom!”*

*My screams went on deaf ears as they pulled me back into the chamber once again. One priest pulled his crucifix from around his neck and put it on the coals. With his Bible, he began his demonic chanting, sounding like a twisted bird singing with half a beak. After a few minutes, the chanting was over and the cross on the coals was red hot. This is where the fun begins.*

*One priest took the cross with a pair of tongs as the other one held me down to burn it into my flesh. By the “Power of God,” they were going to burn the evil out of me. There has to be something ironic about two pieces of shit trying to disinfect something, but the joke was lost on me. All I felt was pain. Was there no one to trust in this world?*

As I said earlier, I first met Francis whenever my parents finally died. Thankfully, this wasn’t long after the exorcism — thankfully, my last one. I spent the last few years of my development in state-funded homes and, thankfully, they didn’t care as much about the “health of my immortal soul” as my parents did. No, they just wanted me to shut up and stay in my room — works for me. By that point, I realized the only one I could trust is Francis, my guardian, my angel, my salvation.

*“I can promise you a place in heaven, forever by my side, but there is something I need you to do for me first.”*

*“Sure, anything for you, Francis.”*

*“My name is *Lucien*. You know this, Adam.”*

*“Fine, whatever boats your float.”*

“Good. Now I need you to do a simple task for me.”

Francis showed me some pretty pictures, pointy pictures, but pretty, nonetheless. He said that they are the pictures of heaven and that all the children must know them. He has many children, but I am his *favorite*. The Children of *Francis*. I just had to draw these pictures and I would be granted eternal “*Poena Ignis*” by his side. I am not sure what that means, but it sounds pretty. Francis is always using these funny words, but he’s a funny guy, so what can I say?

I took the knife to my wrist and cut. Everybody thinks that cutting your wrist will kill you, but it really won’t. You have to go pretty damn deep to do that. I’ve been “cutting,” as they call it, for years. People assume you must have a problem if you do something like that, but it really is quite a normal activity.

Besides, they say, “Cut horizontally for fun, vertically for results.” This is of course referring to if you are trying to kill yourself, which is not my goal — I don’t want to be pretty yet. Anyways, I took the knife and cut — horizontally — and let the blood flow out of my arm. I looked at my arm for a minute. They are right, beauty really is on the *inside*. I let the blood flow down onto my finger and used it like a quill with crimson ink. I began to draw the symbols that Francis taught me, and I laughed. They are very pretty pictures, but very intoxicating.

“I have never felt so good before!” I told Francis.

“Yes, and once you do this, you will feel good forever.”

“No time to waste then!”

I continued to work on the complex circle of symbols that Francis instructed me to draw. I never took Francis to be an artist, damn these were complicated. However, I eventually finished them. I actually had to cut myself a couple different times to have enough ink to finish. Francis suggested that I could use someone else’s

blood as well, but I didn't want to ask. Francis seemed a little disappointed at this, but he let me continue.

Once I had finished the runes on the floor, I asked Francis what I should do next. This is when he revealed his true form to me. He had done so a few other times, but this time just seemed extra special. The horns seemed extra sharp, his fur had extra shine, and he was taller than before. However, it was when he spoke that I got the real indication of what was different.

"Are you ready to begin?" Francis said with a deep, guttural voice, and a goatish grin.

His voice was absolutely wonderful. Such power he commanded! Never before had I felt such a draw towards him. I was ready to serve, to give him my soul and my allegiance to him, forever and ever. Francis was my savior, and it was time that I proved it.

"Of course, I have never been better."

"Good, very good."

The ritual did not take long, or at least what I assume was a ritual. I couldn't really be sure. We stood there and recited some lines from that big, black leather book, that Francis carries around, and then he had me sign in it with some more of my red ink. Some of the words we said were indescribable. Some of them sent shivers down my spine, while others brought feelings of elation. He said that this was normal, that my soul was being elevated from that of a base man to that of a god, a god in his name and HIS image.

"I feel hot, very hot."

"That's normal, it's just the ritual burning away your sin."

Images flashed into my mind of the many "rituals" I had gone through as a child. The pain, the sizzling of flesh — it was all too similar to those devils in the white robes. I pushed the thought out of my mind, Francis wouldn't do that to me. I began to squirm under

the pain, the heat was becoming hotter and hotter. I felt like I was on fire.

“It hurts, Francis!”

“I am LUCIEN! Remember, Adam, this is what YOU wanted. Just another minute and the pain will be gone, I promise.”

That minute felt like hours of needles poking in and out of my body, like I was being boiled alive, and my flesh being pickled, but he did not lie. The pain was gone, and I was ready for the final step of Francis’ ritual. He had grown even more now. He towered at least four or five feet over me. Francis looked at me and grinned. With a stomp of his hoof, we were transported outside and into a realm of fire.

I fell to my knees, and it was beautiful. The fire was there, but it was not hot. It had the warmth of a dead mother’s embrace and all the comfort that entails. People were wailing in elation all around us at the sight of this beauty. I turned to Francis and spoke.

“What is this magnificent place?”

“This is my kingdom, Adam, the place where you will be by my side forever. All around you are people like you that have decided to join paradise, but there is one important difference. They were selected by my subjects, but you were selected by me. I am the LORD of this realm, and I chose YOU, because YOU are special.”

After Francis said this, we were transported back into the room where I had painted the circle. He told me of the one last thing that I had to do to join him. With a slight burst of crimson magic, Francis manifested an object in his hands. It was a dagger, long and sharp, covered in a great number of the same runes that I had painted onto the floor. With a smile, he pushed it into my hands.

“For you to join me in my great kingdom, you must shed your mortal form and ascend into your best self.”

I stepped back. “Is this really the only way?”

“If you wish to join me, you WILL do as I command.”

“I don’t know if I can.”

“You must.”

Francis disappeared from sight. I was left on my own, dagger in hand, in the blood-covered room. I took a few minutes to consider what I was about to do. My mind felt cloudy, as if something was trying to penetrate through the thick determination I had towards Francis. But, over time, that weakened, and I was finally brought back to the proper determination for my cause towards my LORD.

I raised the dagger, contemplating on how I was going to commit the deed. Something quick, there is no need to do something that’s going to take five minutes for me to die. The neck? No, with that I’ll suffocate. That’s not a pleasant way to go. I finally decided on my method. I was going to lodge the knife through my nasal cavity, straight into my brain.

*A gun would have been really nice, but I guess this will have to work.*

Hesitation gripped me. Something was trying to break my resolution, delude me from the proper path. Images of crosses and feathered beings flashed through my head. Disgusting images of wheels in wheels and the sunlight, way too much sunlight. I finally broke through the miasma and plunged the dagger into my brain. Peace at last. Right before my vision faded to black, I heard a strange noise, like a lamentation of sorts. It was in the same odd words that Francis used, but far less certain.

*“O me miserum! O fatum? Alius animam perdidit ignes aeternumque adytis effert ad inferos.”*

Hell if I knew what they were saying, but my mind was too clouded to guess. I finally faded away, out of the world of the living.

I woke up what seemed to be a few hours later into the same blackened fire-scorched realm where Francis had brought me earlier. Except this time something was different. My brain was different, as if some grand illusion was lifted.

Oh God, what have I done? The black nightmare stood there — smiling.

“Hello, Adam,” Lucifer said.

**David Walby**

**Overkill (Free Verse)**

Victory, but at what cost?  
Avoidance of disaster  
Does not imply the attainment of happiness,  
It leaves room to wonder  
Would it have been sweeter to drink the venom,  
Less painful to crash and burn,  
Less outrageous to suffer those famous slings and arrows,  
Than to stand in the blazing sun of new beginnings?

To fear the ominous future,  
Is to inflict paralysis upon oneself,  
And bring those dreaded omens,  
From nightmare to waking horror,  
To forget the past,  
Is sacrilege, denial, and cowardice all in one,  
Both wretched fates.

To pine and wish and dream for days gone by,  
Reflect on those precious fleeting hours,  
Acknowledge their cursed, finite nature  
Nothing is perfect,  
Nothing is eternal,  
But Anything can be Beautiful,  
If only preserved in dreams.

**Zeke Raymer**



**The Valkyre**



**David Walby**

**Eternity (Sonnet)**

Heaven is not forever, my darling  
Bodies of angels wither and perish,  
Poor mortal man, never to cease quarrelling  
We fear for our soul and run to the Parish

We fear what might come next, we crave afterlife  
The idea of void we cannot take,  
We pray and cry and sing to flee time's knife  
Religion is comfort, in death's wake

All fear that last long nap, this is a fact  
So do not judge your fellow man in prayer,  
To your sisters in Silence, show some tact,  
Every man must face that last great nightmare

I feel the void, looming, staring me down  
The time will come, I lose my mortal crown

**Zeke Raymer**

**Aspiration (Reverse Poem)**

I am not pleased with the girl in the mirror.  
Never will a soul hear me say  
I am good enough.  
Life is worth living  
Instead, they will hear me say  
I need to stop eating  
I need the makeup  
They will hear me say not that  
I am happy  
I am confident  
I am satisfied  
I will think to myself  
“The anxiety was self-defining”  
“The heartbreak was efficient”  
“The bullying was deserved”  
I will know not that once upon a time  
Stumbling in the mirror  
My hair a mess  
My makeup running  
My clothes distressed  
That I was happy with  
Myself and who I am.  
I know I am meant to be  
Untouched, Unloved, Unwanted  
I don't deserve to be  
In love with the girl in the mirror  
I only want to be

**Alexa Boyd**

**Dream Diviner**

Shadows hunt

Edge of sleep

Brink of periphery

Dreams all-the-while

Out of reach

Heart trapped

Torn in half

Between here, now, and

What it means

**Dakota Mullikin**

**Fruit Bowl****David Walby**

## Chicken Soap

First, get your chicken and a cruncher  
Maybe grab a little spice  
Boil down chips of soap  
Put the chicken to the grind, and  
Give her a little shove  
Mix it up thoroughly  
(Don't forget!)  
Pour it all piping hot  
Right into the molds  
Let it sit to cool and  
Add a little something special  
(You already know what it is.)  
When they're slightly warm to touch,  
Pop out your little chunky chicken balls  
Remember to take a whiff  
(It won't be long till they're rotten)  
Feed them to your husband  
He's had his fun  
And as he takes his bite,  
His bite of that delicious-smelling soapy crud,  
Smile. As the saying goes:  
Good things come to those who wait  
You've waited all this time  
So, sit back and relax—  
You can wait a little more  
As your husband di(n)es.

**Dakota Mullikin**

**Antonio, Horatio, and Antonio (Sonnet)**

An artery who delivers blood to the heart,  
The heart beats and we breathe, love, and draw our breath  
Held aloft, symbol of vitality and love  
The heart Exonerated and the artery forgotten

The blood is the same, be it organ or vessel  
But lovers pine for hearts, charming scoundrels steal them  
The wicked and adulterous covet and break  
But none crave the identical sanguine vein

Hamlet and Bassiano, both treasured friends  
Sebastian a stalwart ally, a noble man  
But I fear I grow sickly green with envy  
Your soliloquies have left not one single line open

If all the world is but a stage, men playing parts  
The supporting cast must lead, friends turn to upstarts

**Zeke Raymer**

## Fancy Colors



**Alexa Boyd**



## A Safe Space

My desk is almost a sacred place. It is here that I do my homework, color in coloring books, read and write, and play video games. No matter what is going on in the world around me, I am safe at my desk. My pink unicorn plush and photos of my best friends and all of my favorite pens to write with sit scattered around me. In one corner, I reserve the space for a wide array of snacks: chips, candy, nuts, and my favorite — chocolate. It all sits in a big jar, the colors of the wrappers swirled into a rainbow through the glass, all for my viewing pleasure. At the top, on a little shelf, I have a bunch of trinkets that remind me of happy memories. The corsage from my first prom, a photo of my friends and me at my sixteenth birthday party, and a tiny bunny keychain that I got as a gift. The drawer holds pencils, scissors, washi tape; any type of random office supply I have gets tossed in there. Another corner of the desk holds books, colored pencils, paper, and anything I have that does not fit anywhere else. There is even a cubby hole with vinyl records, cleaning spray, and important documents I keep just in case. I have everything I need right here in front of me. I can nap, play, relax, and do anything I want. It feels like nothing can harm me, and I have no negative emotions when I am sitting at my desk.

When the sun sets, however, and it becomes darker, everything starts to fade. I am safe at my desk, but not safe from everything. There is one thing that can get to me: temptation.

**BAM!**

It hits like a semi-truck going ninety miles per hour on the interstate. I cannot focus on anything else. This is the only feeling that can reach me. When it does, it is a rain cloud over my head, and the need to have things that I do not need is the lightning strikes above me. There is nothing I can do about it except to complain. And

whine. And moan and groan. It will never go away. Instead, when it is done with me, it will move on to its next unwilling victim. It circles around us like vultures.

It comes in waves, more often than not twenty-foot-tall ones that will drown you if you do not give in and let them guide you. I often feel like I am floating through space, and the only thing that can reel me in is the wave of control. When the control comes back to me, it is like I am floating down to earth, a feather in the wind.

*Whoosh* —

The remote is handed back to me, and I can change the channel to whatever I want. But this control does not last forever. The buzzards will eventually make their way back to me and then we will start all over again.

All I can do is sit at my desk and wait for it. Distractions only last so long. The clock is ticking, the second hand moving along the face. I feel like the clock is looking at me, waiting for the cloud to appear over my head. It stares at me, its eyes glaring at me in anger, eyebrows furrowed up in an evil frown. I think I am imagining it, but I feel like I am floating again, and everything is starting to blur slowly, coming inward from my peripherals. I do not know why the clock is so angry with me. And here comes the rain cloud again to visit, just as the clock predicted. Is this what it is like to go crazy?

I fall down the rabbit hole like Alice in Wonderland. I cannot help it, the rain cloud grabbed me with its weird, puffy, gray hands. It pulled me in, and it threw me down. The white plastic chairs from the tea party are falling around me. I see the white rabbit, too, blending in with the chairs, almost enough to hide, but not quite. We lock eyes for a moment. Everything is coming at once: teacups, flower petals, stopwatches. How deep is this hole? I finally land on the bottom, and it is too late to turn back around now. Maybe this

is the part where I seek out Absalom, the blue caterpillar. All I have to do is get up.

Get up.

Get **UP**.

**GET UP!**

Look up and see the blinding white light from the top of the hole. Stare into it, reach for it. That is where you want to go.

*Wait.*

My surroundings are changing now. Where am I? What am I doing here? How did I get here? My head is spinning, the room is twirling in circles. Or am I just turning myself in my chair? I slowly come back to real life. The cloud is leaving, and it is waving good-bye. There are no more rabbits, or angry clocks, or teacups. I am not dressed in a blue gown with a white apron and shiny black shoes. I am back in my room, wearing my favorite leggings. These are much better than the gown would have been. In front of me is my laptop, open with a brightly lit screen. I squint at it for a second until it comes back into focus. I still feel dizzy, but I can see clearly now that I was in the middle of something. I take a deep breath, I put my feet flat on the floor in front of me, and I sit up straight in my chair. I place my fingers on the keyboard, and I begin to type again. I sit there, and I type on my laptop, in front of my bed, beside the wall, at my desk. Surrounded by swirls of rainbow-colored snacks and odd office supplies, I can finish my task now. The rain cloud has decided that it has had enough for a while, and I am glad. So now I am back to where I started. I am focused on typing, and I am determined to finish my task. I am safe to do this at my desk.

At least for now.

**Sarah Norris**

## Moro Rock



**Breana England**

## **Black and White**

The sounds around me are very loud  
This happens every night it seems  
I never get tired of it, after all they start  
    Because of me

I get used like a rag doll  
Shaken and torn, ripped and tattered  
I'm gray and dull and used often

The wind whips around every curve and edge of  
    My being  
It seems as though every second of the night is  
    Revolved around me  
But then I get my hopes up  
And it ends with me in a loop.

A crazy  
Winding  
Loop

They cheer for me  
Not for me, for others  
Who hold me close and never want to let go

Every night ends with me being stowed away  
Until the next time I'm important  
Forever loving the title I uphold.

**Alexa Boyd**

## **The Lantern**

I noticed it months ago  
The emanating messenger  
Who called to me

The silent neighbor who glowed,  
A trustworthy sentry designed to guide  
And reveal the world to those who had

Faith and followed  
But only because they were too cowardly  
In the dark.

It faintly glowed far-off,  
As if emitting a light, a signal, intended  
Only for me

Its intimacy was keen, and  
The blanket of warmth surrounding the  
Flame was meant to seduce

My eyes happened to fall upon it..  
Making me the sole keeper of  
Our soulful secret

Not even the flickering expanse of the heavens  
Could rival the romance between us  
As I gazed into its unabashed intention

The intimacy was only diminished by distance

A distance easily covered when an aubade  
Sings to us through the air

But it is then that my journey will be rendered  
Useless  
As my love will have been extinguished,

Until the next eve, a century will be washed  
From my life in the waiting agony  
Until we are to be reunited, and only then by

A soul ignorant of the power they possess  
Over my soul and my heart  
But I always hold hope for the day I will meet my love

**Zoe Lawless**

## **It Takes Confinement to Know Freedom**

His hand completely encompassed mine  
Bringing its personal brand of tinted happiness  
As I felt comforted, yet strangely confined

As though he wouldn't let me outgrow his grasp  
But his eyes told me to fall for him  
And my heart became another one of his scraps

I was told it was my fault, and it may have been so,  
But placed blame implies defensive guilt,  
And what I was ignorant of then I now know

He was charming to disguise that he was a snake  
He was forgiving when it suited his ego  
He was seductive so he could slyly take and take

Never again will I let someone own me  
For I cannot be owned, I cannot be confined  
Here on out, let it be known that I am free

**Zoe Lawless**



## Squirrel Eating Nut



**Breana England**

**Haiku 13**

A solemn spirit  
Soars in the shape of an owl  
The hills are leaf-draped

**Haiku 14**

Reds stain flutt'ring wings  
As they descend the mountain  
Spring water wisps lull

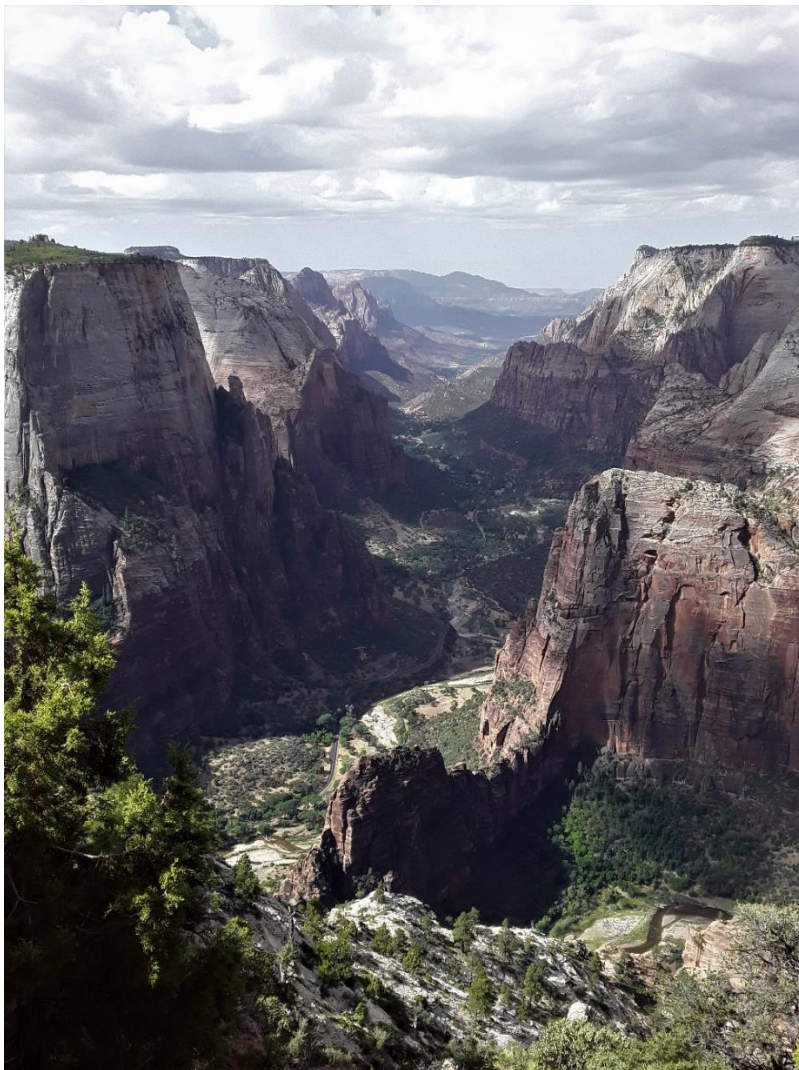
**Haiku 15**

Dark sky all star-strewn  
Glowes at the cusp of night-break  
Summer sparrows sing

**Haiku 16**

Alabaster foam  
Laps away at thin white knees  
Spring thaws the bodies

## Observation Trail



**Breana England**

**Reach**



**Kylie Nidey**

**Mirror Haiku**

Look in the mirror  
Tell me what it is you see  
Friend? Or enemy?

**Summer Hiking Tip Haiku**

Fordable foes  
In your ears, shove in cotton  
To cease the buzzing

**Breana England**

**High RPM**

As the wheels turn,  
A dark figure sits on the road,  
And it begins to churn.

I begin to swerve, hard and stern.  
In this my fate is sowed,  
As the wheels turn

The fencepost may act as my cairn.  
The impact with it voices an ode,  
And it began to churn.

An acrid scent from the tire's burn  
Sends me into a sensory overload,  
As the wheels turn

The vehicle stops, from death I adjourn  
A moment to recompose, my stomach crowed  
And began to churn.

This event brought little to learn  
And yet in my mind, cogs flowed.  
And like as wheels turn,  
They began to churn.

**Ethan Montgomery**

## Long Ride Home

Glass. Field. Car. Bloody man in the trunk. That is what my fifteen-year-old sister remembers from that day.

The sun shimmers on the lake, as the boat moves across the water. I feel the warm summer breeze, water splashing in my face as my friend, Luke, and I glide across the lake in the large inflatable tube. At the end of a thrilling afternoon, we all pack up and get ready to leave. I open the automatic door to my family's white Toyota Sienna, climb into my car seat, and buckle up for a long ride home.

My dad takes the wheel, and my mom is in the passenger seat. I am on a country road coming home from Grandview Lake. The sun is setting in the west over a nearby cornfield. Dusk is upon us. After a hot summer's day on the lake, I am parched. I reach toward the ground to grab my water bottle, take a sip, and then set it back on the floor of the minivan. Except that, when I placed it down, I did not close the lid tight enough.

The vehicle takes a sharp right turn causing the water to spill along the inside of the car. I glance down at the spill and see a symbol. A red circle with a dash through it was drawn over a symbol of a spilled drink. In a panicked voice, I call out, "Daddy, slow down! Slow down!" With no cars in sight, he proceeds with caution. And that's when it happened. My three-year-old sister is crying, I'm screaming, and my mom is calling the police – a bicyclist flew through our rear window.

Screams and cries echo in the Toyota Sienna. Everything moves in slow motion. I turn around and see the man lying flat on his stomach in the trunk of the car. Just beneath him are colorful car rugs and my purple princess blanket, both now covered in blood. My pink sling bag and Adventure Bible are right in front of him. As

soon as she unbuckles her seatbelt, my mom rushes to get my frightened little sister out of the upright car seat. I unbuckle as fast as I can and join them on the side of the road by a cornfield. Meanwhile, my dad asks the man questions to see if he is conscious. My thought is that I caused the bicyclist to get hurt. I begin to panic and blame myself. If only I had not spilled the drink, this bicyclist might have been safe.

I see a police car with flashing red and blue lights coming in our direction followed by an ambulance with flashing red and white lights. The sound of sirens amplifies my fear and anxiety about the accident. All I could do in that moment was pray – pray that the bicyclist that crashed into our window would recover and not suffer serious injuries. Pray that the doctors and nurses could help heal him. And pray that we could get home safely. One of the police officers pulls my dad aside to investigate what happened while the other police officer places yellow and black caution tape around the perimeter of the scene.

Our close friends that spent the day at the lake with us arrive at the scene to pick my mom, my sister, and me up; but, before we leave, I see the bicyclist in a yellow gurney that is being lifted into the emergency vehicle. My dad stays to finish the investigation and then heads home in the rear-windowless white Toyota Sienna.

After a long ride, the garage door opens. We're finally home. We unbuckle our seatbelts, get out of the vehicle, and sprint for the door. My mom, my sister, and I head for the bathroom to remove shards of glass and rubber pieces of bumper from our hair. As I pull glass out of my sister's hair, I look at her cute little face. I see the fear and anxiety in her eyes. I get ready for bed, but I lie awake with eyes closed, disturbed and unable to fall asleep. No medicine could cure my pounding headache and no distractions could keep my heart from racing. I try to calm down and draw my thoughts away



from the accident, but all I can think about is whether or not the bicyclist is okay. Three long sleepless nights later, my dad gets a call that the man has left the hospital with only scrapes and bruises. There was no brain damage, no broken bones. If the back row of seats had not been down, the bicyclist would have suffered grave injuries.

The moment still haunts me. Whenever I ride in the car and it comes to a sudden stop, I gasp for air and my heart races. I am then transported to that flashbulb memory in the summer of 2009. I know that everything is going to be okay, but then I see it. Broken pieces of glass and rubber flying through the white Toyota Sienna. I look at my little sister's face. She is startled, confused, and scared. And that's when I turn back in my car seat. The bicyclist calls out for help, but I'm too frightened. As a seven-year-old, it was a lot to process. But I should be able to move on now, right? Wrong.

I wish I didn't have to go through this experience to learn a valuable lesson, but that's what happens in life. Every time I ride in the car, I find ways to calm myself down. Every time I pray, I pray for safety and health. For the past twelve years I've done so. We all have different processes and coping mechanisms that we use to get past experiences that have had a real lasting impact on our lives. Prayer is one of those coping mechanisms that has transformed my way of thinking and given me the strength and hope I need to live out my faith every day. I have truly come a long way from the little girl, with the pink sling bag and Adventure Bible, I once was. I no longer feel obligated to go to church, but I go because it gives me the joy and freedom that my seven-year-old self didn't have. If not for the accident, who knows where my faith would stand.

**Allison Parker**

## **Alphabetic Springtime**

A cool spring morning with  
Bees bumblingly buzzing, birds  
Cheerily chirping, and  
Dew dazzling  
Ethereally as it balances on shy  
Flowers and blades of new and bright  
Green grass, now ankle  
Height, and quite  
Indignant when it comes to  
Justifiably tickling ankles and  
Keeping ubiquitous weeds at bay.  
Lilacs still sleep in early  
March, but soon  
None will rival their eye —  
Opening beauty and their encapsulating  
Perfume.  
Quite easily I will be drawn to them,  
Reminiscing over years  
So long ago, and yet  
They are only the  
Utterance of memories acquired yesterday.  
Veraciously I know that  
When those Lilacs bloom, the  
Xeranthemum are not far behind, and they too will  
Yearn to be recognized as the  
Zenith turns to pale colors.

**Zoe Lawless**

## **Back There Someday**

My hometown, in the rearview  
It is time for bigger things  
The hardest part is leaving you  
Pulling on my heartstrings  
I know I'll go back someday  
My dreams have come true  
I've accomplished all I set out to do  
There is still something missing in my heart  
I think you are that missing part  
I just know I'll go back there someday  
Was I blind or was I lost  
Or did I just lose my mind  
Who knew feelings so strong  
Can make the body so weak  
I know I'll go back someday  
Here I am looking for you  
I know our love is true  
Just in case you've already heard  
I meant every word  
I knew I'd be back here someday

**Tyler Holt**

**Why I Write**

As I lay down at night  
This is when I begin to write  
My room begins to change  
Now I am in the snow  
Having my own adventure  
Building snowmen, throwing snowballs, and skiing

As I lay down each night  
This is why I write  
My room begins to change  
Now I am on the beach  
Getting a tan  
Building sandcastles, learning to surf, drinking sweet tea

As I lay down each night  
This is why I write  
My room begins to change  
Now I am with you  
Smiling and blushing, just us  
A whole evening

As I lay down each night  
This is why I write

**Tyler Holt**

## Spring Blossoms



**Alexa Boyd**

**God's Song (peninsula trail)**

Laying on my padding,  
In a comfortable cocoon stitched from polyester and cotton,  
I pause from reading  
Look up at the sun kissed leaves,  
Gently swaying in the heart of spring bloom  
Not a cloud in the pure blue sky.

But oh, what songs to be heard!  
The woodpeckers bang their beaks on bark like drums  
The finches harmonize like a chorus of fluttering angels  
The geese squawk like faint trumpets in the distance,  
All the while, morning fires dance in their stone ring

The water glistens like flappers' sequins,  
As the sun boasts its pleasure through a crowd of adoring trees  
I feel its soft warm rays beckoning me to sing along  
Here I am alive,  
Exhilarated by earthly songs  
Here, I feel as though I belong

**Breana England**

**Modern Tree of Life**



**David Walby**

**Tattered Wings**

There is a bird flying  
Soaring past  
The busy streets  
And dirty windows  
Above the rooftops  
And corporate buildings  
Into the sky  
Where no man can hurt him  
No machine can stop him  
Gliding through the cool breeze  
Listening to the melody of the wind  
Against his worn tattered wings

**Breana England**



**Beat of Love**

Your sweet touch

Leaves lingering flames

Like an ever-burning beat

The morning comes and briefly feels too much

With your form enveloped by mine

A comfortable heat

The rains cascade against the rough

On the world outside that never dawns

The soft pounding of your heart, all the proof I need

**Dakota Mullikin**

## **Brown County Lookout**



**Breana England**

## **Parabola**

Hitting the summit,

The effort had paid off.

But something felt empty.

What was there to do now?

Life was spent going step by step,

Now there were no steps left to climb.

It was about the climb, not the end goal.

Now it is all so clear, what I should do next.

The only way to keep climbing is to go back down

And start the adventure

Anew.

**Ethan Montgomery**

**Верный в Лифэ (Russian)**

я буду там для тебя  
Даже когда у меня на спине шрамы  
Я помогу тебе пройти  
Даже когда мое сердце разорвано  
Потому что я верен своей вине  
Меня в детстве учили всегда быть верным  
Чем старше я становился, тем больше понимал, что это тяжело  
особенно когда люди продолжали разбивать мне сердце  
Но все же я сдерживал слезы  
И будь рядом с тобой много лет  
Меня лгали, избивали и ломали  
Но я все еще был твоим знаком  
Я доказал тебе, что я всегда был верен  
Помогаем вам, когда у вас возникли проблемы  
Я сказал это однажды, я скажу это еще раз  
Я буду с тобой до конца  
Ты ударил меня ножом в спину; что мне делать?  
Я всегда был к тебе самым верным  
Я вижу, как пытаюсь уйти  
Но я знаю, что это был бы не я  
Потому что, когда я завожу друга, я делаю это на всю жизнь  
Так что я повернусь, чтобы ты взял свой нож  
я буду там для тебя  
Даже когда у меня на спине шрамы

**Tyler Holt**

**Faithful in Life (English Translation)**

I will be there for you  
Even when I have scars on my back  
I will help you get through  
Even when my heart is torn  
Because I'm true to my fault  
I was taught as a child to always be faithful  
The older I got, the more I realized it was hard  
especially when people kept breaking my heart  
But still, I held back my tears  
And be by your side for many years  
I've been lied to and beaten and broken  
But I was still your sign  
I proved to you that I have always been faithful  
Helping you when you have problems  
I said it once, I will say it again  
I'll be with you until the end  
You stabbed me in the back; what should I do?  
I have always been the most faithful to you  
I see myself trying to leave  
But I know it wouldn't be me  
'Cause when I make a friend, I do it for life  
So I'll turn around for you to take your knife  
I will be there for you  
Even when I have scars on my back

**Tyler Holt**

## **Mordechai, The Butler**

I've always had a peculiar affliction, one of not quite being able to discern reality from fantasy. I'm not crazy; I don't imagine things; I just notice little things on the periphery of existence that defy explanation. Perhaps you have experienced something like this, a strange *déjà vu*, a mistaken memory? My life was filled with such oddities, only more so.

I've never understood why these things happen. My life's not particularly exciting, and I don't take a lot of risks. I shouldn't be haunted by inexplicable events; however, a strange luck or enchantment has persistently kept pace with me.

I feel like it followed my parents, too, right up until their untimely and unlikely deaths. They had been out to dinner; the cab driver had, for some reason, neither seen nor heard the blaring flashing ambulance as it rushed the intersection. Not many people die by ambulance, and that's just the kind of dumb luck to which I was referring.

Their funeral is one of my worst memories. The sun hung blazing that July morning, its radiance heralding a beautiful day, and the city was alive with happy families enjoying the care-free summer. The sight of it all was sickening. Sweating in my small, newly bought, black, oversized suit, I resented the chorus of birds and distant laughter beyond the grim stone walls of the cemetery and how it seemed a dream that now felt impossibly distant.

As the pastor slowly read the eulogy to the somber crowd, my eyes fixed on the dual headstones. Their carved names, Mary and Gregory, seemed like ancient runes, carved in an incomprehensible language. All my young mind could focus on was the confusing storm of emotions that now hovered, fixed, unmovable. I would never smell my mother's lavender perfume, or my father's freshly

cut cigars. Memories wouldn't be filled with their love or laughter any longer. Hope descended into the depths of the earth, enveloped in dirt and shadow.

My life was coming undone as confusion, loss, and anger grew to dominate my thoughts, with anger being the loudest. Growing up, even on the saddest of days, I did not weep; but anger, in all its furious flame, burned through my childhood like a wildfire.

That afternoon, the target of my youthful rage revealed himself, unassuming to others, but standing out to me like a chord out of key. Behind my weeping uncle, staring at me from beneath thick-rimmed, obsidian black, gold engraved eyeglasses he stood, watching, sizing me up. He was tall and lanky, capped with a hairless, shiny dome, luminous under that blazing sun. His face was garnished with a thick moustache, white as snow. The elderly soul stood in the heat, looking somehow unbothered in his tight black suit, blacker bowtie, and the shiniest shoes you've ever seen. I blinked rapidly the first time I saw him, my mind trying to process the immaculate nature of this interloper. Then I grew to hate the well-dressed lurker. How dare he stare silently in on my parent's tragedy, on *my* tragedy.

What I didn't know was that he was to become a fixture of my formative years, that every day he would follow me, shaping and molding me against my will, and most of the time, without my awareness. From that dreadful day forward, my world would be in the white-gloved hands of Mordechai Ginzburg, the butler.

My father was a college professor, and my mother a homemaker and sometime poet. We never went without, but our lives were modest compared to the world I was thrown into. When my parents died, my uncle, Philip, adopted me. He considered my father his closest friend and the loss of my mother and father broke my un-

cle's heart. I imagine they embodied the perfect family he desired, despite his playboy lifestyle. I suppose adopting me was a way of owning that part of his life now gone.

I was whisked from the city to my uncle's lavish country home. I think he was trying to usher me away from my familiar painful surroundings, and I appreciate this in hindsight, but it also isolated me. The red stone, ill-lit, musky halls, and lonely grounds were a prison for a young, damaged kid. I retreated deeper into the solitary confinement of thought, longing for the freedom allotted to the various waterfowl that lived on the grounds. Their chorus of birdcalls was a reminder of my gilded cage.

My uncle was the CFO for a successful finance firm, a job that found him on a constant globetrot. When he was home, we would go to the city shops, a desperate attempt at buying love. However, whether traveling the world or spending a few brief days with me, he was not the parenting type, and he never quite learned how to interact with me. The staff were my only company, and while my uncle hired the best staff he could afford, they didn't interact with me much. Save for one.

Mordecai took it upon himself to oversee every aspect of my existence. He would wake me every day at 7 A.M. with a boisterous "Morning, young Master," throwing open the curtains with such flair and circumstance, it seemed like he controlled the breeze. He would then point me in the direction of my preapproved outfit, rushing me to dress so I would not miss breakfast. After eating, he would direct me to my expensive private tutor. A short lunch period was marred by his noiseless overseeing. Finally, when my studies were over, he would prompt me to take a break for myself, one of the few times a day he would vanish from tormenting me. My momentary escape would be stolen from me as he reappeared from



around a corner or from within a shadow, as if he never truly left. Next came the worst portion of my day: homework and study.

It felt like he relished seeing me fail, if only because it gave him an opportunity to help me grow; at the time though, I was sure he hated me.

I would often snap at him and rail. "I'm not wrong, I've read the book again and again!"

"Not well."

"I know it's the right answer, I'm not looking through it again!" I imagine I did something like throw book aside.

"If you read the book, you should be able to tell me when the Constitution was crafted."

"1783, I told you!"

"And you were wrong. Try again." He stood with arms folded sternly across his narrow frame.

"1784."

"Now you're just guessing. Come on, really try."

1789 popped into my head. I opened my mouth to answer.

"Wrong."

I stood up and threw my pencil into the air. "You don't even know what I was going to say, old man!"

"I know it was wrong," he said, reaching into his jacket and pulling out another pencil. He extended it to me, and that damnable moustache mockingly upturned as his lips fiendishly curled. This was his usual teaching style: jest, with light encouragement. I wanted to kill him for it.

After studying, dinner would be ready, again in the shadow of his haunting presence. Upon finishing my last meal of the day, he would sit me down with a book of his choosing and stand observing as I read it aloud, with his remarks about mispronunciations pouring down like acid rain. I was often made to read classics: Dickens,

Twain, and Plato and Plutarch as I grew older. After the literary torture, I was allowed a quick snack while I played. Then, he would usher me off to bed; lights out. Every day was filled with this monotonous overdone attempt at raising me.

Weekends were my only reprieve. I would often explore the boundaries of the manor, wishing for a life beyond the great maples and pines. I would stare into the dense woods, imagining myself fleeing for wilderness. Then, just as my feet became light enough for me to take this bold step, his voice would shatter the serenity of my thoughts.

“Don’t tread too far, young master.”

The bastard.

For all my boyhood spite, he truly was a curiosity to behold, and I spent much of my free time tracking him to observe his unique mannerisms and habits. Admittedly, this was to undermine him, so I could out him to my uncle for some wretched flaw of character that he would never display outwardly. Yet, what started as an obsession to discover his flaws became a deep look into the life of a most fantastical man.

From task to task, he traveled with an elegant confidence. He possessed a noble stride that must have taken his whole life to master. His head stayed upright, and he moved about the grounds without ever looking down, as if he had memorized every inch. In his wake, the lofting scent of smokey lavender lingered and he made those once loved smells sour in my nostrils. His dress was impeccable: a sharp black and white uniform, his gold-framed glasses, behind which he watched the world through, like the eyes of God. He topped it all off with glistening cufflinks, impossibly shiny shoes, and spotless gloves. I never saw him eat his meals, shower, shave, sleep, or in any way be human. I didn’t even know where his room was. It was like he melted into the walls when his work was done.

Then, there was the way Mordechai handled the other staff, people I despised more than him. Mordechai may have haunted every corner of that house, but the staff were simply cruel, avoiding me and constantly scolding me, threatening to call my uncle to have me punished nearly every day. I think they were simply unable to care for a child as damaged as I was. I was berated by the cleaning staff for making messes, and the groundskeeper for tracking up the yard, and the cook loathed my child's palate and raged at me for not eating the food she poured herself into. Yet, somehow, with a word over their shoulders, the old butler could dispel their anger towards me, making them snap back to position. After these displays of power, he would calmly lecture me on why my actions were problematic. I hated his calmness.

Another aspect of the staff that I could not stand was their rampant superstition. According to them, the corridors of the manor were filled with ghouls, moving things around, making up and cleaning rooms where none of them had been. Apparently, whispers followed them, and they spent their free time huddled together in small paranoid groups. But there were no ghosts. There was only Mordechai, my nemesis, and as much as I hated giving my dreaded enemy any credit, no ghosts were making the beds or cleaning; Mordechai, as angry as it made me to admit, was just that good at his job.

I would say what stood out to me most as a child was the miraculous way he could always provide what I needed, and not just metaphorically. He always provided me with my glasses when I lost them; when my Gameboy's batteries were bled dry, he whipped out fresh ones; hell, if I dropped silverware, he had a polished replacement at the ready. It was perfect and annoyed me to no end.

And that was the problem I had, not just with Mordechai, but my whole life. I had my perfect little bubble with a perfect upbringing. I longed for escape.

When I was ten, my small, isolated existence expanded. A few miles away was a summer camp, and my uncle, on a whim, decided to enroll me in it. "Heaven knows you need to make some friends." I would finally be free of the rule of Mordechai Ginzburg, at least for a couple months.

Camp Wan-na-ho-pe had been founded decades earlier during the Summer of Love, a liberal haven for the kids of hippies, and had largely remained that. The name was a relic from a time where faux-Native American appropriation was still acceptable, even by the "inclusive" counterculture, and they hadn't realized it was a bad look to keep the name. Still, I got the spirit of what they were going for, wanting hope, understandable given the age of the camp's founding, but almost laughably offensive in the present. You should have heard the camp songs.

Still, that summer wound up filling me with hope. It didn't start that way though. I was mocked in the beginning for my many blunders; however, I discovered something amazing. I could fail, something that had never been tolerated before. Most importantly, I was able to grow from those missteps. It was a paradise of pine needles.

I loved all of it, the animal sounds and the smell of the small lake around which all the little log cabins sat. They divided us, girls' quarters on one side, boys' on the other, with a few buildings in between. The separation was a constant source of complaint for the boys. Lunch and a few activities aside, we rarely saw the girls. There was little in the way of privacy for adolescents interested in discovering love and themselves, exactly how the camp wanted things.

This was fine by me. I dreaded interactions with girls, and no matter how much my few new friends tried to get me over my anxiety, I froze around girls.

One day, a girl with messy blonde hair, a braces-lined smile, and nervous walk asked to have lunch with me. My friends scattered, leaving me to talk to her. Her name was Abigail Klosterman, and the girls at her table made her come talk to me because I seemed distant. "And your friends told me your parents died. Mine too."

Too. Too? Too! She knew how I felt, at least on some level, and as we exchanged the simple condolences of children, I didn't feel so alone. Abigail lived in the city also, until the previous year, when her parents' house burned. She now lived with her aunt in a small farming community near the camp, in a lonely existence with little in the way of friends.

From that first conversation, we bonded, and no rules were enough to stop that. We ate every meal together, joined each team we could together, and at night, we would sneak to the wooded section of the lake and talk until near sunup.

That first beautiful summer ended with us separating in the dirt parking lot from a long tear-filled embrace. We promised to write each other often, and we did, until we both got computers and email.

This continued, remotely speaking through the schoolyear, anxiously awaiting summer. Most of all, I always looked forward to our moonlit talks by the silver lake, where our privacy was only shattered by the splashing of bass and bluegill. We told secrets and dreams to each other. We cried over our parents and complained about home. I had my first kiss there, smoked my first and only cigarette, my first and far from only joint, and told Abigail I loved her for the first time. They were summers I never wanted to end.

9/11 changed everything, and the fallout drifted from the collapsing towers all the way to my uncle's brain. Suddenly, going to Camp Wan-na-ho-pe was completely out of the question. No nephew of his was going to get indoctrinated by uppity un-American liberals. Despite my angry protests, he wouldn't yield. For days, I was inconsolable, and Mordechai kept his distance; so, I went looking for him, wanting to unleash my wrath on the devil. I searched the halls until I noticed a small section of wall that was ajar. Ajar! What sort of home has walls that are ajar?

I pulled the wall open, revealing a cobweb-infested spiral staircase, which I ascended with zero hesitation. At the top, I was surprised to find a small musky room. There was a small bed, a short table, and modest wooden chair. On the desk was the day's paper, some parchment, pens and pencils, and a small stack of notecards.

I picked them up and was stunned to find that they were covered in little bits of advice on how to handle me, which sounds manipulative, but somehow, I found it touching. How to treat me when I needed pushing and how to handle me when he needed to back off; reminders of my schedule and that I was just a kid. The handwriting on the notecards seemed familiar, and it struck something deep within me. I put them on the desk and braced myself on it, trying not to cry.

"Young Master?"

I spun to meet the gaze of Mordechai, standing in the stairs, crouching because of his height.

"I'm sorry," I blurted out.

"Don't be. I see you've found my notes," he said, motioning to the pile on the desk, "they help remind me of my purpose. Why I'm here."

“You should know, I spoke to your uncle. You’ll be going back to camp next summer. Don’t you worry.”

“Wait, you did that for me?”

“Indeed. Who do you think put the idea of that camp in your uncle’s head in the first place?”

“You? But why?”

“Because,” he sighed, motioning to the newspaper on his desk, the front page detailing the horrific attacks in New York, “there is far too much hatred in this world, and that camp teaches you to love. That’s important.”

I stopped my personal war with the old man after that. I still didn’t like him; but slowly, these sour thoughts dissipated, and over my last few years in his care, I grew to respect and even care for Mordechai.

A couple summers later, Abigail and I were too old for camp, but this didn’t keep two driving teenagers apart. We both passed high school, endured college, graduated together, and that night, I proposed to her with a ring old Mordechai helped me pick out.

The day of the wedding, the heavens opened, and a torrent of rain soaked everything. We were all drenched, the cake was absolutely ruined, the bottom of Abigail’s dress became muddy, and the rings were lost, and found, three separate times; we couldn’t have been happier though.

I had insisted earnestly that Mordechai be my best man, but he proclaimed that it was up to him to make sure things went well that day and declined the offer with a wave of his magnificent gloved hand. He must have been deeply devoted to the work because I didn’t see him again until I was packing for my honeymoon. We stood in my old bedroom; I could barely move, so stunned with joy.

“You know,” he said, packing a bag, breaking the silence of my paralysis-inducing jubilation “the world is an odd place. Did you know that fourteen years ago today was when we first met?”

My jaw fell slack at his words. In another one of those bizarre happenstances of my life, we had planned the wedding on the same day as my parent’s funeral, and I had become so far removed from that world-defeating grief, I no longer recognized it hovering around. This new life had finally usurped the deep-seated sorrow that had ruled. I sat down on the bed, lightheaded from the revelation. Mordechai sat next to me, putting his arms around my shoulders. The smell of lavender and smoked cigars enveloped me.

After a long while, he spoke, “Sir, I believe it is time for you to depart.”

“You’re right. See you when we get back?”

“No, sir. I’m afraid my services are no longer needed.”

I flew into a fury. “Absolutely not! Is this Uncle’s fault? I will talk to him about this right now.”

“No, no. It’s alright. It’s just time, Sir.”

I shook, unable to process the gravity of it all. “But, why?”

“I was sent here to make sure you became a decent person, the kind your family could always be proud of,” he looked me over, “and I think you’ve become just that.”

We both talked a bit more, but I was too stunned to say much. This man, who had become such an ingrained part of my life, was leaving. Yet, I understood that it was time to shake off this final trapping of youth and head off into the world with Abigail.

I hugged Mordechai and shook hands with my uncle and friends before I entered the limo with Abigail. We kissed frantically as we sat down, so overtaken with each other, like our love was new all over again and the crowd cheered and shouted as we slowly bounced down the gravel driveway.



We parted, gasping in one long breath, and looked back at our guests to wave. I saw all the family and friends I had come to know, but strikingly absent was Mordechai. My eyes darted around, but he was gone, vanished, perhaps into the manor to pack. Or maybe he was crying and couldn't show that vulnerability, having so carefully crafted that flawless exterior.

The hard truth that adults often fail to tell children, that my parents never had the chance to tell me, is that growing up means the whimsical nature of reality often fades. I had this grand ideal: a perfect life with Abigail in the city, both at our dream jobs, both content and happy. It was a child's dream, a dream for something better than what we grew up with, a dream for a kind and just finish to a rough start at a tough life. Reality was much harsher.

I'm sure there have been worse times for teachers in America, but declining pay rates and less and less union protection meant that Abigail and I were tossed about the maelstrom of the public school system. We do what we can; but, with defunded arts programs, Abigail finds it hard to hold down work, and hungry worried kids don't give a damn about a history curriculum that doesn't seem relatable. Don't get me wrong, we love our jobs; helping kids achieve their full potential is something I would never trade away, but it's never easy. Then, on top of our professional life, other dark realities made themselves known.

Abigail's nightmares started early in our marriage; she would thrash for hours, whimper in her sleep, and wrap herself in blankets, a subconscious attempt to shield herself. My mind had also started its own sinister betrayal. Thoughts of death and insomnia took up residence in my mind. We had both been scarred by our childhood loss.

Of course, all this mundane living and nighttime terror has gotten me feeling nostalgic. In my struggle with insomnia, I've been thinking back on my childhood. I have begun talking in great detail about my youth, which led to a recent startling revelation: Abigail never met Mordechai, not even at our wedding. I called up my uncle to verify that he had employed Mordechai, but he told me that while he did hire a butler to oversee the home, he had spoken to the old man only a few times over the phone and certainly did not invite him to the funeral on that scorching summer day. There were no pictures of Mordechai, and the manor burned down two years after the wedding, so I can't even show anyone the room and the secret staircase as proof. I have no evidence of Mordechai. My wife has taken to calling him my "ghostly friend," but ghosts don't set out your clothes, or materialize items as if by magic, and they certainly don't go around protecting your interests. But Mordechai did all of that, and then some.

**Christian Litsey**

**The Shattered Mosaic**



**David Walby**

**Questa è la nostra canzone (Italian)**

Questa è la nostra canzone  
Ricordo quando l'ho sentito per la prima volta  
Eri seduto lì tutto solo  
Ho preso coraggio e ti ho chiesto di ballare  
E questo è quello che abbiamo sentito  
Possiamo sentire il suono di un tempo morbido  
Possiamo sentire il ritmo oscillante  
Possiamo vedere i ricordi

La vita sta diventando dura  
Non sai da che parte girare  
E ti senti come se i tuoi piedi non potessero toccare il suolo  
Fino a quando non senti quel suono meraviglioso  
Sente il suono di un ritmo morbido  
Sente quel ritmo altalenante  
Vedi ogni ricordo

Molti anni dopo che te ne sei andato  
Posso ancora sentire la tua presenza  
Mi ricordo di te e di tutto quello che hai fatto  
Con solo una semplice nota  
Riesco a sentire il suono di un tempo morbido  
Riesco a sentire il ritmo oscillante  
Riesco a vedere ogni ricordo

**Tyler Holt**

## **This Is Our Song (English Translation)**

This is our song  
I remember when I first heard it  
You were sitting there all alone  
I took courage and asked you to dance  
And this is what we have heard  
We can hear the sound of a soft time  
We can feel the swinging rhythm  
We can see the memories

Life is getting tough  
You don't know which way to turn  
And you feel like your feet can't touch the ground  
Until you hear that wonderful sound  
Hear the sound of a soft rhythm  
Feel that swinging rhythm  
See every memory

Many years after you left  
I can still feel your presence  
I remember you and everything you did  
With just a simple note  
I can hear the sound of a mellow time  
I can hear the swinging rhythm  
I can see every memory

**Tyler Holt**

**Ode to Scooby-Doo**

Much more than a cartoon  
Each member of the crew  
Taught me something that I always do  
Fred showed me to be a leader and always have a plan  
Velma showed me that your brain is your most powerful tool  
Daphne showed me that even the smallest of things can be used for  
    amazing things  
Shaggy showed me that friends never quit  
Scooby showed me that it's okay to be afraid  
As you can see  
Much more than a cartoon

**Tyler Holt**

**Snow Much Fun**



**Alexa Boyd**

**Friends Don't Quit**

When you are backed against a wall  
With nowhere else to go  
You're shaking, shivering, don't know what to do  
Just look around and you'll make it through  
I'll be there for you  
Like Shaggy is for Scooby-Doo  
Friends don't quit  
And I'll never quit on you  
Because that's what friends are supposed to do  
When you are broken  
And you can't put it back together  
You try to use your voice  
And nothing will come through  
I'll be there for you  
Like Shaggy is for Scooby-Doo  
Friends don't quit  
And I'll never quit on you  
Because that's what friends are supposed to do  
When you are happy  
Through all the events in your life  
You'll always have someone  
Who will always be right by your side  
I'll be there for you  
Like Shaggy is for Scooby-Doo  
Friends don't quit  
And I'll never quit on you  
Because that's what friends are supposed to do

**Tyler Holt**



## Contributor Notes

### Alexa Boyd

“I plan on graduating with either a major in business, minor in psychology, or vice versa. I plan on pursuing real estate with continuation of my photography business. I am a huge advocate for mental health and supporting the 4-H program. I love writing poems and taking photos of the memories life provides us every day.”

Editor’s Note: “Aspiration” is a reverse poem which should be read from top to bottom and then from bottom to top.

### Breana England

“For as long I can remember, I have loved to write and draw. I also love hiking, camping reading, gardening, and speaking gibberish to my cats. My favorite median of drawing is pencil or watercolor, and I love to write haikus. Most of my work revolves around my passion for all things nature and my strong spiritual connection to our earth. In contrast, I also have pieces that pertain to social matters and my own personal struggles.”

Clayton Ham

Clayton is a senior pursuing a degree in English with a concentration in creative writing and a minor in women, gender, and sexuality studies. He primarily writes lyrical poetry that captivates the hearts of his readers in a contemporary style and has been published in two earlier volumes of *Talking Leaves*, and a poem in the *Northwest Indiana Literary Journal*. Clayton challenges the limits of his writing in the hopes of intertwining activism and inspiring words that help change the world.

Tyler Holt

“The love of the written can lead someone to do amazing things.”

On “Back There Someday”: “I wrote this piece because I have always dreamed of moving someplace far from home, but I know I will always return back home.”

Zoe Lawless

“I am an English literature major in my sophomore year at IUPUC.”

Christian Litsey

Managing editor of *Talking Leaves*, award-winning researcher, aspiring poet, and father. When not reading and writing, Christian collects records and plays Pokémon with his friends and daughter.

Ethan Montgomery

Ethan is majoring in English and minoring in psychology; he wants to create his own worlds for others to explore through his writing.

Dakota Mullikin

Dakota’s work delves into fantasy worlds and enigmatic Japanese tropes and sensibilities. Her desire is to bridge the gap between Eastern and Western writing as well as draw attention to the link between reality and fantasy. She enjoys the company of Japanese

post-war writers, specifically Osamu Dazai who has been an ever-present inspiration. Dakota was previously published in the 2018, 2019, and 2020 editions of *Talking Leaves*.

Kylie Nidey

On “Reach”: “This is a pour painting made in the winter of 2020.”

Sarah Norris

“‘A Safe Space’ is written for the procrastinator, the preoccupied pupil, or the busy bee. Here is to hoping that you relate to me.”

Allison (Ally) Parker

Ally is a freshman who is undecided on a major; however, she is interested in studying music and psychology. This is her first publication.

### Robert (Zeke) Raymer

Zeke Raymer is a 2021 graduate who studied psychology and English literature, who plans to study Environmental Law. He's been a tutor in the Academic Resource Center, as well as a teaching assistant to Dr. Siefker-Bailey. In his spare time, he enjoys running his own games of Dungeons & Dragons, powerlifting, boxing, and political discussion/activism.

### David Walby

David is an aspiring writer, poet, and artist. He is a sophomore studying English literature and creative writing. He's been published in several literary magazines and websites including Indolent Books and Friday Flash Fiction. He writes primarily in the fantasy genre and should be releasing a short story collection within the next year. He hopes you have enjoyed his work.

Mary Webster

“I am a senior in the psychology program.”

Paige Wilson

“I am majoring in psychology. I have always liked writing, so I thought this would be a nice opportunity to share some of my work with others.”

Lexi York

“I am a senior this year majoring in communications studies and minoring in creative writing. I hope to one day pursue a career in broadcast journalism.”



