


TALKING  LEAVES
2019

20th EDITION



TALKING LEAVES 2019**VOLUME 20****MANAGING EDITOR**

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POLICY AND PURPOSE

Talking Leaves accepts original works of prose, poetry, and artwork 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 2019 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.

www.iupuc.edu/liberal-arts/talking-leaves

From the Assistant Editor

This edition would not be possible without our awesome editing team, faculty advisor, and managing editor. Dr. Siefker-Bailey and Michael Donohue have made this experience one-of-a-kind in expanding my knowledge of creative writing, leadership, and love for the craft. Their support to the editors, contributors, and myself is something I'll never forget. It is a privilege to work as the assistant editor for *Talking Leaves* and incredibly fulfilling to be part of an outstanding creative team of editors who dedicate their time to bringing students' prose, poetry, and amazing artwork to life.

Talking Leaves is an honest and true representation of creative diversity and illustrates the raw power of eternal success by students who strive for the impossible and make it possible. The works inside this edition – whether they are personal recollections, fictional adventures, or inspirational pieces of art, are all elements of our students that together make *Talking Leaves* a unified magazine. It takes a wonderful imagination to create, and it takes courage for all to submit. On behalf of myself and the students of IUPUC, thank you to all for taking us on a literary journey unlike any other!

Although I am a marketing major, my creative writing minor holds a special place in my heart. Like most writers I encounter, I am hesitant to share my work with new eyes. Before attending IUPUC, I showed my work only to family members or friends, and I never received honest criticism. However, Dr. Siefker-Bailey's creative writing class forced me out of my comfort zone, and, for that, I am exceedingly grateful.

A special dedication for my mentor, Dr. Katherine Wills, whose fresh ideas and inspiring attitude altered my perspective on writing. Her wisdom, witty comments, and support helped me become the writer I am today and urge me to keep going until I make my ambitions a reality. To her, my fellow *Talking Leaves* team, and IUPUC, I give my well-wishes and admiration as I head into the close of my college career.

Isabel D'Allura

From the Managing Editor

It is an honor to have my name attached to the 20th edition of *Talking Leaves*. In 1994, IUPUC went beyond the promise of fulfillment and began its own literary magazine under the title *Literalines*. Then in 2005, the magazine changed its name to *Talking Leaves*, a title that wonderfully personifies the written word. It is also a term that can be traced back hundreds of years and one that is not without controversy.

There are two versions as to how the phrase “talking leaves” came to be. White people state that, when the Cherokee Indians first encountered the new settlers and observed them reading papers and maps, they perceived the documents as magical leaves that possessed the ability to talk. The Cherokees say they created the term because white people’s words are like leaves: they fly like the wind, without truth or meaning. Both stories hold merit, but you decide which version is true.

I thank Natasha Keever, Joshua Holycross, Kathryn Baylor, Molly McGinnis, and Lyndsey Wolfe for sharing their extraordinary copyediting skills and meeting all goals without complaint or compensation. I offer Isabel D’Allura much gratitude for volunteering to be the assistant editor and for making my job easier by contributing fresh ideas and devotion. Special note of thanks to our faculty sponsor, Dr. Lisa Siefker-Bailey, and to the DLA assistant, Vicki Kruse, who contribute invaluable assistance to every publication.

Lastly, I must thank Dr. George Towers, the head of the Liberal Arts Department, and Vice Chancellor Reinhold Hill for their continued trust and investment in the publishing of *Talking Leaves*. With this, my last edition as managing editor, I'm excited to see the development of a *Talking Leaves* club which will further the growth of the magazine and encourage more students to explore and express their creativity.

Michael Donohue

From the Faculty Sponsor

This year, we celebrate because the IUPUC student literary magazine has been part of campus culture since its inception twenty-five years ago. While it's fortuitous that our twentieth edition of *Talking Leaves* showcases the work of twenty student contributors, it is fitting and poetic.

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

This year's Talking Leaves staff incorporates seasoned editors as well as some new ones, and it's been a joy to work with them. Special thanks for support goes to Dr. George Towers and the Division of Liberal Arts who work together to encourage and inspire student work. We also appreciate Adam Frazier's help in improving archive and submission pages on the website, and we are always indebted to Vicki Kruse, who manages the submissions to ensure anonymity in our blind review process. Another thanks goes to Jay Lesandrini, whose expertise in layout and general support of the book helped so much.

We strive to build the magazine with each volume, and students are especially proud to reach a milestone edition this year. Thanks to our Vice Chancellor and Dean, Dr. Reinhold Hill, IUPUC generously funds publication of the magazine in both digital and print forms, endorsing the value of our students' creativity and voices.

Lisa Siefker-Bailey

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Cover Art.....

Lemons **Painting by Eden Alderdice**

Mt. Hood..... **Photograph by Natasha Kever**

Poetry

air

you were air to me
the oxygen I breathed.
you gave me life—
momentarily.
in and out you went,
passing through in an instant.
you spread the life to my bones,
you were fuel to my existence.

letting you go came naturally,
a reflex I knew through my core.
I was never meant to hold you long,
and you were never meant to stay.
you changed in the midst of us
and effortlessly so did I.
so, I let you pass through
and you left without hesitation.
you gave me life—
until you didn't.
and I stopped waiting for the next breath.

Raegan Smith

Numb

Somewhere along the way,
I began to welcome the numbness.
When the anxieties came,
and the feelings arose,
when depression made its home
like a weight upon my chest—
numbness was a desirable friend.
I welcomed her with open arms.

In her company, anxieties faded,
and the depression was lifted.
Never gone, always there,
were the plagues upon my mind—
and so, I kept the numbness near.

But I did not know numbness by her true name.
Disguised, she ruled my mind.
Appealing were her effects,
and I remained in the dark,
until the day I saw numbness

in all her truth.

I had pushed away anger

and the hurt was distant.

I had driven away sadness

and the pain did cease.

Numbness is easy,

safe and secure.

Feeling is hard.

Numbness suddenly waned—

no longer dominant,

but a choice.

I choose to feel,

the good and the immensely bad.

I will let anger take its fleeting place,

for days to be soured on fury's account.

I will embrace some despair,

to spend mornings stuck in bed,

and nights with tear-stained pillows.

Because the highest peaks in life

cannot be reached

without first seeing the lows.

4

I will embrace what I am,
I will let feelings have their place in me,
and I will not apologize.
I will let myself be
and I will let myself feel.

Raegan Smith

The Thunder

A wave to the shore, she was pulled to him—

Graceful as she danced to the sand.

Never did she worry that she could not swim—

before worry came his helping hand.

Seldom did come a storm from the sea—

when her rhythm was upset or swayed.

The shore was a promise of sanctuary—

a place she would always have stayed.

Until one day a storm began stewing—

roaring throughout the sea's deeps.

She could feel it in her waters moving—

into her whole being it seeps.

Thunder came without notice below—

crashing its way through her floors.

The sand which her hope was stowed—

with her waters began to rage wars.

Thunder rumbled its way to the shore—
cracking and breaking the earth.

It took only one crack and one roar—
to destroy all that ever had worth.

Graceful were her waves no longer—
as the thunder heaved its way through.
Her waters became only stronger—
and the wind raced as it blew.

The world took notice of the fight—
of the sand against the sea.
In awe, they gathered to the sight—
taking notice of water's beauty.

The war went on between the two—
the waves on the sand did pound.
Until her heart leapt and suddenly knew—
resolution she had found.

Within her purpose was far greater more—
than in simply meeting the sand.

So much more was she was created for—
then she could ever have possibly planned.

So, she met with the shore in buoyant delight—
the sand settled with her in place.

The world gathered to watch the magnificent sight—
the water marvelous with her power and grace.

Raegan Smith

Angel

Her walk is heavenly,

Grace echoes with every step.

Her halo shines, glowing

As she walks through the fires of Hell.

She steps forward again

Trying to break the chains.

Her past is carved of stone

Her future is wide open

Her wings will take her

In the direction she needs to go.

Brooke Jackson

Literature

People everywhere complaining

Technology is taking over,

Science is expanding,

Math is getting ridiculous.

People everywhere forgetting

That one thing is dying:

Our souls need it

To breathe, to enjoy life.

Literature is forgotten

Novels are disappearing

Plays and musicals stalled

Poetry is barely noticed.

Without literature,

We lose our memories.

Without literature

Our history is lost.

Brooke Jackson

Poets Never Die

Poets never die.

Their ink is of blood;

Their poems are memories.

Their soul is revived

Each time a poem is read.

Believe me, my dear

My body was temporary

But my memories are forever.

My soul touched you

Because deep down

I knew you needed me.

Brooke Jackson

A Round Table

Armored men, seven strong.

Your ruby seats where you belong.

Shoulder to shoulder, you are brothers in arms

But never allies, never swayed by charm.

Eyes lurk wherever you tread,

Your swords lay unsheathed and shining, never leaving your side at bed.

Thy lips never part, too beautiful to break.

Thy eyes shine like rare gemstones found in the Styx Lake.

Do not be fooled by such false beauty, the seven cloaked in Death.

Lust, Gluttony, Greed, and Sloth.

Wrath, Envy, and Pride.

Their names whispered in hushed breath.

Forked tongues drink fermented wine

And sinister grins gleam divine.

The darkness covers them, the stars their fable

As the seven armored men sit in ruby red around the round table.

Isabel D'Allura

Beacon House

Once upon a time, I built a house.

I chose a hill, where all the elements collided in perpendicular angles – a Beacon House.

The hill gifted me with beautiful sunrises and sunsets, and with white, frozen blankets and Olympian collisions during storms.

We chose it for us, for a safe space to build our fragile future upon. A place to fill the rooms and every crevice with embodiments of our individuality.

Once upon a time, we built a home.

Instead of being our Eden, it turned to Hell.

I pass on that dirt path you once carried me down, the cherry blossom trees skeletal twigs of their former selves.

That vibrant shade of gray we painted reminds me of decaying skin, and the white trim lost its purity long ago to scandalous nature.

I feel hollow as I stare at the husk of a future we spoke about as children; the dreams we shared shriveled under simmering summer suns and passions gathering dust in those old boxes stored in the West attic.

Once upon a time, the house sat abandoned.

I look back on that dirt country road and remember the good times and the bad.

I can't tear the building down, reduce it to rubble and remnants of the stone chimney in the living room you designed.

Time is cruel with its reminder of what could've been. Each room a fragment of what won't be filled. We'll never sit on the porch during the dewy morning hours. We'll never sit in that small kitchen where there's enough room for a tiny fridge, make-shift table, and stove.

We'll never enjoy movies on my old, rickety couch, or slowly lead each other through candlelight into that master bedroom we spent forever dreaming about. That tiny room down the hall, the one with the crystal light fixture, will never house the young ones we said would eventually come.

Once upon a time, both of us cared.

I moved on, so did you. But I find myself somehow compelled to come back to the Beacon House with its tattered shingles and faded existence.

There's nothing left on this perfectly perpendicular hill except the beautiful sunsets and dewy morning hours. So, I did what I could, what was expected because Time wouldn't reverse, even if I sold my shattered soul.

So.

Once upon a time, I turned my back on you.

And drove away down the dirt country road without looking back once at the burning remains of our Beacon House.

Isabel D'Allura

Ethereal

Soft cotton sheets; cobalt and molten, melted steel.

My limbs intertwined, slick and thrashing from the nightmares I feel.

The lilac, sweetened midnight air softly caresses my cheek and dares to stay

Silent about the things I cannot speak.

I rise, rise, rise, from my slab of sleep, begging to be released from those

Disturbingly soft cobalt sheets.

But I'm dragged back under and smothered by what I never see.

But the slumbering stars sing me a lullaby,

The Galaxy above tucking me into his water colored body.

My curves lie still as he pulls me close,

His planetary eyes casting out the suffocating darkness.

So, we lie here, the Galaxy and Earth,

Wrapped and entangled in bare cotton steel.

My chaotic mind slumbering and not afraid to see what we feel.

Isabel D'Allura

Eden

Sunbathed tendrils brush against gossamer and silk.

Swaths of fabric whisper secrets and love songs under their breath.

Time doesn't exist in this place, this hidden paradise.

It doesn't take away from love precise.

Tame my flesh and rid my tongue of lingering doubt.

Take me to this hidden paradise.

Take me to the place free of time and glorious silence.

Take me to a world which lies beyond the fence.

You hold me close, the sky pink and orange and lilac as we swing.

Back and forth.

Back and forth.

Back and forth.

A pendulum, you and I.

Moving together, always side by side.

My smile your light of day.

But by night, your heart and prey.

Perhaps we are the monsters, the Serpent of Deceit.

Why should any of us hide our love, surrendering in forced defeat?

My love and I, we love with an eternal frozen flame.

Feelings so strong which altered Eden to never be the same.

Isabel D'Allura

His & Hers

It's something I'd never admit to; This feeling which haunts me.

It claws at my mind, flaunting its curves;

Making me wish you were mine.

Can I ever escape it?

Can I defy my forbidden lullaby?

Wait, my darling,

My pure turtle dove.

Let me hold you.

What more could you ask for, Love?

Let your worries fade away.

Let me feel you,

 Touch you,

 Embrace you,

 Intoxicate you in my arms.

Come walk this Fragile Street of Sin;

The euphoria you'll win.

 How can you deny me?

You're what I crave;

A beautiful daze of insanity.

But it's not us, this game of wits.

Threatening to shred my heart to bits.

I can walk away.

You won't

I can shut this door.

Whatever would you do that for?

Hush, my beloved darling.

Listen to my Swan Song.

Let your feet dance to the violin,

Your strings I strum deep within.

This is our time, our moment.

To run away and forget all.

Forget him and see only me.

Let me be all that you see.

Your Fragile Street of Sin tastes of wine;

Sweet, intoxicating and unnaturally divine.

But you play me the fool, a pawn of Lust.

Your handsome face no longer one I trust.

So, scrape your knees crawling after my exclusive, golden city.

I shall never think of you again, my Enemy, my Lover.

Isn't that a pity?

Isabel D'Allura

Between the Sea and Sky

Once I lay upon a shore of wet, hot sand.
Foam from the waves soothed my burnt flesh,
Penetrating my pores, flowing within my stream,
Reviving my lonesome, lost soul.
But life earns death, and the imprint is brief.
So, I swam against the tide that tore
Me further from the land I called home.

Then, I floated to watch other specks sail above
The sea and through the sky until they hit
A star. Was it the star of Bethlehem
Or David? Maybe Buddha could shine
Some light on the eternal glow too high?

But I soon descended from all that is sacred
Until the gulls circled, soared, and dove
To tap my blood: reuniting my red with her blue.
Am I at peace?

One with all the lost grains

That float in a dune of diversity.

The pale, yellow, and brown together continue

Their quest for the eternal star that makes

Us die to fly between the sea and sky.

Michael Donohue

I Shutter

I open ever so slowly....

To see, I must turn to bring

Her closer – too close, her hazy

Beauty I cannot focus.

Wooden guards block the light,

Darkness makes her eyes forever bright.

Her vision too pure: an untouched

Wingless angel falling for me.

Hurry, snap before she blows away.

I will develop in seconds

And be a short memory.

A fate unlike mine.

If only I could capture her

Tears that are too cold to be true.

I need that bold beauty

To float to me, tease me,

Tempt me to copy her seduction.

Silence! Rest the drums.

For my aching head has

Collapsed – up and down,

Down and up, I can stand and stare

No more at her chilled presence.

The red light blinked above,

I ignored the warning and released.

Now, I am left to hang forever

In my room of darkness.

A blur I am;

I shutter.

Michael Donohue

One Last Goodbye

Darkness my salvation, when will my time come?

Comfort lies underneath, but heavy

Foul breath tells me I am still alive.

No one cares to see a man reach with hopeful moans

Of dread that orchestrate from beyond, or a face

That drips with ruin. I am trapped inside the wet dream of

A missing person who is lost in smoke and covered in the

Ashes of unforgiving faces – inhaled by the city,

Burnt by the masquerade of the uninformed;

Each day richer with desperate discontent.

Free me from the yesterday's pervading

With the uncertainty of tomorrow.

Let me match a black and blue sock, wear the right

Shoes on my two left feet, and blindly

March down the broken yellow line

That leads to the righteous path, so I may

Gasp just one last goodbye.

Michael Donohue

Step Right Up

A mystical peep show –
Times Square from long ago.
Holmes bulging off the marquee,
Plaid pants and feathered caps
Come to sit on daddy's lap and
Swindle those begging to know
What is Behind the Green Door.
Wear a London Fog for protection,
Hide under a black umbrella,
Dangle a Camel from wet lips –
But keep those hands free!

The four men wrote:
Spit out the vile stuck in your head
Close your eyes and hear what is read
It must be true, for holy men said.

A revelation....

“Step right up, my son,”
Red nails claw your back creating
Slots to raise change deep within.

Souls scream inside a booth while
The poor empty a box picked by a rotten tooth.
Blood blends with blessed water
To replace the wine swilled at last night's supper.
Incense spread to shield the revered,
Smoke from a votive lit for the one
With long hair and a beard. He only
Raised in the shape of a finger
To point at the altar.

Cut it to fit the screen –
The cross is all we need to see
Not him who lingers,
Preying on holy grounds.
Sidewalk grails outside of school gates
Waiting for subway trains
To whiz below
So that the breeze can blow his cloak
Over his shameless head.
Innocence lost before it can be known;
All along it was Father
Hanging Behind the Green Door.

Michael Donohue

Under the Old Oak Tree

I watch for her under the old oak tree.

Although it is through an iced pane,

I see my eternal love drift forever,

But buried safe to hide

So that no man can lie an eye.

Our secret is held dear beneath

The mound of the old oak tree.

I stare past the scattering snow;

Like our love, it runs in all directions

An illusion of more than what it was.

My mind runs far from my frame,

Trying to escape from the agony

Of knowing mine was more

Then what she bore.

One flake fades, while others scatter

Throughout the lifeless field.

They float in a controlled chaos,

Hovering to decide if to fall where

Sad feet tread and tear drops fell, or upon
The dull, felsic granite heads that endure
More than the people they praise; but never
Will they settle on the earth under the old oak tree.

Love melts the hearts of those who can't endure,
But not mine, mine is forever fresh – final.
I saved our love as no one else would, and I'm
Rewarded only to exist and wait for her
Swirling dust to rise and crack the seal
Of my frozen frame. To drag me past other
Loving damned souls and take my place next
To her under the old oak tree.

Michael Donohue

Being A Hero

It means being brave,

And standing up for others.

It means being compassionate,

And helping others in need.

It means having the wisdom,

To walk away from a fight.

It means being an inspiration,

To those you hold dear.

It means loving those who hate you,

And protecting them even when they don't deserve it.

It means believing that God will make a way,

When it seems like there is no way.

It means being a quiet leader,

And following another person.

It means being a mentor,

And teaching others what God has taught you.

It means fighting for what is right,

Even if it means doing it alone.

It means running to win,

Even if the race is impossible.

All these things and so much more,

Are what being a hero is all about.

Mark Murry

God Exists

God is the creator of the heavens,

God is the creator of the earth,

He is the creator of you,

He is the creator of me,

Why choose to believe?

Why choose not to believe?

For I tell you this my family,

For I tell you this my friends,

He can make a blind man see,

He can make the deaf man hear,

He can make a lame man walk,

He can make a mute man speak,

He can make a crazy man sane,

He can make a dead man live again,

How do I know this you ask?

Because He made me autistic,

Yet He made me able to talk,

Yet He made me able to think,

Yet He made me able to write,

Yet He made me able to graduate with a high school diploma,

Yet He made me able to drive a car,

Yet He made me able to live in my own house,

Yet He made me able to fall in love,

Yet He made me able to get married to my beloved wife

Yet He made me able to go to college,

Yet most importantly, He made me able to believe

Mark Murry

When You See Trains

When you see an old rusty steam engine,
I see an old man named Pappy.

When you see a weird looking steam engine,
I see a crazy, yet lovable young man named Oddball.

When you see a pair of small diesel engines,
I see twin brothers named Barry and Byron.

When you see a huge, long diesel engine,
I see a giant of a man named Big Jack.

When you see a black diesel engine,
I see a mechanic named Ed.

When you see a fancy silver steam engine,
I see a British gentleman named Baldwin.

When you see a little red steam engine,
I see a country boy named Billy.

When you see a light green steam engine,
I see a southern belle named Peppercorn.

When you see engines like these and many more,
I sadly see the loss of a bygone era;
Even though it makes me want to cry sometimes.

Mark Murry

Darkness, My Sorrow

Inspired by the poetic works of 中原中也

In the Darkness, my sorrow sits.

I am no longer the man I used to be;

Darkness, my sorrow, hardly quits

As I fade like the colors of the slowly setting sun.

My sorrow, Darkness, is beauty she

Above my head, no sound escapes the golden rings;

Darkness, my sorrow surrounds me

Unfolding like a blanket over everything.

My sorrow dines in darkness.

I fight like the caged bird once wild and free;

My sorrow Darkness feeds

Wings beating on iron bars, steadily tearing.

Darkness, my sorrow, dressed in black

Swallows everything;

My sorrow, bathed by Darkness

Leaves me reeling.

Dakota Mullikin

For Someone Lost to Their Own Hand

Eternal silence is damning,
I know.
Life feels so empty without you here,
Without you near.
It all fell apart to a mournful keening,
That night covered in blood-spattered snow.
The words you left behind fall on deaf ears,
Not mine—I can still hear.
Those words you spoke all this time;
They sound like the fragments of my broken heart.
Living leaves a sour feeling—
I fear, from this, there is no healing.

Dakota Mullikin

In the Midst of Winter

Crisp, silvery snow

Falling on dying landscapes

The red fox curls up

Dakota Mullikin

Last Words

The world fades peacefully,
The soul snuffed out with only a whisper.
I think about what you have made me,
Lying here at the edge of forever.

The world blurs as it falls apart;
There is nothing here except you and me,
Both halves of the same heart,
Standing so close to the precipice of everything.

My dishonesty landed me here,
But I don't regret a single second,
Because you were so near.
It is a shame I have learned, too late, this lesson.

I am glad for your hand in mine.
With you standing solemnly by my side,
Serving as my soul's guide,
I am much less terrified.

If this story had been written different—

Maybe I could have learned the value of having someone so close to me,
Learned that another's heart was so, so significant;
Sooner, and I would have found in you my key.

You are the secret to opening my locked heart
And time can't be turned back no matter how hard we try.
Just hold me tighter to the point it hurts;
I owe you that for my lie.

I love you.
My whole heart aches,
But that is the price I paid
Despite the fact you gave me all the love I could take.

The world fades peacefully,
And my soul is making its last whisper.
As you stand beside me,
Your last words are all I need to hear.

You hold me closer,
But it won't change a thing.
You draw your face to my ear and whisper,
With words that softly ring

“I love you,
And I will remember....
Remember everything about *us*,
So, don't stay because of my selfishness.
Please.”

It's just enough.

Dakota Mullikin

Winter Grass

Peeking from the cracks in the sidewalk,

Three lone blades of grass crept up

Edges brow – every stalk

Scrunched under the foot of a slut.

My eye is drawn to them as they strain

With the pressure of her lone foot

Their companions long since slain

In the white snow, like soot.

The slut pays no mind as she stamps out her cigarette

A car fluidly approaches the edge of the street

Three crumbled stalks turn into a duet,

Only for there to inevitably be another set of feet.

Dakota Mullikin

Dead Breaths

How odd it is the way a sound can haunt the soul.

In the darkness of the dead of the night you hear it,
silent to the rest of the world.

Not a voice or a tap,
not the sound of footsteps in an empty house.

No, it's deeper than that.

How I wish it was the sound of a ghost.

I'd rather be haunted by a dead soul than a struggled breath.

It tracks me down on a sunny day, my early morning.

When I'm trying to fill my lungs with the fresh air of a new day,
it comes creeping up to me like that a rabid coon.

The sound of a struggled breath.

The simple joys of life were sucked out of me
the first time it crept into my house.

It invaded my heart and tore my thoughts apart.

The barriers of a hardened heart were punctured
by the sound waves of horror.

The breaths that struggled on the floor,

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the heart racing in the chest,
the blood slowing down as death sets in.
The purple of his face

The desire to be dead.

To be so close to death,
to live it with it in your eyes.
To sleep in the same house
with it as you tiptoe around out of paranoia.

The haunting of a dead breath.

Stevie Jarrett

He Said that We Were “Just Friends”

Let’s just talk about this for a second.

I’m never the one, I’m literally never the one.

Even though I am the one that deserves it.

I’m not even the girl-next-door,

I’m like the girl-no-one-wants-except-for-when-they-lonely.

You know what my love story is?

“I thought we were just friends.”

No, “just friends” don’t talk for hours in the parking lot of Wal-Mart.

“Just friends” don’t buy me a movie ticket on the first night out.

“Just friends” don’t come over and meet Dad for no reason.

You are either with me or not.

You don’t get me when you’re bored and lonely.

You get me when I’m bored and lonely or you don’t get me at all.

And guess what?

You don’t get me at all.

Stevie Jarrett

Meet My Friend, Anxiety

I share a body with someone else.

Or maybe something.

She isn't a ghost that is after my soul.

Nor a parasite sucking the life out of me.

Well, I lied about that one.

She isn't a child dependent on me.

She slips into my mind,

Telling me that I can't ride a bike

Or that my death is fast approaching.

Some nights, she just makes up some bullshit

About something I did in middle school.

And then I stare at the ceiling all night

Worrying about honestly nothing.

Other times, she tells me I have a kidney stone.

Even though I don't feel anything.

But since she told me that I am dying,

I start to believe her.

Mom says I am a hypochondriac.

She tells me to stop Googling diseases.

I told her, "Mom, I am dying. It says so here."

I throw up in the bathroom.

Usually, after long shifts

Or just stressful days.

You see,

I share my body with something.

I'm not quite sure what she is.

A friend?

Friends don't tell you that no one likes you.

They don't remind you of mistakes you made hours ago

And then tell you that they are punishable by death.

I guess that some friends might do that.

I don't really know because she told me that I don't have friends.

Enemy?

Enemies try to destroy you, I think.

She just tells me that something is going to destroy me.

My boyfriend says, "I don't understand why you can't stop thinking about it."

He drinks beer and listens to metal.

He is asleep right now.

He doesn't know what it is like to stay awake all night

Worrying about the next, guaranteed, existential crisis.

But I also think the economy might fall again soon.

They call that a conspiracy, though.

She says that conspiracies are real and that I should prepare for them.

It's not like we have conversations.

It is more like,

I am just trying to drive down a country road.

And the thing I share a body with is like, "maybe you'll lose your job today."

Great. Now, I must call my boss and ask him if I am trouble for forgetting to sweep the front office last night.

Or maybe I am in trouble for signing in cursive instead of print.

Or maybe I am not in trouble.

Maybe they just fired for me because they hate me.

That is logical.

My brain told me so.

And she is in my brain all the time.

I can usually shut her up if I go to the bar
Or lift weights.
Somehow, she breaks through sometimes.
So, I just sit in the corner of the bar
And contemplate my sheer existence.
My friends say, "What is wrong?"
I say, "Nothing, it's just my anxiety."

Yeah, she really hates it when I call her that.
Because then people look at me with eyes of pity.
Or with eyes saying anxiety isn't real.
That's just annoying.
Anyways, this is my friend.
Her name is Anxiety
And she is a real bitch.

Stevie Jarrett

Four years later (Kyrielle)

No matter the number of tears,
Insistence you loved me most,
You were never close to perfect,
But you're still my favorite ghost.

You drank, you smoked, you cried, you choked;
You damn near won your fight, almost,
Your demons, they won, one last time
But you're still my favorite ghost.

Very few have understood the way,
The artless way I loved you most.
Sometimes we traded poison words,
But you're still my favorite ghost.

Four long, dark, arcane years later
I'm getting high near a lamppost.
I try and say that it's your fault,
But you're still my favorite ghost.

Zeke Raymer

Frustration/Wailing at My Notebook

You know what?

I'm just not feeling it today.

I tried to find a better rhyme,

To construct a lyrical flow,

But I'm done.

I want to scream about injustice to the page.

I want to write what's inside my head.

I just need words that rhyme;

Words that follow

The "Poetic law."

But I can't even have that.

Nothing worth saying seems to rhyme;

Just one syllable off

Or one line too early,

Gwawdodyn and Monotetra become my tormentors.

So, I crumbled,

And wrote free verse.

Is this defeat?

Hell if I know. Sue me.

But I know you're laughing right now

Because you relate; even if you're not a poet,

After all, I'm just you on a bad day.

Zeke Raymer

Satyr Rage on a Saturday Night

The Liquor makes me smile

The rage is comfort

A drug to numb regret and inhibition

Think I'll just lust for a while

Red roses, red wine

Red rage turns my lips to grin.

A wicked transmutation from friend to object,

In a Satyr Rage, you can't tell the difference.

You lust and fight till morning light,

Fuck what-who-ever moves,

Bloody a friend's nose for no reason,

It's not excusable, but I feel like a champion.

They cheer and cover me with praise and drunken lips,

Cheer as I drink more poison, more poison than they can.

Am I legend? Hero?

No, I am Satyr.

In the end, I'm unconscious on the floor.

Shamed, my body is corpse, or maybe a stone

Vomit gushes from the mouth of your champion

I feel the horns, they're still there
Protruding scarlet letters of infidelity and senseless violence.
My beloved sees the horns, and weeps the most painful tears,
I have no excuse, the horns are there,
She will never feel enough;
Even if she's all I ever needed.
She stayed, but it's never been the same,
Every soft touch of our lips, she collides with my horns.
Sometimes being the life of the party,
Isn't much of a life at all.
So please, as one of my idols once sang:
Don't threaten me with a good time.

Zeke Raymer

To Sleep in Fear

As I lay me down to sleep,
The Hat Man emerges at my feet.
He watches me with jet black eyes
smiling as I start to cry.

As I lay me down for rest,
a creature sits upon my chest.
Eyes of a snake, horns of a goat,
laughing while he grips my throat.

As I lay me down to slumber,
my body becomes stiff and encumbered.
Unable to talk, unable to move,
I watch the shadows creep 'round my room.

The fear to sleep, the fear to dream,
the struggle to break silence with a scream.
Waiting for sanctuary that is the dawn,
I sleep in fear with the lights on.

Derrik Waltz

Roses and Violets

Roses are red

Violets are blue

Writing a poem about loving you.

Roses are red

Violets are blue

It's been so long since I heard from you.

Roses are red

Violets are blue

One more chance and I won't disappoint you.

Roses are red

Violets are blue

What can I do to please you?

Roses are red

Violets are blue

I'm so sad without you.

Roses are red
And Violets aren't blue
And need to not need you.

Roses are Red
Violets aren't blue
Hopefully sooner than later I'll be over you.

Roses are red
Violets are Violets
To get better I need to desire it.

Roses are red
And Violets are violet
In my life I need to pilot.

Roses are red
And Violets are Violet
I am a broken man.

Halleluyah Eluobaju

Depression

Depression lurks in bodegas
& behind the mirrors in alley bars
sharing a drink with a troubadour between shows.
It lurks in traffic behind semis.
It waits at the airport baggage claim,
sliding down the conveyor belt,
lurking behind luggage tags.

Depression is a mistress
at once both warm & familiar
& wreaking of self-destruction & danger.
It's the danger that draws you closer
thinking it will guide you to some understanding,
but there are no answers in sadness, my friend.
I've been wading in this filth for years & have yet to reach enlightenment.

Depression waits until everyone has left
taking taxis, walking bus lines
leaving yourself as your only company
to converse solemn eyed in the mirror
with someone whose appearance
seems so foreign.

Joshua Holycross

I guess I'll be here until the cows come to hatch

You may call me languid, that's fine.

I understand I'm speaking a language you may not comprehend.

It's not so much I'm indifferent as I'm selective about which I care or try.

It's not my fault. Ask my mother.

She told me I wouldn't ever have to do anything in this world I didn't want to except go to church and brush my teeth, but especially the former.

And now look at me. An agnostic accused of being apathetic in the workplace. As if.

Just wanna wade in whiskey and watch people

don't wanna have to talk to them. Them's got needs that interfere with my insolence.

I've been asleep too long, like a day after a 12-hour snooze

I just can't seem to wake up about anything

except when I do, I can feel the emotion building in me like an anthill on NatGeo

sped up to fit an entire week's worth of work into just a few seconds.

I'm off the front porch rocker, over the banister chucking lemons of life at the kids

down the street selling sour water at a quarter of a dollar – telling them to “get a

real job.” Fathers with shotguns watch me as I get my mail and tell me to mind my

letters. Don't they know I don't care? Don't they know I haunt the marshes with my

indigo chatter?

I make sad the willows who once stood so tall and make rain the clouds above.

There's a frog in the air. There's blood spread above my doorway.

My firstborn is still missing.

Livestock in the clearing fall dead with boils.

Gnats fill my throat with each breath.

I reach for the sour water as it turns black with blood and I ask:

Who needs religion when life hands you lemons?

Joshua Holycross

I'm Tired of Bleeding

Nothing true to the grass has been written by these hands in some time.

What is it that makes inspiration such a wisp of breath that it leaves at the first
sound of a cloud passing?

I'll search for it between legs and over the sun sprinkled corn growing tall – sheening
gold filling my eyes with dances.

A flower blooms and I smile.

Its leaves turned up to the sky to call for rain.

I go inside to prepare myself for the reality so harsh of non-creativity.

I grab a whiskey – no – an unsweetened tea bitter on my lips.

I let it float on my tongue before swallowing – sure to savor each fuzzy note in my
mouth.

Tonight, a coyote will howl, and I'll sit on my hands – busying myself not to follow.

The crickets will sing, and I'll not listen – I'll find them exasperating and wish that
they stop.

The cicadas will croak, and I'll yell at them inflammatories.

Orion will dance with his sword a' glistened and I'll feign ignorance – sure to not let
my eyes record every move.

I will not let myself be drawn away.

I will not let myself be fooled.

For I've searched low and stateside for inspiration and her minions

And know I'll find only a black hole draining life.

Joshua Holycross

We Only Exist in the Echoes of Our Footsteps

2nd floor view.

Out over the purple leaves & over-grown grass

My roof is copper.

Time comes once a week I feel like crying.

I'm not even particularly sad – just open

Hoping something in the natural world or manmade form makes me feel something
more – a connection – understanding.

All I want is to feel the spirits of the earth & know they too feel me.

We're drifting some void melancholy ego prisons.

Nothing moves when the clouds shed themselves.

When the streets are wet

When the blacktop tap dances

When the worms are washed up –

There's no one to call to.

Joshua Holycross

My Mom with Me

She wished me all her love

As I climbed in my truck.

Today I'm going away

Into the big city.

But I wish I had my mom with me.

I don't know how I

Managed to not cry in front of her

And although living here,

Is getting better

I wish I had my mom with me.

To protect me from the shadows

To tell me everything I didn't know.

To help me face my fears

And to tell me, it's all right,

To let out some tears.

Although I get to see her in a few months

I still miss her so much.

And the things I'd do

To get the past back.

Because I miss having my mom with me.

To protect me from the shadows

To tell me everything, I didn't know.

To help me face my fears

And to tell me, it's all right,

To let out some tears.

Well, I got to see my mom for a few days.

But before long, I had to go away.

It's not getting easier

But somehow, it's getting better.

Because I'll have in my heart, my mom with me.

Clayton Ham

“Yes, I Am Gay”

4 years ago

I found something I didn't know.

It would change my life,

Wasn't sure it was right,

Probably explains why I cried,

Felt like I didn't have a soul.

It took seventeen years

And seventeen years of fear

But in the mirror of my integrity,

There were four words I had to say,

“Yes, I am gay.”

Down the road in one year

I still had fear.

People looked at me with eyes of sin.

And I had to think, is it worth it?

Should I live a life that's worthless?

Time traveled on and I kept breathing

Never knowing where I was going
But then a light came out of darkness
There, my heartless cemetery began to grow life.
Sparks of life that shined like the wings of a butterfly
Ignited my heart with love and hope.
For the lightning of a second, I felt accepted.
Little did I know, it wouldn't last.
The fire of love fades too fast.

Down the road of another year,
I'm on the ground, wallowing in this fear
People still look at me with eyes of sin
I had to think again, am I worthless?
Is living even worth it?

Right when I'm ready to fall in the fire,
Someone pulls me back from behind
Pulls me into their love
Now I'm on my feet
It feels like a dream
But I'm on the ground
My love for him is bound.

Today, I smile when I say,

“Yes, I am gay.”

I won’t give in to the people who look at me with eyes of sin.

When I’ll stand strong and tall

Even if I’m not loved by all,

Just one man changed my heart

They can push, but I won’t budge,

Finally, eight little words I can say out loud

“Yes, I am gay, and I am proud.”

Clayton Ham

Sky, Sea and Land

Sky, Sky, why does thy continue to rain.

Does the sun's sorrow make thy weep fiercely?

Has this sadness given you so much pain?

I will help thee feel better, so hear me.

So vicious you are towards the earth of land.

A hail of arrows to seem to give.

In this blight of darkness, I give my hand.

To which we shall not perish but go live.

Cold you are to touch, but soft your heart is.

You give life to those that which seek it be.

Have you forgotten who you serve, for it is

His command you follow as per need.

The sound of day and night silent to hear,

Only that drop of each blue can be seen.

No creature dares venture forth from the fear

Of your wrong and evil-doing you fiend.

For each life you give, you take down two.

We wonder that which here to be left,

For fear keeps us from wondering of who
This dark and cold hand from, and it's from death.

Hidden you are until I feel the touch
Of your smooth body and to feel your kiss.
The pounding on the roof, soothing so much,
I could nearly fall asleep in such bliss.

Sky, Sky, why does thy continue to rain?
What is it that you are wanting to gain?
Sky, Sky, what is it you are trying to reach?
Earth, sea and sky are all connected each.

Rain, rain, as you go away, I feel free.
The sun sprouts above; you make the land shine.
I gleam in joy and fear as you hear, my plea.
Hope, and life, shown to me by the sliver line.

I despise you, I love you, I hate you.
All these feelings, confusing, and yet I
Continue to wait for your return through
The looking glass, with my fierce gazing eyes.

Joshua Moore

Burn

I didn't even think. I threw it into a pile. I tossed in a match. I watched it all burn. Everything. Every relic from the past six years. The glossy images of every photograph coiled into the center of its white backing and shrunk into a pile of ash. Every letter, card, note, every single word ever written vanished into nothingness as if they had never existed. Those were the cliché yet significant things. There were meaningless relics too. Toothpicks? I saved every single one.

I remember the first time he made the joke. We had revisited the restaurant we ate at on our first date. As we passed the hostess station, he took a toothpick out of the clear cylindrical dispenser and said, "I *pick* you." It was sweet, adorable, and corny, and I loved it. By the twentieth time, it meant nothing. It was like he thought I *expected* him to recreate the gesture, like some lame inside joke. It was no longer endearing; it was forced. Just like everything else. I found those dumb toothpicks everywhere. My car, my purse, my vanity table. They were constant reminders to me that our relationship was a meaningless routine. I saved everything. I was a hoarder when it came to souvenirs of us. I held on and was scared to let go.

That's why I burned everything. I thought I could cleanse myself of the negativity that I harbored by purging everything. I couldn't. I didn't know how to successfully rid my mind and heal my heart of that pain. The fire didn't cure my brokenness, but it did help. Fire. What a strange phenomenon. A source of energy and destruction. The smoke rising into the starlit night was satisfying; it was cathartic. Once all that was left were ashes, a smoky haze remained. It clouded my vision on the windless night, but soon enough it would dissipate, and I would be able to see clearly again.

Abigail R. Alderdice

Declaration

I will not let fear decide.

I will not let fear sit on the throne where peace should rightfully reign.

What power does something have over me other than the power I give it? Will I let fear bear

the crown and destroy my peace, hope, or my dreams? I will not, I refuse.

So long fear has decided my fate, held me captive within the walls of my own mind.
No more.

There is life to be lived, adventures that wait beyond the shores of my doubt. I will venture into

the wild of the unknown, confident that whatever steps I take shall be met with peace.

Fear has no hold on me.

Abigail R. Alderdice

Fly

Flightless bird in a small and lonely cage.
Yet the door is open. Fly, fly away!
Freedom lies beyond the walls of your home,
A world to discover, to call your own.
Why can you not fly? Someone clip your wings?
Or perhaps held by chains, objects unseen
Fear, insecurity, worry, or doubt,
Yet I hear your heart cry, "Please, let me out!"
Out of the things that now hold you captive,
To be made strong in weakness, not passive
To the judgements of those who don't know you,
And are afraid of the things you can do.
That first leap of faith is hard, but please try,
You will never know if you never fly.

Abigail R. Alderdice

Chronicles of an Inevitable End

All I could think while you kissed me
last night, was that one day, I would
break your heart.

You, like always, were pouring out
praise and admiration between fervent
touches. Your eyes were lit, in equal
measure, with lust and love. I returned
your words, faking a coy smile, leaving
teasing kisses and nips. You whispered
endearments, like you always do,
and I had to suppress a noise of disgust.
Have I always hated being touched?
Is it just your hands that revolt me?

I pushed you away, each touch too much,
your hands too hot. You say that my
demureness excites you.

I don't share that it confines me.

You pulled me against you, my right ear

over your heart. It was beating much
faster than my own.

Maybe it's not you. Maybe it's me. My
empty eyes often fail to see your beauty.
Perhaps my heart is just as empty,
failing to feel your love.

I am a firm believer that there is no such thing as "Truth." There is no single answer
to any question.

Maybe that's the reason for my internal struggle.

Why don't I want you? Why don't I want us? I listen to you talk about our future,
our children,

our marriage, our home; I am repelled. In my mind, I remain alone; I am singular.
But as I look

in your face, glowing with love and possibilities, I am selfish. I play the part perfectly.
I name

our children, I paint our home, I keep you content. Would it hurt you to know my
truth? Or

does it hurt me more to pretend to be yours?

Maybe I'm depressed. Maybe I've always been depressed.

Maybe I just see the world too clearly to be happy.

I think I love him. As much as I can love anyone, with these half emotions and empty feelings.

No one seems to realize that I am a dedicated actor, whose entire life is a play. Sometimes I feel

my facial expressions, I can clearly see what I must look like, and I have to force myself to

perform the proper reaction.

Even now, I feel like that was a lie. I think I'm always lying. Or maybe my truth just keeps

changing.

Why is everything about you? I try and I try to tell you. You always reply, "Me too." And then it

is about you. I can't explain myself, there is no room for me.

Last year I thought that maybe the reason I felt so empty was because I kept giving you my

emotions. My passion, my happiness, all taken by you. Like a parasite, you take from me and

demand my attention.

There is nothing left of me.

You left me.

You said you felt that we were a burden to each other. You felt they you were a burden to me.

I was a burden to you.

I can't argue.

You told me that you couldn't stand to watch me battle with my mind, it made you feel weak, useless. I never asked you to help me. I only desired you to stand by me.

You hated my sadness. You hated my empty chest, so I filled it with false love, which you still found lacking.

I can't apologize.

I tried my hardest to please you. Kissed you with lips that bruised your own. Touched you with my hands, leaving me to feel defiled. I let you use me, take all that I dared to give, leaving me with nothing but guilt for not hollowing myself for you.

My all is not enough for you, so you may have none of me.

I can't give anymore.

You didn't love me through my pain.

I think that's what hurt the most. Your lack of empathy. Even through my anger I still gave you all that I could. All of myself that there was to give.

But you. Hateful, selfish you. Demanded so much and gave so little.

You, who would blush and beg for more praise, never gave. You guilted me into constant worship.

Why should I have praised you?

You, without compassion. You, without ambition.

You. Unworthy of my praise.

I am thankful to be without you.

Eden Alderdice

salt and pepper on the table at the co-op

salt and pepper king and queen
come shake your spice on my life
instill your matter in my plate
cold as stone
marble cracked and concaved
not just a little lithe amount
but a hearty heavy shake of passion
leave no piece untouched
no crack uncovered
shake until empty
and nothing is left.

Natasha Kever

Scars

You put your head down

Cover your scars

Try to fade them away.

You say your scars

Make you ugly

Detract from your beauty,

Did they never tell you

Scars are beautiful?

It means you fought back.

Those scars are proof

Some angels win

No matter how hard it is.

The Devil and his demons

Will not win battles

If you learn to fight back.

Continue to fight, sweet angel

Because you're beautiful –

Scars and all.

Natasha Kever

shatter

you broke me like one breaks glass.

little fractures that erode in time

the tap tap tapping of your fingers

against my soul

mercilessly scarring

with your jagged marks.

I want to forget

to rewind time,

but there is no watch to wind

no glance behind

just shards

shattered.

Natasha Kever

want it back

i wait.

fallen on scrapped knees

with no steps taken

you stopped my heart.

a mere muscle now

stripped of dignity

and cut to shreds.

i want it back;

my heart i mean

so i can sing my song

not yours

Natasha Kever

words

what do you say to someone who's dying?
chalked words find no home in dry mouths.

no words come
as tears become lines of sadness
leaking from souls.

"I'm sorry," resonates as
touch now turns to a ghost
that is never enough.

"How will I manage?" prolongs ears as
each glance lingers to stay more
unsatisfied with each passing day

"How long do we have?" makes
time a punishment,
pain constricting us by presence.

hollowed words like "I love you"

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seem meaningless as they
linger on cracked lips
fighting for freedom
in a world of silence.

Natasha Kever

Art

The Country Kitchen



Painting by Elzbieta Bidwell

La Vida de España



Painting by Elzbieta Bidwell

Artemis



Photograph by Stevie Jarrett

Ember



Photograph by Stevie Jarrett

Blue Cobblestone



Photograph by Natasha Kever

Cliffs of Mother



Photograph by Natasha Kever

Denail



Photograph by Natasha Kever

Haystack Rock



Photograph by Natasha Kever

Sleep



Photograph by Natasha Kever

Trinity Cross



Photograph by Natasha Kever

Eddie



Painting by Eden Alderdice

Jeptha



Painting by Eden Alderdice

House of Flowers



Painting by Paulina Nieto

The Garden



Painting by Paulina Nieto

Harmonic Crane



Sketch by Dakota Mullikin

Nonfiction

Macaroni Mishap

I love pasta! No matter the shape or type: bow ties, penne, shells, or elbow macaroni. Spaghetti and meatballs, macaroni and cheese, and lasagna are just a few of my favorite dishes. My favorite dish, however, is macaroni and cheese. If I could have macaroni and cheese every day of my life, I would not complain. I have had it with nearly all meals of the day. I am usually the pickiest eater in my family, so at dinner, if there are no sides that I like, I make some macaroni and cheese for myself.

I usually make macaroni and cheese in microwavable cups. My preference is Velveeta shells and cheese and I know how to make it so well that I have the directions memorized by heart. I don't even need to read the directions because it is almost like second nature to me. There are less than five steps to make it anyway, so it's not that hard to mess up. In fact, it is so easy to do, a young child could do it without supervision.

Another nice aspect of microwavable macaroni and cheese is that it takes less than five minutes to make. There is no more waiting for a pot of water to boil because the noodles are boiled and cooked while in the microwave. The total cooking time is only three and a half minutes, and one minute for the pasta to cool off. The key to making perfect microwavable macaroni is having the correct amount of water in the cup. There is a line to show where to stop, but I go a little bit below the line.

The directions on how to make Velveeta shells and cheese are as follows:

1. REMOVE lid and Cheese Sauce Pouch.
2. ADD water to fill line in cup. STIR.
 - a. **WARNING: HELP PREVENT RISK OF FIRE. ADD WATER TO FILL LINE. DO NOT LEAVE MICROWAVE UNATTENDED.**
3. MICROWAVE, uncovered, on HIGH 3-1/2 min. DO NOT DRAIN.
4. STIR IN contents of Cheese Sauce Pouch.

- a. NOTE:
 - i. STARCH BLEND IN CUP REDUCES RISK OF BOIL OVER AND THICKENS SAUCE.
 - ii. CHEESE SAUCE WILL THICKEN UP UPON STIRRING.
 - iii. DO NOT REUSE CUP.
- b. KEEP KIDS SAFE! AVOID BURNS: CUP AND CONTENTS WILL BE VERY HOT.

One day, I was at home feeling in the mood for a snack, so I went into the pantry and grabbed some macaroni and cheese. I opened the lid and as usual, set the microwave for three and a half minutes, and as the macaroni cooked, sat back down in my chair. Approximately one minute into the macaroni cooking, my family was confused as to what I was making. Someone asked if it was popcorn, and I told them it was macaroni. We checked the backyard to see if someone was burning wood, but there was nothing happening in the backyard. So, what is this funky burnt smell, and where is it coming from?

My dad rose up from his recliner and went into the kitchen. He found the culprit. It was my macaroni and cheese. My dad opened the microwave, smoke came out and caused the smoke detectors to sing a harmonious tune. Then, my dad reached for the bowl and launched it into the sink. I saw my once beautiful macaroni and cheese charred, crumbled, and black as sin. Burnt plastic plus burnt noodles equals a stench that no one wants to smell. It is worse than burnt popcorn and burnt hair combined.

When we finally found out what the smell was, everyone started flooding questions to me. I was terrified and confused about what I did wrong, and I thought I was a failure at life. I mean, how could I mess up something so simple? This was one of the easiest things to cook, and I make it all the time. What did I do wrong? I finally composed myself and realized that I forgot to add water. After all, it only says in capital letters that adding water prevents a fire, and one should not leave the microwave unattended.

My family was not mad at me because we are all humans and that means we sometimes make mistakes. Mistakes and mishaps are just a part of life, and we can use those experiences to reflect on and to learn from them.

I learned the value of what water does to microwavable macaroni and cheese. Without it, it does not cook and can catch on fire. If it were not for my dad taking it out one minute into the cooking process, the whole microwave could have caught on fire and things could have been much worse than they were. It was even possible that the whole house could have caught on fire.

Now, when I make my macaroni and cheese, I always double-check that I add water. I open the microwave before I put in the time to make sure I see the shell noodles floating in the water. It is important to pay attention to detail when making macaroni because it only takes a one-minute macaroni mishap to throw everything off.

In life, I have learned that paying attention to detail is key to success. I always double-check and pay attention to details while in college. For example, I have thought that an assignment was done and complete, and then I realized that I never submitted it, or accidentally submitted the assignment to the wrong professor. If I would have slowed down, and paid better attention to all the details, I could have prevented this mistake from occurring. Paying attention to detail only takes a few seconds and it can help prevent future, smelly mistakes.

Smelly mistakes are sometimes the ones that are the best to learn from. However, they are the ones that are not always fun to relive and go back down on memory lane. Macaroni mishaps and other minor mistakes all will continue in life. But who would have known that one microwavable Velveeta shells and cheese cup would forever have an impact on my life?

Molly McGinnis

Short Fiction

Tenwren & Tanroq

I heard the rhythmic pounding of oversized paws on the ground behind me. I knew for goddamned sure that if I couldn't throw myself up a tree in the next couple of seconds, I was little more than rat bait. My pulse rushed overwhelmingly loud in my ears as I pushed myself to the brink of my body's fastest speed, my surroundings blurring in a borderline dizzying manner. The bait and switch tactic I had come up with last minute had clearly worked. What remained was the tricky part. The tree I needed was right fucking there!

I only needed to stick the landing when I got where I needed to be. In the haze of the moment, I snapped into an intermissional thought about my brother. I only had the time to hope he didn't piss himself and run away. He knows, probably better than I do, that I couldn't do this alone. If I weren't such a coward, I'd have turned to face the thing behind me and shoot an arrow into it or die trying. Mother would probably say it was my gumption that told me not to.

Teeth snapped a hair's breadth from my ankle—so close that I could feel the hot, humid breath fanning out on my exposed skin. For the nauseating moment that my legs swung out from under me after latching onto the branch above my head, I desperately hoped my gloved hands wouldn't slip from the bark or that I had enough upper body strength to climb at all. I scrambled for purchase as my own momentum worked against me. I staunchly refused to get myself eaten. I didn't want to be. Dying in general has probably got to be the lowest thing on my list of priorities. For me, there has never been any honor in death.

I managed to catch myself before I pitched so far forward that I would careen off the branch, and into the jaws of death. Quite literally. My heart pounded furiously in my throat, systematically pushing against my airway. I didn't have the time to dwell on how close I came to choke on myself.

The wood under me creaked slightly with the stress of my weight as I straightened and used it as a jumping off point, reaching for the next branch above me. I could hear the chuffing grunts of the thing under me, a nearly silent threat. A very tangible one. I struggled to pull my weight up, but I desperately needed to climb, to stand.

My non-dominant hand wrapped almost instinctively around my bow's leather encased handle, and I pulled it free from its place on my shoulder. My opposite hand drifted to the quiver secured to my waist—dislodging an arrow with practiced deftness. My gaze washed over that, that *thing*, and a shiver ran up my spine, surging through my guts, and landing in a hard lump in the back of my throat. The hairs on the back of my neck rose up to greet that lump.

The creature's eyes took on the eerie likeness of an owl—simultaneously large and moon-like with pupils that ended in narrow points like daggers; its teeth poked out of its maw as if they could not fit into it, its mouth hanging open for the size of them. Its claws made its teeth look like toys, and its fur bespoke the unnaturalness of it even in something as minute as the pattern upon its back—erratic stripes that transformed into spots that faded into nonexistence by the time they reached the animal's haunches. It took me a long moment to comprehend what I was looking at—a cat; an ugly as hell cat, but a cat all the same.

Putting an arrow in the thing's fucking head would be a mercy I decided. I had seen the way my arrow had bounced off it from the distance when I fired my distraction shot earlier. I had also heard the stories from those who had tried to fight it before. I've never been stupid. Piercing the eyes was the only option I could use without being in its mouth. If I didn't have my bow, it would have been a certainty.

I knocked my arrow subconsciously, and I made a carefully deliberate pull to full draw, lining up my aim despite the fact my arms were still shaking from my desperate climb. The custom metal alloy at the tip of my arrow gleamed with refracted sunlight just before a subtle movement drew my attention.

The beast rose to its haunches and, using its massive musculature, propelled itself upward. Its teeth clapped audibly as it made to take my weapon away. I realized, without a doubt, that *that* was its intention. To take my weapon—not to attack *me*. Not yet anyway. My arrow whirred into the ground behind the animal, my chance at a sure shot decimated. I staggered violently, and barely regained my balance. It was sentient; that much I could tell.

“Shit fire, FUCK!!” The animal's overlarge claws dug into the bark of the branch I had used to get into the tree, and I was acutely aware of the fact that I needed to move my ass as fast as possible. I *needed* to get down that branch. The

only route to my salvation was blocked by an animal that wanted me dead. Maimed. Dismembered. I'd have to go around to get back, so I whipped around as fast as my body allowed and climbed for the life I wholeheartedly wanted to keep.

Luckily, it seemed to me, the beast was being cautious taking its time to climb toward my sorry self. The entire tree groaned as if it were in pain, as if it wanted to fall apart at the sheer weight of the damned thing ... I knew I could use that to my advantage.

My breath was horribly ragged, and my lungs burned with the intensity of a blacksmith's forge fire. My brother's face flashed through my mind, accompanied by an unsettling feeling of premonition. "Ah, I'm going to die today, aren't I? Tanroq, your ass will be the first one I'm going to haunt." The words came out as little more than breathy mumbling, but I still felt the need to say them out loud. It was enough to distract me.

By the time I was within reach of that precious first branch, my hands were sweating profusely, enough to permeate through my gloves. My bow slipped through slick fingers, jolting me with an icy bolt of dread. It hadn't occurred to me that I still held it in my grasp, that I hadn't returned it to its place on my shoulder. The whine that escaped my lips was involuntary, but it didn't go unnoticed by either myself or the animal perched behind me.

The tree was already buckling when I threw myself to the ground. It was essential that I got my bow back, and the pain from the fall wouldn't kill me. At least, I was pretty sure it wouldn't when I made the leap. What I realized after the fact was that it hurt like a son of a bitch.

I fumbled to grab my dropped weapon when the tree behind me howled like a damned specter caught in the depths of the Underneath. I hadn't comprehended the noise, just reacted to it—pushing out with as much force as I could muster to one side. That paralyzing shiver from before returned for a moment when the animal crashed into the underbrush where I had been just a millisecond before, front paws creating a quake that reverberated through the air itself. "Fuck." The animal collapsed, backside whipping violently over its own head. For a moment, I thought it had broken its own neck. To me it was obvious the beast had not anticipated my escape.

“You have to sacrifice instinct for sentience, fuckface.” I snatched my bow from where it landed after the roll and broke off in a sprint that I knew wouldn’t last very long if my weary muscles were any judge. I was a bit giddy, but also a bit pissed. Tanroq was unreliable at best, but I still didn’t appreciate the bullshit of having to go to him, of his negligence in following through with my plan. I decided that if I wasn’t dead by the end of this, he would be.

I could tell the exact moment the animal started to resume the sickening chase. I was wishing, with limited confidence, it would run *away*. If my strangled, erratic breathing wasn’t keeping me from it, I would have sighed.

The instant my brother’s gold-wreathed head came into view, relief flooded me. Everything would be alright, or so I thought. My right leg caught on a branch that I tried to jump over, tearing my leg out from under me.

Shit was the only thing that rang in my head for the time it took me to hit the ground. My voice reverberated hollow and jagged in my ears—thoughts running a blank. The pain was decidedly worse than the plunge from the tree, my head smashed as it was against a rock embedded in the ground.

The beast hadn’t arrived yet and I was aware my time was limited. I pushed myself to my feet. Much too fast I realized as my vision shook, and blood plunged down my face. Rancid breath and almost tenderly soft lips grazed my leg. I knew I was fucked. My legs tried to jerk me forward in a fight or flight response, but my stomach dropped into a pool of icy dread. I wouldn’t be able to move fast enough.

The red-hot brand dug almost surreally into my calf. The pain was absent for a flash, until those disgustingly large teeth pulled away and I *felt* it rip my flesh, rending it to tatters. The scream that I heard must have been my own.

“Tenwren!” My brother cried out, and the beast turned its head; I could tell as the offensive breaths left my skin. I swiped frantically at my brow, trying to clear my field of vision as I tried to drag myself away. The fact that Tanroq hadn’t provided enough of a distraction was painfully obvious as a heavy paw landed on my injured calf, claws digging in just enough to paralyze my movement.

“Brother, do something!” The vocalization came with a pitchy whine, if shouts could even be whines. Everything was starting to blur together inside my head, my brain erasing memories that I still needed to process. Shock. It must have

been. My brother's response sounded like a vague chirp, but I couldn't comprehend it. It didn't matter. The paw lifted, and I was thrown into instinctual overdrive, a sudden burst of energy pulsing into what little blood was still left in my body.

I flipped over to face my attacker, hand waving unsteadily over my bleeding brow. The damned thing was playing with me, just like any other cat does with its food. My left hand groped for something, anything, when I grasped a rather smooth stick. My bow. Old trusty. The beast huffed, and I could smell the rot of dead flesh. It was getting tired of playing, but I had a plan. It wouldn't work very well, but it required patience and luck. This was like a game, and my neck was the winning move.

Bile rose in my throat. I bit it down. My eyes weren't working. So, I wouldn't use them. It was all an elaborate game of wit, and I always win at games of wit. My blood sank into my eyes, but I listened, felt with hyperaware nerves for every breath and every muscle movement. I was as ready as I could be. The animal sucked in a breath, nearly silent over my own gasps, and I swung my bow as fast and hard as I could manage.

My bow buckled with a tension from a direction it wasn't meant to handle, and the string snapped. The animal jumped back with a howl. It was morbidly thrilling. I wondered with a euphoric rush if it caught the animal in the eyes. It was pissed, growling loudly when it lunged forward again. I moved my bow between those terrible teeth and myself in anticipation.

The bow broke with little effort on the part of the beast, and teeth sank agonizingly into the flesh of my arm, scraping bone. The wooden shaft of my bow mitigated the blow, and the animal was officially physically incapable of closing its mouth all the way. The wound was less serious than the one on my leg.

I had nothing left up my sleeve. Not really. I was done for. The animal crept forward agonizingly slow toward my exposed throat. I wouldn't be able to time it right before those teeth stained with my blood dove into the vulnerable center of my lifeblood. I wondered how I was still conscious, much less alive.

My good hand pulled an arrow out of my quiver. It was broken; I could tell, but that didn't matter. What *did* matter was the fact it still had the piece of metal attached to it. The animal staggered to its right with a sudden, violent jerk, nearly falling over completely. It appeared that Tanroq had done *something*.

I could barely tell what direction was up, or see any color but red, but I put as much force into stabbing the animal that I could manage. My balled fist made it all the way to ragged fur, arm brushing against the hardened enamel of massive teeth. Searing hot blood sank over my hand and I desperately pulled to dislodge the arrow.

The animal howled and whimpered in the same breath as blood spurted out of its neck like raining fire. I didn't stop stabbing it when it collapsed on top of me, making weak attempts to flee. It didn't give me that, so I wouldn't offer it myself.

Eventually, it stilled. Silent. The deed was done. My body stopped moving of its own accord, and I was suddenly aware of my heavy eyelids. I just wanted to sleep.

"Tenwren? You're still breathing, thank the Gods. Little bro?" The foggy haze in my head hadn't abated, but I registered my brother's voice all the same. "It'll—it'll be okay. I got help. Hang on, 'kay?"

Other voices came into the periphery of my awareness, like whispers through a fog. How long had I been lying there? Was that tearing flesh I was hearing? Were those the voices of the Gods?

"Son, you were brave enough for today." Not the Gods, at least they didn't seem to be. Their tone was the only thing I could distinguish, not the words. I think they were supposed to be soothing.

"It can't hurt you anymore." The weight lifted off my chest, but I could not move. Could barely even breathe.

"He's still alive, the poor thing."

"Get some rest, it's alright child."

"There's so much blood."

I listened to the incoherent voices until I could not hear at all, and my world faded into a haze of dried blood and grime. I felt hands pressing on my wounds until I couldn't anymore. It was like I was in a void, existing, and yet not.

Dakota Mullikin

The Death of a Japanese Heart

May 17, 1868 Japan

The air in Itabashi glistened with the pre-heat of early summer, and the moisture from the previous days' rainfall. Today was clear; not sunny, but it lacked the chill of abundant cloud cover. The street was filled with people, but they significantly lacked in the number that might be expected for the hour of the day. It was stagnant. Peaceful even. Upon closer inspection, anyone passing by would notice the distinct tension lacing the air, forming an invisible weight that bore down on the entire vicinity. Iron could practically be tasted despite the fact no blood had been spilled.

Members of the new government's military slid onto the street, towing between them a man with his head held high despite the obvious predicament he found himself in. The men walked past the onlookers without deigning to give them a second glance. The center man's eyes were locked onto the place in front of them, to the last place he would see before being forced to stare at the earth below him. By the time anyone realized, the group had made it to the straw mat where many men had knelt their last.

The man from the center sat obediently on the mat before him. One of the military men began to speak, reading from a parchment. None were to be seen, but the tone in which the military man spoke gave the distinct impression of recitation. The name of the man to be executed was announced as Kondo Isami, and it was on this day, after twenty years spent in incarceration for his crimes, he would die here.

The other men prepared Kondo for his "long-awaited punishment," and many of those who had been previously wandering in the street came to watch like dogs waiting for scraps. The weather was almost too pleasant for the occasion.

Kondo's topknot was lifted from his neck for it to receive its proper shave, as was deemed necessary in this type of execution. The goal of the scenario wasn't to prolong suffering. The executioner himself made a minor show of sharpening his blade, decidedly to ramp up his own sadistic pleasure as his blade had already been sharpened the night prior. He gave it a little flourish when he had chosen an adequate time to stop.

The time had come after what many would consider “an eternity of waiting.” Such was the sentiment widely held by the crowd that doubled in size for the show’s climax. Kondo dutifully bowed his head forward, holding his topknot so it couldn’t hinder the executioner’s blade. The question that hung in the air was presented with a finality that had managed to silence the crowd, even in their exhilaration. “Your final words?” It hung in the air for only the briefest intake of breath.

“I have been a terrible trouble.” The blade swung in a silver crescent arc that seemed to bleed moonlight. The air filled with the metallic stink of blood so thick it could be tasted, and the crowd moved on, making their way to finish the business they had set out to do prior to the execution without bestowing the body a second glance.

The executioner snapped the blood that smeared the steel of his blade onto the street next to him, and he and his entourage made their exit. Their job was done. One half of a single heart had been destroyed.

Kondo’s headless body was later removed from the scene before the scent of abundant decay caused the people of the town to develop any illnesses. His head was placed upon a wooden pike on the river’s edge facing the street for display. A lesson. A warning.

By the time Hijikata Toshizou had received official word about his friend’s death, he had already realized his pleading for the man’s life had utterly failed.

II.

There wasn’t enough time to think on Kondo’s death during the Battle of Utsunomiya Castle. The battle was hard-fought, but hard lost. Reinforcements from the opposition had destroyed their victory when it was so close at hand. It was strikingly apparent they were fighting a losing battle, and likely had been since the beginning.

As the Shinsengumi made their retreat from the disastrous battle, Toshizou lamented the state they all had arrived at. “How could we have fallen so far?” He asked himself—more times in recent memory than he cared to admit.

His only answer was the hollow *I don’t know*, resounding in his skull. The problem was, he did know. His pride had supported him all this time, and now it was

crumbling to the dust swirling underneath people's feet. They lost everything, and nothing would be spared.

A memory that left nothing but a sour taste behind. *That* is what they had become. With Isami gone, it was like he became a ghost haunting the streets changing before their eyes—the guns, the war had sprung up. Order had fallen apart, and foreign trade poured in. Nothing was as it used to be, and nothing could be more terrifying than the intense upset it caused.

The trip to Aizu was less than favorable. Not for a lack of decent weather, but because the trip was unwillingly accompanied by endless thought, a never-ending stream of inner turmoil. Toshizou's injuries ached, but that was the least of his concerns.

He wrote letters to his brother-in-law in Hino, but they proved less than cathartic. He spoke openly in them. He figured, if he put his emotions on paper, shared them with someone who *knew*, then he might be able to reconcile himself. To build up what had been knocked down so thoroughly. But it seemed nothing could solve the burdensome emotions he felt. Not a single poem, not a single word of prose, nothing could save him from himself it would seem.

His wounds would almost certainly never fully heal, or so he had been told. He had already been aware that this was—in all likelihood—the truth, but he resolved to fight this battle until the end. At this point, their chance was virtually nil for any kind of victory. It didn't mean they had zero chance, but it also didn't mean there was any room left for hope. That didn't mean he would stop fighting. He had made a vow, and he would keep it.

He alone would shoulder the burden of his friend's death. It was *his* job to keep mistakes from happening, and now everything seemed nothing more than one big, nightmarish mistake Toshizou felt he could have subverted had he just put in more effort. If only he could have said something different. If only he could have convinced the loyalist army to stay their hand. What was done, was done. Nothing could change it and now he had to live with the consequences.

When they arrived in Aizu, the primary goal was to recover from their wounds, and, on a secondary note, put Isami's ghost to rest. Ten'nei-ji Temple was the place where Toshizou chose to oversee the construction of the gravesite for his old friend. Isami wasn't the common criminal he was executed as, and Toshizou

refused to let the rest of the Shinsengumi forget what he was. Even if the rest of the world forgot, Isami would be remembered as the samurai he was.

The funerary rites they could perform blurred together in Toshizou's grief and in his physical pain. Isami Kondo was gone. Only one thing remained that had to be done. The end.

III.

August 1868

Toshizou took the remains of his troops to Sendai to meet with the Enomoto Takeaki's fleet. They would make their final stand in Hakodate, the star-shaped fort. It was their last resort. If they could establish themselves as a separate entity, a separate government, then perhaps they stood a chance at making it through the war. A desperate attempt made by desperate men, just as it must have looked like to the loyalist army.

Toshizou had come to the realization some time before making the journey to Hokkaido but managed to filter it out of his mind. The only thing left for him to count on was the startling truth: "The Era of Swords" was over. The looming death of the Shogunate was all the proof he needed for affirmation. So, he would not falter. If Isami could not die in an honorable suicide, neither would he. But he also had his duty to uphold—an unintentional compromise on his part, but he held himself to his code, and he would not go back on it. A samurai does not go back on his code, even if his time is truly, hopelessly dead.

On their way to the northernmost island of Hokkaido, Toshizou spoke with the Shogunate doctor accompanying his troops, and admitted the one truth he had not uttered aloud to anyone other than himself.

"I am not going to battle to win. With the Tokugawa government about to collapse, it would be a disgrace if no one is willing to go down with it. That is why I must go. I will fight the best battle of my life to die for the country." The unspoken words said explicitly *that is my duty and my repentance*. He owed it to the other half of his heart, the dead half in Isami Kondo, to follow through with his decision.

The Battle of Hakodate ended the Boshin War and began the reign of the Ezo Republic. Doom was sure to greet them if they failed. Toshizou knew they would, but that didn't change the decision he had made.

IV.

June 20, 1869

Toshizou went to battle after speaking with his page. It had been a more painful affair than he'd imagined. The interaction between them. He recalled it vividly. Not because of its recency, but because it reopened the wounds that had calloused over in the time since Isami died.

He gave his page one last order. The boy had clearly not expected it, as it had come out of the blue from his reticent vice commander.

He had thrust the folded parchment into the boy's hands and willed him to leave with it. He needed to have it taken to his brother-in-law, to his family in Hino. It didn't matter that the boy had wanted to join him in his final battle. The letter ensconced in the parchment contained a photograph and a short poem he had written that read "Though my body may decay on the island of Ezo, my spirit guards my lord in the East." It was his final testament. His legacy.

The boy had been in shock for a while, and tried to refuse him, but in the end, one simply cannot refuse his master. The boy had recognized that all too well. Toshizou then entrusted his swords to the boy, and he left—refusing to look back. The boy could not refuse a dead man. And certainly not his dead master.

The gunfire jammed his mind back into the present. He could not move, and his back was in terrible agony. His horse slumped near him, exhausted, but much more alive than anticipated. He could only hope someone would approach him and put an end to his suffering. How disgraceful to need a pity blow, that a weapon like a gun could not put him down faster than a sword. How fitting, he mused. He yearned to see Isami again, and there was only one way to see that come to pass. The world turned into a hazed blur around him. His eyes locked with those of his horse for a moment, and for the first time since Isami's execution, he allowed himself to see beyond himself, beyond his mistakes, his pride, and his responsibilities. In that instant, the field where he was shot down appeared strangely beautiful to him with lavender blooming in ceaseless abandon around him. How funny, that flower. *Faithful* he recalled it meaning. Faithful. He liked the sound of that.

Dakota Mullikin

Bottomless Pit

The Bottomless Pit was where I wondered about the afterlife. I wondered if the path to Heaven is as narrow as the preachers say, or if the amount of people going to Hell is as numerous as they led it on to be. There are much better Christians in the world than myself, but I thought I wasn't a bad person, and I don't think that earns you a ticket to eternal damnation. For a long time, I wasn't sure if I became a Christian because I truly meant it, or it was because I feared what might lie behind the bullet of the handgun that dug into the side of my temple.

Do you remember your life when you're in Hell?

I posed this question to my youth minister several years ago when I was 18, and I didn't know why that moment chose now, of all moments, to be so unsettlingly vivid.

I think you're focusing way too much on Hell, and not on what God is doing within you now. Pray about it, and He'll give you the peace you're searching for.

They were big fans of moves of the Lord at those conferences, I suppose; "let God give you answers to your situation in His time," and all that. It was hard to wait on someone else's time when you perpetually feel as though yours has been over for a long while.

I put the gun on my nightstand and climbed back into bed, my eyes endlessly staring down the barrel. It looked especially cavernous tonight.

"You want your usual tonight, Desmond?"

"Yeah ... maybe an extra waffle, though."

Rodney was a nice guy. He certainly didn't deserve to be stuck as a night shift Waffle House waiter, but he was never annoyed with me for coming in that late; Lord knows that's how I'd be with people during my illustrious stint at McDonald's. He'd even started to get fresh dark roast brewed up for me on these late Sunday nights, the caffeinated chaser for my usual waffles and bacon.

Unlike most of the other restaurants I'd stopped at in downtown Philadelphia, this Waffle House was well-kept. When I arrived, the floors, windows, and most of the tables gleamed with cleanliness, except for one belonging to a group of people that had just left. Even their plates that Rodney was on the way to collecting looked good; the waffles looked so tantalizingly well-cooked, I was tempted to convince Rodney to let me finish them off. The lone cook on the night shift and Rodney were well-dressed, leading me to believe that this must have been a corporate Waffle House. With my street clothes sweaty from all the stage lights just an hour prior, and bearing the scent of a show gone bad, I felt like a peasant among the royal court.

"You don't seem like you're all there, bud. Was it a bad one today?"

The smell of rotten tomatoes seemed to flood my nostrils again when he asked me this. In all fairness, Rodney warned me about how the comedy clubs were in Philadelphia, but I didn't know they were old-school enough to throw food on stage when they didn't like you. I felt the strangest mix of anger, disgust, and amusement that turned into the numbness. I became used to it all too quickly.

"Yeah, didn't go too well. They had the audacity to kick me off before I even finished, too."

Rodney nodded and gave a sympathetic "hmmm." He handed the cook my meal ticket, then took the open seat across from me. There were no other customers in there at 1:46 A.M.; I think I hit the sweet spot between the midnight "this here's Jimmy and I'm Cletus" truck drivers and the 3 A.M. college students.

"That's the rough thing about doin' comedy, I've heard. Everybody loves you on your on days, but they never let you live down your off ones."

"Rod, it's been nothing but off days. Every show I've done, they've kicked me off stage. All the other clubs hear about those shows, then they cancel on me and get some lame indie band or a washed-up Stephen Colbert rip-off to take my spot."

I took a sip of coffee to calm down, realizing how loudly I'd said that. Rodney sat stoic, hands folded in front of his face in concern, a pose out of Dr. Phil's playbook if I've ever seen one, though that was likely unintentional.

“I just ... I don’t know. There’s not much for me to go back to anymore. I need this, and I feel like I’m long overdue for things to start going well...there’s nothing else I want to do but this.”

Rodney raised an eyebrow, a mix of doubt and intrigue on his face, but he still wanted to help the best he could.

“You mentioned once your parents are still back in Cleveland. Nothing wrong with heading back to their place for a while, gettin’ a new plan in order.”

“I can’t do that, man. If I go back to my parents’ house as an unemployed stand-up comedian, what’s that gonna say about me? That’s no one to be proud of.”

“It’s gotta be better than what you’re putting yourself through now. Living in the sketchiest apartment complex in town, coming to places like this and stuffing your face almost nightly.”

Rodney began to grow long brown hair from the roots of his buzzcut, and his voice had gone a couple octaves higher. My mind wanted Sarah telling me this; and for a moment of bliss, it was.

“I mean, don’t let my manager know that I said this to you, but this stuff will put you into *cardiac*, dude.”

I had to laugh at that remark, even though it was cruel how quickly it became Rodney sitting in front of me again. “That is a fair point, yeah. It’s just ... after what happened with Sarah, the idea of going back there and things like that just scare me.”

Rodney poked his head over the counter to check on my food, then readjusted himself in his seat; the way people do when they’re about to take you to school on whatever you just said. “Believe it or not, I wasn’t supposed to be a waiter here. I was at Temple University on a football scholarship, and by my senior year I was going for the NFL Draft, projected for the 4th round or so.”

I moved my head to the side, eyebrows raised.

“That is, until one biochemistry grade got put in the system. Just underneath a D; and they’re not going to want to keep you on scholarship if that happens. I guess it was meant to keep their university esteemed, or some sort of

technical-sounding bull crap. I was out of the school. Girlfriend dumped me over text message the next day as I was tellin' her about what happened. In the span of 48 hours, the life I was trying to create for myself had disintegrated. All I had at that point was my car, and I gave a lot of thought to going on the highway and driving in the opposite direction of traffic."

The same thought crossed my mind. I thought it would have been too much money to cover for the surviving person involved, though.

"I called my parents, and the only advice they gave me was to work. And that's what I've been here doing, man. It's not glamorous, but who said life was going to be? If I've got my own apartment, and I'll soon have enough to start taking online courses with that community college near here, then I'd say I've done pretty good."

I nodded. It was a better place than I was in.

"People like to say that the hand you're dealt determines what happens in life, Des. But it's how you play it that matters."

The cook stuck my plate onto the end of the bar table; Rodney's cue to stand up and hand it to me. "I'm not gonna tell you how to do this, man. Just promise me you won't do anything stupid like I was going to...and that you'll try."

"I will, Rod. Thank you so much, man."

He placed a hand on my wrist and squeezed it before heading back behind the counter. I wondered why he'd put his hand on my wrist, of all places. He could probably tell what was hidden underneath my sleeve.

"It looked *especially* cavernous that night."

This became the punchline to what was supposed to be a half-assed filler joke about Donald Trump, but the crowd seemed to really like it. I was doing well for myself so far; there was one or two hecklers for any awkward pause that happened in the set, but even I could handle that.

I was already on thin ice with Mr. Miller, as I showed up to his illustrious Comedy Lounge late for the show. Every now and then, I caught a glimpse of him from up in the sound booth, and it typically looked like a smile on his face. In the wake of my other two Philly gigs that ended in disaster, he was helping me more than he would ever realize.

“Anyway, I’ve been having a great time here ever since I moved to Philadelphia. It’s weird having an actually good football team to root for; jumping from an 0-16 team to the winners of the freakin’ Super Bowl is a big leap.” There were more cheers than laughs at that from the local fans, but I saw that coming.

“See, you can see right off the bat there who was in the riots, and the people that didn’t say anything were the ones that got their cars turned over.” I was worried about how the audience would take that one, but it received laughs, thankfully. I began to see the appeal of being a comedian in Philadelphia; with a city full of people that don’t take themselves too seriously, the sky’s the limit.

“I’m a pretty big football fan, though, if that didn’t give it away. I’d go and see Browns games back home, but I didn’t want to experience the pain of losing every game by myself, so I’d try and get my....” A lump materialized in my throat, and it wasn’t budging.

I didn’t have any problems reading this joke in rehearsal. Please don’t do this to me now. Please keep your cool, please, please, please....

“...’scuse me, sorry, I’d always try and get...”

I used to watch comedians before shows to get inspiration on how to move around the stage, deliver certain jokes, and so forth, and the number one cardinal sin I used to judge them all from whether they left a joke unfinished. I could taste the irony as that was exactly what I did, on nervous instinct; and it tasted like her.

I fumbled around between my political Trump jokes and my tirade on vegans, which was about as good of a combination together as orange juice and freshly brushed teeth. Part of me wasn’t even conscious of the booing that had started, or maybe I just put all my effort into pretending they weren’t there because I for sure wasn’t putting that effort into saving my skin.

“Say something, at least!!!” A man screamed from the corner in the back, followed by the audience yelling, “yeah” and “come on.” I brought the microphone up to my lips and could only be honest with them. “I wish I could, sir.”

I walked off stage, people already yelling about wanting their money back and various words that I’m sure were all expletives. As if this were an old-fashioned opera, something more brown than red that I was afraid to call a tomato managed to catch me in the cheek, its pungency already wafting into my nostrils. A chuckle crept across my mouth as I wiped off the residue, but I kept my head down and continued.

Mr. Miller was outside already, on the phone with the ticketing agency. I knew better than to instigate the situation after making brief eye contact and seeing the blistering anger in his eyes, and he seemed to share the sentiment, so I went to my car, that was thankfully away from the audience’s parking lot.

Sitting there at the steering wheel was the first time I ever cried and felt nothing. Tears were streaming, but I didn’t have to expend any effort to sob. They always said depression was more numbness than anything, but I didn’t know it would be like a perpetual anesthetic in a surgery that the doctors forgot to wake me up from afterwards.

I wondered if Sarah would ever cry like this.

A small stain was accumulating on the carpet underneath my wife. I knew the 911 operator was talking on speaker, but I couldn’t hear the words.

All I heard was Sarah. All I *wanted* to hear was Sarah. All I wanted was for someone in a hospital uniform to tell me that I would wake up tomorrow and hear Sarah tell me good morning again.

I checked for a pulse, but nothing was there. She wore a pair of sweatpants and a Pink Floyd T-shirt; the one I gave to her. The rainbow protruding through the triangle had mostly become red now, and I couldn’t look at the palette she’d used to do this dripping off her arms for more than a moment before I choked. The knife was on the table next to her. Looking at her wrists, I couldn’t escape the thought of

her wanting to leave this world the quickest way she knew how, and the goodbye I never gave her transformed weeping into convulsions.

There was a pounding on the door. Was it my parents or Jesus, finally catching up to me for not sharing the Gospel with her after every opportunity I had? Was this my punishment for not being good enough for them?

Big, forceful hands wrapped around me and pulled me away from my wife. In some brutish way, I suppose they were meant to be comforting, but I was beyond that. I was beyond any words of comfort these officials could give me, I was beyond the thoughts and prayers I could already see my church friends messaging me on Facebook with, and I was even beyond the energy to stop them as they pulled out the body bag to place my wife in.

I had just lost the love of my life. I could have helped her, and I didn't. The rest of my life would have to be lived with the ghost of what we shared together.

I could barely hear Sarah's voice from the living room in response to what I'd say. I tried my best to work with her on days like this when she'd have her episodes, but it wears you down.

"Hon, this has been my dream since I was in middle school. Everyone here is telling me that I can make it with doing this, and if I can make it in Philadelphia, I can make it anywhere."

"I already know you can make it anywhere, Des. And I'm asking you to make it here. Just packing everything and moving like this isn't a commitment I'm ready to make yet."

"Then you are the first person I've ever met that wants to live in Cleveland, Ohio, for the rest of their life."

"I don't ... okay." Sarah's voice went soft again. I knew better than to go on a tirade on her, or *anyone* in this circumstance, but I stomped into the living room in a brief few seconds of anger. When I saw her, though, it all dissipated; she had a knack for being at peace in times of stress, and I suppose it just rubbed off on me.

I sat down next to her and put a hand on her thigh. She looked at the hand with a mix of coldness and emotionlessness. I got the hint and pulled the hand away. "I'm not gonna get an opportunity like this again, Sarah. Please, believe in me with this."

She sighed, and I could see the gears turning in her brain. I appreciated consideration, at least. "You know how bad it's been getting with my dad. How could I forgive myself if I were to just leave him there?"

"They ... they found out the tumor was benign, didn't they?"

Sarah stiffened up, turning to face me fully. "It was still cancer, Desmond. He still went through all the horseshit medical procedures, all the pain of being told that he wasn't gonna make it, and I've been by his side for all of it, just like he has for me my entire life. I couldn't forgive myself if I left for Pennsylvania now for an opportunity you *just* heard about that we're not even sure is going to follow through." Normally, she'd have said something like this with her trademark femme fatale ferocity, but I heard a heaviness in her voice that I couldn't trace. "I've been getting bad, too, Desmond. I've stopped going to therapy, and —"

"I know. And I'm not going to force you to do anything you don't feel like you can do, but I don't want to live the typical life. I know you don't, either. To do that, it's going to be best for us if we go to Philly."

Sarah sighed, looking down at the carpet like there was something else she was going to say.

"... alright. I'll trust you."

"... really?" I did not expect that would be it.

She gave me a curt nod. I thought I saw contempt in the half-smile she gave me, but I thought nothing of it. "Really. Just give me some time to prepare."

I threw my arms around her. The kiss we shared bore the same fire as it always had, so I don't know why there was something icy between us, in the form of something left unsaid.

“Just gettin’ the usual today, Desmond?”

Sarah and I didn’t make it into White Castle before Denise asked us this. She was used to me coming in after doing shows at the local bar; I wasn’t really a fan of alcohol post-performance, and I knew Sarah appreciated that. Not that White Castle was five-star cuisine, but alcohol nightly will come back to bite you a little bit faster than fast food will.

“Somewhat. You guys still doing that Valentine’s Day special?”

Denise laughed. “Absolutely we are! I haven’t met this gorgeous lady before!”

With a bashful laugh, Sarah waved and introduced herself. “I’m the wife. He finally got me to come see one of his shows!”

Putting in the order, Denise nodded in acknowledgement. “Is that right? Well, if you wanna keep makin’ money, don’t let him go too far down that rabbit hole with being a comedian! It’s an *especialy* cavernous one.”

That was far from the first time she and I both had heard that before. We nodded and politely laughed like usual, and once I got my change, I turned around to see a man in a suit far too fancy for this side of Cleveland, looking straight at me.

“Desmond Roberts. Just caught your show.” He stretched his hand towards me, and I took it happily.

“Good to see ya, man. You wanna get a selfie? We don’t have any of the venue agents here, so this one’s free.”

He emitted a cold chuckle. “Actually, I’m one of those agents myself. I work in Philadelphia, and I wanted to see about getting you up there to perform.”

Sarah saw the starstruck grin that crept across my face. “I’ll go pick out a table,” she said with a wink as she took my drink cup and left us to ourselves.

The conversation went by like a whirlwind. It was the conversation I’ve dreamed about: it was about opening spots at comedy clubs frequented by people like Jim Gaffigan and Hannibal Buress, the clubs that were visited by booking agent

after star-studded booking agent, and they were the homes of regular sold-out crowds. I didn't bother to ask how the agent knew I was going to be at White Castle; stalker-like tendencies take a backseat when your dreams are coming true.

Once the details were worked out and phone numbers were exchanged, the man bought a small drink, which I suppose was as an attempt to dispel any suspicion about how he knew I was coming here, and he promptly left as I sat down across from Sarah and our sliders. The somber vocals of John Mayer were playing over the speakers; "Slow Dancing in a Burning Room," I believe was the name of the song. It was an inherently sad song, and the irony behind how giddy I had become struck me.

"So ... what'd he have to say?" Sarah said this with a knowing smirk, undoubtedly preparing for all my excited gushing.

"He's spread the word about me to the other agents in Philly, apparently. If we're able to make it up there, I've got confirmed spots at some of the biggest clubs in town."

"He doesn't expect you to pick everything up and leave right now, does he?" The tinge of nervousness in Sarah's voice was a bit off-putting, but I thought nothing of it.

"Oh, no, he said not to worry about the technicalities. We'll just cross that bridge when we get there, I suppose."

"Right ... well, regardless, I'm really proud of you, Desmond." She was a natural skeptic, and in some strange way, this became one of the many reasons I fell in love with her. I tried to have my career not cause any problems with her bipolar disorder. Most times it was manageable, but she'd always tell me how she didn't like me doing all this touring and moving around. Nevertheless, she's stuck with me this long, and there's something about having your best friend next to you that makes the hard parts of life just a little more bearable.

"I love you," I said with a smile as she took an ill-timed bite of her slider. She swallowed and fumbled with her burger so she could reply and get a laugh out of me. I even found her beautiful eating something as messy as a White Castle burger.

Down the block, sirens of a downtown Cleveland police car emanated from a street corner. We looked out of the window to see two police officers arresting a couple of burly gentlemen. I could make out that they were holding white bags in their hands, so it wasn't difficult to determine what the cause of the arrests were.

"Man ... you'd think people would know the cops watch that spot for drug dealing now, after having this happen so many times."

I threw up my eyebrow at Sarah's nonchalant cadence. "You're familiar with all the good spots, I take it? That's where you go on break?"

She scoffed with a grin, trying to conceal her laughter. "Shut up. Like you haven't been seeing headline after headline about it either."

"Fair point," I said, returning the grin as I sipped my drink.

"Didn't one guy get caught a couple weeks ago and pulled a gun on them, so they had to shoot him?"

"Yeah, that was a friend of mine's co-worker, actually. To lose your life just for getting a brief high ... I don't get it."

Sarah nodded in reply as she finished her food, and I did the same. She became unusually quiet. Her thoughts were in a whole new realm, and I was about to stand up to throw our trays away when she broke her silence. "Desmond, when people die, do you think they'll remember their lives in the afterlife?"

I adjusted my seat for this somber change of subject. I wasn't expecting it to be strikingly like the question I'd posed my youth pastor years ago, and the one I was still searching for a conclusive answer to. Still, I felt obligated to come up with an answer. "Well, in heaven, sure. Where'd that come from?"

"I don't know ... talking about that guy getting shot just got me thinking. Even if you go to heaven, I feel like having eternity to stew on the stupid decision that ended up taking your life away is still hell."

The point she made was unnervingly sensible.

"Sometimes, life can pull the rug out from underneath you when you least expect it. I've still got a hard time accepting that."

I pulled the agent's business card out of my back pocket and held it up in my fingertips. "If this bad boy is any sort of omen, I think you and I are going to create some memories that we'll want to cherish for more than a lifetime."

Sarah sighed with a toothless smile, "I hope you're right, Desmond," she said as we walked out of the restaurant. "I hope you're right."

Spencer Prather

Happy Thanksgiving

Frankie awoke in his bed and that was always a good sign. The blinds kept the dull daylight of another dreary, cloudy November day in Brooklyn from entering his room. However, they could not stop the room from smelling like piss and turkey, nor could they filter out the rumbling of the F-train that ran up and down McDonald Avenue, shaking and waking all things living and dead in a two-block radius.

He felt his underwear and then his sheets to make sure that he did not wet the bed. He was dry and so were his sheets. You would think after two years of him and his brother sharing a room with their grandfather that he would know it was the urinal hanging off his grandfather's headboard that made his room smell like a public toilet.

That lucky bastard was never out of bed for too long anymore. When he first came to live with them, he would spend every day at the nursing home where the woman he was married to for almost fifty years was lying in a bed withering away, unaware of what is, what was, and what will be. Now, perhaps she is more aware than any of us, and he only gets out of bed to shit and eat and if he could do that in bed, he would.

The feeling that he was in serious trouble kept him paralyzed in his bed. Frankie tried to remember how he got home last night, but he drew a blank. Blackouts frightened him, but not enough to make him stop drinking. Frankie was only sixteen years old, but he inherited an incredible tolerance for alcohol from his father and he thought that made him a man. But it only transformed him into a boy entering a world that he wasn't prepared to be in. He believed blackouts were par for the course and sometimes it was better not to know. Although, sometimes, if he thought long and hard, he could piece nights back together. His mother always fell asleep early on the couch, so there was always a good chance of him getting past her without her knowing he was drunk. His father was his only concern and that was on the rare occasions when he did not drink at Harold's Pub until closing. He hoped last night was not one of those nights. As far as he can tell, he wasn't bruised, so for now, maybe, he was safe from his father's wrath.

He had to pee, but he knew that he would not make it to the bathroom and back to his room without running into his father. He would hold it; his young kidneys

could handle it. He turned on his side and stared at the pictures of old film stars he hung on the wall. He wished he could crawl inside one of those images and perform instead of participating in this so-called life. He could be suave and debonair like Cary Grant or tough and feared like James Cagney. He could be a combination of both and simply not give a damn like Clark Gable. He knew he did not have Gable's looks, but neither did Bogart, and he married Lauren Bacall. He wished he had a girl that he can call Baby. He wished he did not have to get out bed. He wished he did not have to pretend all the time.

The odor of the turkey crept underneath the door again, and it reminded Frankie that it was Thanksgiving and he would have to get out of bed soon. He could lie there until his relatives showed up. His father would never hit him in front of company. His parents mastered the game of pretend. His mother swept all the family dirt under the carpet but always kept the top of the rug stain-free, and his father simply stayed drunk. Ignore it and it will go away was a motto that should be on a magnet and stuck to their refrigerator. Sure, he would get dirty looks throughout the meal, but he could handle that. Then, after dinner, when his relatives adjourned to the living room for a night of heavy drinking, listening and singing along to Irish music, Frankie could slip back into bed without anyone noticing. By then his escapades, if any, from last night would be forgotten and that damn belt would stay wrapped around his father's waist. If only he could remember what happened. If only he could go out and pee.

Oh shit, shot through Frankie's pounding skull as his door opened slowly. He did not have to turn around to know who it was. He felt the stare. Seconds felt like hours.

Do not move. Do not blink. Keep still and stare at the pictures. Ignore it and it will go away.

"Just let him sleep a little while longer," his mother said in her nasally neutral tone.

"He can sleep when he's dead," his father's deep voice responded.

Shit. It's worse than I thought.

"Please, Jimmy. I just want to have a nice holiday."

“Don’t blame me for this one, Catherine.”

“I’m not. Don’t worry, in a few days, it will all be forgotten.”

“Bullshit. They don’t forget nuttin’ round here.”

Oh no, whatever it was, the whole neighborhood knows.

“I know it’s bad, but....”

“It’s a little beyond bad.”

“At least he came to us.”

“He’s probably awake now. You hear me, don’t ya?”

Yeah, I hear ya. Now, go away or I’ll get out of this bed and fill ya full of lead.

“You’re going to pay for this one, boy.”

“Stop it. Come on. We still have time to....”

“Okay, but if he ain’t up soon, I’m gonna drag him out by his hair.”

Yeah, tell ya story walking. I’ll stay in bed for as long as I want, and you’ll like it.

The door closed.

That’s right. Do as I tell ya. I always knew you were yeller.

It was time to retrace and find out what happened last night. He always met Eddie, Pete, and Marie at seven o’clock on the corner of 16th Street in front of Nick the Greek’s deli. He remembered it was a brisk night and he was happy he wore his Irish cap and peacoat as he strolled across the avenue. When he arrived, Eddie’s large frame, wrapped in an army jacket his uncle wore in Vietnam, was leaning on a parked car with a large black trash bag set down between his legs and he was smoking a Parliament. Frankie always told him that men smoke Marlboro, but Eddie said he liked to blow into the hole of the filter before he put it in his mouth. Eddie always left himself wide open for abuse and Frankie was merciless

toward Eddie. He pretends “it’s a dick” or he’s “practicing for his boyfriend” were a couple of replies that Frankie could never resist. By the end of most nights, Frankie and Eddie were punching the shit of out each other or Eddie ran home early from the verbal onslaughts. Even though Pete dished out his share of abuse toward him, Eddie would never dare to go against him.

Pete and Marie always arrived last.

“Where are they, Frankie?” Eddie asked.

“How the fuck am I supposed to know?” Frankie replied. “So, you gonna tell me what’s in the garbage bag, Eddie?”

“No.”

“What do you mean, no? You chop up some mug who double-crossed ya?”

“You’ll find out when Pete gets here.”

“It’s not Marie, is it?”

“I wish.”

“You’re fucked up, man,” Frankie said, then glanced over Eddie’s shoulder. “Here they come now.”

Pete and Marie crossed the street, walking hand in hand. They were inseparable. Pete was the taller, stronger, smarter, blonder, and more sophisticated version of Frankie. Marie never wore make-up and the loose jeans and T-shirts she wore, hid a tight, taut, hot body. Frankie remembers the first summer roof party Pete brought her to and the shocked look on everyone’s face when she stripped down to a bikini. Still, to Frankie, she was Marie, and she was like a sister to him. She was the only girl Frankie did not feel he had to put on a show for. He even tried to convince Eddie to accept her, but Eddie would never budge; Frankie wondered if Eddie’s jealousy of Marie ran deeper than he showed.

“It’s about fuckin’ time,” Frankie barked.

“Fuck you, I was waitin’ on the woman,” Pete replied.

“That figures,” Eddie threw in.

“You can all kiss my ass,” Marie shut them all up with.

Eddie reached inside the bag and pulled out a black, plastic water gun that looked just like an Uzi submachine gun.

“Hey Pete, check this out, man,” Eddie said, aiming his weapon at Marie.

“Don’t you dare, Edward.”

Eddie quickly lowered his weapon. “What do you think, Pete?”

“I think we should team up and play commando.”

Pete and Frankie snagged the bag from Eddie and pulled out two other realistic versions of the submachine gun. They squirted each other, laughing, and enjoying the moment of acting their age. Then Frankie and Pete directed their fire on Eddie, until he began to bitch and moan.

Marie stood off to the side feeling left out. “So, where’s mine, Edward?”

“Sorry, I only have three,” Eddie lied.

Pete ran to his girl’s side. “Don’t worry, baby, we’ll share mine. We’ll only need one gun against these two fags anyway.” Marie kissed her knight and then an onslaught of water from Frankie and Eddie soaked the two of them, ending the tender moment. Pete returned the fire, but the guns ran dry.

“What the fuck, man?” Frankie tossed his weapon on the sidewalk.

“You’re going to break it, asshole!”

“Who cares? They suck. I can spit father than they shoot.”

“If it’s cracked, you’re buying me a new one.”

Frankie laughed. “You’re screwy!”

“You know, you sound like an idiot when you talk like it’s 1940,” Eddie fired at Frankie.

“Oh yeah? Is *fuck you* better?”

Pete jumped in between the two of them before a fight broke out.

“Alright, stop, you jerk-offs,” Pete commanded. “Now, everyone ante up and let’s get some beer. Nick will let us refill them in his sink.”

After buying a case of Budweiser and filling their water guns at Nick’s, they searched for a wooden bench to hang out on outside Prospect Park. The bums had broken up most of the benches for firewood, leaving remnants of what they once were. The parks department used to repair the benches with new wood and paint them green to mark the beginning of spring. However, they must have grown weary of fighting against their inevitable destruction because most of them were left bare throughout the year.

A few yards away from the entrance to the park, they settled on a bench that had one strip of wood remaining on it. Sal’s Deli sat across the street, and it was jammed in between two six-story brick apartment buildings that occupied the remainder of the block.

Sal was a short, stocky Italian man with big mouth who lied about his connections to the Mafia. He would not sell teenagers beer or cigarettes, so after Nick the Greek closed, the neighborhood white boys had to risk walking to the bodega in the Puerto Rican neighborhood to buy beer. Getting in was never a problem but getting out in one piece was a challenge.

The chilly fall air did not stop them from drenching each other with water guns, drinking too many cold beers, and sharing a couple of fatties. However, the water, the weed, and the beer did not last long and one of the worst things that could happen to a group of drunk stoned teenagers happened: they were bored.

They sat watching the trees sway, which were naked from having withstood weeks of abuse from the gusts of wind, warnings that winter was near, sending their colorful coverings wandering through the night until they found their resting places on the ground. Usually, they would pile themselves around the bases of the eight-foot black streetlamps that men rooted next to the trees. These lamps were an endless intrusion of light used to peek inside the bodies of these gigantic corpses, which would not feel the warmth of natural light until spring decided to appear again and bring them back to life.

“Hey Frankie, go see if Sal will fill up our guns,” Eddie suggested.

“That mug ain’t gonna let me.”

“Why not? Don’t he know your old man?”

“Yeah, but I don’t think the old man likes him.”

“I don’t think your old man likes nobody.”

“Yeah, but....”

“C’mon, don’t be a pussy.”

Eddie recited the magic words to say to any teenage boy from Brooklyn if you wanted him to do something. They would rather risk their lives jumping from roof to roof from six-story apartment buildings, egg a cop car, play chicken on the subway tracks, or run across the highway during rush hour than be branded a pussy. You might as well just pack your bags and move to Long Island if that label was stamped on your back, because in the streets of Brooklyn, news of a new pussy spread across the borough like a lethal virus, leaving the host defenseless against his enemies.

Sal leaned over the counter reading the newspaper. He stood at attention when Frankie and Eddie entered.

“Oh no, don’t even think about it!”

“Think about what, Sal?” Frankie said innocently.

“You ain’t gettin no beers, no cigarettes, no nothing. So just turn around and get the fuck outta here.”

“C’mon Sal, I know you’re on the up and up. I wouldn’t dream of asking you that. I just need a small favor.”

“No favors neither.”

“Just let us fill up our water guns in your sink.”

“So, you want to use my water and not even buy a stick of gum?”

"I don't chew gum. It's bad for your teeth."

Eddie laughed.

"Yeah, that's funny. Now, go." Sal went back to reading the paper.

"Wow, what's his problem?" Eddie asked.

"They don't make fags wiseguys."

"Still betta than your old man," Sal murmured.

"What did you say?" Frankie stormed back towards Sal.

"You heard me," not giving Frankie the respect to look at him.

"Don't you talk about my father!"

Sal laughed, "Why not? Everybody knows what a no-good drunk he is."

"He is not. He's just having a hard time finding a job."

"Yeah, well, the last I heard, Harrold's Pub ain't hiring." Sal laughed at his own joke.

Frankie grabbed Sal by his collar. "Take that back, motherfucker!"

"Get off me, you little shit!" Sal ripped Frankie's hands off his shirt, grabbed a baseball bat from underneath the counter, and slammed it down on the counter. "You got two seconds..."

Eddie grabbed Frankie's arm and pulled him toward the door. "C'mon Frankie, this motherfucker's crazy."

"I ain't afraid of this little ginny. C'mon, Sal, let's see what you got." Frankie took his arm back from Eddie and stood tall by the door.

Sal hurried around the counter swinging the bat as if he were Reggie Jackson. "You betta get outta here, you Irish piece of shit."

Eddie took a stronger hold of Frankie's arm. "Let's go, Frankie."

"You betta listen to your friend before I call your parents."

“Yeah, you look like a squealer.”

“Squealer? Sal lowered the bat and laughed at Frankie. “What year are you living in, boy?”

“This ain’t over!” Frankie promised.

Clouds covered the moon, making the dim streetlamps the only source of light on the Parkside. Sal stepped out his store and began to pull the steel grating down over the windows. Frankie and Eddie rushed behind him, pushed him into the gate, and stuck their phony guns into his back.

“Stick’em up,” Frankie ordered, imitating James Cagney to disguise his voice.

“What the hell is this?”

“You heard me. Now, get’em up and look straight ahead.”

“You can’t do this. You know whoi I am?” Sal yelled.

“Yeah, and your salami breath is killin’ me.”

Eddie pulled out the garbage bag he had the water guns in, put it over Sal’s head, and punched him in his belly. Sal fell to his knees.

“It’s payback time,” Eddie threw in, trying to mask his voice in deep monotone.

Eddie waved Pete and Marie to join them. Pete and Marie ran out from behind a parked van, pushed the gate back up, and hurried inside.

Sal moaned underneath the bag as he heard the glass doors to the coolers and to the deli case being smashed. His store, his life, shattered by disrespectful punks. He knew it wasn’t a real robbery because he was still conscious. It was amateur night and they will slip and give themselves away.

Frankie looked around nervously. They were taking too much time.

“You punks are going to pay for this.”

“Pipe down you mug.”

“Pipe down? What year are you living in?”

Frankie poked the water gun into the back of Sal’s head, “One more word out of you, and I’ll fill ya full of holes.”

Pete and Marie hurried out of the store holding shopping bags filled with all the essentials: beer, cigarettes, and munchies. They ran straight into the park, and Frankie and Eddie pushed Sal inside the store, locked the door, and flowed Pete and Marie into the park.

Wait! That’s it!

Sal recognized his voice or somehow saw him, and he ratted him out to the old man. That’s how it worked in the neighborhood. No matter what happened, you would not call the cops because the punishment from parents would be worse than any moron cop could dish out. The four families would pay for the damage done to Sal’s store and the kids would work after school to pay their family back. But Frankie’s punishment would also involve his father’s belt and few random bare-fisted beatings.

Frankie heard his grandfather peeing into the plastic urinal. Oh, the humanity, if only he had one of those. Frankie sat up. “Grandpa?”

His grandfather looked over his shoulder, still doing his business. “What Frankie?”

“Can I use that after you?”

His grandfather laughed. “Sure, but you know, eventually, you’re gonna have to go out there.”

“I know. I’m just not ready yet,” Frankie said as his grandfather turned and handed him his half-full urinal.

“Happy Thanksgiving, Frankie.”

Michael Donohue

Contributors

Abigail R. Alderdice

Abigail is a junior at IUPUC, studying English with a concentration in literature. In addition to her studies, she enjoys reading, writing music, and photography.

Eden Alderdice

Eden is a sophomore at IUPUC, studying English who holds a long-time passion for art. Her primary mediums are oil painting, watercolor painting, and pastels.

Elzbieta Bidwell

Elzbieta is a 2019 spring graduate from IUPUC.

Isabel D'Allura

Isabel attends IUPUC as a marketing major with a minor in creative writing. Although she strives to be a successful businessperson, her passion lies with writing short stories and poetry. This is Isabel's second publication with *Talking Leaves*, and she believes a simple sentence can turn a moment into eternity.

Michael Donohue

Michael graduated in August of 2019, and left IUPUC with a heavy heart filled with gratitude toward all the students and faculty who assisted him in attaining his degree in creative writing.

Halleluyah Eluobaju

This is Halleluyah's first publication with *Talking Leaves*.

Clayton Ham

Clayton is a junior at IUPUC majoring in creative writing with a minor in women's studies. His work has been published in *Talking Leaves* and Z Publishing House. He primarily writes lyrical poetry and hopes to create change in the world as a writer and a human rights activist.

Joshua Holycross

Joshua is an English major at IUPUC whose work can also be seen in the *Blue Lake Review*. His academic journey has been long and for now he walks the path of parent, student, and worker, while dreaming of one day being able to purchase a book that does not cost \$300 to read for four months.

Brooke Jackson

Brooke views her creative side as being part of an adventure. She hopes that her writing soothes the souls of her readers. Brooke believes she was meant to be a poet; therefore, she shall be one.

Stevie Jarrett

Stevie entwines her writing with a little bit of everything. She draws readers into a universe of classic vinyl, spirituality, and the question of human existence.

Natasha Kever

Natasha displays her talents for photography and writing in this edition of *Talking Leaves*.

Molly McGinnis

Molly is a freshman at IUPUC who has always had a passion for studying English, and she loves to make people laugh.

Joshua Moore

Joshua is a computer science programmer at IUPUC who loves to challenge himself by writing creatively. He also enjoys flying, sailing, and testing the limits of gravity.

Dakota Mullikin

Dakota is an English major at IUPUC, and for the second year in a row her work has been selected into *Talking Leaves*. Her works focus heavily on character as she explores the complexities of human thought and the duality of human nature. She blames her interests and proclivities on Osamu Dazai, who is an ever-present inspiration to her.

Mark Murry

Mark is majoring in English with a concentration in creative writing at IUPUC and loves to write about superheroes.

Paulina Nieto

Paulina wants her paintings to evoke a sense of peace and tranquility into others. Her work is inspired by nature's beauty and she likes to use her art to remind herself and others that there beauty everywhere we go.

Spencer Prather

Spencer's major at IUPUC is psychology and he chose creative writing as a minor. He is a strong advocate for mental health and passionate about writing. His favorite genres are science fiction and fantasy, and he enjoys lyric poetry.

Zeke Raymer

Zeke is a sophomore at IUPUC, studying psychology and creative writing. After graduation, he plans to attend law school and help fight for the working class.

Raegan Smith

Raegan is a sophomore at IUPUC majoring in English. In her spare time, she enjoys drinking coffee, reading, writing, and photography.

Derrick Waltz

Derrick's chilling poem comes from his experience with sleep paralysis.

