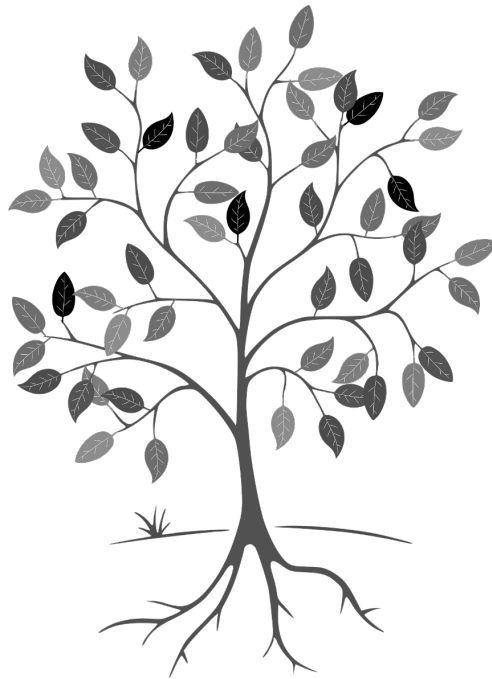


root and branch  
volume XVI





The name *root and branch* was chosen as a symbol of students' lives at Ivy Tech: they come with solid roots but grow and branch out – intellectually and creatively – through their college experiences.

**Special thanks to Dr. Emily Bobo, the Ivy Tech-Bloomington English Department, and Susie Graham.**

Cover Art:

**After Again** – *Bert Gilbert*





Views expressed by the contributors do not necessarily reflect those of Ivy Tech Community College. Contributors retain all rights to their original materials.

*root and branch* is free to Ivy Tech students: hard copies are available while supplies last, and everyone has access to a digital version via our website.

For submission guidelines, please visit  
**[www.rootandbranchmagazine.wordpress.com](http://www.rootandbranchmagazine.wordpress.com)**

April 2023

## EDITORS

**BJ Yoho** is a 21-year-old student at Ivy Tech who has been a Riley Hospital patient since birth. He loves to write about anything and everything and aspires to be a film director. Whenever he is not working on schoolwork, BJ finds himself writing screenplays for films he'd like to make one day, along with writing short stories and fanfiction about his favorite fictional characters. In his spare time, he enjoys watching anime, sitting outside under his favorite tree, and making funny voice impersonations of his favorite characters.

**Wilder Mouton** is an Ivy Tech student with plans to transfer to the University of Illinois Chicago in the Fall 2023. They plan to major in literature and hope to work in publishing. In their free time, they like to play guitar and write poetry, as well as listen to jazz, hip-hop, and electronic music.

## ADVISOR

**Christine Brandel** is a writer, photographer, and teacher. She is a Professor of English at Ivy Tech Community College-Bloomington. Her first full-length poetry collection, *A Wife Is a Hope Chest*, was published by Brain Mill Press in 2017. Her writing portfolio is available at [clbwrites.com](http://clbwrites.com).

## SUPPORT ROOT AND BRANCH

Please consider supporting our magazine. Your donations fund production costs and scholarships for the editors.

In person donation:

Ivy Tech Foundation, Room A102, Ferguson Academic Building  
(cash/check).

By mail:

Ivy Tech Foundation, Room A102, 200 Daniels Way,  
Bloomington, IN 47404 (make checks payable to Ivy Tech  
Foundation and designate English Program Fund in the memo  
field).

Online:

Visit [ivytech.edu/giving](http://ivytech.edu/giving) and click Give Now; then click  
Bloomington and select “English Program” via the dropdown  
designation menu.

Gifts to the Ivy Tech Foundation are tax-deductible as charitable contributions and qualify for a special Indiana state income tax credit.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>A Billion Strong</b> <i>Bert Gilbert</i>	1
<b>Pollinate – Elliott Samons</b>	2
<b>Tire Swing</b> <i>AnnMarie Adams</i>	3
<b>Motif – Elliott Samons</b>	4
<b>Banners and Bicycles: The Final Battle</b> <i>Jayden Dunbar</i>	5
<b>Where the Water Flows – Jeff Grounds</b>	9
<b>Eileen</b> <i>Anna Bexell</i>	10
<b>The Kindness of the Reaper</b> <i>Ryland King</i>	11
<b>Remembering the Past – Jeff Grounds</b>	15
<b>Fall</b> <i>Elijah Armendariz Peavy</i>	16
<b>Call and Response – Elliott Samons</b>	18
<b>Vera's Violin</b> <i>Neil Frederick</i>	19
<b>Party Time – Bert Gilbert</b>	20
<b>Anomalies You'd Rather Not See Explained</b> <i>Tyann Barrentine</i>	21
<b>What It's Like to Have PTSD</b> <i>Viktor Cullen</i>	26

<b>Reconciled</b> <i>Heather Perry</i>	28
<b>One Line</b> <i>AnnMarie Adams</i>	30
<b>Patience – Holli Rebecca Williams</b>	31
<b>Squares</b> <i>Destiny Morgan</i>	32
<b>Strong</b> <i>Holli Rebecca Williams</i>	33
<b>Fragile Hope – Holli Rebecca Williams</b>	36
<b>Reflection of an Old Buzzard</b> <i>Floyd Boesch</i>	37
<b>End of the Road – Jeff Grounds</b>	38
Contributors	40



## **A Billion Strong**

It is a snow globe in which I live  
Snowflakes of time falling softly around me  
Here in this insulated, windowed world  
A bubble in the brown and grey wood

I twirl busily around  
Energized by the anxieties I devise  
The world spinning steadily below me  
Quietly behind the beautiful walls

In this world I can control my fate  
The world flashes by on a TV screen  
But my reflection tells me I look fine  
And if not, I can change my mind

Change my hair and eyes  
Staple and fold to fit into the mold  
Schedule lit to my whims  
The universe be damned

Sitting at God's table  
Flashing my eyes boldly  
A billion strong  
Unique, complete, individual.



**Pollinate** - *Elliott Samons*



## **Tire Swing**

“Middle or top?”

“Top.”

I always choose top.

I swat the helping hand away.

I’m a big girl; I can climb.

I settle on top, shifting for comfort.

“Ready?”

“Yeah!”

I grip the rope tight as I feel myself rise.

High... high... higher!

Then I feel it let go,

The rush of wind, the drop of my tummy.

Back and forth, I feel a push,

Higher! Higher!

I am pushed for a long time,

But it feels so short to me.

“It’s time to eat.”

The tire is stopped.

No hand offers to help me down.

‘Cause I’m a big girl.

Had I known that would be the last time,

I would’ve let him help me down

From our tire swing.



**Motif** - *Elliott Samons*

## Banners and Bicycles: The Final Battle

Lucas, little more than a ghost of the proud king he once was, steeled himself for the challenge he would face. Where once he had legions of bicycled boys ready to charge headlong under his banner, he now stood alone against the tide of his usurper brother's legion of brigands. But his brother was proud, too. And that pride could be exploited, just as his brother had done to him. Above the cacophonous revelry of the kids at the birthday party for the minor Lord Stanley, Lucas could hear his brother brag and boast of his dominance of the kingdom that Lucas once held firmly. Approaching the gate to the backyard of House Stanley, Lucas slid his hand above the hilt of his yardstick and resolved himself to the bloody work he must do.

"ERIC!" Lucas bellowed as the very wind seemed to cease its howling. "USURPER! TRAITOR! THIEF! You sit upon a throne that does not belong to you!"

The pregnant pause befell the House at Lucas's declaration. All Houses in attendance could only still their breath as they awaited word from their warlord, across whose face stretched a twisted smirk. Motioning for the gate, two of Eric's bannermen opened it with caution, aware of the hateful being beyond its threshold. Lucas held for a moment as all eyes fell on him. *Good. Let them watch. Let them see their folly.*

The crowd of brigands formed a circle around Lucas as he entered the yard, whispering curses and threats all the while. Surrounding the former lord of House Shreveport, their hands quaked as they silently contemplated interfering in their warlord's affairs. Lucas couldn't help but let the slightest of smiles creep upon his face, reveling in the fear of his betrayers. One of the brigands, however, was braver than most. With a carved stick, he charged through the crowd at his warlord's enemy.

As quick as the wind itself, Lucas pirouetted to his attacker's side as the stick pierced the dirt. He then drew his yardstick from his beltloop and swatted at the back of the brigand's knee in a single swift motion, drawing gasps and winces from the onlookers. Leaving the boy in a crying slump, Lucas scanned the crowd for the Great Traitor, only to find him slowly clapping.

"You've improved," Eric said facetiously, his rancid words stinging like acid. "You managed to find yourself a new toothpick after I shattered the last one and used it to lay low a common sell-sword unfit for a House of his own. Oh, and I also heard of your failed negotiations with the

Houses of Birchtree Lane, much to my surprise. I mean, how is it that a common 'Warlord' managed to secure bicycles for my boys from the wealthiest kids in town, when the ever-so-mighty lord of House Shreveport failed so spectacularly?"

"It's really rather simple, brother," Lucas retorted. "They saw how you razed my kingdom to the ground and seized the crown for yourself. How you rallied the lesser Houses to rise under your banner with promises of glory and plunder. But I will warn you, brother, that your usurpation of my realm has unshackled me from the weakness of the other Houses that have kowtowed to your pillaging. I do not fear you."

Lucas pointed the tip of his yardstick towards his brother, clear in his intentions. He would let all in attendance know that House Shreveport, though destroyed, would seek bloody retribution from its foes. Eric, unfazed, gave a slight shrug as he snapped his fingers. One of the kids under his command produced an N-Force Warlock axe, undoubtedly plundered from someone's garage. Gripping the foam weapon, Eric made his way toward the center of the crowd to meet his brother in combat for the final time.

"You know," Eric quipped, "it really is a shame that once I dispatch you, I'll never again be able to defeat you so utterly. The shame you will endure here will leave you even less of a shell than you already are. There will be no honor in your continued trouncing." Lucas felt the words attempt to crack at his resolve, though he remained steadfast.

Unmoved by his brother's cutting words, Lucas stood firm as Eric took notice of the ineffectiveness of his taunting. Yet, he continued.

"I think once this duel is concluded, I'll use your former crown for kindling at the next campfire." Eric took his brother's pilfered Burger King crown from atop his head and gave it a short glance. "Or...perhaps..." Eric threw the crown into the dirt below him and gave it several hard stomps, hoping to see a flash of anger in his brother's eyes as he desecrated the last sole evidence of Lucas' sovereignty. And again, he found nothing but steely resolve. Eric's smug grin had reversed into a slight snarl at Lucas' refusal to be done in by pettiness.

"Do you think you're going to win here?" Eric hissed. "That I won't lay you low for all here to see? I've defeated you before and rallied the army you see around you! You'll not escape with your life or dignity, so end this stoic façade of yours."

Still, Lucas stood. Still, Lucas taunted his brother by simply being unaffected by his words. Gritting his teeth, Eric let loose a mighty roar as he charged, axe in hand, towards his stalwart foe. Eric wound up a wide, obvious blow to the side, which Lucas dodged with ease by ducking

beneath the axe's cruel bite. Eric's rampage of heavy blows continued, each one more dangerous but more obvious than the last. His mouth watered at the thought of his brother's destruction, if only he could get a hit.

"Strike me!" Eric yelled, enraged by the ducking and dodging of Lucas. "Why won't you strike me!?" Eric's arms grew heavy as his breath quickened. Sweat streamed from his furrowed brow, and his strikes came slower with each swing. Lucas, not wasting the opportunity his brother had given him, obliged.

"As you wish," Lucas acquiesced. He produced a ruler from under his shirt and brought its edge across Eric's gut. The crowd gasped, and a silence fell over them again. At least, until Eric began to chuckle once more.

"Fool brother," Eric wheezed, laughing all the while. "You'll need much more than that, or have you forgotten the Accord so easily? As a king, I must be stricken three times before I'm out." Eric released a sickening howl of a laugh at the perceived idiocy of his brother and was joined by the cackling of those he led. Lucas looked at the ruler in his hand, gripping it tightly.

"I remember well, brother," Lucas said. "But like all things, it seems you were the forgetful one. You must be stricken three times, that much is true. Unless, of course, you fall prey to a poisoned blade."

Lucas flashed the edge of his ruler to reveal the shape of a red lipstick kiss at the blade's base, which Eric could only look upon in horror. His heart only had a moment to sink before he succumbed to a series of violent convulsions, crumpling into a spasming heap on the ground. Taking the opportunity, Lucas straddled Eric as he hoisted him by the collar of his Transformers tee-shirt. Finding himself in the opposite position he had found himself in the last time he had faced his brother, Lucas took a moment to revel in his ill-gotten victory before whispering to his brother a final time.

"Today, I answer treachery with treachery, Eric," Lucas spat. "You annihilated my kingdom because of your blind ambition, and now, my blind vengeance will annihilate yours. What I do now, brother, I do not do for the honor of House Shreveport, but for its memory. And that memory will haunt what remains of Baker Street for a generation. Goodbye, Eric."

Lucas released his brother and let out a bellow before walking off and shutting the fence's gate behind him, the crowd parting in fear before him. The brigands and cutthroats then surrounded their warlord, who was still able to move to an extent. Ordering someone to him to hear his final words, the boy's face drained itself of color as Eric whispered his last. The boy rose slowly as the energy finally left Eric and turned to the eager mob.

“Well, spit it out. What did he say?” one of the brigands asked. The boy stammered and stuttered, trying and failing to respond through his own panic.

“C...c-co...Coo”

As he failed to convey the final words of his lord, a shrill, cacophonous howling beset the yard on all sides. Those in attendance could only guess in panic as whatever lurked beyond the wooden privacy fence began to pound at the meager fortifications. They began to round up whatever weapons they could find, shouting curses upon their unseen assailants in a vain attempt to dissuade them. The boy who had lent Eric his ear began to weep to himself in a corner, as the brigand demanded to know what was happening.

“We’re all going to be infected,” the boy wept. “We’re all trapped in here with nowhere to go.”

“Infected with what!?” the brigand demanded. “Who is out there!? Tell me!”

Sets of blankets billowed above the top of the fence as the attackers finally made their move. Several creatures, human-like and lanky, crawled above the fence and landed in the yard with a small thud. Looking up at the crowd, the creatures all sported an eerie rictus grin as the boy in the corner finally spoke.

“Cooties.”

Beset on all sides by girls, every boy in attendance succumbed to the virus in a matter of moments as they found themselves unable to escape the feminine onslaught. All Eric had built for himself was snatched away in a moment in a twisted reflection of the destruction he levied upon his brother. Hearing the shrieking of the boys, Lucas breathed a sigh of defeated relief. The other Houses would never let him near them after this grand atrocity, but he didn’t care. They hadn’t before when Eric had stolen his kingdom. He would be a pariah, a detestable story whispered amongst the remaining Houses. And he liked it.

*If I cannot rule my own kingdom, I shall dance as theirs burn.*



**Where the Water Flows - *Jeff Grounds***

**Eileen**

Like a single raven, death follows her.  
It started with plague, quickly it'd kill.  
It stole her home, along with her mother.  
Only she would survive, never once ill.

The doctor who tried to save them in vain  
Noticed her intellect and took her in.  
In conspiracy, she began to train.  
From the Raven Queen, power grew within.

By the Queen's guidance, she helped all she met.  
Some through her healing, but many in death.  
For those who lived, it wasn't their time yet.  
If it was, the Queen would take their last breath.

Now she travels in a party of eight.  
What does the Queen have in store for her fate?



## **The Kindness of the Reaper**

When I was a boy, I saw Death. Now I had seen things die before, animals while hunting with my father, but they never truly shook me. It wasn't until I was 11 when my father died that I truly understood death, but that is not what I saw. A few months had passed since his death and the winter was beginning to close in around our cabin. Against my mother's wishes I had snuck out into the woods with my father's bow to find us wild game to help my weary mother survive the winter. I had steeled my nerves and made my way far deeper into the woods than my father had ever dared take me. There in the deep and gnarled woods as I scanned for any trace of life, I saw him sitting on a stone at the base of a pine tree. I saw Death. Whatever stories I had been told, however mighty and powerful the Reaper had been described to me in warning tones by my mother, they did not hold up to him. With all the things I had been told, Death had been painted as a force that could not be ignored, yet as I looked across the forest floor, I would not have noticed him if not for the dark hue of his cloak.

In an instant I was frozen in fear as I studied his features, wondering if my mind was simply playing tricks on me. Yet as I studied him, he only became more real. His body was wrapped in a dark cloak, but rather than being like a robe of billowing smoke or living shadow as the legends had told, it was simply a black and tattered shawl, worn thin with use and covered in dirt and debris. His face, as he looked across the woods blankly, was not but a skull, its eyes void of any pulsing darkness or flickering flame, his bones showing signs of weather as he sat upon the simple stone. Upon his back, held there by a simple leather belt, was a long and tarnished scythe, looking even more used than the one at my own homestead. But there was more than just the scythe adorned over his robes. Hanging next to it was a simple quiver, half full of arrows much like those in my own. Across his narrow waist he wore a belt, burdened by all the tolls it carried. A large hunting knife in a worn sheath, a pair of old shears with notches in the blades, a hatchet with a crack running up its dark wooden handle, and strangely a leather holder containing an overstuffed book and an ink quill. Yet among all of these common tools something stood out: on his right hip was a sword, its sheath as dark as the night and its intercut gold and silver handle shining in the dim light which pierced through the trees. The hilt was adorned in the imagery of bones and skulls, the pommel looking to be a dove with its wings closed around itself and an arrow through its heart, and from the way it glistened in the light, it looked as if it

had never even been drawn from its sheath. Drawing my eyes away from the sword, I saw that he had a longbow laid across his lap and a single arrow resting in his hand.

**“Don’t worry child, I mean you no end on this day,”** Death said suddenly, his voice sounding harsh as an old crone who had gone long without a drink, yet with the same chilling softness as my father’s voice moments before he slipped away in my mother’s arms. To say I was startled would be a grand understatement. As soon as I heard him speak, I stumbled and quickly found myself rear first on the forest floor with a thud.

“You...you...you’re Death, aren’t you?” I remember sputtering out as I pushed myself back off the ground.

He did not respond at first, instead he continued looking forward and gave me a simple nod. **“I suppose if that is what people call me, then I am,”** he responded with a sigh, before standing slowly.

“What...what are you doing?” I asked him as he slowly strung his old wooden bow.

**“When it comes through the brush, do not move from where you are,”** Death instructed me calmly as he notched his singular arrow into the bow. In confusion I followed his gaze as he raised the bow. Before I could ask anything further, a sound began to ring through the woods, the sound of thundering hooves and the grunting of a boar. In an instant, the sound grew to an impossible volume as the boar careened through the brush in front of the Reaper. I remember screaming when I saw it, for it was not normal boar. The beast stood nearly twice the size of a bear with long shaggy fur and a pair of horrible, jagged tusks that resembled the overgrown antlers of a deer as they branched off its face. Calmly the Reaper drew back his bow as the boar charged, looking as if it were to close the distance at any moment. Yet silently Death let the arrow loose, and like the sun as it sets perfectly in the horizon, it found its mark. The arrow imbedded directly between the monster’s eyes, causing it to roar in pain and crash to the forest floor. Death took a simple half step backwards as the boar screeched towards him, its massive frame tearing away at the grass and dirt as it slowly came to a halt just before his feet.

I remember standing there in shock as Death placed his bow on his back and approached the monstrous boar.

“Why? Why did you do that?” I asked as I looked down at the beast, its massive body lying still in the dirt as Death takes a knee by its side.

**“This creature was far past its time, young one – its soul had become trapped in its body,”** Death explained as he unsheathed the knife from his belt.

"Its soul was trapped?" I asked as I cautiously approached, wanting to see what Death was doing.

**"Yes, it is actually more common than you may think,"** Death explained as he slowly began to cut into the boar along its stomach.

**"Normally when the soul's time comes, the body begins to die. But, on occasion, the body misses this message and continues to persist and grow."** As Death spoke, he slowly created an opening in the boar, before placing his knife on the ground and pulling up his sleeves.

"What are you doing now?" I asked him, looking down for a moment at the knife he had placed on the ground.

**"Now, I am retrieving the soul,"** he said calmly as he reached his hands into the boar. I remember watching with a mix of intrigue and disgust as he fished around for a moment with his skeletal hands. After a moment, he began to pull his hands free of the carcass, and as he did, my eyes went wide with wonder.

Held gently in his hands was the translucent form of a piglet, whimpering softly as he held it to his chest.

"Is that...?" I asked in awe, my fear gone then as I stood next to Death and looked over the pig.

**"Yes, this is its soul. Innocent and pure, as all things start,"** Death told me. **"Hold it for a moment,"** he instructed, not giving me any time to disagree as he placed the piglet into my arms. It barely weighed anything, I could have forgotten I was holding it at all if not for the coldness of its form.

"Are you sure you want me to hold it?" I asked, looking down at the soul, my eyes having a hard time focusing on it.

**"Of course, child, how else am I to show you how to skin a boar,"** Death said, as he knelt down again and grabbed his knife.

"You're going to show me how to skin a boar? Why?" I asked him as I held the cold piglet close to me.

Death patted the ground next to him for me to sit.

**"Because child, it was your father's final request before he was gone,"** he said with a remarkable amount of kindness alongside the sound of mourning in his voice.

I remember feeling tears well in my eyes as I sat next to him, knowing my father's final wish was enough to break any resolve I had built in my grieving. And so, I sat, as the soul of the boar slept in my arms, and I watched as Death butchered the boar. The process was long and clean, not a single movement wasted, not an ounce of disrespect. And then it was finished, Death had separated the boar into a few large bundles of usable meat and bound them in rope along with the fur.

**“For now, child, take the fur and the first bundle of meat with you. I can promise you that when you return for the rest of the meat, it will be waiting for you untouched,”** Death told me as he sheathed his knife and stood. I looked at the meat as I wiped my eyes, the sheer amount of it could last my mother and I long into the winter.

“Thank you, thank you so much,” I told him, not trying to fight back the tears this time. “But I have one more question.”

**“Of course, child, what is it?”** Death asked me.

With a deep breath I looked up at him, only one question on my mind. “Did my father...did he make it to heaven?” I asked, fearing the answer.

**“Truth be told, I have no idea. Being that I have never died, I do not know what comes after death,”** Death sighed as he took a knee, a sense of guilt in his raspy voice. **“But what I can tell you is your father loved you more than anything in this life. If there is an afterlife, I am sure he has made it to the brightest one imaginable,”** Death told me, placing a hand on my shoulder. In that moment I had wished for a different answer, but I knew then as I know now, that was the answer I had needed. I embraced Death, sobbing into his worn robes as he gently stroked my head, until my tears dried, and I was ready to move on.

“Thank you. For everything,” I told him, my eyes red from crying, yet a smile on my face.

**“Of course, child, this has been wonderful. We will meet again, but I hope that that will not come for a very long time,”** Death told me, giving me his best attempt of a smile with his skull. And then he was gone, as if he was never there to begin with. And along with him went the soul of the boar.

After that, my mother and I did not simply survive the winter, but we thrived. And many years later when she died, I was comforted knowing that she would be in good hands. And now I see my old friend again. As my weary eyes open, I see him sitting there, his weight barely pushing down on the worn boar’s skin that lays across my death bed, and I smile.

“Hello, old friend,” I say, my voice now as raspy as his own after the long decades since our first meeting.

**“Hello,”** he says, with fondness in his gentle voice. **“Are you ready?”**

“Yes, I think I am.”



**Remembering the Past - *Jeff Grounds***

## **Fall**

Leaves change  
Summer fades  
Days pass fast  
Nights creep over with a chill.  
Clear and crisp  
The winter brisk blows  
closer and closer to home.  
But the leaves  
– beautiful sweet colors  
From red to gold  
Grand and gorgeous  
like watching the sun  
set over a season –  
Bring me feelings of warmth,  
Almost the warmth of a hug.  
You know the kind  
God, I love a good hug.  
Days like this  
the lake is where you'll find me  
Skipping rocks and watching the sky  
Change these leaves even more.  
A copper glow  
Shows through the trees.  
Ah, these days.  
Though nothing gold can last  
A new feeling passes over.  
Leaves fall  
One and all.  
Each a grain of sand  
as the hours pass  
through the hourglass  
Counting down to await the snowflake.  
But the snow does not wait for the last grain to fall.  
So it does what it does best  
covering all,  
So bright it hurts my eyes,  
So still.

The beastly bears sleep beneath frozen earth  
The birds fly to warmer lands  
The snow has not been disturbed.  
What a blessing it is to see.



**Call and Response** - *Elliott Samons*



**Vera's Violin**

She plays below Kharkiv  
This stoic silence and incendiary sound  
Above  
The emotive gentle tune from a violin  
Ukraine's "cellar violinist"  
In a dark basement  
With heat and food  
How souls speak to souls by sound  
Mood  
An apartment building  
Basement  
Vera  
Of Kharkiv  
And Vivaldi  
Staying  
Creating  
Things that don't die.



**Party Time** - *Bert Gilbert*

## Anomalies You'd Rather Not See Explained

“Cee, pick up, please, *please* pick up.”

Cecile Azikiwe hadn't heard the phone ring, but Devon Wongs's panicked voice coming from the answering machine was enough to shake her from her slumber.

“I just need to hear your voice. You didn't call like you said you would – you said you'd call last night – and I just want to hear your voice. *Please.*”

Cecile pulled her right arm out from under the leg of whoever it was who was in her bed. There were two strangers here, she noted. One had a healthy layer of fat all over her body, creating a comfortable cushion where it pressed against Cecile, and a few inches of bleach blonde hair sticking up from her head at different angles. The other had dark brown skin, long limbs with bulbous joints, and an impressive hi-top fade with zigzags shaved into the sides. One of his arms was draped over Cecile's stomach. As the grogginess receded a bit, Cecile briefly remembered her two bedmates making out as she unlocked the door to her studio apartment the previous night. And before that, the man buying her a drink. Before that, the woman flirting with her in the bathroom.

“It's been *two days*, Cee, and you said you'd call every day, and I don't know if I can do this without hearing your voi –”

With a beep, Devon was cut off, and silence fell over the apartment. Cecile's head pounded. Water. She needed water. As she extricated herself from the bed, clambering over the blonde woman, the phone began to ring again. Each ring reverberated in Cecile's skull as she stumbled to the kitchen sink, her limbs barely cooperating. There was one of her favorite Hardee's Smurf glasses next to the sink, a quarter of the way full, dirty with layers of lip prints. She drained it and filled it and drained it again. Smurfette looked at her from the glass, in that stereotypical seductive pose – one hand on her hip, one on the side of her head. She filled the glass again.

The recording of Cecile's voice played from the machine – *Can't come to the phone, leave your number, I'll call you back*, yadda yadda.

Then, the beep and “I can’t do this Cee. I need you. Pick up the phone. Just pick up. Please. *Please?*”

Cecile filled the glass one more time, then walked over to the desk where the phone and answering machine sat.

“I can’t tell you how much it hurts being here without you. You don’t understand. Please pick up, I’m begging you.”

Devon’s voice was cracking. Cecile stared at the machine in front of her, its faux wood paneling and silver buttons that clicked in a satisfying way when pressed. Then she looked at the African violet next to the machine. A dozen purple-blue blossoms with little yellow stamens, fuzzy heart-shaped leaves. When did she water it last?

“You’re my entire life, Cee. I’d be nothing without you. *Please answer.*”

Cecile stuck a finger into the soil of the African violet. It was dry. She lifted a few of the leaves, and tipped some of the water into the soil, being careful not to get the leaves wet.

“If you don’t pick up, I don’t know what I might do. I know I said I wouldn’t try again, but—”

*Fuck.*

She grabbed the handset from its cradle and put it to her head.

“Devon, you promised.”

“I knew you were there. Why didn’t you pick up? Do you hate me?”

Cecile rubbed her eyes. How many hours of real sleep had she gotten? What time was it anyway?

“I don’t hate you. I was asleep.”

“You didn’t wake up when the phone rang?”

“I was up late last night.”

“What were you doing?”

“I was working. In the studio.”

There was a pause on the line. Cecile could feel Devon processing this information, trying to believe it.

“You weren’t with someone?”

“I told you. I was painting. You know, I think I’m coming down with something, and I really should go back to bed.”

Devon didn’t say anything for a few seconds, then the comfort of denial won out over the pain of the truth. “Alright, if you have to. It’s just we- we haven’t gotten a chance to talk in *days*.”

“I’ll call back after I feel better.”

“You promise?”

“Yes, I promise.”

“And we’ll talk about when you’re coming home?”

“I don’t know, Devon. I mean, I don’t know if I can come home 'til Thanksgiving. But we’ll talk about it soon, I swear.”

Devon’s voice cracked again as she quietly said, “I-I love you, Cee.”

“I love you, too. I promise I’ll call soon.”

“Okay.”

Devon’s desperation seeped through the phone and into the pit of Cecile’s stomach. She didn’t feel guilt often, but every time it was more gut-wrenching than the last.

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

“I love you.”

“Love you, too.”

“Bye,” Devon said again.

Cecile hung up.

Was it ever going to be safe to end things with Devon? It had to happen at some point. Or she could just stay in San Francisco forever, and hope Devon never left New York. Or maybe Devon would meet someone new and forget about her. What were the chances of that?

A groan came from the bed.

Cecile prayed to whatever higher power there was to pray to – *please let Devon fall in love with someone else*. Then she finished the last of the water in the Smurf glass and headed back to bed.

Several hours later, after having gotten a bit more sleep and showered off the bodily fluids of two complete strangers, Cecile emerged onto Texas Street. When she was in high school, she had read about Potrero Hill in the Sixties, with its art scene and its gay culture, and she had decided she had to be there. And, in some ways, the Hill was everything she thought it would be. The art school was there, of course, and the galleries, showrooms, and designer warehouses to go with it. And there were the bars and venues, the music, the nightlife. But a handful of shops and restaurants had closed since Cecile had moved there in early August, and it was only just mid-October. These days, it seemed like all you had to do was eavesdrop on any random conversation on the street, just for a few minutes, and you’d hear the same thing – *it’s the economy, what can ya do?*

Cecile made it down the hill and onto 18th Street, and there was Farley’s, right around the corner. Within a few yards of the door, the scent of recently roasted, dark-brown-almost-black coffee beans smacked her in the face, and she could have sworn the smell alone got her buzzed. Stepping inside, she found herself immediately standing in line behind three people – close to the maximum occupancy for the tiny shop. In the cramped quarters, it was impossible to avoid overhearing the conversation happening between the two people in front of her in line.

“Tomorrow?”

“Between the fourteenth and the twenty-first.”

“And you read this where?”

“*Gilroy Dispatch*. Geologist said so, some expert. Berkman, Berkland?”

“And this geologist said we’re supposed to get a six-point-o? Tomorrow?”

“Between three-point-five and six-point-o. Sometime between the fourteenth and the twenty-first.”

“So, possibly tomorrow.”

“Possibly.”

“Aren’t experts always predicting the world will end tomorrow?”

The strangers’ conversation ended as the first of them stepped up to the counter to place their order. Cecile was left to wonder if the world really was about to end. If it was, she wouldn’t have to deal with Devon. Fingers crossed.

## **What It's Like to Have PTSD**

It's like

driving to the store  
the doctor  
your therapist  
in the snow. It's unreal

a nightmare

you cannot awake.  
You're trapped  
forever  
being hunted by a ghost

unrelenting

while your heart  
beats faster  
harder  
like it will jump out during

a sleepless night.

The drive down the street.

---

It's like

a bloody war ongoing  
deep inside  
your mind.  
Threatening you with

a choice

questioning sanity.  
Is it fake  
or reality?  
You'll never know what

you're faced with

until you're against the wall  
lungs burning  
nails deep in your neck  
debating between



denial or suffering.

What's worth reliving?

---

It's like

trying to break free  
from a prison  
guarded by demons  
talons gripping your heart tightening

a vise

around your throat  
gasping for air  
choking out screams  
tears falling burning

threatening

drawing out life  
from your lungs  
death lingering there  
just out of sight

choking out life.

And all you did was look at your car keys.

## **Reconciled**

This is an old scar. This is a talking-story.

This probably isn't about you, unless it is.

This is what I can't say but want to.

This is where I can't quite believe my friend still talks to you because you hurt me so much. Doesn't everyone know that? Isn't that important? That I was hurt?

No, it isn't.

And I've been on the other side of that door as well.

Private lives, closed doors, and friends who decide it's easier not to ask.

So. "I'm not just allergic to your cat, I'm allergic to all cats" — and I understand "cat" is just a placeholder for "women" is just a placeholder for "you."

Says the man who now has two cats and is married.

Of all the hurtful things I've said to myself over the years, you surely gave me half the language, you who thought a compliment was "I guess you're not too stupid."

You who didn't worry that a sleeping body can't give consent.

Most days, I chalk this up to my past and surmise that as I've grown as a person, you probably have, too.

But for all my problems, my "issues," my defects, my crazy, my not-good-enough, my fat, my ugly, my grief: it wasn't me.

The cat is a cat is a woman is an allergen, and you could never handle it. Could never handle me.

And that was not my deficiency, not my fault, not my failing, not my flaw. It was yours.

Many days, I can find it to hope you're happy – but today isn't one of them.

I hope the memory of me burns.

## **One Line**

All I want is two lines.  
Two lousy lines  
that show my body is doing  
what it is designed to do.  
The signs are there  
plain as day...  
but is it all in my head?  
Wishful thinking?  
Phantoms? Dreams?  
The wait is agony, why do I do this?  
Is it worth it? Can I keep going?  
I turn it over, refusing to see;  
giving up is admitting defeat.  
I know I can do this.  
God, why won't you give me a chance?  
I did everything right  
and in the right order.  
I keep failing at something so basic,  
so simple, so complicated, so pure,  
so brutal, so beautiful, so primal.  
I was not perfect, but I learned.  
Figured out what I want and how to get it,  
got it and kept it.  
I want to understand!  
I'm the good one, the responsible one.  
the one people call on for help.  
It's tiring, it's frustrating, it's impossible.  
All I want to know is when...  
when will it be my turn?  
Am I undeserving or weak?  
Will I be terrible, awful, a disgrace?  
The time has come, I must look.  
Hope crashes down  
as I stare at that  
One. Solitary. Line.



**Patience** - *Holli Rebecca Williams*

## **Squares**

I've decided to find myself a home within my mind.  
Somewhere where my thoughts are no longer scowled,  
And I can make my blanket  
Square by square.

I take my yarn and hook to the station.  
The sun smiles with me as I face the breeze.  
It kisses my fingertips as I touch the trees  
Which hum with song.

Am I doing anything wrong?

Do you, too, not carry a hook  
To weave your memories together  
As I do, with my blanket  
and squares?

## **Strong**

Don't Cry! Don't Cry!

This is what I used to tell myself before I had been properly introduced to my own strength. At a time in my life when social anxiety had snuck up on me and slammed me to the ground, I used to tell myself, Don't Cry! I tried desperately not to show weakness, to keep my feelings well hidden, to hide that fact that I was struggling with life.

The thing is, everyone struggles with life. The struggle may be a diagnosis of a chronic health condition, or the loss of a beloved feline friend, or the crushing upset of most of your classes being changed to eight weeks instead of the sixteen that you had already struggled with in previous semesters.

In 2016, my struggle was the fact that my husband of nearly two decades felt it better to live alone rather than with me and our five kids. Together we had created a situation that limited my options. Honestly, I didn't want options. I wanted my family back together.

In the midst of the struggle to figure out my own life, my thirteen-year-old came out to me as transgender.

I knew immediately that I was not strong enough to deal with this in my weakened state. However, unlike all the personal blows that were knocking down every ounce of strength I could find, this struggle was different. This was not about me. This was about my kid. I knew I had to become strong for my kid. It's funny. All the things you thought you could never do, you find a way to do when it comes to your kid.

The first thing I knew I needed to do was minimize the social anxiety I was currently facing.

I had grown up performing in front of crowds, so it wasn't a stretch for me to envision trying this again. I signed up for an acting class through my college. I thought it would be a great place for me to explore some emotions that I had been ignoring because of my current pain and fear.

A few days after I signed up, the class was canceled.

Don't Cry! Don't Cry!

As I was trying to formulate a different plan for addressing my social anxiety, I saw an Ivy Tech announcement about auditions for a musical.

Again, I never would have considered auditioning had it not been for my need to become emotionally stronger for my kid. I thought, “Well, I might as well jump into the deep end and just see how this goes.”

I walked into the theater, the oldest person amongst a hoard of crazy-talented teens and twenty-somethings. Their warm-ups in the hallway completely intimidated me. I looked and listened as my hands shook. Then I wondered what would become of my trans child if I walked away from this present fear and never found courage to help them face their own fears. That thought kept me focused and resolute in my plan.

I hadn’t prepared much for this audition other than choosing my monologue and song. Since music had been my background, I felt more comfortable starting the audition with a song. I requested that I accompany myself on piano. I knew it would add another level of comfort and help calm me since I’ve been playing piano since I was six years old.

For my monologue I went with something that I had memorized in my early twenties. It was actually the first paragraph of the first novel I had written and published.

I stood in front of the director and his crew. My hands were trembling. My insides felt like they were tires traveling down a gravel back road. My mouth was so dry that when I swallowed, my throat stuck together. I was certain my knees would not hold me upright for the entirety of this one-minute performance.

I introduced my selection and explained that it was from a novel called, *Love Is Patient*. I also explained that the character I would be portraying was a young woman from 1880, who had just lost her newborn to a fever epidemic that had ravaged her town.

The director signaled that they were ready for me to begin.

I took a step backward and turned around to get into character. I felt my heart thumping as if it was bouncing from my chest to the floor and back again.

Just Don’t Cry!

But in a flash, I realized something that shifted the way I would think about myself for the rest of my life.

I realized I was trying so hard to not cry, but the woman I was about to portray had just lost her newborn so, of course, crying would be part of her character.

I was trying so hard not to tremble, but this character was so angry from the madness of losing her child and family that she would be quaking with rage.

I was trying, to no avail, to calm my quivering voice, and yet this character’s voice would most definitely be failing her.



In the span of those three seconds before I turned back around to begin my monologue, my weaknesses became strengths. The breaking voice, the groan of fear, and yes, even the crying, were for that moment a strength. It was a powerful strength that I could bring to the performance of this character. The emotions that I was always trying to hide from people because I thought they would think less of me were actually a beautiful strength. It is a strength to show humanness.

I lifted my chin and dropped my fear to the floor as I allowed all of my emotions to surface for this performance.

I began:

Ya don't have ta tell me about hurtin'  
Hurtin' seemed ta crawl up next ta my heart and bloom  
fully grewed,  
flitter about just a pretty as you please.  
Awmost makin' me not wanna kill it 'cause it be so pretty.  
Seemed ta suit me.  
'Cept when I think on it now,  
just maybe I been confusin' my butterfly o' heartache  
with bein' the only thing I'd ever truly known.

When I walked out of that audition, it didn't matter if I made callbacks. I had won, simply because I was not afraid of myself anymore. I wasn't afraid of things that other people may view as weak. I wasn't afraid to show my feelings. I wasn't afraid to cry.

I made callbacks twice more and landed the part of 'adult woman' in Ivy Tech's production of the musical *Spring Awakening*, directed by David Anspaugh.

My child is happy and healthy.  
And now – I am stronger.



**Fragile Hope** - *Holli Rebecca Williams*

### **Reflection of an Old Buzzard**

I watched you through your own eyes. I watched you  
Tucked under your mother's wing  
Staying warm, staying dry  
Taking in, consuming all the things your father  
Provides. I watched you as a young Sparrow,  
Flying 'round the barn rafters, banging  
Your flapping wings amongst the horse stalls  
Skinning your knees on the tools.  
I watched you become the Songbird  
Singing your lyrical melodies  
Amongst the drunkards, lovers,  
And the swindlers too.  
I watched you become the Hawk,  
With blood on your feathers  
Stalking your prey in the night.  
I watched you become the Bald Eagle,  
Proud father, perched in the mountain tops  
Providing what you could for your offspring,  
Tucked under their mother's wing  
Staying warm, staying dry  
I watch you now, you old Buzzard.  
I see your reflection in the clear  
Blue crystalized mountain streams below.  
I watch your reflection, hanging on and surviving  
Trying to accomplish what has yet to be accomplished  
O yes, I see your refection! I'm still watching!



**End of the Road - *Jeff Grounds***



## CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

**Anna Bexell** is both a student and staff member at the Ivy Tech-Bloomington campus. Her sonnet "Eileen" describes the backstory of a grave domain cleric she's been playing as in a game of Dungeons & Dragons since this past autumn.

**AnnMarie Adams** is a current Ivy Tech student. An older adult returning to college after a life-changing medical diagnosis, she is embracing the world of online and virtual learning, with the goal of graduating Ivy Tech - Kokomo in the fall of 2023 with an associate of arts in liberal arts. AnnMarie hopes to transfer to Purdue Global to study English and creative writing.

**Bert Gilbert** is currently a senior scholar at the Ivy Tech-Bloomington campus. He's been taking pictures for the last fifty or so years for his own enjoyment but has never submitted anything anywhere for publication. He holds a bachelor's degree from Indiana University in sculpture and painting, class of 1983. Since then, Bert and his wife created and ran a remodeling company, raised a son, and restored an 1860 farmhouse.

**Destiny Morgan** is a member of the 2022 ASAP cohort on Ivy Tech-Bloomington's campus. She loves frogs, science, and all things comfy.

**Elijah Armendariz Peavy** has always loved nature, its deep intricate webs and connections. He tries to use his poetry to capture that.

**Elliott Samons** grew up in Seymour and likes to spend time learning and trying to share knowledge. He is interested in gardening, music, and the relationship between art and culture.

**Floyd Boesch** is a full-time English instructor at the Ivy Tech-Terre Haute campus. He earned his master's degree in English with a concentration in creative writing from Indiana State University in May 2022. He earned his bachelor's degree from ISU in 2020, majoring in English with a minor in creative writing. Floyd is an Ivy Tech alumnus, graduating with an associate of General Studies in May of 2018.

**Heather Perry** is a scientist, storyteller, and figment of her own imagination. She accidentally dreamed herself up one day after eating cheese too late at night, and now we're stuck with her. She works for the city of

Bloomington at night, doing science stuff while you're asleep, and she lives with her excellent cats and fantastic husband. She promises she's not a werewolf though she will admit to having a mustache.

**Holli Rebecca Williams** is a performing artist and entrepreneur with experience as an author, editor, actor, voice talent, playwright, singer, songwriter, and musician. She transitioned a music career that included four albums and years of concert tours into writing novels and theater performances. Holli's authored six novels and performed lead roles in *Always*, *Patsy Cline* and *Spring Awakening*. Her poetry, essays, short stories, and creative nonfiction have previously been published in *root and branch*.

**Jayden Dunbar** has attended the Ivy Tech-Bloomington campus for a bit over two years after a disastrous attempt at higher education in 2013. To understand more about himself, and with support from his teachers and family, he hopes to become a better writer and share his characters and worlds with other people.

**Jeff Grounds** loves all forms of art. He has been doing many different forms of art his whole life. He draws, paints, writes songs, plays guitar and drums, and takes photographs. He has an associate degree in fine arts from Ivy Tech-Bloomington and is currently working on a bachelor's degree at IU.

**Neil Frederick** has worked at Ivy Tech Community College-Bloomington for 35 years, having had the opportunity to assist students trying to better themselves. He has been humbled and inspired by so many of our students' courage, resilience, and achievements. His home of about fifteen years is a spot on some wooded acreage in Brown County.

**Ryland King** is a young author starting his journey to writing fiction. His dream is to become a published fantasy and science fiction author. He is nearly finished with his long-term novel that he plans to be the first of five. He loves fantasy, like the Lord of the Rings and The Inheritance series, as well as science fiction, such as *Star Wars* and the Cove series by Scott Savage. He hopes to be able to write memorable stories and characters, with interesting new lessons and morals, that may not change the worlds of fiction, but might stick with a couple people and inspire them to write. He attends the Bloomington campus.

**Tyann Barrentine** is an Ivy Tech-Bloomington alumnus, attending IU Bloomington. She is currently working on a short story project inspired by the Magnetic Fields' *69 Love Songs*, with the hopes of eventually finding the wherewithal to get the stories published. Her submission for this issue is a part of that project. She is overjoyed to be included in *root and branch*.

**Viktor Cullen** (they/he) is an agender non-traditional student at Ivy Tech. They are working towards a 2nd degree in Nursing. After graduation, Viktor hopes to work in Women's Health, NICU, or other critical care fields. They love to write their experiences with mental health into both fiction and non-fiction genres.



