



Who Zac?

A Book About Zac Rodgers

Written By

Mary Sweeney

With contributions from James Rodgers, Brian Ellmann,

Kate Fahey Tiger, Mary Catherine Jude Ford,

Rebecca Gardner and Christopher Sweeney

Art by Zac Rodgers

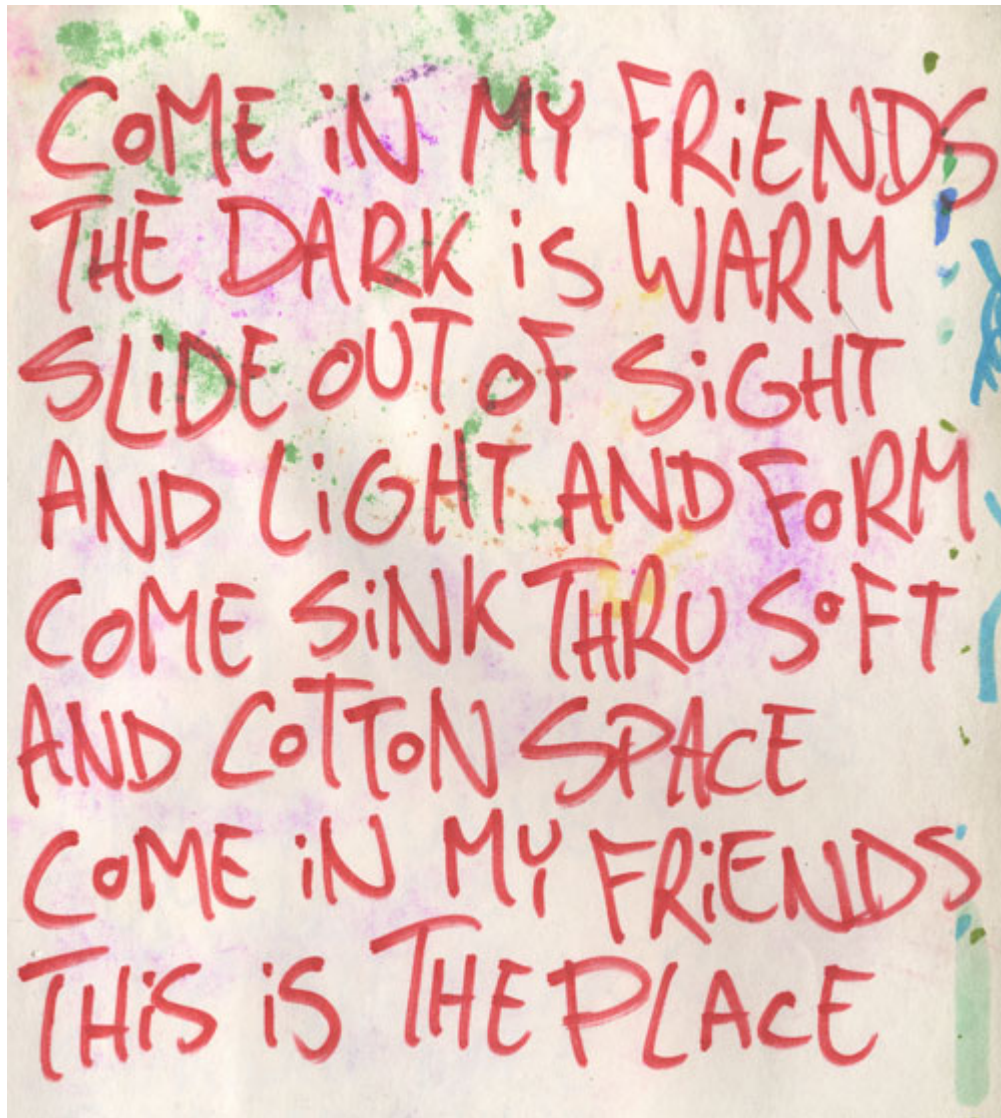
Dedication

This book is dedicated to the memory of Zac Rodgers and his cousin DJ Dimas. Both were taken from us too soon in this life but remain in our hearts forever.



In San Francisco celebrating a birthday

From left: Brian, me holding James, Mick, DJ, Zac, our friend Bridget holding her daughter Tara



COME IN MY FRIENDS
THE DARK IS WARM
SLIDE OUT OF SIGHT
AND LIGHT AND FORM
COME SINK THRU SOFT
AND COTTON SPACE
COME IN MY FRIENDS
THIS IS THE PLACE

A welcome from Zac's journal

Acknowledgements

This book would not have been possible without the help of my sister Sally Cordrey who assisted with scanning old photos and cleaning some of the journal images. Alex Gorelik and Lee Lee lovingly scanned all of Zac's journals and other artwork shortly after his passing. Without them, none of Zac's art would be in this book.

Contents

Introduction	1
Zac Was a Cool Guy	3
Always Drawing	5
Art in Civic Center	7
Creating Something from Anything	9
The Wooly Mammoth	11
Brotherly Love	13
A Big Irish Family	13
Evan and Mo	17
Fun Facts about Zac	19
A Climber	21
The Wanderer	23
The Writer	25
Empathy	29
James Remembers His Brother Zac	31
The Wide Awake Giant by Brian Ellmann	35
My Nephew Zaq by Christopher Sweeney	39
Merricat's Story about Meeting Her Friend Zaq	41
Zaq on the Importance of Cozy Feet	45
Kate's Story about Road Tripping with Her Friend Zac	47
Becca's Story about Zac	51
Tower Designed by Uncle Zac	53

v

Introduction

"Hello Mother, this is your darling son Zac." This was how my son Zac started every phone conversation when he called me. This is when he was an adult. And he was a darling son, as well as a worrisome daredevil, a creative genius and a whole lot more.

Zac was born with a certain sense of cool, a manner of observation followed by quick wit – he could crack you up with comments on anything. He also drew constantly, often off to the side while a party or family gathering was going on. He always carried a notebook, journal or sketchpad with him. He also was very adventurous and liked making up games for his brothers and friends to join in on.

This book is the story of Zac as told by me, his mom. This is for Liam, Patrick, Zac Stephen, Finley, and Story Lou who will never know their Uncle Zac. I want you to know a little bit about who he was and the kind of guy he was. I'm sure your dads can tell you many more tales about their amazing brother. They, along with friends, also share some memories here.

Mostly you should know that Zac was loved very much and would have loved all of you.

Grandma



Zac Was a Cool Guy

Anyone who knew Zac will tell you - he was so cool.

He was a smooth talker. He spoke softly, and was really funny. He could change his voice to sound like a gangster or pirate or any of a million other characters stored in his imagination.

He had a lot of interests. He loved music and played in several bands. He drew all the time. He painted and made sculptures and pottery. He gave his art away to his friends.

He would sit and write in a coffee shop, sometimes with a friend. He wrote poetry and comics and short stories. He was working on a book.



Zac had his own style. He liked to mix up colors and types of clothes. He wore pajamas to school. He had a pair of bright yellow pants that he wore with every different kind of shirt you can imagine. He dyed his hair so many different colors I could not recall his natural color.

After he came back from Europe he went for a very sleek, sophisticated look. At his cousin Kate's wedding someone thought he was a rock star!

For his eighth birthday, Auntie Betty gave him a shirt that had big blue stripes going across it. At the bottom it said "DARE TO BE DIFFERENT" in big letters. He wore that shirt almost every day until it was too small and falling apart.

That was what was so cool about Zac. He dared to be different.

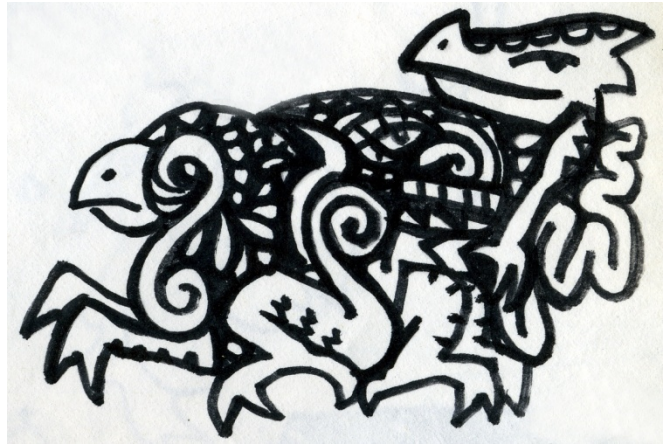


Some of the drawings in this book have a funny color and shadows. This is because they are copied from an old journal.

Always Drawing

Zac drew a lot. It just was what he did - like breathing.

He didn't just draw on blank paper – he drew on envelopes, in journals, on pizza boxes, on napkins and the backs of placemats in restaurants, on his school papers, on his shoes and his clothes. He drew animals and people, boats and buildings, dragons and angels, and creatures no one had ever seen before.



When he was little and I would go pick him up at daycare he would ask "Did you get any dumps today, Mommy?"

He wasn't asking about garbage or dump trucks. The dumps he wanted were stacks of computer paper that I got when my computer program broke. Bad news for me was good news for Zac. Lots of drawing paper! He could draw on the back of this kind of dump.

He started carrying around notebooks, sketchbooks and journals when he was about six years old. He wanted always to be able to retreat into his own world and draw. He also carried markers with him – they were his favorite when he wanted to color.

He would often give his artwork away. If a waiter in a restaurant admired his drawing on a napkin, Zac would give it to him. Most of his friends have multiple pieces of his art. He never really tried to sell it, or make a career of his artistic passion.

Look closely at this page from a journal.

Do you see the face?



This is the kind of random art you would find wherever Zac was.

Art in Civic Center

Zac discovered sidewalk chalk when he was in high school. He loved it!

He and his friend Dave were drawing on sidewalks all over town. Sometimes a small crowd would gather to watch as they were talented artists. One day they decided to draw on the walls of an old stone amphitheater in Denver's Civic Center.

They were drawing pictures of Vikings and horses. There was nothing gross or having to do with gangs. Just fun stuff.

They were stopped by the Denver Police who charged them with graffiti and defacing public property. "Defacing" means permanent damage to something. Zac and I had to go to court.

We were in juvenile court. Fortunately, we were able to convince them that since it was only chalk it would wash away. The drawing was not permanent and would not deface the wall.



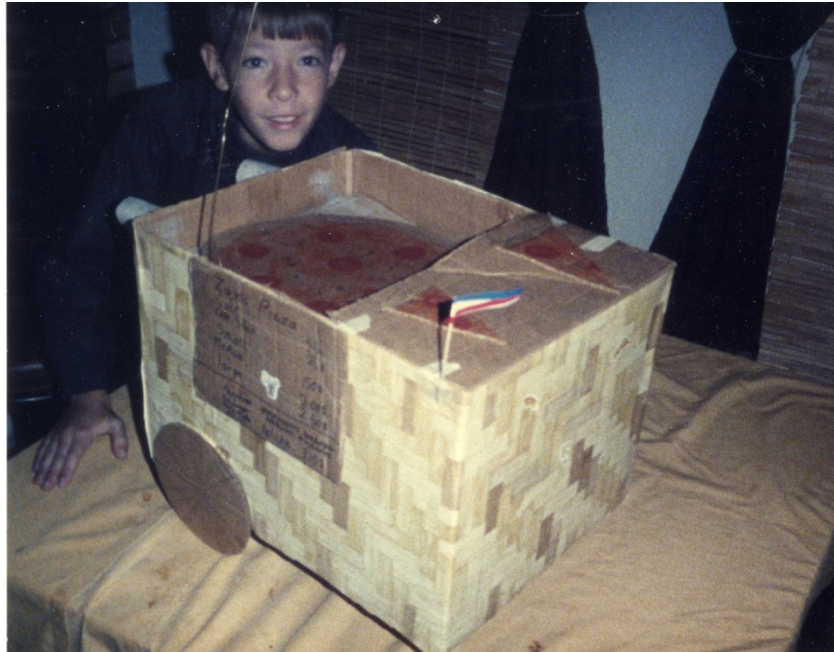
Zac got off with a warning. He was lucky. His friend Dave was 18 and went to adult court. He was convicted and had to pay a fine.

They both got in trouble with their parents, and learned to keep their chalk art to sidewalks.

A Creative Guy



"This is Murphy," Zac said as he came in the door one day after art class. He was holding a statue that looked a lot like him. He had blond hair and a pair of pants with suspenders. He never did say why he called the statue Murphy.



Zac took an old box and transformed it into a pizza cart, complete with menu.

Creating Something from Anything

Zac liked to make things. He would come up with new creations from whatever he could find. His artistic talent was not limited drawing.

One morning there was a three-dimensional paper valentine on the kitchen table. I asked him "Did you get up in the middle of the night and make this?"

"No," said Zac. "I got up at four o'clock this morning. Sometimes, I wake up and I just have to make something!"

Another morning the living room had been transformed into a cave with three small rooms. He had moved the living room furniture around, and brought in kitchen chairs and a blanket to make the walls.

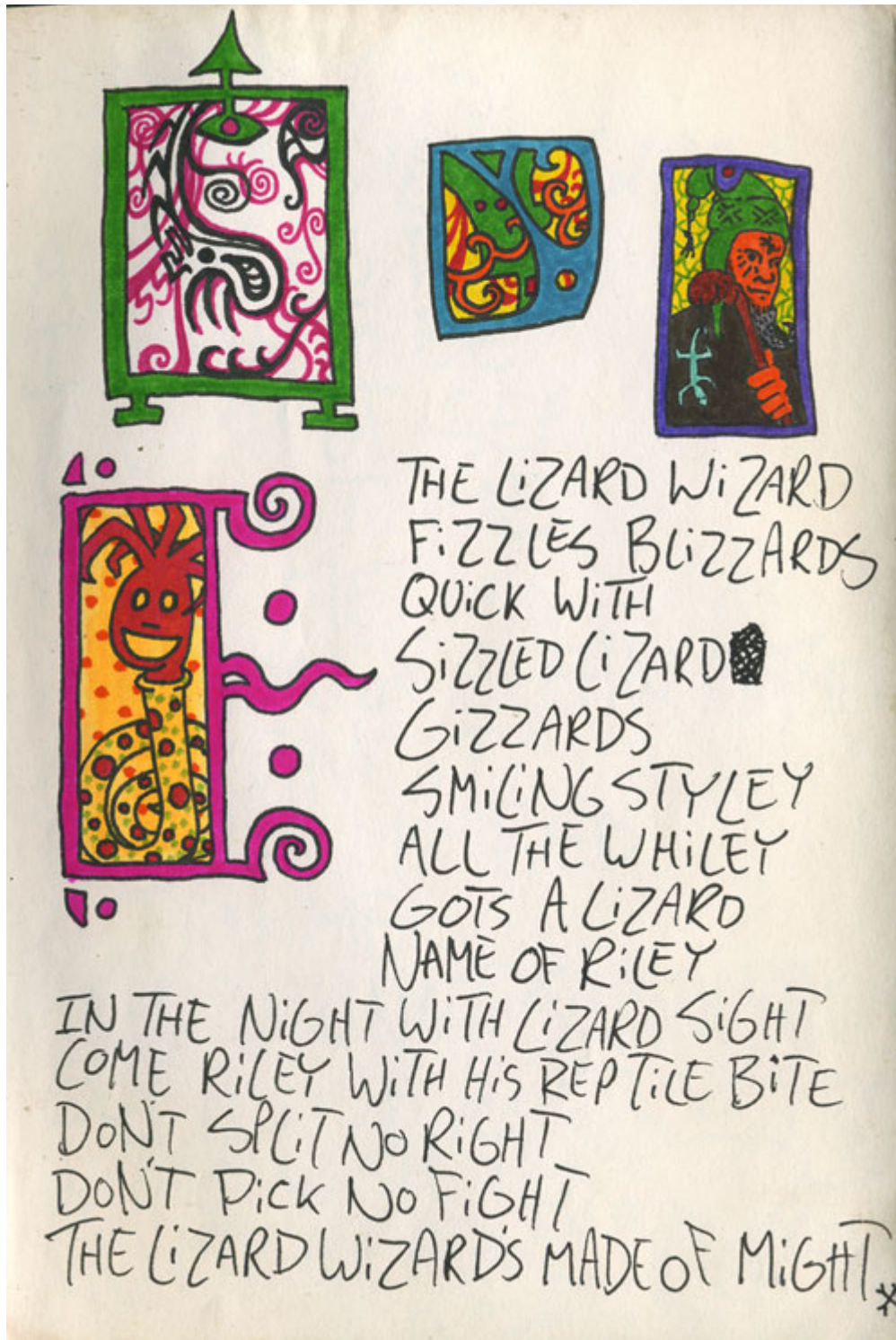
He had a brilliant imagination.



He made stuff out of other stuff. He could make swords and shields out of old sticks, boxes and packing material. He made clothes for his stuffed animals from old socks and scraps of fabric. He made costumes for all the animals and put on plays. He made finger puppets from small paper cups.

He made storefronts from cereal boxes. They were for a model town he was creating. He used his toy cars and made a paper street. His little people and trees were made from sticks and paper.

At Christmas time he would make a fireplace out of construction paper taped to the wall. We all tacked our stockings on to the mantel. This was Zac's creative solution to no fireplace for Santa in an apartment.



Art and poetry right out of a journal

The Wooly Mammoth

When Zac was in middle school in Steamboat he joined this cool program called Odyssey of the Mind. Kids worked together as a team to solve a problem and then made up a play about their solution.

They had to use only materials they could find. They had to make all the props and costumes for a 10-minute show. Zac loved this!

His team had to show how people once made tools from bones. Living around a forest made bone hunting easy. They made costumes and put on a play about cave dwellers.

For their play they made a large wooly mammoth. They used old carpet scraps they found for its fur. It was hard to move so they put roller skates on its feet. A rolling wooly mammoth!

The team won first place in the county competition. They went to the state meet in Denver. They didn't win the state competition but they got an Honorable Mention for Creativity.

The rolling wooly mammoth was on display at Steamboat Middle School for many years.



Zac with his foot on the wooly mammoth



Three bros, in 2002



Brian & Zac during their cammo stage

Brotherly Love

When Zac was almost three years old I was about to have a new baby. One night before bed Brian and Zac and I were talking about how exciting it was going to be to have a new brother or sister. Suddenly Zac's eyes got big. "Who's going to be the new baby's mommy?" he asked.

"I am" said I.

"No!" he said. "You're my mommy!" Then he added slowly, "and Brian's." He did not want to share Mommy with anyone else. Brian was quite enough, he thought.



When the baby came it was another boy! We named him James and called him Jamie. Zac decided he was okay and called him his baby. As soon as Jamie started walking, he followed Zac everywhere. Zac and Jamie created their own little world of play. They formed a special bond that lasted through the years as they grew up and became adults.

All the boys were close and had each other's back whenever trouble appeared. One night I woke up to find a police officer questioning Zac in the living room. Brian was trying to be his lawyer and telling him not to say anything!

When they were little, Brian would sometimes follow Zac on one of his climbing adventures. Brian was afraid of heights and would panic and not be able to get down. Zac would very patiently go up and lead him down to safety.

Of course all three of them fought with each other like all brothers do. But when it came to telling me what just happened, stone silence. They stuck together like glue.



Zac's grandparents Jim and CC Sweeney at a St Patrick's Day parade



Zac and I at the same parade

A Big Irish Family

My kids were all born in California. When Zac was six, we moved to Colorado to be near my family. The boys got to know their grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins well.

They also go to know the joy of being Irish. St. Patrick's Day was a huge deal at the Sweeney house. There was a big party. Zac and Jamie dressed up as leprechauns and greeted everyone when they came in the door.

We also went to the parade every year. Grandpa marched in it, and sometimes other family members were in it too. After the parade, Grandpa took everyone out for corned beef and cabbage at a nearby church hall.

His grandparents were important people in Zac's life. Grandpa helped out with rides to practice, or attending school events when I could not because of work. Grandma watched them after school.

My brother Chris, who was in high school at the time, helped take care of the boys in the evening. He brought them home, made dinner, and stayed until I came home from working the late shift.

Chris brought his record albums over with him and the boys rocked out. Chris remembers that Zac would ask him to put on songs that had "bad" words in them. All three boys would listen closely until they heard the bad word. Then they would all crack up laughing.

One time the whole clan went out for dinner. Zac and James sat on either side of Grandpa. Neither one was over 21; James was still in high school. Grandpa ordered each of them a beer. The waiter didn't even pause, assuming the old man knew what he was doing. And he did: an Irish grandfather taking care of his lads.



Auntie Betty cracks up when Zac tries on Mo's boa!



Mo and Zac make Christmas cookies.

Evan and Mo

Zac had a special fondness for his cousins Evan and Mo. He was much older than them but whenever the family got together he made a point to play with them.

I remember one Christmas when Evan was just a baby. Zac was in high school. Zac got down on the floor to check out Evan's new toys. Evan did not want to share. Zac just stretched his long body (he was over six feet tall) out and got comfortable.

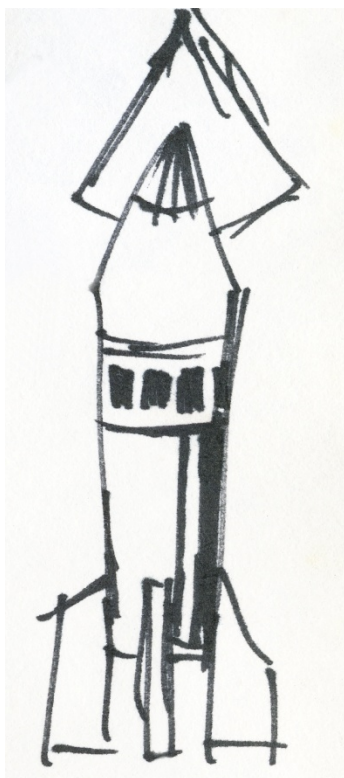
He talked softly with Evan until he had coaxed him into bringing every single toy over to him. They were happily playing together when we had to interrupt them to come to dinner.



Over the years Zac would play trucks with Evan and Barbie with Mo. He would get them both going with on a project with paper and crayons. When Evan and Mo came to my house to make Christmas cookies, Zac joined right in. He even went to the Parade of Lights with us one year (picture left, with Aunt Sally).

Mo remembers Zac as "the person I was always with. He was my adult best friend. He was the reason to look forward to Thanksgiving. He didn't talk to me like I was some little kid. He gave me that necklace with the Chinese symbol. He got it in Spain along with the small box and the sea glass."

Evan and Mo both remember when Zac was babysitting them and they all got into a food fight. "Don't tell your parents!" Zac said, but they weren't worried. They knew their dog Sammy would clean up the mess.



Fun Facts about Zac

- *Zac hated TV – he said it ate your brain. He even refused a free one for his apartment!*
- *Zac was very stubborn. He would sit in time-out for hours rather than admit he had made a mistake.*
- *Zac's favorite food as a kid was grilled cheese sandwiches.*
- *Zac loved movies especially "Singin' in the Rain" and "The Wizard of Oz."*
- *Zac always carried colored markers with him, even as an adult.*
- *Zac did not need a lot of sleep. He would be talking or singing quietly to himself long after his brothers went to sleep. He would also get up in the middle of the night to play or make things.*
- *Zac made friends easily because he always had a good idea for an adventure or a cool game to play.*
- *Zac was a terrible driver! Several family members and friends refused to ride with him.*
- *Zac was so smart he was usually at least two years ahead of his classmates. He taught himself to read when he was four years old and was an avid reader from then on.*
- *Zac loved rockets. He had a tattoo of a rocket on his arm.*
- *Zachariah was his given name but everyone called him Zac. At different times in his life, he spelled his name Zach, Zack, Zaq and finally settled on Zac. When he was little he thought his middle name was Aariah!*



Up a tree



Up a rock formation with James



On a city wall

A Climber

Zac climbed on everything! He was a climber from the moment he escaped from his crib as a baby.

He could climb the monkey bars at an elementary school when he was three years old. These were old metal structures made for bigger kids.

"Look at that little kid!" The adults would holler. "How does he do that?"

Zac would pull himself up the bars like a monkey going up a pole. Level by level, up he went to the top. He would come back down the same way he went up. He showed everyone why they were called "monkey bars."

Zac never saw a rock formation or mountainside he didn't want to climb. As a family, we would go fishing but Zac thought that was too boring. He would find something to climb – a tree, a hill, a pile of rocks.

He was fearless. That lack of fear was dangerous. Many times he fell and hurt himself.

When he was two he climbed up to a high shelf and got his asthma medicine. He got the childproof cap off and drank some. This was very dangerous! Brian saved his brother's life by going to get me. I took Zac to the hospital where they made him throw up. Yuck!

When he was older, he tried to go up the sides of buildings, onto rooftops and high fences. He loved to climb onto bridges that went over rivers or highways. Sometimes he would get caught and chased away.

"OK, you're scaring me now Zac!" I or a friend would say. Sometimes he would get down then. More often though, he would just keep climbing!



Zac with Amber in Spain



The Wanderer

Zac was very curious and loved adventure.

Walking down the street when he was little, Zac would pick anything up to examine it: rocks, bottle caps, sticks, coins. His pockets were often full of the treasures he found.

Sometimes he would just take off to go exploring. When I caught him, he would say "I hike!" He said this even if he took off down a city street. I was always worried about him wandering off. His dad once found him, at age two, a block away from home, chatting with a scruffy old man. He had just wandered out the front door.

One day we were at a concert with friends. The announcer came on the stage and said "we have a little blond boy ..." No one even looked to see if he was missing. Everyone just said, "Zac!" We were sitting by an aisle. Zac had been stopped by an usher as he tried to make an escape.

As he got older he was allowed to explore on his bike and with his brothers and friends. Once we lived by an open field. They spent hours out there hunting snakes and building things with sticks, rocks and other stuff they found.

When we lived in the mountains, in Steamboat, he could roam freely, in and out of town. He could go camping or rock climbing or just explore the forest. He learned to have someone else along in case he fell or got lost.

As a young man he lived in Denver and Chicago. He walked all over the city, sketchbook in hand. He liked meeting other people and would strike up a conversation with anyone, especially a pretty girl.

He went road trips with his friends all over the country. He even went to Spain with his girlfriend Amber.

I'VE GOT A LUCKY PENNY
I KEEP IT IN MY SHOE
I WALK
MY LUCKY PENNY
IT WALKS ME STRAIGHT TO YOU
MY LUCKY PENNYS NEVER FADED
NEVER MAKES ME BLUE
IT MAKES A SHINE MOST OF THE TIME
WORTH TWICE THE PRICE OF TWO
I'VE GOT SIDEWALK
STUCK TO MY SHOES
THE SKY IS IN MY HEAD
A DREAM OF STEAM
IT SEEMS TO ME
MAKES ME FEEL CLEAN
AND DEAD
I LOVE YOU CLOUDS
UP IN THE SKY
ABOVE ME STUMBLE TUMBLING BY
IF I COULD SLEEP AND NEVER DIE
IF I COULD KEEP YOU IN MY EYE
I'VE GOT A LUCKY PENNY
I KEEP IT IN MY SHOE
I'LL WALK MY LUCKY PENNY
UNTIL MY LUCK IS THROUGH.

The Writer

Zac started writing stories before he could even write! He would draw pictures and tell me the words so we could make a book. I would write the words to go with the pictures. We stapled the pages together and he would put them in his book box.

Zac wrote poetry and stories in his journals.

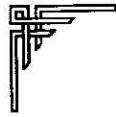
One time I found a short story he had written on the back of a pizza box. It was a complete tale about being lost in a corn field without any food. It was really funny. I wanted to keep it but it disappeared from the house. Zac said he gave it to a friend.

One day I met a young man who said he worked at the high school as a reader/editor. This is someone who reads student papers. He looked for grammar and punctuation mistakes. I asked if he'd ever read any of Zac's work.

"Zac?" he said. "Zac's papers are always so interesting! And so long – sometimes 20 pages or more. Most kids struggle to get out a page. What a great imagination, and never a mistake of any kind."

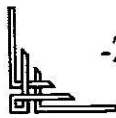
Zac and his friend Alex started an online magazine called *enfuse* where they posted their poems and stories for several years.

On the opposite page is a poem Zac wrote. Alex saved it and it hangs on the wall in his kid's room.

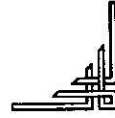


Wind

Beloved friend wind
capers carelessly around me
Wraps me in delicate embrace
Brings leaves to dance at my
feet
Suddenly savage
Like teeth ripping
Calls clouds
And rain
Beating like bullets at my back
And fades away
A quickly quiet calm
an easy breeze
To dry my clothes
Making light of it all
Fickle friend Wind
Far better than being alone.

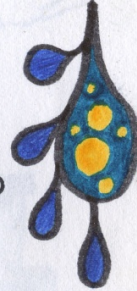


-Zaq Rodgers



A poem published in his high school magazine

BELOVED FRIEND WIND
CAPERS CARELESSLY AROUND
WRAPS ME IN DELICATE EMBRACE
BRINGS LEAVES TO DANCE
AT MY FEET
SUDDENLY SAVAGE
LIKE TEETH RIPPING
CALLS CLOUDS
AND RAIN
BEATING BULLET HAMMERS
AT MY BACK
AND FADES AWAY
A QUICKLY QUIET CALM
AN EASY BREEZE
TO DRY MY CLOTHS
MAKING LIGHT OF IT ALL
FICKLE FRIEND WIND
FAR BETTER THAN
BEING ALONE.



The same poem as it appeared in a journal



Empathy

Zac told me that a man stopped him on the street and asked him for money to catch a bus. When he opened his bag, the man took all Zac's money and ran away.

Zac said he wasn't mad because the man just didn't have any "empathy." Empathy is the ability to understand how someone feels because you can imagine what it is like to be them. Zac was just as broke as they guy who stole from him.

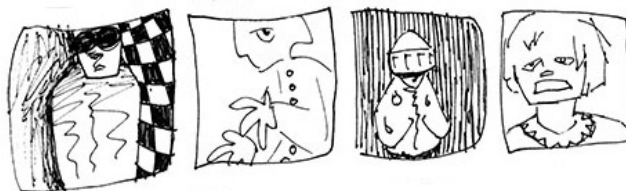
Zac had a lot of empathy for other people. That's why he was willing to help the guy out even though he didn't have much himself.

Whether you were feeling happy or sad, Zac was someone who would take the time to talk with you and "empathize" – show empathy for you. He would also play, talk, dance, drink, or just have fun with you.

Merricat told me "Zac got me." She was one of Zac's many friends who said he really understood them. That's because he took the time to listen and talk and explore the world with them.

Zac cared deeply about people. He would show it by making little cards drawings or other pieces of art for them. In fact, he gave most of his art away.

He would also call or drop by just to check in, see how you were doing.





James Remembers His Brother Zac

Zac was always up to something. And I was usually a few steps behind just trying to keep up. He was always drawing. Little cartoony people. Wizards and warriors, dragons and demons. This made him an artist so, he always knew that he was different, special. He was really into fantasy, reading lots of books and getting into role playing games. He started designing his own role playing games. He even made rules for live action role playing, we made our own padded weapons and ran around Steamboat beating on each other with swords and maces, throwing beanbags and pretending they were fireballs.

He was always climbing things, trees, fences, houses. He wanted to be up high, he wanted to be agile. He would walk across fences and rooftops like a tightrope walker, and sometimes he would fall. Once, when we were in Steamboat he decided we should all climb up the rocks next to the first fall of fish creek falls. It is famous because it is the fall which appears on the Coors original beer can. Me and all his friends followed him up. The climb was completely vertical next to the falls, though with plenty of hand-holds, but about half way up you could work your way off to the side and there was a more gradual slope that eventually you could walk up. I, of course, and most of his friends bailed out off to the side once we got halfway to two thirds the way up, but Zac climbed all the way up. Then there was the time when we went to look at the house we moved into on Albion street and the keys weren't left where they were supposed to be (or some such); so Zac climbed right up to a second story window and broke in (me right behind him). The neighbor came out and wrote down Mom's license plate and that required some smoothing out. Of course, we did end up renting the place.

Zac came a little late to his love of music. I mean, we had Thiller and he tried to learn to moonwalk. He even tried to break dance for a bit when he was like 10. And anyone who was around him in high school remembers his INXS phase. But when he came back from his, ever so brief, stint at college, he really found his love of music. He built this drum set out of pots and pans and played them with chopsticks. He would jam in his little studio apartment on Washington with his friends. He would take the whole set up downtown and play on the mall and Larimer square for spare change. Sometimes I would play with him. He eventually put together a "real" drum set out of bits and pieces he got at Goodwill. An old high school band bass drum, a mis-matched snare and floor tom, no hi-hat with an old shaft of a practice arrow sticking out of the top of the bass drum to hold up a lone cymbal. The set slowly grew and improved over the years, each new addition a prize. This was the same set that I learned to play drums on as Zac moved on to the electric bass, the instrument he stayed with to the end.

He continued to cobble together his musical instruments, holding onto his beat up orange bass for years and his puffy, silver sparkly Kustom amp. Which emitted staticy, car crash lighting noises whenever bumped and shocked you whenever you touched the mic while holding your instrument. I mentioned to him once that you could make a microphone out of a speaker and he immediately did. Making a mic out of a Pringles can with a little speaker at the bottom. It sounded pretty awesome. He got a Tascam 4-track recorder and made numerous living room recordings including the, perhaps infamous, Space Case tape. Full of spooky, atmospheric tracks anchored by his straight up bass playing and poetic lyrics. He was always the best personality in our various bands as well as the most prolific promoter and designer.

We shared an affliction, which seems common to males of our line, that being the incessant need to write. His notebooks are filled with his simple, silly and often beautiful poetry. His varied, often dark and mysterious or, just as often, light and whimsical stories and comics were always engaging.



He would work little snippets and phrases into his drawings, just words that sounded good to him or an idea that wouldn't let him go. Or words that seemed to bubble up through the art floating on the top or buried, dripping with ink and barely legible in a dark scribble.

He crafted stories too. Clean, efficient writings which stand on their own, some published in *enfuse* magazine. *enfuse* magazine itself was something he crafted, with Alex, Brian and Aaron, in his fervent need to always be doing and creating. As I said, he was always up to something.





The three lads and me, 1994



Zac with Karen and Brian, 2002

The Wide Awake Giant by Brian Ellmann

As his older brother, I wish I could write about how Zac would have been quick with a wizened bit of Uncle Zac advice. I wish I could write down a list of Zac's "dos and don'ts" in various situations that would hold my boys and the other kids he would have touched in good stead as they grew into adulthood. The problem with my wishes is that they would require a level of conformed thought and uncreative action that Zac would never have suggested to, much less wished upon, another person. Instead of some list of contained wisdom, I am left only with a story about Zac as a means to convey what I think Zac would have strived to share with his niece, nephews and the children of his many lifelong friends.

Zac, James and I lived many places, but came to believe that Steamboat was our home town. The town is in a valley and is surrounded by tall, majestic peaks and this one little mountain called "The Sleeping Giant" - the mountain really does look like a massive giant that curled up and went to sleep. This one mountain is like a beacon for the tiny town we grew up in and it is used as metaphor for many great aspirations in the town.



“The Sleeping Giant” was particularly popular with teachers in our schools. Zac and I had the same teacher, Mr. Riggs, for our freshman “Intro to Physical Science” and Mr. Riggs LOVED the Sleeping Giant. Mr. Riggs loved the mountain itself, because it was a great example of the physical beauty that could be shaped by the science he was teaching us. But what Mr. Riggs really loved about the mountain was the name and how it let him hang a poster with this beautiful mountain and the inspirational message “Awaken the Sleeping Giant in every kid!” on it.

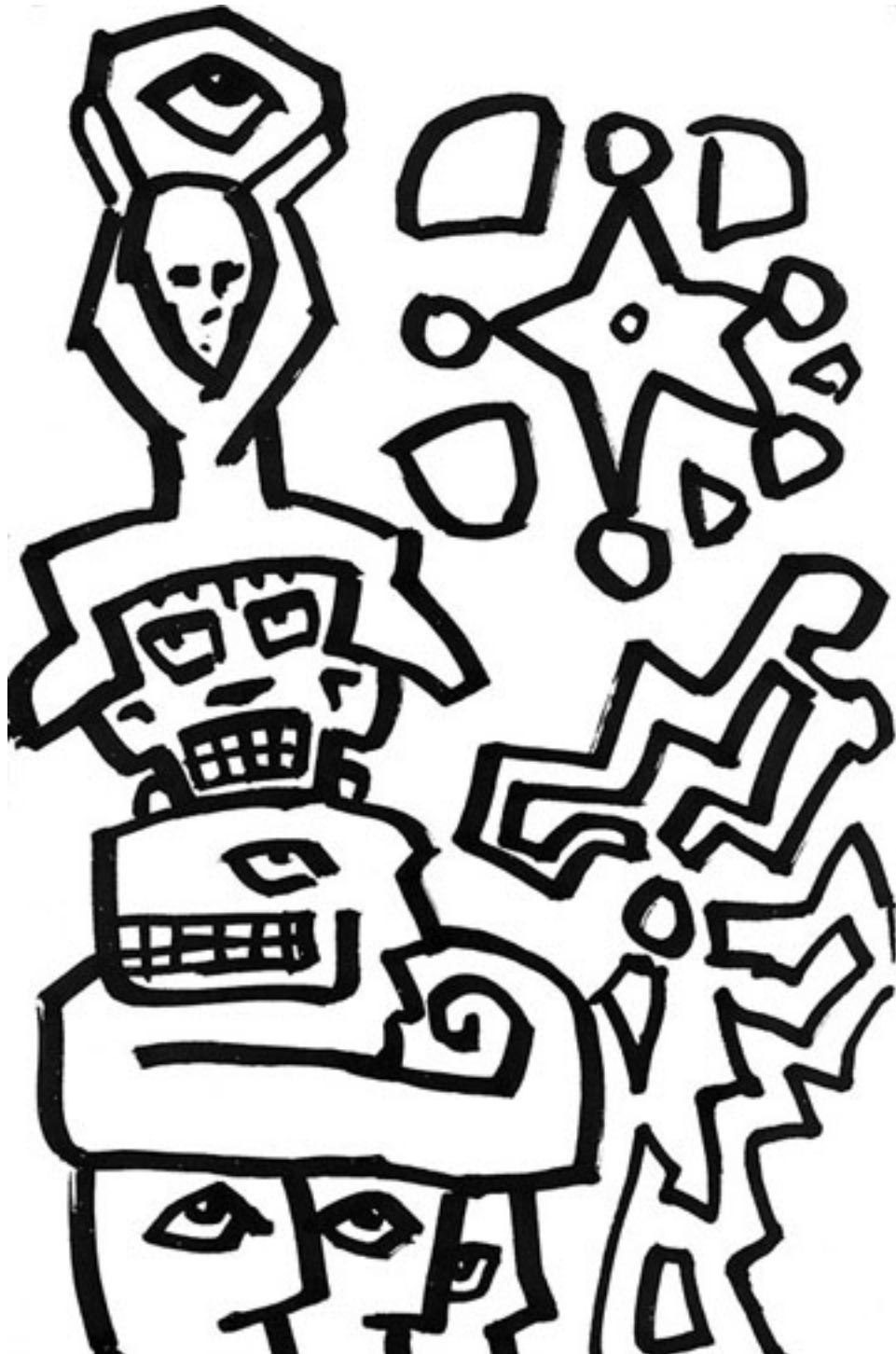
When I saw that poster for the first time as a freshman, I thought “WOW! What a cool thought!” When, a year later, Zac saw that poster for the first time, he came home and asked me what I thought of it. When I told him I thought it cool, Zac looked at me like I had landed from Mars. When he asked me why I thought it was cool, he looked at me like I was speaking a language he did not understand when I started saying it was such a cool use of imagery and words to inspire finding the great inside of someone. When Zac asked why I needed a poster or teacher to help awaken the giant in me, it was my turn to look at him like he was from another universe. I simply did not have an answer to his question when we were in high school.

It took me years to understand what was behind Zac’s bewilderment with the poster in Mr. Riggs’ classroom: Zac’s inner giant was already awake when he saw the poster and had been for a long time. By the time Zac had walked into that freshman science class, he had already figured out that the world was a wide open place. Zac had already opened his mind up to the creative possibilities that the world beyond our small town held and he just could not understand how his older brother, or anyone else for that matter, could not figure that out without the aid of some poster hanging on the wall in science class.

When I think about what Zac would have been like with his niece, nephews and the children of his many lifelong friends, I have no doubt that he would be right there helping the kids keep their inner giants wide awake. I can easily see him ignoring all the adults in the room and sitting down to a nice drawing session, playing random notes on whatever instrument is handy or participating in the creation of some magical world of dinosaurs, swords and anything else you can create. The reason I have no problem imagining those scenarios is because the world of creativity was Wide Awake Giant inside Zac and he would have endlessly shared that world with the kids he loved.



Zac with baby Liam



My Nephew Zaq by Christopher Sweeney

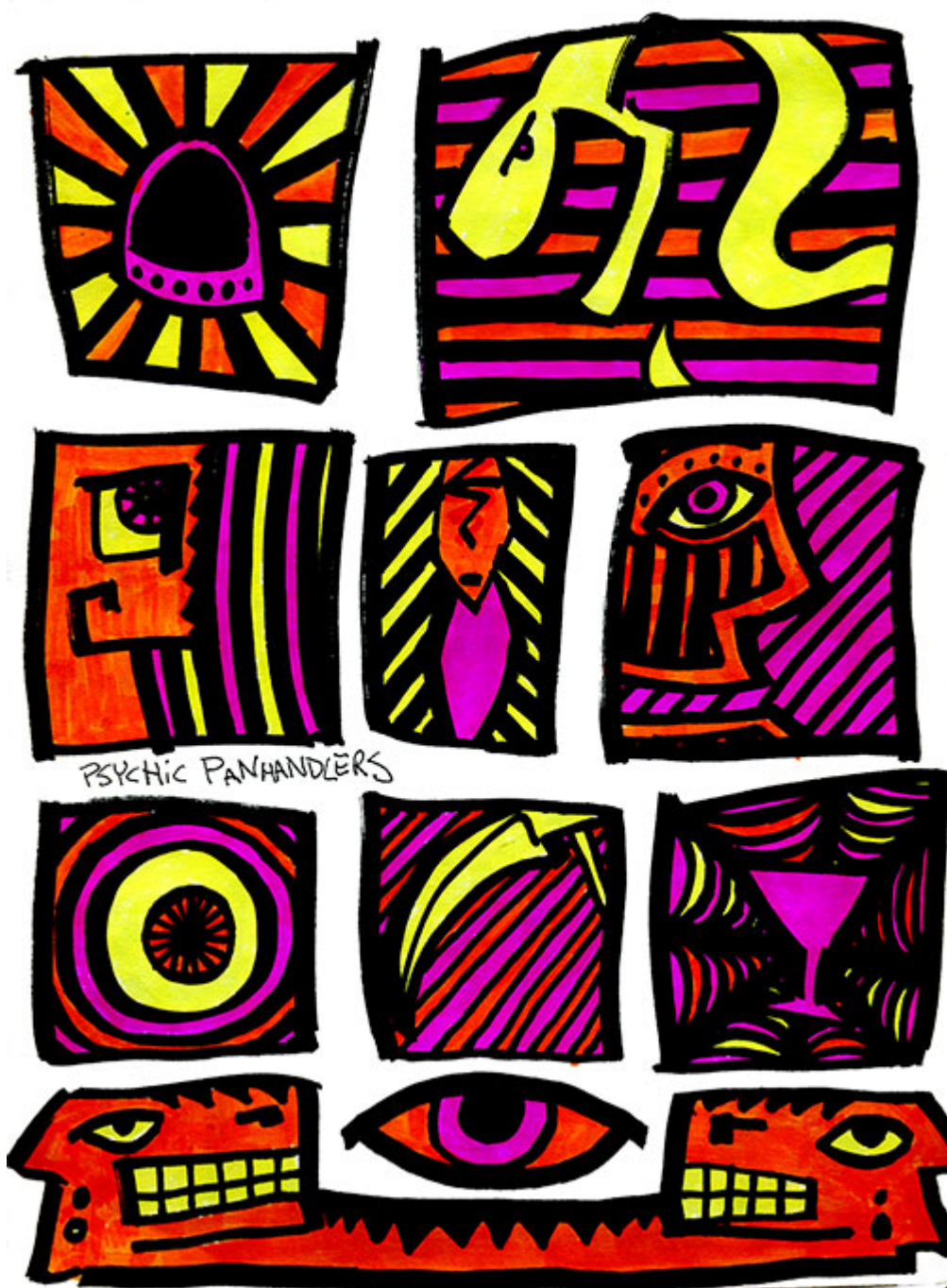
While I was in high school, Mary hired me to watch Brian, Zachariah, and Jamie during the week. We spent those summers swimming, playing outside, and goofing off.

Zachariah (Zack to later be spelled Zaq), with his straight blond hair, always had an adventure going on with Jamie in tow. Focused on his latest project or plan, he was pretty quiet other than to ask for something or trying to get a word in while Brian talked my ear off.

Zaq lived in a world of his own developing stories and acting out scenes, in the house or outside, using string, tape, furniture, or anything else he could get away with as props. Every once in a while he would invite you to participate or tell you the story. He absolutely hated to be interrupted with chores, eating, or needing to leave for any reason. Zaq loved to play.

I look back and remember a very easy sitting job with three nephews. (A very talkative older brother, a creative adventurous middle brother, and a cute youngest brother.)

I believe those summers were the closest I would get to know Zaq and his personal world.



Merricat's Story about Meeting Her Friend Zaq

As Pope John Paul II's helicopter circled to land in the middle of Mile High Stadium, as thousands streamed into its bleachers to catch a blessing from the holy man, I could be seen running at full speed out of my seat, out of the bleachers, through the winding maze of the stairways in bowels of the stadium and out, out and away; I couldn't run fast enough away.

It was 1993. I was 16 and I did what so many teenagers in Denver did when they wanted to run away from something: I went to the 16th St. Mall. With World Youth Day in full swing, the mall was packed with tourists in town to see the pope and take part in all the Youth Day activities.

The little mall bus opened its doors, welcoming me aboard, but I wanted to walk. The open sky was what I needed, the fresh air. As I walked down the mall, my nerves were raw. I had just run away from all the guilt and comfort, the beliefs that had nourished me and built my personhood all my life. Sure, I had been moving away from Catholicism before today, but this felt final. I knew what I was leaving behind, but where was I headed now?

Looking back, I see how much I was searching. How lost I was.

Walking down the outdoor mall, I heard a ringing, not bells, something more than that. The tones of Tibet maybe, but with the rhythm of rock and roll slowed down and sped up. The sound was of metal drums, of water over rocks, a beat that caught me in its arms and swung me toward the open Western sky, toward release.

I ran toward the music, dodging eager teenagers with awkward white sneakers and clunky cameras, between punks huddled together scraping together "Spare Change?" for Taco Bell. I ran toward the sounds until I found a boy (oh, it breaks my heart to remember this. God, it does) fast hands bent over a medley of pots and pans, two neon green pencils spinning, ringing up and pooling over me with the magic I was looking for.

I just sat down. Right there in front of him. I can't imagine how I looked: huge puff of dark frizzy hair, thick glasses, long loose skirts, grinning and transfixed. But, I just didn't care how I seemed. This was what I was looking for. This music, this sound, this boy in front of me was the answer, had the answers.

When he looked up, the sparking bright eyes smiled at me. His eyes were so clear, the way a child of only 6 might have when he still has the world cracked open and all its beauty is still his.

"Hi, I'm Zaq. What do you do?"

"I sing," I told him. "I sing."

"Hey, you can sing in my band."

And that was that. I did. I had found someone who would always hear my poems and know them, who really heard all my colors, all the bleak drops of my character and my art. Zaq saw all that I could do and believed in me.

I sang with him, gnashing my sounds to be as ugly and raw as I felt and still he let me sing on with him, though I'm sure the singing wasn't what he expected or maybe even wanted. Sometimes, I found a sweet lullaby sound, a jazz ring but whatever it was, he was there to listen and compliment, to fill in under and paint over my voice with his own music.

Of course it wasn't just the music he gave me. He offered the gift of being heard: my singing, my poems, the stories I dredged up after late nights of red wine after we had tired of music. He spoke my language and heard me and believed in me so completely. It was a gift, his spirit and joy, that light in his eyes: when it shone on me, I believed in myself more. I believed that I could create and someone would hear me and that what I had to say and sing mattered. What he gave me came at a time in my life when I was wandering and he welcomed me into his life, his music. It was a privilege, a proof to me that I could succeed, I could do something important.

It was 1993 and I was 16 and I was finding my voice. And Zaq helped me do it.





Good Days, Bad Days, the Near Collapse of the Universe and the Importance of Cozy Feet

I wore my slippers to school today. It was crazy, I know, and outlandishly dangerous. Nevermind the hazardous hardwood floors and treacherously jagged linoleum which gnaws with brutal savagery at one's unguarded feet like the very jaws of Satan. Consider the psychological repercussions. Why, just the unnatural horror of it all could unravel the very fibers of one's psyche, could crumble the elaborate structures of thought and understanding like crusty combread. People just don't wear slippers to school. I mean, if you can't count on that, what can you count on? What greater truth is there to govern this existence? The known universe jiggled uncertainly on the brink of catastrophic collapse, and if it wasn't for the inoculating effect of pajama day, things might have ended then and there. As it was, most people got over it.

Of course, no one really knew the seriousness of the situation, not consciously anyway (I know because God visited me in a dream during study hall and told me what happened). To those who actually witnessed the vise, it registered as kind of vague and disturbing twinge from somewhere deep within the confines of the brain, a kind of discomfiting malaise which manifested itself in an acute sense of terrible wrongness hovering about slippers. And wrongness can not be tolerated, at least not without a good reason. And good reasons were shortly demanded.

Reasons? Er. . .sure. I've got reasons. Some real good ones, too.

I wore them because I thought today might be a bad day but also because today might just turn out to be a good day and one could never really know for sure so it seemed like a good idea to be on the safe side and wear my slippers. My rationale being thus: If things resolved themselves to go badly, I would have only to take momentary note of the sweetly symphonous shufflings of mine own footware to realize just how truly beautiful, intricate, and spiritually resplendent a world I was slipping through, in the process, guarding myself against manic depression and consequential suicide temptation. On the other hand, if the day was looking like it might be a good one, I thought it might be nice to top it all off with cozy feet.

I really had no idea how fragile the fabric of the universe is. But hey, we're all still here, right? I guess we all have a little something to be thankful for.

(If you find yourself unclear on what exactly the purpose and point of these last few paragraphs was, you are perfectly healthy.)

-Zaq Rodgers

Published in Serendipity Literary Magazine at East High School



Kate's Story about Road Tripping with Her Friend Zac

Of all the treasured memories I hold on to, my life and friendship with Zac can be summed up in road trips. We shared a love of the open road. We liked to roam around, sometimes near and sometimes far.

I think our first real road trip was in high school. We drove to Glenwood Springs, Zac and I along with my boyfriend, who was driving, and my cousin Pam, who Zac was a little sweet on. Glenwood Springs is a few hours from Denver, a beautiful mountain drive up I-70. Of course we decided it was a necessity to take this little drive around 10pm one night. So we couldn't really see any of these beautiful sights. But we didn't care. It was exhilarating to just get in a car and go.

We got to Glenwood in the middle of the night and ended up in a Village Inn parking lot. I don't remember if we even went into the Village Inn. I think we might have sat in the car and talked the rest of the night. The next morning, we visited the hot springs pool. None of us had bathing suits, but I think they let us rent some. Then we drove back, and enjoyed those beautiful mountains in the daylight. I was hooked on the spontaneity and adventure. From then on Zac and I were road trip companions for a good many years.

Whenever we were in between jobs, or had a long weekend, we would find some kind of adventure. It wasn't always a road trip. There were some great adventures in our own backyard. But the road trips were glorious, and wacky and weird. We usually drove my 1981 Subaru. It wasn't a pretty car, but it was roadworthy. We named it Tinkerbell, not after the Disney fairy, but because there was a short in the wiring. The "door open" warning bell would go off for no reason. It got so bad at one point when we were driving back from Portland, that we pulled off the road in the middle of nowhere Idaho and Zac tore my door apart until he found the right wire and we ripped it out.

Neither of us knew anything about car wiring, so we felt it was quite a victory. Although, it did take me about a year to get my door paneling back on properly.

I did most of the driving, because Zac was a pretty terrible driver in his youth.

I tried to teach Zac how to drive once in high school. At that time I drove a giant powder blue Cadillac. It was my family's starter car. Zac ran that thing along the side of concrete viaduct wall and scraped half the side off. My dad was none too happy. I told him a car ran into it while we were parked.

After that I wouldn't let Zac drive for a long time. But eventually that rule relaxed and I shared the wheel. In truth, I trusted Zac with my life. I always felt safe with him. He had a calmness that was contagious.

Our last great trip was to the ocean. Well, that was how it started anyways. We were sitting around one cold January afternoon and we thought, wouldn't it be glorious to be on a warm beach right now. We had been to the west coast many times, but none of us had seen the Gulf of Mexico. And it wasn't too far away, we reasoned. We could be there by morning if we left immediately. So we packed the car and headed out, me and Zac and his girlfriend Katie.

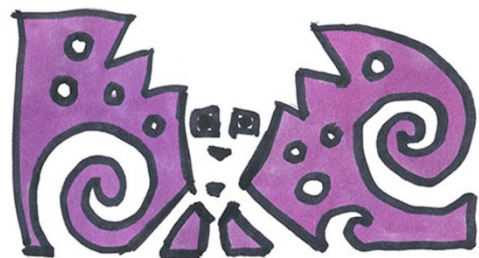
We drove straight through the night and ended up in Corpus Christi, TX the next morning. I remember walking along the ocean, and there were bright blue jellyfish washed up on the beach everywhere. We laid our sleeping bags out on some dunes and took a nap with the sound of the ocean in the background.

We had not originally intended to extend this trip any longer, but as we dug our feet into the sand and watched the ocean stretch out to infinity, we decided that we weren't ready to go home.

We turned east and drove to New Orleans. None of us had much money; we could just barely cover the gas. We ate a lot of cheap gas station food. We slept in the car, in parks, on roof tops, where ever the universe provided. But that was usually the way with our trips. We relied on the kindness of strangers and we relied on each other. We watched out for one another. I remember sitting on a curb in the French Quarter in New Orleans, the three of us sharing a Po'boy sandwich and a can of Schlitz beer and watching all of the characters. I was perfectly content, in love with life and in the love with the people I was sharing it with.

When I think of Zac now, what I remember is freedom and youth. Maybe we "stayed" young a little too long. But trust me, life gets serious whether you want it or not. The last few years of Zac's life, we definitely had increased responsibilities - jobs, bills, relationships, all of the usual adult stuff. The road trips slowed down. We still had adventures, but it's never the same as when you're young. These days I often find myself drifting off into some random memory of Zac and I suddenly realize I'm grinning like a big fool or laughing out loud. These memories are precious things.

Zac knew that it was important to always have a little adventure in your life. And if he was alive today, I believe he would still be up to some antics. Zac loved life and he was not afraid of it. He embraced all of the good and bad. He wanted to see and do everything. And that is a pretty good policy.





Zac goofing off with Alex, James, Alberto, Kate and Becca



Zac on the drums

Becca's Story about Zac

I first met Zac in high school algebra 3 or 4? I can't remember exactly, I was a junior and he was a senior. We hit it off instantly and he asked me for my phone number. He began to call me every night, he was always a persistent person. I think he had a crush on me, but as we spent more and more time together we began to realize that we were destined to be best friends.

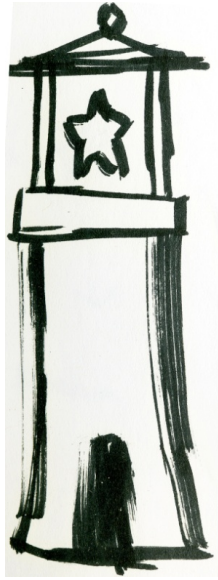
There are so many stories, but I think the one that best exemplifies Zac's tenacity and voraciousness, would be the time we lived together in an old apartment on Colfax and Humboldt in Denver. Zac, and several of our close friends were starting a band. Zac wanted to play the drums, but couldn't afford a kit. A minor detail to Zac that would never stop or even attempt to keep him down. So he would take my pots and pans to the 16th street mall and play them like a drum kit. My mom used to say she would see him while she was on her lunch break and that he was quite a hit in the office. He made \$60-80 a day. Zac got his drum kit.

There are so many stories I could tell, but I find this one to explain a lot about him.

One more thing, Zac was so important to me, we were best friends and talked on the phone at least once a week (when we weren't living together) We were roommates on 4 separate occasions and I felt like he was my brother. We always looked out for each other and opened our hearts to each other. His presence will always feel like a huge void, but because of his love I feel like I have some of his light.



Tower Designed by Uncle Zac



One day Finley and I were playing in the back yard. We found a big cardboard box that the new freezer came in. We decided to turn the box into a castle.

Besides the box, there were large pieces of Styrofoam that had held the freezer in place. Two of the Styrofoam pieces were perfect for the doors of the castle! The doors already had windows.

We set to work on forming walls from the big box. We cut the box open along one corner and made a curved wall with the cardboard. The lid of the box made a perfect floor.

Some heavy green tape attached the doors. Soon we were using markers and crayons to decorate the walls and the doors.

Liam came out to see what was going on. "The castle needs a roof!" he said and ran into the house. He came back out with a Spiderman sheet and threw it across the top of the cardboard walls.

He also brought out a sword so he could stand guard.

We thought it didn't look like a castle without a tower. So Liam said "Let's make one! We can use that picture on Finley's shirt for our design."

There were four more Styrofoam pieces we could use for walls. Finley and I taped three of them together for the base of the tower. Meanwhile Liam worked on cutting out the door from the fourth piece. He then cut a star and a circle from the extra Styrofoam.

We found another box to use for the top of the tower. We poked the bottom out and kept the sides so the star could hang inside. Then we put the circle on the top and had a tower just like the one Uncle Zac had drawn so many years ago.
