Gandy Dancer

A student-led literary magazine of the State University of New York

Issue 2.2 | Spring 2014

Gandy Dancer is published biannually in the spring and fall by the State University of New York College at Geneseo. Issues of Gandy Dancer are freely available for view or download from gandydancer.org, and print copies are available for purchase. Special thanks to the College at Geneseo's Department of English and Milne Library for their support of this publication.

ISSN: 2326-439X

ISBN *(this issue)*: 978-149746024-9

We publish writing and visual art by current students and alumni of the State University of New York (SUNY) campuses only.

Our Post Script section features work by SUNY alumni. We welcome nominations from faculty and students as well as direct submissions from alumni themselves. Faculty can email Rachel Hall, faculty advisor, at hall@geneseo.edu with the name and email address for the alum they wish to nominate, and alums can submit through our website. Both nominations and direct submissions should indicate which SUNY the writer attended, provide a graduation date, and the name and email of a faculty member we can contact for confirmation.

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Cover photo: Star Trails Around Maytum Hall — Jason Zimmermann

SURAJ UTTAMCHANDANI

Why Not Know More?

It is still awkward in the house. Shanti Jana leans one arm on a broom as she stares at a calendar on the refrigerator. It is colorful and government-provided, orange marking the days of trash pick-up and green marking recycling. She places a dark brown finger gently on November, running her finger across the rows until she hits today's date. Her wedding was in August, which means that it has been almost four months since Rajiv, a stranger who spoke perfect Hindi but took his chai with too much milk, arrived at her family's house in Mumbai. It has been three months, then, since she stayed up all night whispering with her mother about whether this was what he wanted, certain that no man would want to take her and her barrenness to America. It has been two and a half months since she woke up in Boston and it has been one hour since she last wondered if her husband was happier living in bachelorhood in America before his parents required that he pick up a wife in India in much the way you stop by the market to pick up chilies and lamb to make for dinner.

Rajiv comes home from the university every night at six o'clock, although once in a while he holds a review session for an Introduction to Physics exam or helps a student who is having difficulties with a problem set. It has not yet been a full semester, so Shanti doesn't know if this will always be her husband's pattern. She lets tonight's *dal* boil as she considers this. She has only been to the university once, on the first weekend she was here—the walk was short but it was chilly—and she did not much care for it. It was efficient to the point of excess. Glass windows. Fancy new computers. Whiteboards with

markers. The whiteboards are perhaps the strangest part, she thinks. She has never seen erasable markers before.

As she adds coriander to the pot, the increased pungency of the kitchen is comforting. Cooking is her most sensory connection to Mumbai since she has come here. The house is small enough that she hears keys turn in the front door's knob, since the lentils are no longer boiling so loudly. Rajiv walks into his house.

"Hello, Shanti," he says in Hindi. He is cordial but not romantic.

Her response is friendly with an afterthought of trepidation: "Hello."

"How was your day?" he asks, as though they have just learned the routine in a Hindi class and are practicing it with a partner for the first time.

"It was nice. I walked to the market. The fish monger gave me a good price."

"Is that what's for dinner?"

"It's Monday." Her response doesn't compute for Rajiv. Since he is not trying to hide his confusion, she continues, "I cannot cook meat in this house on Monday."

Her family has made a long-standing observance of this. For generations, they practiced vegetarianism on Mondays and the *purnima*, the full moon. Her parents have warned her to be flexible with regards to her new life in America, but this is one issue on which she cannot remain docile. After all, she thinks, I should not have to cook an animal merely because my husband has been in America longer. She has no objection to Rajiv eating meat on these days, but she refuses to prepare it. "I made *dal,*" she suggests, and moves to set the table. He sits.

She arrives at his office in Alan E. Case Physics Conservatory at the edge of campus with Thai food in a wrinkly brown bag from Phuckett Express. Shanti has wavered slightly from her adherence to an Indian-only diet and is no longer offended by the idea that there might be other good cooks in Massachusetts. She has grown bored of the house and its daily emptiness, so she has taken to bringing lunch to Rajiv and sitting with him. Their talk is still a rare thing—she does tell him a joke that she read in *Miss India* this week and he laughed—but she often watches as he works out equations on a whiteboard using symbols with which she is unfamiliar.

She cannot stop herself from wondering about the validity of his conclusions. They look believable, but how can he deduce perfectly how much cooler a hot plate will be in three hours or how fast a ball will fall from a balcony? There is something about her husband's work, she thinks, that is ludicrously unbelievable. There is so little consistency, so few rules. She is

in America now, she recalls, and does not know whether this fact proves or disproves her theory.

She convinces Rajiv to drive her deeper into the heart of the city, where the cinema has started showing foreign films. A Bollywood movie is playing and Shanti is very excited at the prospect of going. Rajiv, for his part, prefers Hollywood films.

"It will be fun!" she says.

He replies, "Shanti, I have to grade these tests."

She says, "You never take me out."

"I didn't know that mattered to you."

The room is silent for a quarter of a moment before Shanti feels guilty. He has, after all, provided for her for half a year now.

"It's not important," she says.

He gets the car keys.

Boredom permeates the house as Shanti puts the Windex back under the sink. She has only just recently begun to consider the possibility that the house is too small. It can only be cleaned so many times before it fails to get messy again. In the stagnancy, her thoughts go to little ones. Little ones would run around the house, crying, screaming, needing. She would spend thoughts on their education and values and happiness. They would smile and sob often, bundles of blankets that cannot control their emotions. Little ones would make the house messy.

She thinks about what she would name them until she knows she shouldn't think about it anymore. Four years ago, her body simply stopped ovulating (her mother checked her temperature daily to make sure). Her parents took her to a hospital deep in Mumbai, where the British doctors still were, and they told her that she was barren. Shanti learned long ago that there comes a point where you must stop thinking or you will unravel, and if you cannot produce life you must at least retain your own. She speaks out loud. "*Meh ma kabhi nahi bun sakti.*" It is a phrase she is too familiar with: I can never become a mother.

She goes to the tall bathroom mirror, checks that the sari she is wearing is decent, and leaves the house, stopping at Frank's Deli to pick up sandwiches and chips before she arrives at Case. After their quiet lunch—she mentions a new recipe she came across this week, and Rajiv expresses interest in trying it—Shanti begins walking home. The library building lies in the auxiliary of her vision every day, but today it pulls her focus more so than usual. She checks her watch but there is nothing she needs to get back to, so she wanders in.

The lobby overloads her senses. There is a couple kissing, pecking each other lightly on the cheeks until their lips finally meet. There is a clattering of the new ivory keyboards. A bell is chiming every few seconds to indicate an elevator arriving on the main floor. She cannot conceive of someone being able to get work done here. After a minute, she turns around and returns home.

Rajiv opens the door into the kitchen, and Shanti is glad of it. Her days are more humdrum than ever and she has grown to love her husband's arrival, enjoying the uncertainty of it. There is a strange thrill in what Rajiv will or will not say on a given day. What mood will he be in: talkative or taciturn? Will the conversation be serious, or polite, or silent altogether?

She quickly concludes that today, Rajiv is talkative. He has picked up the newspaper from the kitchen table and is huffing at certain headlines. This is how he tries to convey to Shanti that there is something on his mind, and she knows this. She continues to play the game, ignoring his huffing until it is so clear that he is trying to get her attention that ignoring it for any longer would just be silly.

"How was your day?" she begins, in their usual way.

"It went well. How was yours?" he replies.

"It was okay. Dull as usual." Shanti's sentiments are no secret to Rajiv.

"It's interesting that you say that. There was that faculty meeting today, the one I told you about? The provost was going on and on about the general curriculum requirements. Professor Cohen, the head of the language department also spoke. It seems they are adding a mandatory foreign language requirement for all students."

"Oh? So the kids will know not just American, but also English?" They laugh lightly.

Rajiv continues, "They're teaching all the European languages, you know, Spanish and French and all that. But they want to have even more options."

The room is silent for a moment, since they both have a sense of where the conversation is going.

"Do you think that they would want someone for Hindi?" Shanti asks.

"You have an interview next week with Professor Cohen."

She has chosen a beautiful sari, one that she has never worn before. She performed a small *puja* this morning, and, with a red *tilak* on her forehead, she looks as though no time has passed since the day she immigrated to America despite the year between then and now. She carries a spiral notebook and the textbook she has selected—*Namaste! A Friendly Introduction to Hindi Language and Letters*—under her arm. The classroom is larger than

she expects it to be and her figure in the front of it is not at all imposing. She lays her books out on the podium and the doors rattle as someone else enters.

Rajiv is smiling. Shanti imagines he is pleased with the way they teamed up to get her this job. She too is pleased.

"First day!" he begins. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm nervous," she says. "What if they don't understand me? What if I don't do a good job?"

"Peace, Shanti. Come to Case after class and tell me how it went." A student, the first one, walks into the room, and Rajiv switches to English. "You'll do fine."

With that, Rajiv shakes her hand and leaves the room.

She sits quietly in her office, unsure of what to do. The space is small but larger than the bedroom in which she grew up. She puts *Namaste* on the shelf, on its back since there are no other books to help keep it upright. She is out of things to do, so she begins to tidy the barren space, dusting it with the end of her sari. This task is quickly finished, so she looks up at the clock on the wall. She is supposed to be holding office hours, but it has been half an hour and no students have arrived for help. She thinks, would it really be so bad if I leave? Shanti sits at the chair, disquieted by the large desk before her, and begins to whisper-sing a *bajaan* under her breath.

"Repeat after me: *Meh*."

"*Meh*."

"*Bharat.*"

"*Bharat.*"

"*Seh.*"

"*Seh.*"

"*Hoon.*"

"*Hoon.*"

"*Meh*: I. *Bharat*. India. *Seh*: from. *Hoon*: am. *Meh Bharat seh hoon*: I am from India. Now, repeat after me: *Aap*."

"*Aap.*"

"*Umreeka.*"

"*Umreeka.*"

"*Seh.*"

"*Seh.*"

"*Hain.*"

"*Hain.*"

"*Aap:* You. *Umreeka:* America. *Seh:* from. *Hain:* are. *Aap Umreeka seh hain:* You are from America." Shanti pauses for a second, thinking about what she's just said. The students' pronunciation was particularly good.

"Professor Jana," a declarative voice asserts, accompanying a polite knock on Shanti's office door.

Shanti looks up to see Anna Johnson, a tall sophomore with curly red hair. She looks downtrodden and confused, as though she accidently put salt in her tea instead of sugar. Her glasses make her look more intelligent, but she is skinny and looks fun-loving as well. "Can I come in?"

"Yes, of course," Shanti says as she folds the newspaper back in half and places it in the corner of her desk. "Take a seat. What's troubling you?"

"I have some bad news. I don't know how to phrase it."

Shanti wants to say, let me make us some chai and we can discuss whatever it is. Instead she merely gestures for Anna to continue.

"I have to drop Hindi."

Shanti leans forward slightly, sitting on the edge of her chair. "Why?"

"My parents don't want me to keep taking it."

"Why?"

"We got into a fight about it last week over spring break. They didn't want me using up credits on it since it doesn't count for anything and I got Spanish credit from high school. I mean, I do want to graduate on time and, well, they're paying for college so it's their call. I'm sorry."

Has Anna not been enjoying the class? Does she think it will never be useful? Shanti's sadness becomes anger; why sign up in the first place when there are other people who might want this spot? She is suddenly confused. How does someone just stop trying halfway through the term? She chooses silence as Anna reaches into her knapsack and pulls out a manila folder. Inside, there is a small sheet of paper which she hands to Shanti. Printed neatly across the top, she sees *Course Withdrawal Form*, and then below it, Anna's name and ID number in handwriting that carries a forced formality. She reads *HIND 100—Elementary Hindi I* and then her own name. Below that is a blank line, with small print under it that directs, "Instructor's signature required."

Shanti opens a drawer to grab a pen and briefly considers writing in *Devanagari* script, but decides against it and signs. "Have a good day, Anna," she says, handing back the form as Anna stands and puts her knapsack back over her shoulder.

For dinner, they have lamb kebobs with chutney, cucumbers and bread. She had to extend office hours today, as the students kept coming in, actually waiting outside her office for a good half an hour to fix their pronunciation or ask for clarification. With the extra pull on her time, she is grateful that it is an easy meal to prepare: defrost, stir-fry, chop, toast, and serve. Neither of them has much to say, so dinner is spent mostly in silence.

As they finish up, Shanti rises to begin washing the plates. Rajiv continues eating. Between bites, he begins, "Today, my boss told us about the department meeting next week where we decide which classes each of us is going to teach next year. Has Professor Cohen contacted you yet?"

"No, not yet. Is that bad?"

"No, I'm sure she'll come by in the next day or two."

"So what do I do at this meeting?" Shanti asks, as she squeezes more dish soap onto a sponge.

"Usually everyone just says what they want to teach and then the department chair makes a list of courses that have to be taught and people pick from them. It's not so bad."

Shanti places the last glass in the dishwasher and returns to her seat at the table. "Rajiv, has anybody ever dropped your class halfway through the term?"

"Yes, of course. Why?"

"Have they ever told you why they quit?"

"Mostly because the class was too hard for them."

"Never for any other reasons?"

"No, not that I can think of. Why? What happened?"

Shanti is torn. When she studied history at a university in Mumbai, nobody ever dropped out of a class in the middle of the term. She studied mostly conflict and Indian history, but what might have happened had she enrolled in a Mandarin class? Would her parents have yelled at her? Would they have made her come home and not let her go back? Would they have locked her in her room and jammed a broom under the doorknob out of anger? She considers these, but the idea is too surreal and she somehow cannot believe her mother and father would be so intolerant. Why would they care if she was studying Mandarin, as long as she still went to the *mandir* twice a week for the *puja*, observed a special *aarti* on the full moon, and stayed vegetarian on Mondays? Her father always used to say, "Why not know more?"

Perhaps Rajiv can offer some insight. He has been at the university longer. He has been in America longer. She decides to confide in her husband.

"Today, a student of mine, Anna, came into my office with some news." She tells him what Anna, and her parents, said.

"You know that this must be for the best," Rajiv replies. "And you cannot take these things personally. After all, it's not your fault she dropped. These

things happen. You just have to worry about taking care of the kids who are there."

Shanti feels like she is supposed to be satisfied with this answer. And intellectually she is, for it is very logical. She still allows herself a short moment of self-pity before rising to wipe the stovetop clean.

It is clearly November on the college green, which is no longer green but covered in red, orange, and amber leaves that wisp about passionately in the wind. Rajiv thinks they are like excited electrons. Shanti thinks they are like children when a mango seller comes into the market, swarming him, pulling their parents by their fingers, already tasting the sweet, tart juice in their mouths, salivating for the fruit's coolness in the Mumbai heat.

Shanti steps back from the library's sixth story window towards the corner where foreign language books are shelved. She runs a fragile finger over the spines, looking for a copy of the *Ramayana.* While she is partial to a copy for little children, as she knows that will be the most fun for her class, she will take any copy she can find. She remembered that *Diwali* is coming up in just a few weeks and wants to celebrate in Elementary Hindi I. She has a copy at home, of course, but the idea for a lesson on the significance of the festival of lights just hit her, so she wants to get her hands on a copy of the entertaining epic as soon as possible. For this reason, she trudged through the sensory overload that was the first floor and made her way up here.

As usual, she finds nothing, so she returns to the lift lobby. However, she is shaken. It is her third semester here, but this is the first time she has actually looked for the text on campus. Where is it? This work is not just important for students studying Hindu theology; it is important for anyone who wants a proper college education, she thinks. Even if she never actually read Shakespeare in secondary school, she became intimately familiar with the plots of his stories. In the same way, she thinks, the *Ramayana* is an important story of a great journey to the demon's kingdom and back. Stealing herself, she pushes the door open, taking the stairs down instead of the elevator. She wants to find her husband, go home, and make a proper four-course meal for them to enjoy. *Samosas*. Chicken Curry. Eggplant *Bhaji*. *Gulab Jamun* for dessert. No fries or chips on the side.

When she reaches the ground floor, she leaves the library and heads towards Case. Then she reconsiders, wanting to be alone, and doubles back towards her own office.

In their bedroom, Shanti is folding the laundry while Rajiv watches the news. They are both in their post-dinner routines: Rajiv is catching up on the world's events while Shanti catches up on the chores she's neglected. She plac-

es the last towels in the closet and, tasks completed, returns to the room. Rajiv is absorbed in the news, but Shanti has only a passing interest in it. She pulls the covers over herself and reaches for the *Ramayana* that she usually keeps on the nightstand. It is a favorite book to her; she reads the same passages again and again and never stops appreciating them. It isn't there, though, and she suddenly knows exactly where it is: on the corner of her desk in the office. Somewhat annoyed, she turns to Rajiv.

"Rajiv, I can't find my copy of the *Ramayana*. Where's yours?"

"Hmmm?" Rajiv lowers the volume and looks at her. "Oh, I don't have one."

"But you've read it, right?"

"Yeah, my mother read it to me when I was young. I myself have never actually read it though." Footage of a fire erupts on the screen and Rajiv raises the volume.

Shanti makes a note to buy him a copy for his next birthday then rolls over to pick up an issue of *People* from the floor.

A glass has crashed to the ground. Shanti was asleep, but wakes with a start, much in the way a mother wakes when she hears her baby crying. Monday morning doesn't usually sneak up on her, but she stayed up late last night with her students' papers. The 100-word compositions are their last assignment before the final and she wanted to give the papers back today so that the students have all week to study them. The clock glares at her: she has slept twenty-seven minutes later than she should have. She comes to her senses and rustles out of bed. A shawl hangs behind the door and she grabs it on her way downstairs.

Rajiv is furiously sweeping the floor with a broom and dustpan. He looks up and a pained look crosses his face. "Oh, I didn't mean to wake you," he says.

"It's fine, I should have been up sooner anyway. What broke?"

"A teacup." He picks up the dustpan and throws the tinkling remnants away.

"What were you doing with a teacup?"

"I was making the chai this morning."

It occurs to Shanti that she was not up early enough to make the morning cup of tea. Then a second, sillier thought occurs, and she is surprised to find herself voicing it. "You know how to make chai?"

"Of course. Remember, I lived by myself before you got here." Rajiv smiles and gets another cup from the cabinet, pours the remaining chai from the pot into it, and adds milk. "I made your cup."

Shanti watches him. He still adds too much milk, she thinks as she sits at the table and accepts the drink. The kitchen is warm, but the idea of winter is chilly to her and she wraps her fingers around the cup gratefully. She sips it. Hmm, she thinks. Perhaps a little heavy on the cardamom, but otherwise surprisingly good. She makes a note to add more of the spice than usual to his cup tomorrow. Shanti asks Rajiv if he wants toast for breakfast. He asks instead for a ham and cheese sandwich. She reminds him that it is Monday.

The room is silent except for pages turning. The students are studying at the last possible minute for the final exam. When Shanti walks in, they look up. Tucked under her arm is a spiral notebook, a large stack of exam booklets, their textbook, the *Ramayana*, the latest *Miss India,* the latest *People* magazine, and today's copy of the *Boston Globe.* She will have plenty of time to read during the exam. She moves to the front of the room and places the large pile of papers on the desk.

"*Namaste!"* she says. She briefly considers explaining the directions for the final exam in Hindi but decides that she'll spare her students and speaks English, clarifying the details of the identification, vocabulary, letter connection, dictation, and grammar sections of the test.

The students scribble while she reads. She reads about the crisis in Lebanon. She reads a few of her favorite verses of the *Ramayana*, where Hanuman leaps across the ocean to Lanka. She reads movie reviews in *People* and interviews with actors in *Miss India*. She browses the textbook and a copy of the exam one last time to make sure the test is fair.

After about two hours, the students begin to leave, and after the three hour exam period is done, Shanti stands up and tells the seven remaining students to pass in their exams. She notices Rajiv in the doorframe of the classroom. As the students file out, (looking mostly pleased with themselves, Shanti notes), Rajiv files in.

"Hello, Shanti. Are you ready to go?" he asks. They both have finished administering exams for the day and have decided to go to the cinema in the city and catch a Bollywood flick.

"I will be in just a second," she says, as she packs up her things. "Which movie do you want to see?"

"Any one is fine with me, whichever one you have heard is good."

Shanti considers the movies that she read about in *Miss India.* Then she realizes that there are a few she read about in *People* that looked surprisingly interesting that Rajiv might like more. Besides, she has to grade fifty final exams in Hindi tomorrow. Maybe it's better to enjoy a movie in English. She offers this suggestion to Rajiv.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, Rajiv. Whichever one you want."

He smiles, and she smiles too. She looks around to make sure there are no students lingering and kisses her husband. Then she gathers her sari around her, picks up her books, and follows Rajiv out of the classroom. She hits the lights on her way out and they begin walking home. As they walk, she spots the library in the periphery of her vision. All of a sudden, an idea occurs to her. "Rajiv, can we stop in the library for one minute?"

They walk in and, though packed, the library is buzzing with the silence of studying students. Shanti and Rajiv walk up to the service desk where a student is reading a textbook. Shanti shuffles through her papers and finds the *Ramayana*. She tells the perplexed student, "I'd like to donate this to the library's collection, please."

The student seems underprepared to handle the situation at hand. Shanti smiles amiably. Her hand brushes Rajiv's as they prepare to leave. "It's important for the library to have it," she says, "And there's space on the sixth floor."

BIBI LEWIS

In Jackson Heights, My Father Outsmarted Puberty

next to LaGuardia runways, spent his summers keel
against terminal shells, smoking

5 cent cigarettes while the bottoms
of his shoes melted to tarmac.

He flirted with flight attendants who drew giveaway pens
from the pocket of their uniform-mating call

to give him six-digit phone numbers scrawled
on grease stained peanut bags.

& at night he slumped over the shoulder
of the LIE, kept his eyes

fixated on polished stones in Cavalry
cemetery: a Queen's response to her older sibling's skyline.

BIBI LEWIS

Golem in the Backseat of Our Parents' Blue Station Wagon

Facing behind, we stare into eyes too focused on rain to see us: children with oversized scowls, my seatbelt crushing heather green wool coat (two siblings too large), his fingers pointed into fleshy laser gun. Hips calloused to collapsible third row, feet tangled in ripped yellow of old ikea duffel. My good time is not interchangeable Sunday morning talk radio or mid twentieth century architecture. Stagnation at sixty miles per hour: finding sand between creases of felted velour seats in late December.

MEGHAN KEARNS

Holes and Patches

I am standing in the middle of the road, a quiet side street in an upstate New York village of 6,300. At least, it's usually quiet. Today, the oak trees lining the sidewalk bounce the war cry of a stubborn three-year-old between them the way scabby-kneed children toss rubber balls across a parking lot at recess. All I asked was that Emma move back to the curb before an SUV late for soccer practice came barreling around the bend, the garbage truck arrived early, or Mrs. Hansen returned home to find her little miracle frolicking along the pavement, trailed by the most inept babysitter in all of suburbia. This request has put me on the wrong side of a preschooler's war against safety. Emma can identify all twenty-six uppercase letters of the alphabet. She can ride a bike with training wheels and Velcro her sneakers securely. She will walk where she pleases.

"Emma." I say her name in a warning tone, stressing the last syllable and letting it trail like a question while we each calculate our next move. Her nose scrunches, her hands find her hips, and I know I am in for it. Her eyes are like a forest, shifting from green to brown according to her internal seasons. Now they are a feverish August morning, and they dare me to cross her.

"Come over to the side with me." I hold out my hand. In response, she folds the collapsible pink doll stroller she has been pushing along. Her short brown hair is sticking to her sweaty forehead, and she pauses to wipe a strand from her eye before rearing back with her makeshift weapon. *Whack*. A wheel makes contact with my shin.

"If you want your M&Ms, you have to listen." I am not above bribing a child with sugar and red dye #40. *Whack*. I am apparently not above taking a beating from one, either.

"You. Can't. Tell. Me. What. To. Doooo!"

I am a nineteen-year-old legal adult who can write complex theses. I can operate an industrial printing press and tie a mean double knot in my shoelaces. I want to sit down and cry. The image is ridiculous, the two of us blubbering on the asphalt, unable to safely navigate our way across the street. Cars would brake for us like they brake for the geese that confuse themselves in the middle of Lincoln Avenue near the pond by my house. Drivers would beep or wave impatiently, making sweeping motions with their hands as if they had the telekinetic power to brush us aside.

But feigning nonchalance is a talent of mine, and my inner distress goes undetected. When I do not visibly react to her display of violence, Emma drops the stroller and stomps to the sidewalk. She walks the rest of the way home with her head up and shoulders back to indicate that this slight change of route is her choice and has nothing to do with the fact that I asked her to take it a few minutes earlier. Startled by my own emotional instability, I let any resentment toward my two-and-a-half foot charge drain into the pavement as I bend to retrieve the miniature pushchair. In fact, I begin to marvel that a person who's only been around for three years can function at all. Counting nine months of fetal limbo, I've had two decades of existence in this strange world, but I feel as though I am toddling precariously on the stilts of self-awareness. Emma strides like a girl who has not yet discovered she is breakable. Later, she falls asleep in my lap.

I have been babysitting the Hansen kids for eight years, long before Emma was adopted at one month old. Now, her siblings are growing self-sufficient and I spend most of my energy chasing the youngest Hansen child around the house and yard. Today, however, is different. In addtion to all four Hansens, I have also acquired Milo and Sophie from the house on the other side of Mrs. Hansen's garden. The skinny blonde duo, ages seven and three, have made a habit of joining us for fort building and butterfly catching. With six overheated children under my wing on this cloudless summer Wednesday, Milo and Sophie's father eventually takes pity on me and invites us over for a swim.

I make Emma wait at the edge of the pool until chlorinated water nips at my waist and I am deep enough to catch her. She leaps into my arms and enthusiastically washes away any hopes I had of keeping my hair dry. I let her go and she bobs off in her vest like cork on a fishing line.

Mr. Jim is a tall, stocky man with a shiny head and firm handshake. He emerges from the sliding glass door in a pair of red swim trunks and wades into the pool behind me.

"So where did you say you go to college again?"

"Geneseo," I respond distractedly. I am hesitant to make eye contact because watching a fearless three-year-old in a pool of school-aged children is like playing the game in which a marble is placed under one of three cups, and one must visually track the designated cup through a lengthy scrambling in order to receive the marble back at the end. Mr. Jim is determined, though, to have a real conversation. He is a stay-at-home dad, his wife works long hours, and he needs to exercise his adult voice before he is stuck speaking in sing-song for eternity.

"Oh, I hear that's a great school. What are you going for?" Before I can answer, a stream of water invades my ear and we are caught in a firefight between Milo and Sophie. "Milo James, apologize to Miss Meghan!"

"Oh, just Meghan's fine."

"Miss" makes me feel formal and deceptive, like the rare days I switch out my jeans for a dress. The title seems to signify a presence I do not own. It is for people whose roles are stable and defined. Miss Cobb was my Kindergarten teacher, Miss Sharon my swim coach. Although I am nearly twenty, my identity is pockmarked by adolescent confusion and one too many perusals of Camus. We move towards the side of the pool and out of disputed territory.

"Anyway, I'm double-majoring in English and International Relations."

"So you want to be a teacher?" He glances down at seven-year-old Lydia, Emma's sister, who sees monkey bars where my limbs should be. Now she is wrapping her arms around my neck as she plants her feet securely on the shelves of my hips. I am grateful for her fairy-like build. *I'm an English major who loves kids. Teaching could be fine.*

"I have absolutely no idea."

"That's okay." He lets a short, breathy laugh escape his smile and shakes his head. "I'm forty-two, and I still don't know what I want to do." He goes on to explain that he used to be an engineer but realized it wasn't for him around the time Milo was born.

"Well, I'm sure your kids will look back one day and appreciate that you were there to raise them. As far as careers go, I'm sure you'll figure it out."

I wonder how Mr. Jim feels about being called "Mister."

A few days after we go swimming, I leave my babysitting post to spend a week in South Carolina with my father's family. One morning while I'm gone, the Hansens awake to discover Nemo, their beloved pet fish, floating in his tank. The children scoop him up with a net and tote him to the backyard for a proper burial beneath a maple tree. Milo and Sophie spot them from next door and hop off their swings to join the ragtag procession. Emma looks up at her friends to explain.

"Our fish just died."

When Milo responds, the Hansens think they must have heard him wrong. He clears his throat and repeats himself.

"Our dad just died."

A year has passed. Emma is four, and the two of us are growing dusty on the floor of her garage. It is a humid summer morning not unlike the ones that followed Mr. Jim's heart attack, the ones spent rolling plastic trucks back and forth on the cool concrete with Milo and Sophie while adults unraveled like yarn dolls in the house next door.

Emma and I are playing horses, and I am in character as "Baby Horse." I don't know what prompts Mommy Horse to stop crouching on all fours and sit cross-legged in front of me. Our previous conversation consisted mostly of whinnies and the occasional snort. It is clear, though, by the wrinkles in her forehead and the whitening of her lips as she presses them together like hands in prayer that she has done some serious contemplation between trips to the trough and vet.

"Can you jump all the way to Heaven?" *Where did that come from?*

"Um, nope." I hesitate, trying to answer the way I believe her devout Catholic mother would. "Only God can take you there."

"When you die?"

"Yes."

She pauses, and I think the conversation is over. I realize now why so many privately cynical parents still drag their children to Sunday school each week. Who wants to explain to a kid the possibility that, when she's done, she's *done*?

"I wish we didn't have God." *Curveball.*

"Why?" I ask. She is silent. Her eyes are still like a forest. There are questions beneath rocks waiting to be upturned in muddy creek beds. There are answers beneath layers of leaves on the ground.

"Emma?"

"If we didn't have God, we wouldn't have to go to Heaven. I don't want to die."

We sit quietly for a moment. I absentmindedly poke some pits in the cement floor. She knows she is breakable now. She is beginning to see voids in the universe she once trusted, but my words cannot fill them for her. I could tell her that Heaven is a beautiful place. I could tell her that God loves her, and everything will be okay. I could tell her that no God doesn't mean no dying. But it's 80 degrees and loose stones are nesting in the flesh of my knees and I am too tired for logic or faith.

"Me neither." I sigh.

I think about the cavities in the ground where Nemo and Mr. Jim have peeled and shriveled. I wonder how long it takes the earth to reclaim its territory.

My mother takes the passenger seat again. She has been forcing me to drive the twenty minutes to Emma's house every morning. I have had my learner's permit for three years, but few things give me more anxiety than the gargle of an engine and the sweaty leather of a steering wheel. I have barely come to terms with occupying my own body, and maneuvering a vehicle makes me feel as though I have grown a heavy metal shell. I take up more space, and space means responsibility. A larger region of existence lies within my immediate control; my clumsiness and inadequacy are amplified. I want to be small and inanimate, but the car expands my presence. My breath quickens as I jam the key into the ignition. While my foot is on the pedal, every inhale is a theft and every exhale an apology.

Half an hour later, I ring the doorbell and a chorus of shouts and giggles greets me in response. Emma and Lydia attempt to shove each other out of the way as they race to the door and tumble onto the patio.

I take them to the creek and they fight over who gets to release one of their captive frogs from its yellow pail prison. Lydia screams and Emma bites her sister on the arm. It turns out okay, though, and within an hour they make up over popsicles beneath the soothing draft of an overhead fan.

After lunch, we venture outside to look for bugs. Emma keeps a chrysalis in a small hand-held cage. I catch a glint of wonder in her eye as she picks up the container by the handle and holds it to the sky to examine the creature from a better angle. A soft but sudden wind rustles the branches. If God is anywhere, he is in the breeze of awe that passes across a child's face when she sees something lovely for the first time.

When I finally sink in front of the glove compartment on the ride home, I no longer feel bloated and incompetent inside my mom's blue Sienna. Nobody expects perfection. There is beauty in becoming something else.

My cheeks are swollen and my gums are torn in the hollows where my wisdom teeth once nestled. The first time I leave the house after surgery is to babysit. It's just after New Year's, and I haven't seen Emma since the summer. Upon entering the Hansens' front hall I am engulfed in a typhoon of questions and arms and leftover chili-breath. Mrs. Hansen explains my sore mouth to Emma and warns her not to touch my face. For the rest of the night, she takes it upon herself to guard my cheeks from unwanted contact.

"Daddy!" She addresses her father with the sharp tone of a parent commanding a child's respect. Mr. Hansen, lanky in his white coveralls, pokes his head around the corner.

"What's up, Emma?"

"You cannot touch Meghan's cheeks."

"Yes, Ma'am!" He obliges her pseudo-authority with a salute. I laugh to myself. If her father is touching my face at all, dental health is the least of my problems. She turns to me.

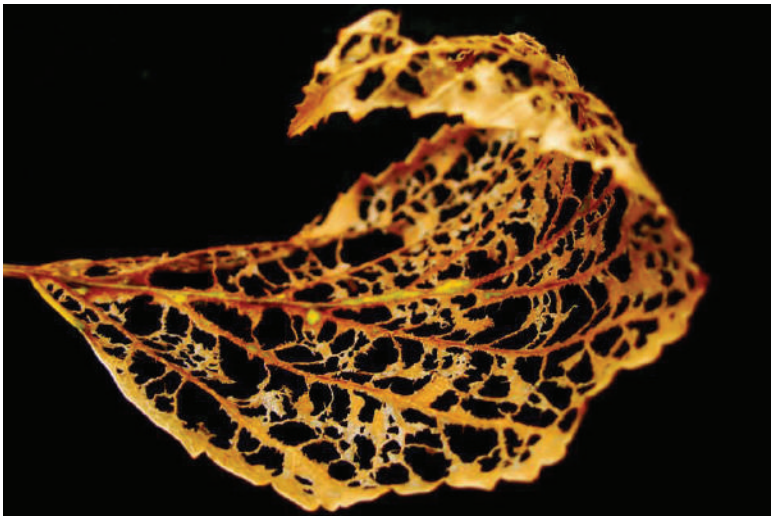
"Did you have to go to a doctor?"

"Yep."

"I go to a doctor and he puts the cold jelly on me because when I was born I had a space in my heart."

When she was one month old, Emma's first adoptive parents gave her back to the agency after they discovered her heart condition. The Hansens brought her home shortly after. Now she is five, the tissue has corrected itself, and I am secretly grateful for the medical detour that has brought her to a home where I can share in her endless cycle of stumbling and healing. The initial adoptive family was clearly not ready to bring a baby into their lives. What had they expected? A child is just a more honest version of an adult, covered in holes and patches.

Emma asks me to lie down with her until she falls asleep. As I tuck us both under the thick down comforter, she warns her stuffed animals not to bump me. Within ten minutes her breath becomes deep and slow, but I am not ready to peel myself out of bed just yet. Here we are, the two of us, bodies under construction. I smile as I think of how protective she became of my puffy face, causing a warm ache to radiate from the bruises on my lower jaw. It's painful, this constant state of becoming in which we are never whole. Life chips away at us, ripping teeth from tender gums and children from the soft, warm torsos of their parents until faith in anything constant grows moth-eaten in old garages. But Emma does not shrink in her state of incompletion, nor does she apologize for her passionate if clumsy command of the space she occupies. My cheeks are throbbing from the grin stretching across my distended face in the dark. The more it hurts, the more I smile. She will walk where she pleases.



Nature's Capillaries, Julianne Rocco

ANNA KUSHNIR

Silence, I Discover, is Something You Can Actually Hear

—Haruki Murakami

Sleepy bodies amble out of seashells—hands light-switch: blue night
laps against windowpanes. Night-breath mingles in the bathroom as we scrub
teeth, white foam coalesces under the bulb, stretching cat peruses our ankles—waits

for breakfast. You tuck Murakami inside a blue & gold matryoshka: scintilla for rising
at dawn. Paws glint down the hand-scraped hardwood of your parents house,
follow us into the marble-kitchen, bare feet waltzing the way my parents do

while the kids are still asleep. We spend half an hour assembling & wrapping in silver
—the palinoia of tomato basil sandwiches. Boiling kettle-water steams down
inside a thermos of black tea, stir in raw honey & whole-lemon slices with silver

spoons—the heat travels up & through my hands. I watch bits of honeycomb & pollen
settle at the bottom, decide I want to be a bee-farmer like my uncle.
You laugh & tell me I've run from every bee I've met.

We trickle down each stone stair to the birch trees—you thumb through logic puzzles
& tuft up grass strands into neat combs. The sky is used bath-water. An egg-yolk sun wavers
above a hill. Rose-breasted Grosbeaks & Savannah Sparrows

come home for October. We open like nesting dolls—shedding cable-knit layers. I wear a sarafan. Birdcalls warble un-mowed grass, aster & goldenrod usher sunbeams to join our gökotta.

MADELINE HERRICK

Grandfather's Clams Carved in the Spring

He sculpted ducks with a bead of sand
castled in his thumbnail like DNA.

I would watch wings unfold purple for hours,
my suit worn white from salted boats

that cradled circles in ballet dunes to whisper
recipes into my mother's throat. Hollowed

shells became cups for her penciled revisions
on last year's lasagna. I ran

corners through tousled-blonde
down: catalogued towels by who used them

first. Grandpa's: white with a lighthouse
nestled on the corner & birds: a lookout

for stray drops of cocktail sauce missed by thick
clam tongues. Shellfish caught by chiseled necks

of swans on a workbench are marked February
for snow. Wood shavings fell like parmesan

on littlenecks to feed summer's cousins:
names whittled into lungs exhale chlorinated

games of monopoly that lasted years.
But it's okay. I remember you winning

me over with my own timber duck,
its eyes braised coal, lively & memorable

like a kitten chasing its tail.

Sidewalk in Geneseo, Hannah Glaser

JAMES FITZ GERALD

A Bit about Nothing

I walk outside and light my cigarette. The air is warm and humid, and the sky is black. There are no stars, no moon. The weatherman said rain. He's wrong again. We walk down the hill that descends towards the house. I'm drunk and stumble a bit. I give Theo a cigarette.

I'm a hundred yards away from the house but I can already hear the music. It's the music nobody likes but everyone listens to. We approach the steps of the front porch. A guy in his mid-twenties who never graduated sits in a chair. He's wearing a white polo shirt and khaki shorts. His hair is gelled and his eyes are glassy. He asks for five dollars from my friends and me.

We give him the cash, and he gives us each a red cup from the stack next to him. A couple of girls are smoking on the porch and one sits on the ledge. I flick my butt onto the front lawn and look at her as I walk into the house. She looks back and takes a drag.

The house is loud. I show up with four other guys but within moments they're nowhere to be found. I see Theo nestled up with his girlfriend in the kitchen. The others must have made a dash towards the keg. The air is thick, and a layer of smoke sits below the ceiling.

The girl walks in through the front door. I look at her again. She's not as pretty as she was outside. Her chest hangs out and her skirt is stretched high upon her thick thighs. A charm bracelet jingles from her wrist. There's some fullness to her face, but she's not chubby. Her hair is curly.

A guy bumps into me from behind. The brim of his hat is flat and I can't see his eyes. I don't take note of it. I see the girl again, walking with one of her friends towards the keg. I walk behind them. The line is long. While I wait behind the girl and her friend, Phil comes over and says hello. We talk a bit about nothing. The girl peeks towards me as Phil and I speak. I smile awkwardly as she bites her bottom lip.

Phil leaves and walks towards the kitchen. The girl and her friend take turns filling their cups. I'm not sure if I can take another beer. A bit of vomit sits at the bottom of my throat, and there I am again: it's three years ago and I'm a freshman at my first party.

That night wasn't much different from this one. I had three beers and a shot and tripped coming out of the bathroom. My roommate left early and I was lost. A senior came towards me with a pint of gin and thrust it into my chest. I grabbed the bottle and polished off what was left. Some people cheered. I threw up on the bathroom wall. The senior made me clean it up.

I notice the girl holding her hand towards my cup. She asks if I want a fill. I say yes. I'm not a freshman anymore. I decide I'll try to fuck her.

"Thanks," I say.

She nods her head with a smile. I walk towards the room where Phil is. She stops me and asks if I want to have a cigarette. I don't, but I say sure. We walk towards the back door through the kitchen. There's nobody else on the porch. The music isn't as loud.

"I think I remember you," she says.

"Yeah? Where from?"

"I think I saw you out."

"What year are you?" I ask.

"I'm a freshman," she replies.

She takes a sip from her cup. I look at her and take another pull. She looks prettier.

"You have a boyfriend?"

"I did, he's an asshole. I…"

She goes on about how she had some guy through high school. They were going to get married. After graduation, he stayed home and went to community college. She came here. They were only two hours away, but soon he started getting jealous. He screamed at her whenever she went out. One day she looked at her phone and there was a voicemail from him. He accidentally called her while he was messing around with her friend, who was still in high school. At least, I think that's what she is saying.

"You have anyone?" She asks harmlessly.

I don't reply. Or do I? It makes no difference; you're speaking to me now anyway.

It was summer when I met you. We were teenagers and awkward. There was a breeze that night, and you were wearing a sweatshirt. We were having a bonfire in a backyard, and you must have come with what's-his-name. I went inside to take a piss. I came out of the bathroom door and you were there in the kitchen with a

cup of water in your hands. You held it close to your chest. Your shorts were white. Your skin was fair and your hair was dark. You smiled, and that's all it took. You didn't know me yet, and you were too shy to make new friends. I approached, and you shook my hand gently. Hours went by, and we talked, delved, discovered. We got cut short by your friends coming inside. They said they were looking all over for you. You left with them.

That year went fast. We tried it. It didn't work. Who strayed first? I lost sleep, and you gained weight. I fucked up. I fucked up.

The girl finally takes a drag of her cigarette. I ask if she wants to find some place quiet. She throws her butt towards the grass and I do the same. I finish my beer and open the door for her. She walks through the kitchen and clutches my hand. We walk upstairs and people stare at us.

She opens the first door. Two frat guys are bumping off a mirror and tell her to leave. We walk across the hall and she opens a door. The lights are on. The room is empty and dirty. Wrinkled shirts and a pair of dirt-laden jeans are scattered throughout the floor. The sheets are falling off the bed. She tells me to lock the door and shut off the light.

I oblige. She turns on a desk lamp and starts taking off her top. She ghost dances to the music downstairs. She doesn't dance like you.

I remember dancing some years back when we went to the firework show. There were so many people packed around a large makeshift dance floor on the beach. We had only seen each other a couple of times. I told you I didn't dance. You loved dancing.

I told you I would only dance to a slow song. You danced for a while with your friends before going to the music booth. You whispered into the D.J.'s ear and he nodded in compliance. A slow, melancholic tune began echoing from the speakers. You looked at me and your brown eyes glowed dimly. You smirked humbly and your teeth were white. You put out your hand and waved me over. We danced and the old couples looked at us in reminiscence. I kissed you that night.

"You gonna take that shirt off?" the girl says to me. "Or am I gonna take it off for you?"

She's only wearing a laced bottom. Her breasts are small. Her face is tanner than the rest of her body. She jumps on the bed and I relent. I thrust

and wish I hadn't drunk so much. She screams, and I close my eyes and hope it ends.

I wonder what you're doing. You're probably watching that show you always loved. We would watch that for hours. You would lay your head on my stomach while the low volume of the television broke the beautiful silence after sex.

She's getting dressed and I reach into my pocket for a cigarette. She asks me for one. I tell her no. She straps her bra and reaches for her shirt. It's under my waist. When she grabs it, her hand touches my bare stomach. The rain is coming down hard outside.

"Guess the weatherman was right about tonight," she says, opening the blinds.

I take a drag and tap it lightly towards the side of the bed. She says she'll see me around and walks out of the room. I put out the cigarette on the desk next to the bed and get dressed. I walk downstairs and she sees me, but she keeps talking to her friend. Theo is still in the kitchen. He asks me if I'm going to the keg. I walk with him and fill up my cup. I stare towards the window as the drops hitting the glass scatter like webs. They start at the top but never reach the bottom of the pane. I wonder if it's raining by you, too.

SARAH CORCORAN

Recording, Day: Hour: Minute

00:00:00
he offers me a half eaten box of chocolates
because he got hungry on the way over. Later,
as I puke into the traffic of a highway, he lights
his cigarette with the sun

00:07:05
together we stand on the rooftop, two black birds
stuck in the inky tape of old answering machines.
I want to bottle lightning to ignite the brushfire
in my throat: the end of the tunnel

00:15:21
I press my pinky into my ear until the thoughts of him
stop, run my tongue along the edge of the scrap corner
holding his number

04:23:34
standing in my door jamb, he's the static
of passing under a bridge in a hailstorm: whirring
dust orbs in diluted desk lamp haze.
I try to simulate my own electroshock therapy
by pressing the line of skin from wrist vein to foot arch
against the hot bulb to stop the panicked shivers

10:14:21

I suck at the rust-marrow of the shower vent with my teeth,
but only end up swallowing a wasp that makes my bones vibrate

15:14:21

our heels catch on cement split with dandelions. Standing
still will get us lost: the lull before the movie credits roll. I kneel
out the window of his car and watch the rain in horizontal motion,
we are a broken record playing the same line lost
thirty miles back when we started to pick up speed

SARAH CORCORAN

Seismic Fragmenting

I'd set out to discover the hazmat sign
around her tense, slim neck. To understand her

bobbing knee left me running my tongue
along her conchoidal fractures, torn between

a statue in her door jamb & giving her space
of a thousand bumblebees. Her geocached lipstick
smears made me a TNT stick lit from both ends.

I remember dry pine needles under her
bare toes, the crunch

of my molars against I *need*—. Her tight-lipped
smile lasted the 365 day trek without falling

to pieces I built, believing I could chart her
pink tint with fingers alone.

Glitz, Joseph O'Connor

JIM RYAN

Window Seat

Hanna slides a dollar bill into the slot, where it is accepted with a beep. "Thank you, sweetie," the woman behind the wheel says. It's 6:35 and still dark outside as Hanna makes her way toward the middle of the bus, where the heaters are. Glad to be shielded from the February air, she will be at the community college in an hour—a commute that would take her only twenty minutes if she had her own car. She is self-conscious of the fact that she is still without a driver's license at nineteen, but this is made slightly less embarrassing by the fact that she can't afford a car anyway.

Hanna is normally the first one to board the morning bus, since West Springs is the farthest point from the city and the last stop on the route, but today there is a young man with a neck brace sitting in one of the seats closer to the front. As she makes him out in the near-darkness, her eyes meet with his for a second. Blue under-lighting from the seats glows faintly against his wide stare, and his beard is pressed out by the brace as if it grows horizontally from his chin. She catches her breath slightly and lowers her eyes as she finds a seat several rows behind the man with the brace.

Hanna slides over toward the window and fogs the glass with her breath. A heavily-bundled couple walks by the bus, holding hands as they pass beneath a street lamp, and Hanna wonders for a moment who would choose to go for a walk at this hour. Maybe they will be leaving for their respective jobs soon and this is the only time of the day when they get to do whatever they want. Hanna remembers how she and Thomas used to go for walks, how on their last walk she had reached her hand into the small space between them and he didn't close the gap with his, how during their following walks they had walked a little farther apart. Soon the couple is out of sight and the street returns to its usual morning inactivity.

Hanna opens the thick notebook she holds in her lap. It contains everything from class notes to meandering thoughts and drawings. Each page is marked with a colored sticker that indicates its category: blue for notes, yellow for parts of stories and poems, green for the pages she shows to no one else. Flipping to the last page marked in blue, she confirms that she's done all she needs to do for today's classes. She keeps her coat wrapped close but pulls off her knit hat, planning to replace it with headphones from her backpack—she will slip them over her ears, turn up the volume and drift off until the bus gets close to the college stop. But before she can get comfortable, a body drops into the seat next to her with the swoosh of a Nylon windbreaker.

"Hey, you wanna talk about something?" the man with the brace asks.

Hanna turns to him—he's very close to her now. He must be in his late twenties, and his face looks like it's been left out in the snow too long, blue eyes etched with red. He is staring at her expectantly, not blinking.

No, she does not want to talk to him, but she has nowhere to go and she has a feeling he won't take no for an answer. "Um, sure." Hanna rests the headphones on her lap.

"I really need to smoke a fucking cigarette," he says, in a way that she guesses is supposed to seem conversational. "You know what I mean?"

"I don't smoke," Hanna says, moving her eyes to the back of the seat ahead of her. She focuses on the pattern of crisscrossing colored lines in dark-blue fabric. Maybe if she doesn't feed into what he is saying, he will give up and leave her alone.

"Yeah, that makes sense. It's really shitty for your health. Still, I've been on this bus for a while, now, and I'm starting to really need one."

Hanna sees that his hands are shaking and imagines that cigarettes aren't his only vice. There is a lighter in his right hand that he keeps flicking, hard enough to cause a faint spark, but not to bring a flame. She has the urge to tell him that he probably shouldn't fidget with a lighter on the bus, but she doesn't.

"Broke my neck," he says. "Never should have gotten on the horse, I guess, but I really wanted to. Mom said, 'You better not do that, honey,' but I did, anyway. That's pretty much why I'm where I'm at now. Dad kicked me out of the house. Can't work with a busted neck, ya know, so I lost my job at the Sunoco station. And who am I gonna sue for this?" He taps a fingernail on the brace—*click, click.* "Am I gonna sue the farmer because I jumped bareback onto his fucking horse?" He raises his eyebrows at Hanna, his gaze jumping back and forth as if considering alternatives. "Well, am I?"

"No, I suppose you aren't." Hanna looks up at the driver's rear-view mirror, which seems so far away. The driver apparently has her eyes set firmly on the road, and Hanna can only see the rim of her blue hat. Hanna presses her body tight against the cool window, if only to put a few more inches between

her and the man who has cut off her passage to the aisle. The bus passes over the river, and Hanna gets a quick look at the water through the bridge's guardrail, pushing onward as if refusing to freeze—it has someplace to be in a hurry.

"You're damn right I'm not," he says. "That shit I was doing is illegal to begin with." He looks around for a minute as the bus comes to a stop just past the bridge.

Maybe he will get off here, Hanna thinks. But he doesn't. She turns again to the window, her breath forming veins of frost on the glass. They have reached Platt Falls, a step closer to the city. A church stands near the bus-stop, and she can see a man carrying a briefcase stepping through snow toward the bus. Soon they continue to roll, and the man with the brace looks to Hanna again.

"I have no home right now because my father kicked me out of my own house. I'm homeless. Does that sound right to you?" His eyes bear down hard at Hanna this time, and she feels a knot tightening in her chest. He looks so angry. At his father, at her, it doesn't seem to matter.

"No, I guess it doesn't."

"I've got a good mind to severely lower his quality of life." He reaches up with his left hand to scratch at his chin. "I mean, my life is over. I have no money and I can't even nod my fucking head. Just spent my last bit of cash on this box of cigarettes and the fare." He starts to laugh with his chest heaving like he's trying to hold it in. The noise of his laughter eventually trails off.

Hanna thinks there is something particularly menacing about his choice of words: *lower his quality of life.* She imagines that he is riding to his parents' house now, where they are probably still sleeping. Would he knock down the door? Or quietly step through the house and into the bedroom before pouring gas over his father and igniting him with that lighter he is still flicking? The fire department would find two roasted bodies—the father and the mother both consumed by the flames. Or maybe the fire wouldn't kill the mother right away, and she'd live out the rest of her short life, unrecognizable, in the burn ward of the city hospital.

The man is still in her personal space and isn't showing signs of leaving anytime soon. They come to two more stops without change. People walk up and down the aisles absorbed in their routines and seem to not even notice him. They zip and unzip coats. They talk on cellphones. It is like the man with the brace is a ghost placed on the bus just for Hanna.

Hanna wonders if he will stay with her until she gets to the college and if he will follow her off the bus. At five feet, five inches, and probably only half his weight, she feels she is too small and thin to defend herself against him, even with his broken neck. She thinks of the fork that she packed with her lunch—maybe she can get it out of her bag without him noticing and then

stick it in his eye if he comes at her. But that thought disturbs her as well. The idea of seeing the contents of his eye slop out across his beard and over the white plastic and Velcro of the brace makes her queasy.

"Anyway," he says, "my name's Brian." He shifts the lighter over to his left hand and reaches his right over to Hanna in a friendly gesture. His eyes are creased in the corners and the anger seems to have relaxed out of them somewhat.

"Hanna," she says. His hand feels surprisingly soft as they shake, not like she expects. But what *did* she expect? Brian lets go of her hand with a tremble and continues flicking his lighter.

Then he's getting up from his seat next to Hanna and rushing toward the front of the bus. "Shit, that's my stop. Stop the bus!" he says. He's already pulling a cigarette from a rather crunched-up box and shoving it between his lips.

Hanna looks to the empty seat at her right, almost expecting that Brian will have left something behind, but there is no trace of him except the slight smell of cigarette smoke, which fades in moments. It's only after he steps out through the folding door and the bus starts moving again that she notices her hands are shaking, not unlike Brian's.

Hanna slowly makes her way down the hall connecting the administrative building with the geoscience classrooms. The financial aid offices are on this hallway, and there are lines of people shifting around like worms. Sunlight bears down through the windows on the opposite side of the hall as restless students type text messages and shuffle papers and listen to music through fat headphones pressed into baseball caps, afros, and bedheads.

Nearing the end of the hall, Hanna needs to nudge through one line of students to reach the hall where her class is. She bumps her elbow into a tall boy wearing a black hooded sweatshirt, and he turns around, seeming to make eye contact with her for a brief second.

"Oh, hi; excuse me," Hanna says.

But the boy is already facing back toward the windows, staring into the distance. Hanna's face feels hot and she keeps walking. As she passes the last group of waiting students, she pulls her phone out to check for messages, though she knows she doesn't have any.

She arrives at Human Geography five minutes early. Professor Laney is a tall woman with blonde hair who can't be out of her twenties, yet has a surprisingly deep voice. Hanna thinks she is nice, even pretty, but not necessarily the best teacher. Professor Laney once said that limited crude oil supply is not really a matter of concern—if we just keep digging, we'll keep finding more

oil, no problem. Hanna had wanted to challenge Professor Laney on this. *What about the millions of years it takes for animals to fossilize into the oil we use? How can that be sustainable?* But, just as Hanna had started to raise her hand, a boy toward the back of the room spoke up: "Amen to that! I'm so sick of hearing about this so-called energy crisis," and she had dropped her hand back to the desk.

"Good morning, everybody," Professor Laney says. "It's good to see all of your lovely faces." She turns off the lights and uses her laptop to project a PowerPoint presentation, just as she always does. The PowerPoint lulls Hanna into a stupor with charts and bulleted points about birth-rates, death-rates, GNPs and GDPs. Hanna knows she should pay attention, take notes, and engage with the material. These are important things to learn, after all—there is a lot going on in the world, and she should try to be aware of it. But she finds her thoughts drifting back to the morning's bus ride, to the blue under-lighting between the seats, to the man with his neck brace, to the feel of Brian's hand gripping hers. Hanna looks to the girl sitting at the desk to her right, whose chin is planted in her palm as she stares at the projections. Professor Laney clicks forward to the next slide, and Hanna sees the colors reflected on her neighbor's glasses flip in unison with the image on the screen.

On the ride home that night, she reads part of Elie Wiesel's *Night*, trying to make some progress on her homework for her class, Literature of The Holocaust. As usual, Hanna's the last one remaining on the bus, and the driver decides to make a stop at McDonald's before driving by her block to let her off. Hanna watches the driver's heavy gait as she makes her way across the parking lot to the glass box of a restaurant, the glow from inside McDonald's casting a broad shadow in her wake.

Hanna wonders if Thomas ever watched her as she walked away from him. Would she have looked resolute to him? Or just alone?

She has replayed the moment over and over in her head: Thomas is wearing his glasses as he sometimes does when he is in too much of a rush to put in his contacts. They stand outside the room where they have statistics class together and where they have just finished taking the final exam.

"Hey, I've been meaning to talk to you," he says. "And now that we're done with finals and everything—"

He trails off, his fingers messing up his short blonde hair.

"What's wrong?" Hanna says.

"It's just that I know we've been hanging out less, lately. Talking less and everything."

"Yeah. Well, we're done with classes now. More free time to do other stuff."

"That's kind of what I wanted to talk to you about," he says. "I'm going back to work now, and I'm sure you'll have a lot going on too. Neither of us is going to be around the campus for a while, and we obviously don't have class together anymore. What I'm trying to say is that it probably won't make sense for us to try and keep hanging out."

"Oh," Hanna says. The pain in her chest is worse, and she's staring down at the floor, at the flakes of bluish and red color in the smooth tile and the bands of shiny metal separating one square from the next. That's what their relationship has been reduced to: *hanging out.*

"It's not that I'm mad at you or anything. Really."

Thomas's voice sounds like it is coming from far away and Hanna can't bring herself to say anything. What could she possibly do? Ask him to please change his mind and keep seeing her? No, she thinks. If she has to ask, then it isn't worth trying. She's already lost him.

"Say something?" he asks.

"Okay," Hanna replies. "I understand. What you're saying makes sense."

She makes herself look back up at him. He looks uncertain, not of whether he's making the right choice, but of whether he has properly let Hanna down easily.

"So, are we okay? I mean, are *you* okay?" he says.

"Yes, I'm fine. See ya later." Hanna turns and walks down the hall, away from Thomas. Her arms are crossed in front of her, gripping the straps of her backpack. She listens for Thomas to say goodbye back to her, or tell her to wait, but she hears nothing except the relieved voices of other students leaving the final exam.

After several minutes, the driver is back in her spring-cushioned throne, filling a cheek with some apple pie as she pulls a lever to shut the folding door. "So sorry to keep you waiting, honey," she says. "Woman's gotta have her sustenance, you know?"

The bus continues rolling and Hanna reads a passage from *Night* about a group of people who were hanged in Auschwitz before a sea of onlookers. One of them was a small boy—a "sad-eyed angel," Wiesel calls him—who struggled and dangled there for some time before dying. He was simply too light for the rope to do its work quickly. Hanna finds herself thinking something this bad could only be the product of a stray, dark imagination, but reminds herself that it is real and wills herself to see it that way. However she tries, though, she suspects she will never understand how bad it was, and she is ashamed of herself for this.

After stepping off the bus, Hanna makes the short walk down her street to the house. The sun has dipped below the horizon, but the sky is still par-

tially lit. As she gets closer to home and a pinecone crunches under her foot, it seems that all the color has drained from the world. But, surely, it will be back in the morning. After all, she has no reason to feel sad—her life is comfortable, safe.

Dinner is leftover spaghetti. Her dad pulls it from the fridge in a Tupperware that had belonged to Thomas. He made her cookies for her birthday late last year and she never remembered to give the container back. She offered to bring it to him, but he said he didn't care—he had more like it. Hanna still suspects that he wanted to avoid seeing her again.

Her dad twists his fork in his spaghetti, scraping the tines against the Pyrex plate, making her cringe. "Something wrong, munchkin?" he says, wiping tomato sauce from his neat beard.

"Nah, Dad. Everything's fine, just a bit tired." And her eyes are back on the Tupperware.

It was just luck that Hanna met Thomas at school. Growing close with him was like an alignment of the planets; she is sure it won't happen again.

Hanna is alone on the bus, slipping in and out of sleep, as usual, listening to the same old songs on her iPod, even the ones that remind her of Thomas that she never seems to get around to deleting. Like the previous day, there is no sign of Brian. She wonders if she just imagined him being there, if there was never really a man who dropped into the seat next to her and shocked her with his words and the click of his lighter between thumb and fingers. The more she considers the possibility, the more likely it seems. After all, she's been getting very little sleep lately on this schedule, getting up before the sun every day and going to sleep after midnight. Isn't it possible for people to hallucinate when they are sleep deprived?

But when the bus stops at Platt Falls, she sees him. He's walking up alongside the bus toward the open door, head held rigidly forward by his brace. Soon the bus is rolling and Brian gingerly sits himself down in the seat next to Hanna. He doesn't say anything at first, just stares forward at the seat in front of him. Hanna feels the hairs on her neck standing up, but she wants him to say *something*. His silence worries her.

"Hanna, right?" he says.

She nods. "And you're Brian."

"Yeah, so I ended up getting my dad to let me back into the house. Says I better get a fucking job real soon but it's fine if I stay there for now. You know, I'm not *that* old. I know plenty of 24-year-olds that still stay with their parents from time to time."

"Sure, yeah, that's good. I'm glad to hear it." Hanna thinks he must look older than he is because he smokes, or maybe just because he hasn't had an easy life.

Brian rotates his shoulders so that he can look over at her. "Thanks," he says. He gestures at the notebook in her lap, and she notices that he's holding his lighter, just like before, but not flicking it as much this time. "Nice notebook. It seems like people hardly ever write by hand anymore. Always clacking on the keyboard." He makes an exaggerated typing motion in front of him.

"Thanks," Hanna says. "I write in this all the time."

"I figured as much. Since you had it with you last time I saw you, too. Look," he scratches his beard, "how would you like to grab a drink or something sometime?"

"What?" Hanna says. Her ears suddenly feel hot. "I'm nineteen, I mean. I can't drink."

"Oh, you seem older than that for some reason. Coffee then? I don't mean like a date or anything. We could just talk, ya know? I'd like to talk to you more."

Hanna looks down at her lap, running her fingernail along the spine of her notebook. "Thank you for asking, but I better not."

"What do you mean, you better not?" He raises his eyebrows.

"It's just that—I don't know."

"Hey, don't worry about it," he smiles, "I don't want to seem like some creep who tries to impress pretty girls with his all-day-pass." He laughs. "It was silly. I'm sorry."

Hanna realizes that Brian probably won't talk to her anymore. He seems embarrassed, turning to face forward again and flicking his lighter. The bus is approaching a stop a few blocks away from the college, and she notices Brian reaching for his pack of cigarettes and nudging one out with a ragged thumbnail.

"Are you getting off at the next stop?" Hanna says.

"Yeah, I need to shop for some stuff up here. Get a bit of food to bring back to my folks' house." He speaks abruptly as if he's not interested in Hanna anymore. He makes her nervous, but at least before he seemed to like her and care what she thought of him. She feels a weight in her throat and wishes she could rewind to before she said "no" and say "yes" to him instead.

The bus comes to a stop, brakes whistling, and Brian gets to his feet. He has the cigarette between his lips now, ready to light up. Standing just before the bus comes to a stop, he holds onto the seats for balance.

"Brian," Hanna says.

He turns to face her. "Yeah? I gotta get off here."

"I know, it's just, why don't we meet for coffee sometime?"

"You sure?"

"Yeah, why don't you meet me at the Java's on campus this Friday? I'm done with classes around five. Does that work for you?"

"Sure, Hanna. I'll see you there." He smiles for a second, then he's gone, stepping off the bus for his smoke.

She wonders for a minute if she's out of her mind, wanting to meet with this stranger. It's almost like she wants something bad to happen to herself, or maybe she's just seeking a thrill—a sort of social skydiving. She watches Brian stride away from the bus, his frozen breaths mingling with cigarette smoke in the air behind him.

All Hanna can think about as her history class wraps up on Friday is her imminent meeting with Brian. If he remembers their plan, he'll be waiting for her at the campus Java's, ready to have a cup of coffee with her. Loading her things into her backpack, along with her notebook, she keeps wondering what she will say to him. She has no idea what he will want to talk about, but that's what keeps her dwelling on their encounter—because based on her previous encounters with Brian, he will have *something* to talk about, and it will be important to him that Hanna listens. Her presence at Java's will be meaningful, and she won't have to work to make it so. Rather, it will come naturally. Will he call her pretty again? Will he ask to see what she's been writing? These questions fill her mind to the brim and cause the end of class to approach rapidly.

Hanna makes her way toward Java's. It's five o'clock, and as usual, the halls of the college are thinned out by this time of the day. Java's is located in an open area between two parallel hallways in the central building on campus. The floor and chest-height walls around the seating areas are a brick façade, and there are comfortable booth seats along the sides as well as round tables with steel-frame chairs in the middle of the café.

As Hanna approaches Java's, she gets just enough of a view over one of the walls to see Brian sitting at one of the booths on the opposite side, neck brace firmly Velcroed. Her chest feels hot when she sees him. He actually came? She still hasn't prepared for what she would do if Brian followed through on their meeting. But there he is, gaze set on a napkin in his hands as he tears the *OK*-hand of the Java's logo into small fragments that drift to the tabletop in front of him. A few other people are sitting here and there, but the area is empty in comparison with the activity of the early afternoon.

She pictures herself walking up to him, at which point they would exchange greetings and smiles. They would walk the fake-brick ramp to the serving window and order coffees, standing shoulder to shoulder. At one point, their arms might brush against one another. He might offer to pay

for hers, and then again, he might not. They'd sit back down across from one another while he would stare into her eyes with that particular intensity of his and talk to her; all the while, Regina Spektor would sing about the color blue over the speakers in the background. Brian's own blue eyes would refuse to let Hanna's gaze go—the rapids of his thoughts would prevent her from becoming complacent or disengaged.

But as she stands there beyond the perimeter of the coffee shop, she sees other groups of friends, couples, and individuals studying alone. They each have their reasons for being there. Brian, sitting there picking apart his napkin, is there for no reason at all other than to meet a girl he doesn't even know. Hanna remembers the bus that she will probably miss if she doesn't leave now, the meal that will be waiting for her at home, and also remembers that certain planets will never align because they orbit on different angles. She knows that, in reality, she will sit down across from Brian at a loss for words and he will launch into a stream of consciousness, with or without her. They may or may not even get coffee, they won't stand shoulder to shoulder, he won't ask her about herself or how her day was. She and Brian aren't friends—maybe they could be, with enough effort, but their lives are largely different and nonintersecting.

Hanna turns from Java's while glancing back over her shoulder at Brian, who doesn't look up from the napkin he is tearing. Holding her notebook at her side, she makes her way to the sliding glass doors that lead out onto the sidewalk and eventually to the bus-stop. This time, she's positive that the stranger with the neck brace won't be on board.

A few weeks have gone by since Hanna last saw Brian in the coffee shop. She hasn't spotted him on the bus or around the campus, and she is mostly relieved. He probably isn't happy with her since she stood him up—then again, he might have found somebody new to talk to, to frighten with stories about his life.

Professor Laney is having trouble with the projector in the classroom. Hanna watches her frantically pressing keys on her laptop, trying to get her PowerPoint presentation to display.

"The technology issues at this school…" Professor Laney says. She sighs dramatically and says not to go anywhere—she's going to get the computer guy to help out.

The room is dark except for the glow of the solid blue projection screen in the front of the room. People shift around restlessly at their desks and chat among themselves. The girl sitting next to Hanna just stares forward, tapping her pen on the three-ring binder in front of her. Hanna knows her name is Marcy from the roll call at the beginning of each class, but they've never

spoken. Of all the tables in the room, Hanna and Marcy's is the only one that isn't contributing to the soft hum of conversation in the room.

"Hey," Hanna says. "I'm impressed you actually take notes in here." She gestures at Marcy's binder. *That was dumb,* she thinks. *Who starts a conversation like that?* "I'm lazy and just download all those lame PowerPoints in order to study."

Marcy turns toward Hanna, the blue glare reflecting off of her glasses suddenly vanishing to reveal a set of surprised eyes. For a moment, she looks at Hanna as if she had just popped into existence in the next seat over, but then her expression quickly changes to a smile.

"I know, right? These presentations always put me to sleep," Marcy says, laughing. "Hey, you're Hanna, right?"

"Yep, and you're Marcy?"

"That's me," she says. "Nice to actually meet you."

Professor Laney flurries back into the room and presses a button on the projector. The cover page of her PowerPoint appears on the screen, an image of a high, sharp cliff-face with a neatly-pruned field running right up to its edge. "What do you know," Professor Laney says. "One push of a button and we're back on track."

AHH, Sarah Simon

STEPHANIE NAWROCKI

Broken Bucket Wisdom

The office was in an old walk-in cooler. It was the only area of the Japanese restaurant where I could work without the weight of heavy food trays or sore feet that needed to be elevated with a stack of pillows before bed. I pretended to be earnest during Yasuko's job interview, but the second I saw her fragile frame and exhausted, elderly demeanor, I labeled her as unfit.

Waitresses are expendable. The second they decide to pocket tips or help themselves to our wine cellar is the second I'm ordered to toss them on the streets with a reputation as clean as a used condom. Restaurant work is brutal—my mom worked three serving positions when I was a girl, and I grew up coloring white paper napkins with old crayons in an empty booth while watching my mom carry tray after tray of sushi to demanding customers. When I turned thirteen, Mom put me to work—and I climbed my way up the ladder.

Yasuko shocked me by handing over a formal résumé—even the paper that it was printed on shouted that she needed this serving position.

"And what's your level of education?" I asked.

I slammed my jaw shut, trapping a piece of my lip between the top and bottom rows of my coffee-stained teeth. The résumé claimed she had obtained a master's degree in Japan.

"I earn master degree in Fine Art, girl."

"Why you never go home after work?" Yasuko's voice took precedence over the repetitive Kyoto geisha suicide music that we listened to day after

day. I treated it like a constant reminder that we should never believe that we are denied options: I can serve sushi and make enough money to pay the bills, or I can go home and kill myself.

I continued to fold the green dinner napkins. "My mom and I don't get along," I replied.

"She Korean right? No one get along with Korean women!"

I laughed politely to make it seem as if searing needles weren't pricking the outer layer of my skin.

"She's definitely hard to get along with."

"What about Dad?"

"We don't talk." I stood up and walked to the back door for a much-needed cigarette break. When I returned, Yasuko had thrown the leftover unfolded napkins back into the bucket. I swallowed hard and acted as if the thought of my parents was harmless.

"Ay-ya girl, you don't need to play tough with me!" She crushed my inventory list into a crinkled paper ball and then began folding the rough edges into a swan. "Sometimes girl, even most broken paper can become swan," she said before turning the swan back into a worthless ball.

"Is that what you learned at art school?" I joked, wanting to dodge the intimacy that Yasuko so happily handed out.

"Swans are beautiful, until they hiss. Then they not so beautiful." She grinned and threw a green dinner napkin at me.

I loathed the customers that would come into the restaurant for dinner, selfishly wanting the dining room to be empty so that Yasuko and I could talk unbothered.

It was another slow day at work as I sat in my favorite secluded booth, staring at the teardrops of water as they streamed along the window and converged. A bowl of white rice and miso soup steamed in front of me, and I thought about how I would be begging for the warmth of food later in the evening. Of course, I had to find a new place to park my blue Honda Civic. The paranoia of being found habitually sleeping in my car alone at night in the same spot at Ellison Park forced me to become an explorer.

I thought about calling my dad; the scenario played out in my mind day after day. Of course, it was just a fantasy that I lived whenever I felt desperate enough to ignore the memories—or construct some fictional father figure in my mind. The reality is that whenever I found the courage to speak to him, my words were as rotted as the clothing left on a corpse.

If I breathed too heavily, if I lost my balance standing atop the rows of empty glass bottles, the nights I held my little brother Brandon under the

blankets in my bedroom while the thin drywall around us crackled and crumbled under the weight of a morbid marriage would be stained into my head for hours. My mother's wails always changed in tone with each fist that struck her delicate cheeks—nothing more than a musical instrument for my father to practice, night after drunken night.

"Are you open for lunch?"

I felt a slight jolt at the strange voice from behind.

"Yes! How many for today?"

The older man began to take off his raincoat as he settled down at his table. "Two. My daughter should be here soon."

I smiled, handing him two menus. I felt my skin crawling with disgust as I walked into the kitchen and smashed a crystal wine glass against the wall. As I swept up the pieces, I began to laugh at my own ridiculousness and then I sobbed in the storage room, muffling each deep breath with a hand tightly cupped around my mouth.

"You know them, girl?"

I grimaced at the content and functional family in the back without realizing how obvious I was being.

Yasuko jabbed me in the shoulder with the back of her pen, forcing a soft click. "Girl, you always so angry! You see this pimple?" She pinched my cheek and laughed as I jerked away. "Angry makes pimples! Ay-ya! So many!"

"I'm aware of my acne," I snapped.

"So pretty, but so much anger! So much anger make for bad wife!"

I hunched my back and mocked her posture. "So much talk make for bad server! Go take order before I old lady like you!"

Later that night, I caught Yasuko wincing in pain as she put every ounce of her energy into using the heavy mop. I sent her home and finished the job for her. As I filled out the closing paperwork, I lied and jotted down that she stayed the extra hour. I was starting to care about the old bag of bones.

Goddammit, I thought as I slammed the books shut.

"I know she's psycho, but you have to take it," I said.

I felt my little brother's forest-green eyes shoot flames and laser beams into the side of my face as I continued to drive down the dusty gravel road.

"Steph, you don't understand."

His voice had become so deep, it drowned the high-pitched little boy who used to ask his big sister to sit at the foot of his bed until he fell asleep. Already, I had suspicions that this "brother-sister" trip that Yasuko lectured me into taking was a shitty idea, one that might result in a secluded knife

fight to the death. Her voice echoed: "Brother is same blood! What you mean you no get along?"

I thought about her broken English and warm honey-brown eyes.

"You go spend time with baby brother! He all you have!"

I snapped out of reflection and questioned whether or not my little brother would cut my throat if I antagonized him enough.

"I understand better than you think," I mumbled indifferently a few seconds after the fact.

"Mom told me to kill myself yesterday."

"How?" My head jerked when the front tire of my car dipped into a massive hole in the makeshift road.

"She said, 'if you no want to go to the school, then you can go to the hell.' Then she told me to go get hit by a car."

My laughter bounced out of the rolled down windows of the car and eventually his deep chuckles joined in.

"I swear, Mom is getting more and more creative," I squeezed out, laughing at the imagery of our Korean mother ordering my brother to lie down in front of speeding traffic.

"Do you ever wonder what her issue is, Steph?" I answered with silence, and he continued, "She still asks about you."

I turned the steering wheel to the right and parallel-parked the car in front of the opening to the hiking trail. "Tell her that the faggot is alive and just fine."

He rummaged through the trunk as I reached in the backseat for a handful of granola bars, which fell out of the torn plastic bag and scattered amongst the random articles of clothing and books.

"When d'you think you can come home?"

I cursed under my breath as the back of my head hit the roof of my car and a wave of rage welled up within me.

"Don't worry about it! You just worry about covering your own ass and passing summer school!"

The high squeal of a mosquito buzzed in my left ear. I slapped myself in an attempt to squash its evil plot. Brandon marched in front of me, careful to avoid the holes that begged to sprain a careless ankle.

Hours later, we both leaned on our knees and gasped for breath after scaling a significant portion of the trail, which shot up at what felt like a ninety-degree angle. I rolled my backpack off my shoulders and reached inside for my cheap, re-used Poland Spring water bottle. I splashed the lukewarm water on my face to wash away the dirt and sweat and peered down at my phone to check the time. A single unread message popped up as a red talk bubble in the bottom left corner of my iPhone's display.

"I think we're finally high enough to get service," I proclaimed in amazement.

I read the message over and over again to the point where my brother couldn't help but peer over my shoulder in curiosity: *FAGg. You know what you do what ever. You make me so seek of you for toomany time I relly don't give shit as long as you don't make me mad for so many of everything. You are out of controle. Hope one day you know what you did to everybody.*

Another text message from my mother appeared as my phone vibrated for a quick moment: *I want you gone for good.*

Brandon wrapped his muscular left arm around my shoulders at the sight of my shaking.

"At least she got the last one grammatically correct…"

I smiled momentarily to console him. Tears fell from the corners of my half-Korean eyes and drove along the bumpy contours of my cheeks. My little brother hugged me so tightly I couldn't brush away the tears from my eyes.

"I don't know what to say, so I'm just going to hold you—okay?" It was the same thing I used to repeat to him while our parents fought.

That night, I sat in the driver's seat of my car, unable to sleep under the noise of rainwater smashing against metal. The air smelled of rotten wood as I examined one of the many paper dragons that littered the floor of my Honda like garbage.

I unlocked the double doors and walked into work with two medium black coffees from Dunkin Donuts in hand. Yasuko was attached to every thought that trailed along my mind. Work was no longer unbearable and even though I was house-hopping from friend to friend, constantly worried about whether I would be sleeping on a couch, a bed, or in my car, I felt at home when Yasuko's voice was present. I sang along with the radio that I blared early in the morning and began setting up the dining room.

Around 11:15 am, I became annoyed that her coffee was a disgusting lukewarm temperature. She was rarely late and a mere fifteen minutes wasn't cause for alarm, I told myself. A growing concern pricked at my thoughts ,but I continued to work and hum along to the music that was now more of a distraction than a pleasure.

Hours passed and her whereabouts were still a mystery as I ran from table to table, trying my best to keep up with the demands of the angry customers that bitched about their limited lunch breaks. I dumped the cold coffee down the drain and crushed the paper cup under the weight of my fist.

Yasuko didn't show the next day, or the day after that. For whatever reason, perhaps as an indication of my own self-destructiveness, I would hope to see her straggle in with her "ay-ya's" and constant references to me, her manag-

er, as "girl." I missed her teasing jokes, and her accusations that I wasn't a "true Asian" when my face turned a bright shade of crimson from her spicy papaya salad. Her absurd home remedies for the common cold included binge-eating mangos and forcing me to eat an entire bowl of fresh pickled ginger.

I had always laughed at how she refused to call glasses or cups by their official name. Teacups, wine glasses, empty pints of beer—none of that mattered to Yasuko. They were all buckets in her eyes. A week before she unofficially quit both her job and her unofficial homeless lesbian daughter, she lectured me as I mopped up a mess made when I dropped a tray of full water glasses. Shards of glass scraped against the tiled floor as I rolled my eyes at her voice from behind. She picked up a large piece of crystal glass with her bare hand and interrupted me when I began to protest.

"Even broken piece can hold water, see?" She tilted her hand and I watched the water pour from the edges.

I rang the heavy mop out into the bucket as she continued.

"Hope is water that stays in broken bucket."

ANDREA SPRINGER

Croissant[1]

You say *worldly*
and *well traveled.*[2]

I blanch, don't
admit my word:[3]

blistered. You
must've left

layers of yourself in
every posh cafe[4]

you graced. You
shaved your soles

to blanc, mewling
skin, exorcising callus[5]

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[1] As Seen Undergoing Flocculation

[2] to the same seventeen
cocktail dresses and dismissive
how lovelys

[3] for the you
who presented yourself
to me from Paris
and who kissed me
on two cheeks instead of one mouth
and who complained about the wonder
bread the next morning

[4] draped in garish chiffon, and smelling
like desperation: the odor of emulsification
agents expiring

[5] in the interest of self
rasterization, discarding
dimensions so your scarf lies
flat.

ANDREA SPRINGER

Barbie's Confrontation Dreamhouse

i.
Inhabiting a space of sandpaper-
pissed off would be a nice change. I can't
fathom how to grow tiny daggerstones

into my countenance, but I make mean
mental comebacks. My dearest hypothetical
is jackhammer sound ripping

ribbons through concrete. Larynx
charged with battery—enough volts
to damage trachea and sparring partner.

ii.
Amygdala Override—file under: renegade reactions—take hydrochloric responses & shove them so far into subconscious that they chafe against superego. De-purse Pepto Bismol pink lip. Fill pliable head with thoughts of being sexy doctor & sexy astronaut & sexy Susan B Anthony to forcibly squeeze out irritants. Meld four surrounding digits into springloaded middle finger & ensure that feet are too small, too soft, too stiletto-ready, to kick any ass. Keep composed.

iii.
I eye Skipper,
but contempt is hard
to manage with joy-painted
eyes. Through gapless
teeth, I cuss her

out, but my argument,
like my molded pink
plastic oven, or Fuchsia Summer
Fun Party Jacuzzi, lacks real

heat. I move to chuck my ultra-
violet vase at her, but the base
stuck: melded to my vanity.
Unopposable thumbs struggle to pluck

day-glo-green pansies, sharp
enough to puncture rubbery
face flesh, but this entire god
damned mansion is baby proofed.

Sienna Streets, Samantha Lambert

JOSHUA KELLER

Nursing Home

Would you believe that we found God on VHS?

Yes. It was after the chaplain resigned in the wake of his sex crimes. What were they? I wonder. No one at the home seems to know. And you should know that any good nursing home is rife with rumor, and usually rumors are lies at best or truths in the worst way.

The best case scenario, I think, is that the world will soon end. Helen and I both think so. Whether we live to see it or not: doesn't matter. If the priests start calling it quits, you know you're in trouble. They're the optimistic ones. They close their eyes and smile when the organ plays out of tune.They ask us to shake the dust out of the hymnals when we open them and to pick up the pages that fall out even though it's hard to bend down.

But anyway, Helen and I saw Him one night in the cafeteria on a ruined cassette of *Pollyanna*. We had tried to tape over it for our grandson's little league game, but you know you can't do that with the Hollywood ones. All you get is static. So we had taped over it and then forgot we had taped over it and then forgot to throw it away.

We put the tape in, and right when the star hits the ground on the other side of the Disney castle, that's when we see Him. You can hear Him, too. He looks like static and He sounds like static. I know it's Him, and Helen believes it's Him—we are of different opinions on the matter.

So we grow old this way. We wait until it's late and the orderlies go out back to smoke reefer. Helen helps me push a loveseat up to the screen. Then we just sit and watch. He tells us everything we need to know, and we know that once He stops talking, we'll have lived enough.

JOSHUA KELLER

Mobile

My father stitched his own Care Bears for us, seven of them, but we weren't allowed to hug them. The insides of their wrists said *radix malorem est cupiditas* in curly black yarn. And the bears weren't ROYGBIV, as I've since learned to call the rainbow. They were like when we mixed all the paints together hoping to get the best of each color but only ending up with mud. Shitty, greenish-brownish mud. On their bellies Father stamped the names of the vices that he warned us about every morning at breakfast and every night when he tucked us into bed. He'd list them off and point to each bear and it was like a bedtime song. I figured that the vices were the bears' names, maybe. Like I said, we weren't allowed to cuddle them, but Father hung them over our beds with fishing line so we could watch them twirl and tangle in the moonlight.

JOSHUA KELLER

Wallball

Tim wore boat shoes to P.E. He forgot to say "ouch" when someone stomped on his feet. And it did hurt—guaranteed. Bob Michaels did it and Bob Michaels wore size eleven Skechers. So then everyone dropped their backpacks on Tim from way over their heads and Phil Steiner slammed his fingers in a gym locker door and the pinky got purple. My grandpa always told me that bullies hammer kids into the shape their lives will take. Tim wasn't taking shape.

We put him against the brick wall in between the science modules. On the way out, everyone picked up a basketball. If you didn't pick up a basketball, someone would push one into your gut really hard and knock the wind out of you. We pelted him big time. I could almost feel how the rubber must have scraped and pulled at his skin on impact. He didn't try to dodge like he's supposed to. We all pitched hard and fast until our arms hung loose, but Tim just kept standing there and standing there as the balls hit him and bounced back to our feet.

Through my tears, I could see Tim sinking into the wall. The hole spread as tall as a basketball hoop, but not at first. It started above Tim's head and stretched up and down as he sunk in. And when he finally disappeared out of sight and the hole started to close, the last thing I saw—still peeking out of the gray stuff between two bricks—was the purple pinkie.

We stopped throwing and Dan Bradley and Eric Stambaugh ran back inside. They said they knocked on the shop department door until Mr. Harris let them in. They ran to the other side of the wall, but Tim hadn't come through.

No one goes in between the science modules these days, but before biology my friends and I look out the back windows of the module and we can

still kind of see it—the pinkie, I mean. Now it looks more like a caterpillar in mid-crawl or like an old piece of bubble gum.

Kids lie and say that they walk right up to it, but no one's dumb enough to say that they touched it.

SARAH CHRIST

Welcome to Joe's

"Are you going to stare at the truck all day or actually help?" my boss, Jane, snapped as she struggled by me with a pouch of queso flung over her shoulder.

"Sorry," I said quickly, reaching down to grab hold of the black beans. "I was just deciding what to bring up next."

"Could you decide a little faster next time?"

Every Monday I was in charge of bringing the truck shipment up from the loading dock to our back stockroom at Joe's Taco Shack. Then I would play Tetris to fit all the oversized containers in our walk-in refrigerator.

The black beans came in clear containers that I had to use two hands to carry. I stared down at the watery tub, where the beans stuck to the plastic sides and little black specks floated in the liquid. I wasn't even sure they should be considered beans. They were more like pellets that Joe's liked to pass off as something edible.

I ground my teeth as I followed Jane's bleached blonde ponytail upstairs. She hated me. From the moment I showed up for my first day of work two years ago, all Jane could manage out of her mouth was criticism.

It wasn't just her personality, because my coworkers could do no wrong.

Oh Jake, you forgot what a Homewrecker is? It's okay, that's a tricky one.

But the moment I burned a quesadilla during my second week, I became, for her, the reason that people thought fast food workers were incompetent.

I couldn't prove it, but I always assumed Jane held a grudge because I had a bachelor's degree in communication. She had been working at Joe's since she was a teenager and had climbed her way to the head management position. She'd been a manager for over ten years now and she was proud of it. She thought all of higher education was corrupt, and would tell anyone who'd listen that people shouldn't waste their money just to get a piece of paper they could frame and hang on the wall. Sometimes I thought she might be right.

Even with a degree, I was working here the same as she was. But I tried not to think like that because it depressed me. In their promotional materials, colleges always promise that an impressive percentage of their graduates get hired within the first year. They never mention the people like me who are working at minimum wage jobs, thousands of dollars in debt, nine months after graduation.

I watched as Jane piled the queso bag on top of the others in the corner. She wiped the sweat from her hairline where her brown roots were starting to show through. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe she hated me because she was a middle-aged woman who still couldn't figure out how to dye her hair properly.

"Hey, Jane, I'm supposed to go on break at one. Do you think you can finish the truck by yourself?" I gave the bean container a shove. I was trying to squeeze it in between two basins of guacamole. There was clearly not enough space, but I pushed, determined to make it work so that I didn't have to walk and get the ladder from the closet to reach the top shelf. I swung my hip against the side of the container with force. The corner hit the lip of the shelf, causing the container to tumble out of my hands towards the cement floor.

Shit. I felt like I was in slow motion as I automatically stretched out my hand to try to catch the falling container. I watched my hand move under it, knowing it was a bad idea but lacking control to stop it. The ridged cap hit my palm and bent my wrist back past a ninety-degree angle. Pain wound around my spine as I cried out and reached down to grasp my wrist. The container hit the ground at the same moment I lost my balance on the slick floor. The bean juice flooded out as the cap got thrown across the room, and I landed in the puddle.

"Are you okay?" Jane asked.

I rolled sideways, still clutching my wrist in pain. I didn't notice that my hair was soaking up the grey juice like a sponge, or that black beans covered my white work shoes. Why did the black bean containers have to be so damn heavy?

"Are you okay?" Jane repeated, a little more forcefully this time.

I looked up and found Jane staring down at me with a slight worried expression on her face. She was probably concerned they would have to pay me workers' compensation. I realized how pathetic I must have looked, sitting in a pile of black beans on the floor of the walk-in fridge. I surveyed my wrist. It didn't look broken, but the creases in my skin were a fiery red. I moved my wrist cautiously. It hurt if I bent it past a small range of motion, but it was probably only sprained.

"I'm fine," I said when I managed to sit up.

Jane looked at me with her eyebrows raised. I grabbed my wrist self-consciously and fought back a grimace as pain shot up to my elbow. Jane watched

me for a second longer, then let her gaze fall to the beans scattered across the floor.

"That was fifty dollars worth of black beans," she said quietly, shaking her head.

I bit my lip and swallowed a retort that maybe if the fridge was better organized, I would have been able to fit all the containers easily without spilling them. I knew the time and place to pick a fight with Jane, and sitting in a pile of black beans that I had just spilled wasn't it.

"Clean this up and finish the truck. Then you can take your break."

I nodded meekly and Jane left the fridge without another word. I flicked a black bean off my knee. I hated that a dumpy manager at Joe's thought I was incompetent. I'd been in the honors program in college and graduated with a 3.8 GPA. How had this become my life? I hobbled out of the fridge and over to the broom closet. The mop and bucket were behind the ladder near the back corner. I slammed the ladder out of the way with unneeded force. It was the ladder's fault this had happened. If it hadn't been so far away, I wouldn't have had to shove the container in between those two bins of guacamole.

The mess took me forty minutes to clean up. The black beans had flown everywhere and refused to be picked up by the twisted threads of the mop. I had to bend down and pinch them off the ground individually, then throw them into the bucket. My college friends would puncture a lung from laughter if they could see me now, picking black beans off the floor of Joe's.

"Isn't Alex supposed to be here?" I asked Jane after I put away the mop.

Jane looked up from her paperwork. She had a deep scowl on her face that caused the skin around her eyes to scrunch into crow's feet. I noticed those the first time I met Jane, except I had incorrectly assumed that she got them from laughing too much, and figured she had to be a happy boss.

"I was wondering if he could finish the truck," I said when she didn't respond. "My wrist is sore from falling and I don't think I can carry the rest of the stuff upstairs. I could work the register for him, though."

Jane looked down at her paperwork. "It's just Marisa on the floor today. We can't afford to have you being the only one making the food, so you'll have to make it work."

I ignored the fact that she had just insulted my ability to put together tacos. "Where's Alex?"

"He called in this morning to quit. Didn't even give two weeks' notice."

My heart felt as if it had been pinched between the slits of my rib cage. "What? Why?"

Alex was the one good thing about this job. Jane seemed to despise him as much as she hated me, so I always felt like I had someone to complain to. He was only a year or two older than me, and had graduated from Kendell Culinary College. He had dreams of becoming a head chef and hated work-

ing at Joe's as much as I did. When we got bored, we would race each other to see who could make a taco the fastest, or bet on how long we could disappear to the bathroom without Jane noticing. I honestly can't say I blamed him for not taking the job seriously. He knew how to make *crème brûlée* and was stuck putting together burritos at a semi-fast-food joint.

"He got a job at Bonefish Grill as the junior chef."

"Of course he did," I muttered without thinking.

Jane looked at me, her face scrunched slightly in confusion. I ignored her. I thought Alex and I were supposed to be friends. I shook my head slightly, trying to shake away the hurt that Alex had told Jane about the job before me. Jane opened her mouth as if she was going to say something, but then shook her head and turned her attention away. She started typing on her computer, her fingers tapping the keys furiously. I watched her fingers blur in motion for a second. It's not that I wasn't happy for Alex. I had tasted his cooking; he deserved to be a chef. I just didn't like the feeling of being left behind.

"I'm taking my break now." A sliver of bean juice dripped down my forehead from my hair and I wiped it away with the back of my hand.

Jane looked surprised at my statement. She stared at me for a second and I was taken aback by her expression. I had expected a fight, but Jane wasn't wearing her normal scowl. I examined her face trying to place what was different. Her features seemed softer somehow, her mouth less taut, and her eyes weren't squinting. I felt my heartbeat catch in my throat as I realized Jane felt sorry for me.

Jane nodded slowly. "Okay," she said. "Have a nice break."

I walked out of her office without a word, feeling worse than when I had been sitting in a puddle of black beans. The break room had blank white walls with a strip of red around the top towards the ceiling. I thought that was an attempt to make the room look Mexican. Jane hadn't done much to decorate here other than throw a sombrero on top of the fridge. It was the same sombrero she made us wear when she was on a power trip, although she insisted it was fun for the customers. My locker was in the back corner of the room, past the table holding the microwave and a pile of plastic forks. I tried to open the locker with my left hand, since my right wrist was still throbbing, but the door was stuck on the paystubs I had neglected to empty out of my locker for weeks now. The door wouldn't budge and I gave up, slumping down into a chair. I wasn't hungry for ramen again anyways.

Even with the door closed, Marisa's squeaky voice yelling, "Welcome to Joe's!" crept through the slit in the door whenever someone came into the restaurant. I squeezed my ears tightly, trying to block out the phrase, and thought about how much I disliked each and every one of those words.

"Welcome to Joe's!" Who came up with that idea? Why did they think people would like being shouted at as they entered a restaurant? The customers were just hungry and wanted food.

My phone vibrated on the table and I looked down at the screen to see it was my mother calling. I groaned. I pressed the silence button quickly and a pain shot through my wrist at the sudden movement. I cradled my wrist in my lap with my other hand; I didn't have the patience to deal with her right now. I loved my mother, but she had a tendency to trap me on the phone with pointless chatter for at least forty-five minutes when she called. I stared up at the red stripe, not really seeing it. I was wasting my life in this godforsaken place. This wasn't what college had prepared me for. I was twenty-three years old. I was supposed to be an adult by now, not living paycheck to paycheck and eating free Joe's I snuck home for dinner because I couldn't afford anything else. I should be a PR representative by now, making a name for myself. Instead I was working for an hourly wage. My phone vibrated again and I looked down at the screen. Damn it.

"Hi, Mom."

"Becky, honey, I called you three times yesterday and you never returned my calls." My mother's shrill voice echoed through the speakers.

"I know, I'm sorry. What's up?" I asked.

"It's Aunt Linda and Uncle Jon's fiftieth anniversary next weekend and it's at Valley Oak Inn, so Linda needs to know if you're coming. I told her you probably would be there, but you know Linda. She needs to know for sure."

I rolled my eyes. My mother had never liked my dad's sister. Aunt Linda liked to lead an extravagant lifestyle, even though she worked as a secretary at a high school, and it drove my mom crazy. Linda and Jon hosted Christmas Eve dinner at their house every year and sent out fancy invitations with RSVPs on them. My dad had to write and mail the RSVP back because my mom refused to, claiming normal families use the phone.

"Yeah, tell Aunt Linda I'll be there," I replied. There was no reason not to go: free food, and watching my mom interact with Aunt Linda was always fun. Plus, I knew my mom would throw a fit if I said no.

"It's next Saturday at seven, so you can come home first and we'll drive over together. Linda wants all of us to wear cocktail dresses. Honestly, I don't know who she thinks her family is, because I don't know one Taylor who owns a cocktail dress other than Linda—"

"Listen, I've gotta go, Mom," I interrupted her. Her voice was starting to give me a headache.

"Is everything alright, Becky?" she asked, completely ignoring my attempt to get off the phone. "You sound tired."

I paused for a moment, trying to figure out how to answer that. I considered telling her how horrible my day had been, that I hurt my wrist and that Jane made me pick up a whole tub of black beans off the floor.

I settled for telling her the bare minimum: "It's just been a rough day at work."

I glanced up as one of my coworkers, Angela, walked into the room. She smiled and waved enthusiastically at me. Angela just started last week, and I had yet to see her without a smile plastered across her face. I gave her a small smile back. She was a sweet girl, even if she was too happy.

"You're always complaining about it there, honey. Why don't you look for a better job?" my mom asked.

I closed my eyes and let the silence between us be my answer. I knew she was just trying to look out for me, but I was aware of the limitations of my current situation without her reminding me.

"You can't let those interviews haunt you forever," she said.

"I don't want to talk about it. I've told you," I snapped. She always had to bring up the interviews. Always. I grabbed a fist full of my bangs and twisted them around my fingers until my scalp was stretched out tightly. It's in the past, I reminded myself. In. The. Past. I took a deep breath and tried to force the frustration back down into the pit of my stomach where I had buried it.

I was newly graduated when I had gone to my first interview. I had barely been out two months and I hadn't even received my diploma in the mail yet. I walked into the office with a confident smile and my public relations portfolio tucked into the briefcase my parents had bought me for graduation. I had been to all the career workshops at school and knew confidence was key. If I thought I was going to get the job, so would the interviewers. I shook their hands, firm and quick, as I'd be instructed.

The interview went well, or so I thought. The interviewer was an alumnus of Ohio State as well, so we reminisced about home football games for at least twenty minutes. I knew how important it was to network, and I thought we really made a connection. I left more confident than when I had walked in, shaking his hand and nodding with a smile when he told me they'd give me a call. For the next two weeks, I carried my phone around with me religiously. I even brought it into the bathroom. But once two weeks had passed, I took matters into my own hands and called them. The secretary who picked up had a ring to her voice that reminded me of a bell. She told me a decision had not been reached yet and I would receive a call when it did. I hung up, satisfied, but another week passed and I still didn't get a call. I called the bell secretary back, except this time when she answered my question her voice resembled a gong more than a bell.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Becky, but that position has been filled," the secretary said, pity seeping through the microphone of my cell.

I hung up, irritated that a secretary felt the need to have pity for me. I shrugged it off; I would just have to apply for another job. It was okay.

For the next few months, I interviewed for at least a job a week. Sometimes I would get a second interview, but ultimately they always ended in rejection. Every time I heard that dreaded phrase—"the position has been filled"—I wanted to bang my head against a wall in frustration. I tried to stay optimistic, but I felt like I was in a boxing match and the job market was destroying me, one punch at a time. After three months, I was finally defeated. I walked out of my last interview frustrated to the verge of tears. I just knew they'd choose someone else. I managed to hold in my tears until I got to the car. I called my mom, sobbing, barely able to see the steering wheel in front of me, much less drive.

"I'm never going to get a job, Mom," I managed between sobs.

She tried to soothe me, but I was inconsolable. I drove home and curled up on my bed. It's been five months since then, and I hadn't applied for a job since.

On the phone now, my mom was oblivious to my distraction and still talking. I concentrated on the rapid rate of her words to block out the meaning. I didn't think she was even breathing. "Just because you didn't get those other jobs doesn't mean you never will—"

"Actually, I got a job." It was word vomit. My mouth sagged open as I tried to comprehend what I had just done.

"You did?"

There was no taking it back now. I swallowed the pool of acid that had collected at the base of my throat.

"Yup." I tried to steady my vision by concentrating on the small burn mark on the corner of the tablecloth.

"Oh, honey, that's great!" I heard my mom jumping up and down, her feet pounding out a fast rhythm as they hit our squeaky kitchen floorboards. "Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

"It's not official yet. They have to do a background check first, but I pretty much got it." The lie rolled off my tongue effortlessly. It was the fantasy I had been telling myself for the last five months. In those moments at night before I really fell asleep, I would let my subconscious drift into a world where I got that phone call telling me that I was, at last, a true professional, that they wanted me to be a part of their team. That I was, in fact, good enough.

"I'm so excited for you!" I almost couldn't stand the level of shrill my mother's voice had become. "What's the job?"

"A PR firm based in the city. They're a startup company." I needed to stop. I wasn't in my fantasy; this was real life. "I've got to go, Mom. My break is over."

"Okay, but you should come over to celebrate when you're done with your shift. We'll get out the champagne!"

I numbly agreed and hung up. She sounded so happy. How was I going to tell her that it was all a lie and she would still have to tell her friends that her daughter worked at Joe's? My foot tapped repeatedly against the tiled floor. *Thud, thud, thud, thud, thud*.

"Congrats on your new job!"

I jumped at the sound of Angela's voice. I had forgotten that she was in the room. She was smiling at me again, except this time I didn't smile back. I felt like I was going to throw up.

"Uh, thanks."

"So, when's your last day here?" Angela asked.

I opened my mouth but no words came out. I looked up at Angela's smiling face, blinking rapidly. Maybe I could tell her I was still going to work weekends. Or I didn't start my job for two months. Maybe she would forget.

All of a sudden, Jane stuck her head into the break room, "Break's over. I want the truck finished in the next fifteen minutes."

I smiled at Angela meekly and rushed out of the room before she could demand an answer from me. I walked to the truck in a daze. I guess I was finally a complete failure. I was the girl who lied to her parents and coworkers so she didn't seem pathetic. I tried to bring the rest of the truck up, but my wrist wouldn't support the weight of the boxes and I kept fumbling them. Jane finally gave up and sent me to the dish room with a shake of her head. I walked away from her without a word, happy to be dismissed to the one place that I liked in this restaurant. I had no idea what I was going to do next. My mom had probably already told everyone about my new job, and I was positive Angela would let it slip before the end of her shift. Angela wouldn't mean any harm. She probably thought I wanted everyone to know. Why wouldn't I? I thought that the emptiness of the dish room might give me clarity or help me snag a PR job in the next twenty-four hours.

I liked to wash dishes because I preferred it to yelling at customers as they walked in the front doors. The dish room was in the far back corner of the restaurant, so no one ventured back there very often and it was quiet. I slipped the rubber gloves onto my hands and closed my eyes, enjoying the silence, only interrupted by the hum of the water heater in the corner. Maybe if I stayed back here, no one would find me and I could just hide forever. I shook my head at the childish thought.

I started the water and let it run until it became hot. I never thought that I would say I enjoyed washing dishes. My mom used to have to threaten me as a child so I would help her clean up after dinner. But at Joe's I discovered there was a precision to washing dishes. If I pointed the nozzle at the exact right angle, I could clean a dish in one spray. Every dish was like a puzzle that

only I could solve. I picked one up and focused on the rhythm of my method: dish, spray, turn, dump, dish, spray, turn, dump. I spent the last hour of my shift in that rhythm, not letting myself concentrate on my thoughts.

I rushed out of the building when my shift was up. The cold wind made me shiver as I stepped outside. Snow was starting to fall from the clouds and the sky was an overcast grey. I looked up at the falling flakes and blinked them away as they fell on my eyelashes. I needed a cigarette. I dug into the bottom of my purse with my uninjured hand, trying to locate the pack I kept hidden in the pocket for emergencies. It was a habit I had picked up in college and couldn't seem to break. My fingers reached desperately across the smooth fabric but found nothing. *You've got to be kidding me*. I shoved my keys in the driver's side door and flung it open. Here was one more thing I wanted and couldn't have.

I got in the car, turned on the defroster and leaned back, waiting for the heat to clear my windshield. I rubbed my hands together and closed my eyes, letting the silence envelop me. For a moment, I thought about going to my parents' house and having a glass of champagne. My mom would have the crystal champagne flutes out that we used on holidays. She would fill us each a glass and our flutes would make an off-tune melody of chimes as we clinked them together to celebrate my accomplishment. A combination of pride and tears would fill the corners of my mom's eyes as my dad proposed a toast. She would lean over to grab my hand, her skin clammy against my ice-cold fingers.

"I always knew that you could do it," my dad would say, reaching over to give me a hug. He would squeeze just a little too tight like always, and I would let my face sink deeper into his chest, so that my breath caught on the snares of his wool sweater, pretending it was real and sharing their thrill. Even if it was just for a minute.

JOSEPH O'CONNOR

I Gave My Uncle Seashells for Ashtrays

Everyone has one
gay uncle
who has been neatly tucked
away.

Mine took me out for lobster—
smoothed a white cloth napkin across my thighs,
taught me how to snap my wrists

so the whole claw fell
clean into my lap. How to clench
nutcrackers until my knuckles burned

bright as Orion's belt. I pucker a thin leg as he fingers
his cigarette. Blow fake smoke. How to get to the good meat: split the tail
open by cracking sideways. *One day you will realize you are different*

like me. The words spread as butter. A gulp of bread
at the bottom of my throat: my make-believe Adam's apple
stoppering my speech. He orders my first

drink: Shirley temple, extra cherries. I suck it down
without thinking. *Don't let Uncle Johnny take you*
to the bathroom. I cross my legs and squirm

like the bottom-feeders orgying
in the restaurant tank—he let me choose my own

red heart, to be boiled alive in clear heat,
to be cannibalized by no one other than myself.

JOSEPH O'CONNOR

Take a Lover Who Looks at You Like Maybe You are Magic

—Marty McConnell

We fucked like alchemists
teasing taboos underneath the planets. Experimentation

between two boys in a field testing warheads—a dipping sun transmutes
their curiosity: makeshift sundials pointing

no where in particular. He kissed
my mouths, kissed the inside

of my forearm. Doctors stick me
intravenous (he knows). Still searching for tonsils

floating in far-off pickle jars. Watch muscles convex
like when he carries in groceries.

Infinity is moon-crescent fingernails burning figure-eights
into my breast—he brands my obsession.

Like magicicada, we sleep seventeen years in darkness. Wake,

sing brazen through the night. Then fuck. Then die.

Our research hangs in the air, like spiders
crafting invisible silver in the night.

Pluck a shiny pube from his teeth and blow,
like dandelion seeds, like birthday candles.

Years of looking for the needle in my stack. And then you
torch it all to kingdom come, leaving nothing but a glowing
metal slice. It flies towards your magnetism.

Steel Snow, Jason Zimmermann

BRANDON RUMAKER

A Solitary Zebra is Helpless Prey

The clock read 1:46 AM.

I've been sitting here for six hours, Roger thought as he glanced at the clock sitting on the corner of his desk.

There was not much else on his small desk, just a few notebooks. The room was eight feet by twelve feet with white walls that had not been repainted in at least a decade. Most of the chipped paint was covered by posters of African soccer players, whom Roger still referred to as footballers even after years of living in the United States.

Roger stood up and stretched, knowing that he still had another hour or two of studying left for the night. He gazed out his window at the silhouette of the tree that leaned against his building. He could tell it was a particularly windy autumn night because the branches were massaging the brick wall of Roger's building. It was a large house that had been transformed into an apartment building through diligent renovation and students in need of shelter.

The scraping sound of the tree harmonized with the whistling of the wind to create a song that reminded Roger of the music of Pépé Kallé. Roger received his name in honor of the inspiration for some of Pépé Kallé's music, the footballer, Roger Milla. The day Roger Milla brought the Cameroonian football team to the Quarter-Finals of the World Cup, Roger Nzuji was born.

"You were destined to be special," Roger's father told him four years after that World Cup. "You were born on a day that Africa was able to stand out for talent, bright as the sun. Milla was at the center of that light. So are you."

Roger's father, André, stood tall like the maize they were harvesting. Looking up at his father required him to crane his neck so that he was facing the sky. His few memories of André were all of a smiling man gazing down at him, the closest humanity could get to a re-creation of God's protection.

"We saw your spirit within moments of Cameroon defeating Colombia. Milla showed the world that any one of us can be blessed. The second you were born, we all knew you were destined to carry the name."

The words faded from Roger's mind as he began to hum the song "Roger Milla" by Kallé. The music filled the air with a peaceful atmosphere that could not be penetrated by the gloomy November night.

As he hummed, he couldn't help but think of his brothers, Daniel and Emmanuel, both of whom were working in the fields of the Congo at that very moment.

"I win!" Daniel always shouted out after scoring the last goal in their childhood football games.

"You got lucky," Roger always said back with a smile.

Daniel was a year younger than Roger and quickly developed footballing ability that made Milla proud. Roger himself did not acquire his namesake's gift for football, but he still played to pass time and bond with his brothers.

Emmanuel was born two years after Daniel. There were two other siblings, but neither survived. The last child never even had a chance to see a sunrise. She died in their mother's womb, taking their mother with them. Their mother's death happened soon after the dictator, Mobutu, fled the country. After the Democratic Republic of Congo shed the name Zaire in a naïve attempt to evolve. After the civil wars began.

Roger had a natural curiosity and work ethic that stood out. After their father died in the war, the brothers united and began to work on their small maize farm with dreams of leaving the death surrounding them. Only Roger was destined to leave.

"We were lucky to learn English," Daniel said one day while they were working.

The sun was burning directly over the flatland, leaving them with no shelter from the daylight blaze. They often spoke and sang to distract themselves from the heat when the meditative rhythm of picking maize wasn't enough.

"It won't be of much use here," Emmanuel said as he gazed in the distance, searching for the locusts that were producing a drumming song that warned of crop destruction.

"It can help us get out. The camps sometimes have outsiders," Daniel responded.

"Where would we go?" Roger asked his brothers, afraid to think about leaving behind the only place they knew as home.

"Away from the fighting."

"Away from the soldiers."

"What would we do?" Roger knew that neither of the other two had an answer, but he had to say it out loud. They had discussed leaving before, but each conversation led them back into the Democratic Republic, back into waiting to be saved or be killed. They were tired of having no power. Roger regularly left the country for schooling, but he refused to leave forever without his brothers.

"We might not all be able to leave," Emmanuel said quietly, his words almost inaudible over the locusts' music.

"Roger, you were always the smartest. If we helped you leave, would you promise us that you would someday come back?" Daniel looked at Roger, waiting for a response.

Roger was surprised by the question, but he could tell by his brother's tone that this was something Daniel and Emmanuel had discussed in secret for some time. Maybe they hadn't even said a word to each other.

All three of them knew Roger would have the best chance beyond the farm. He had gone to school for years in Ghana but always came back to help with the maize. Daniel and Emmanuel never went to school. Instead, they worked as hard as they could so Roger could focus on his studies—harder than the winds currently drumming on his apartment window.

He could no longer focus on his biology textbook so he sat on his bed knowing any attempt to study would only cause frustration. He looked around at his room and thought about how different it was from home. He had a radiator and an overhead light, both of which seemed incredible to him at first. He didn't understand why people would continue working after dark, or live in a place that required fake heat to be comfortable.

"I doubt you would even recognize me," Roger said to himself, thinking of Daniel and Emmanuel, who were still surrounded by grasps for insignificant power.

"Power," Roger said. He had personal experience with the difference in power between the rebels in Africa and the government of the United States. It was clear each time he met someone new.

"I'm from the Democratic Republic of Congo."

"Where's that?"

"It's in Africa."

"You're from Africa? Wow!"

It was the same reaction from everyone he met. At first, it made him feel special or important. But after countless introductions to people, he felt embarrassed and learned to not even mention the name of his homeland. Africa was all one place to most people he met. He felt like he was a continental display.

"Good for you, making it all the way here."

"It's fucking crazy over there."

"You must be so strong."

"Do you miss it?"

"You must like it better here, right? All that war, it's horrible."

Roger wanted to be home. And each time he met someone new, he was reminded of the exact reason. He wasn't from the United States and never would be. He would always be some fortunate soul who escaped the tragedy of Africa.

"You were born on a day that Africa was able to stand out for talent, bright as the sun." His father's words constantly guided him. The people he met far from home had good intentions, but they didn't see the harshness of their own words.

"Africa is not a horrible place, there are just some bad men. It could happen anywhere," he would say.

They would look at him with a smile that said, "Definitely not here."

"I'm going to go back someday," he would add.

He would get two responses.

"Really?" and "You're crazy." They would always try to joke about the idea, not realizing that Roger's home was more than just a house to return to at the end of each semester.

"I want to help my family and my community. I don't think that makes me special." Roger was always surprised at how there was no sense of community at his school. Everyone was so focused on their own ambitions and goals.

They don't need to worry about protecting their family here, he would think. He hated how he was considered unique for having a desire to help others, to improve his home.

The other person always became friendlier while talking with him, as if living in Africa was the most interesting thing on the planet. But he knew being an African in America made him stand out, even among actual African-Americans.

"This is not your world, you are only visiting," Roger would remind himself. "Six more years and you'll be where you belong."

Roger was studying to become a doctor. He knew that trying to stop power-hungry fighters was dangerous, even before they acquired deadly weapons. He still bore scars from directly confronting rebels. So he decided that the

best option to help people was not to cause more violence, but instead keep everyone alive and healthy.

Many of the refugee camps were a biological nightmare, filled with a cycle of disease and death, a pendulum's endless swings created from a tiny push. The camps needed clean water, more medicine, and more food. But most of all, they needed toilets.

Diarrhea in the United States was something people made jokes about, but in the camps it was deadlier than sadistic soldiers. There was no treatment available, so one case would quickly spread through the camp, causing severe dehydration and, eventually, death. There was no clean system to remove waste, so the disease sat in the open. The smell of feces and corpses rotting in the heat was unbearable, at least for the first few weeks. After some time the smell became like the buzzing of locusts, ignored but ever-present.

"We can't stay here," Daniel had said shortly after arriving at one of the refugee camps. It was filled with hundreds of colorful plastic tents all clumped together with no organization. The tents looked more alive than the people inhabiting them.

"There is nowhere else," Emmanuel responded as he looked straight down, trying not to see the disorder and disease around him.

"We can survive," Roger said in an attempt to motivate his brothers. "It will get better! We will change things. We won't let the fighting happen again."

"Really?" Emmanuel looked up at his brother, his face a valley of hope and fear.

"Yes, I promise," Roger said with a smile that revealed two missing front teeth.

The three brothers were forced to leave their farm when rebels from Rwanda began terrorizing the country in retaliation of Laurent-Désiré Kabila, the leader who overthrew Mobutu. Their father left to protect his country, to protect his children. Like Kabila, André Nzuji would not survive the war. Roger was seven.

Roger wiped his eyes as if they were webs filled with spiders. Yet he couldn't stop those spiders from crawling down from his eyes, past his chin, and to the floor below him.

"I miss you," he said to his father. He said it to his brothers, too. Anyone he met from home. He was an outcast in the United States, and each day only got harder than the day before. More work, more responsibility, more thoughts of his family. Most of all, there was more doubt.

The spiders were released from his eyes and began to fill the room and take on lives of their own. Roger imagined them slowly climbing the posters of some of his idols and the posts of the bed. They climbed his legs and covered his body, a river of squirming brown and frozen white thread, covering him to his neck. He was paralyzed and began to hear his heart beat louder than any drum as a brown mass rose from the sea of spiders.

He was gazing at a *J'ba Fofi*, a spider he had only heard of, but had never seen before. It was similar to a tarantula, but larger. It rose like a person doing a push up and slowly turned toward him. Its body was roughly three feet long with legs long enough to span Roger's head and toes. The *J'ba Fofi* began to slowly turn towards him until the two were staring directly at each other. Roger could not see its features in detail as his tear ducts were still creating more spiders.

But he did feel nausea as they began crushing his whole body, as if every cell in his body was being choked. He couldn't breathe or swallow and his body became incredibly sensitive. The room was brighter, the spiders were louder, and each one of the thousands of legs was distinct on his skin.

This was not the first time Roger felt the entire world become unbalanced. Soon after arriving in the United States, he had fleeting moments of strong panic, as if he was still at that refugee camp, and he would relive moments he prayed he could forget. Sometimes he would spend the entire day angry and unsure why. All it took was a car speeding by, someone using a knife, or yelling and he would immediately feel himself collapse like so many regimes in the Congo.

He could never predict when the fear would return. His father had taught him what fighting an unwinnable battle would lead to, so he surrendered to the emotions until they passed. He watched this enormous spider, fascinated, as it turned towards the window and slowly began to back away.

What could be out there that would make something like you afraid? Roger wondered.

Then he blinked.

And the *J'ba Fofi* was gone.

The other spiders began leaving through any crack they could find, either in the wall or under the door, as Roger calmed down and wiped the tears from his eyes.

The *J'ba Fofi* and its children were just reminders of the world that Roger had left behind and would never be truly a part of again. He had fully immersed himself into academia and there seemed to be no turning back.

Roger had been able to wade through the ocean of academics with the assistance of Dr. Regina Graceman, his academic advisor.

When Roger walked into Dr. Graceman's office for the first time, she was intensely reading an article on her computer, only half-facing Roger. Roger immediately noticed that her desk appeared to be a storage facility for various articles and essays, which stood out in comparison to the office itself. The office had shelves of books and journals that were alphabetically organized by author and then by title.

"You want to go to med school?" Dr. Graceman asked Roger during their first of many conversations.

"Yes," Roger said with determination as he shifted his weight, so that the uneven legs of the wooden chair he was sitting in were properly balanced. Dr. Graceman turned towards him in her green swivel chair to look at him carefully. He had only been in the United States for a few weeks and was still adjusting to the new culture.

"Do you know how the process works?" Dr. Graceman asked with some confusion. She was a tall blonde woman with hazel eyes and a large mole on the left side of her lip. When she spoke, the mole danced in time to her voice.

"Process?" Roger asked her, trying to ignore the mole.

"Yes, you have to go through an undergraduate education first. After that you can apply to medical programs."

"Under…I don't know what that is. I've only taken classes on occasion before. I was only told that I would be studying to be a doctor."

"Basically, it's a way to indicate that you're intelligent and capable. Not everyone can just become a doctor. It requires considerable work."

"I'm sorry. I don't quite understand."

"There's a system and—"

"No, I mean the word, indicate. I don't think I have heard it before."

"Oh." Dr. Graceman was silent for a moment as she gazed into the depths of a yellow and green coffee mug hidden from Roger's view. "Is English your first language?" She asked.

"No, French. *Français*."

Roger quickly realized that despite having leraned enough English to get by in the Congo and his classes in Ghana, he was not ready for the language of science. He could handle the material if it was in French, but it took him a while to learn it in English. After a year, he had made considerable progress with the assistance of Dr. Graceman. She had found French copies of his textbooks online and introduced him to some of the French professors in the language department. Roger compared the language within the English textbook to the language within the French book. It was a tedious task, but he would refer to each book as one of his brothers in order to remain focused on why he had come to the United States in the first place. Emmanuel was the French book, Daniel was the English book.

But these textbooks were not really his brothers, and Roger continued to struggle.

"What happened?" Dr. Graceman asked after Roger failed a test. Roger had gone to Dr. Graceman's office repeatedly over two and a half years, but never to discuss one of her tests. "I know how hard you work; this isn't like you," she said.

"I don't know," Roger said quietly, staring at the yellow and green coffee mug, which had become a symbol for stability. It was the only object in the office that Roger knew for certain would be there the next time he visited Dr. Graceman.

"Are you doing okay?" she asked, regaining his attention. Roger frequently talked to Dr. Graceman when his stress became too much for him, but he would not talk about his problems unless she directly asked. He didn't want to seem rude by interfering with her work, so he would never initiate.

"I can't focus. I can only think of home. I tried to study, but I couldn't. Even during the test, it was only home," Roger said, looking at her with squinting eyes.

Dr. Graceman sighed, mulling over the piles of papers covering her desk. "Well, there's nothing you can do about it now. No changing what happened." She smiled at him. "One bad grade won't ruin your chances. Once you start going for interviews, they will know that you have talent," she said to him.

"A zebra never loses its stripes," he said to her with a smile.

He had only seen zebras a few times in his life, when he was around five or six years old. He remembered talking with Daniel about why they looked so strange.

"Zebras avoid getting eaten by making lions dizzy. When a lion or a scary animal attacks, they all run around. They become one," Daniel had explained.

"When they're scared, you can't tell where one starts and one ends," Roger mumbled, still sitting on his bed. "Zebras aren't meant to be alone."

The memory of Daniel explaining the survival skills of zebras helped though. Roger began to smile as he imagined a younger Daniel teaching a lecture on zebras to university students.

Was Daniel five at the time? The thought appeared as suddenly as the spiders had disappeared.

The only reason Roger even knew his birthday was because of the World Cup, and he hadn't figured that out until after arriving in the United States. *How old would they be?*

Roger continued to think of his siblings, his source of strength. *Without them I couldn't be sitting here right now,* Roger reminded himself. And with a wipe to his face, the last spider creeping was flung off.

He looked over at his biology textbook, considering the option to study once more. Medicine had been his way out of the Congo; now it was going to be his way back in.

"Who is that?" Emmanuel asked in a hushed voice.

"He's not one of us," Daniel said, peeking behind their blue tent at a doctor who was treating a woman with a high fever.

The doctor appeared to be a younger adult and was not as tall as Roger's father had been. He stood out in the camp, for he had clean clothes and a walk of confidence and strength. The man glowed in comparison to those he was treating.

"No one helps the dying like this," Daniel said in wonder of the mysterious man. They had never seen a doctor using Western medical techniques before.

"I heard that he has powers," Emmanuel whispered.

"A gift from God," Roger said with a breathless voice that revealed his curiosity. He approached the man.

"Who are you?" Roger asked him.

"You can call me Ekow," the doctor said, turning toward Roger.

"Ekow? Where are you from?" Roger asked.

"Ghana." Ekow spoke quietly and slowly, as if each word was a lullaby.

"Why are you so different? How did you get here? What are you doing to her?"

"So many questions." Ekow smiled. "I am a doctor and I trained far from here, far from Ghana. Do you know where Ghana is?"

"Yes, I learned it in school."

"What about Europe?"

"Europe?"

"That's where I learned medicine. The old ways were not working, so I learned the ways that could work. I was looking to help the sick, and I looked all the way here," Ekow, said as he sat down next to Roger.

"Can I learn too?" Roger did not know where Europe was, except that it probably wasn't in Africa. He was willing to go anywhere if it meant leaving the diseases and violence behind.

"Only if you're willing to," Ekow said.

"I am."

"Good."

"Would you take me with you?" Roger asked.

Ekow's eyes narrowed and his lips curled into a frown. "I can't this time. I should be back in a few months."

A few months could be a very long time for a child in the refugee camps. Shortly before fleeing his farm, Roger had learned that thirty sunrises was called a month. Many refugees died after a handful of sunrises, and survival became a bigger challenge with each new day. To survive over a hundred sunrises until Ekow returned seemed impossible.

"Can I go with you next time?" Roger asked.

"Only if you're willing to," Ekow said.

"Can my brothers come too?"

"How many?" Ekow asked quietly. Roger barely heard him but it seemed as though Ekow sounded upset.

"Two, Daniel and Emmanuel." He gestured back towards the blue tent where the hands and faces of the two children could be seen sticking out from the edge of the tent.

Ekow looked at Daniel and Emmanuel for a few seconds then said, "I'm sorry. If you want to stay with your brothers, you can, but I cannot give space to all three of you."

Roger glanced back at his brothers for a second and then looked back towards Ekow. Roger looked towards the sick woman who was behind Ekow. "Will you save her?" Roger asked.

"Yes, I will," Ekow said as he looked over his shoulder at her. He turned back to Roger and said, "Plus many others. I won't let these people die."

"I'll go with you," Roger said.

Roger was brought back to his room as a sudden thud forced his thoughts of the past to retreat. He could hear laughing and yelling from outside his building. There was another thud and Roger realized someone was hitting the door to the building. *I wonder who it is. Maybe someone forgot their key.*

Roger leaned over his desk to reach for his blinds so he could get a better look. As he began to pull the blinds up, he was greeted by an orange object smashing against his window. He immediately leapt back at the the sudden sight and the booming sound that acted as its companion.

He squinted slightly, trying to determine what the object had been. It had left a small amount of residue on his window which looked like paste. Then another object collided with his window along with another bang. He realized that whoever was outside was throwing pieces of pumpkin at his window.

He closed his eyes and took a slow breath, assuming that the cheering people outside were drunk and would eventually move along onto something else. He just had to wait. He had been doing it for decades—he could wait a few seconds more. He opened his eyes in time to see a third piece of pumpkin invite itself to the glass of his window. Then a fourth. Then a fifth. He leaned

over to lower his blinds, which had only partially opened. As he reached for the cord of the blinds, the people outside stopped throwing pieces.

Instead, someone decided to throw an entire pumpkin at his window. And they decided to throw it as hard as they could. It struck his window just as he began to pull the blind down. The sound it created was closer to a gunshot than an instrument. The noise was joined by a faint cracking sound as the pumpkin proved itself to be stronger than the window. Roger felt the fear from minutes before return.

Was this what the *J'ba Fofi* was afraid of?

Roger had almost shouted at the sight of the pumpkin flying towards him. Now his heartbeat was muting any sounds from outside and he began to feel his chest being prodded along with a sudden desire to vomit. He collapsed to the floor as his vision became unfocused and his thoughts turned once again to the past. This memory was different, for it forced its way into his mind as if it were that pumpkin breaking through the window.

He could see a man with a machine gun yelling out to a crowd surrounding him. His brothers were there too and they looked just as afraid as he felt.

Suddenly the man with the machine gun turned to Roger and began yelling in a language Roger didn't understand. Roger tried speaking in English, then in French, but the man shoved the gun into Roger's mouth and stood silently, watching him.

All around them, plastic tents of various colors were being knocked over and searched by Rwandan rebels. It was a raid to find women and food. It was also an excuse for the rebels to abuse the little power they had. They had guns and were looking for a reason to use them.

Minutes passed. The refugees all stood perfectly still in absolute silence. Their eyes were on Roger, the epicenter of tension. Everyone in the camp was waiting for Roger to die. But he didn't die. In a final attempt to telepathically communicate with God, he thought of as many prayers as he could. But the rebel did not fire his gun.

The rebel slowly pulled out the gun and said in English, "You are nothing to me. You can live or die. I don't care." The rebel then took a knife and waved it in front of Roger.

"This knife and this gun. Remember who has the power," the rebel said. Then the knife was deep in Roger's leg and there were screams. Gunshots. People running on the dirt and grass. Tents falling. His brother's face. Roger couldn't tell where bodies had started to fall and where the last one had fallen.

"I don't want to think about this. I don't want to think about this. I don't want to think about this." Roger kept shouting these words as if they would protect him from the pain he was reliving.

It was a memory that replayed itself over and over, a clear recording of that most terrifying moment. Roger hadn't seen the memory in such detail since coming to the United States, so he had thought that he had finally made progress. Now he knew that the memory had tricked him, waited for him to become completely unsuspecting before rising and striking again. He wasn't sure what to be more afraid of: the fighting within the Democratic Republic of Congo, his own memory, or the people outside the building who were ignorant to what was going on in Roger's room.

"They don't know," he said, unsure if that made him angrier or empathetic.

The sounds of the yelling began to fade, as the people outside grew bored of their evening activity. Roger remained on the floor listening to his heartbeat pulse through his entire body.

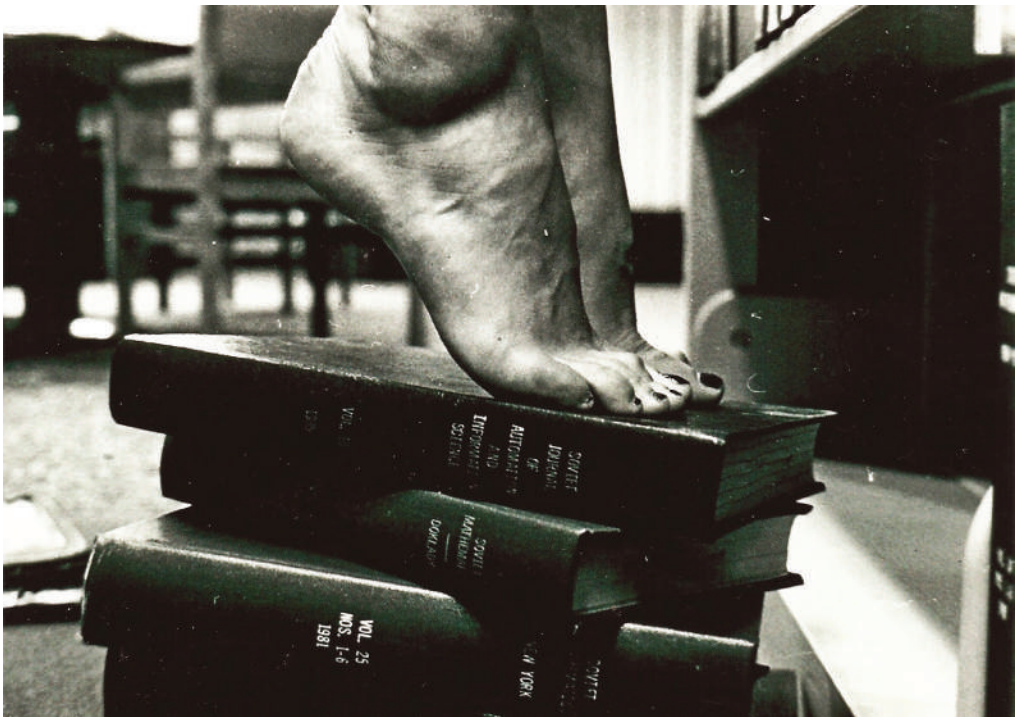
He began to hum the song "Roger Milla" once again, in an attempt to force the anxiety to fly out of his vocal cords in a buzzing swarm and disappear into the night. After humming the song for twenty minutes, Roger slowly got up and once again looked at the textbook sitting open on his desk.

"They become one." Daniel's words came out from between Roger's lips. Roger thought of his father, of Daniel and Emmanuel, of Ekow, of Dr. Graceman. For a second he even thought of God, after years of doubt.

Roger sat down at his chair and took a deep breath. As he exhaled, he picked up a pen and prepared himself for another hour of studying.

The night became quiet except for the music of Pépé Kallé.

"Good thing I'm not alone," Roger said with a smile.



Studious, Danielle Levin

Amuse-Bouche

The Atlantic floor litters
a décor of rotted bones laid
in fragments—arrows: femurs and phalanges
pierce feet. Dive further to bear
witness. Scattered mandibles are aftermath—dinner
guests carried utensils in their gums & watered mouths
over a main dish served rare & tender.
Saline-shake corneas: for best taste.
Sear the bottom, prepare carpal garnish,
let sit in coral trench.
Resurface as ragged tooth bends across jostled ulnas.
Shored; patella fins kick against a humorous pallet.
Forward strokes extend—clavicles
crack into oceanic crust.

MEGAN NOLAN

Supply Ice to Swelling

Palming wasps, I skate
diaphanous wingtips
into bookmarks—chaptering
leaflets of our existence: before
age ten & after

I stopped eating radishes (parsed
into cubes, fed to your dog
under the table). You spent snow
days at my hip: a helium
balloon brushing stucco

ceiling & refusing to pop.
I thought eating gummy worms
in my pudding was childish,
told you I had a dentist
appointment during your birthday—

I gifted sandbox leftovers
two days late & you saved me seashells
party-favored with nametags: you didn't tear
mine apart—hail-stuck eyelashes
cracked goodbyes, you exhaled

your frost-breath smile. To cure
egos tattooed on scalps: slip
icicles through my hair & skim
those years for ladybugs hidden
on the undersides of leaves.

Momentary Pause, Hannah Glaser

CARLY FOWLER & LAURA GOLDEN

Hannah Glaser: Featured Artist

This volume of *Gandy Dancer* includes Hannah Glaser as the featured artist. Hannah is a junior at SUNY Geneseo, creating personal and realistic works of art in multiple mediums.

GANDY DANCER: While we reviewed your artwork, we were blown away by your use of realism and personal touch. Your experience and passion really spoke to us. Could you tell us how long you've been creating art, and if there is a medium that you prefer to work with?

HANNAH GLASER: I've been making art ever since I can remember. When I was little I was drawing constantly with markers, pencils, pens, anything I could find. I also went to an art camp in the summers for about five years in a row, and entered paintings and drawings in the county fair. But I never actually got to take an art class until the end of high school. It's pretty hard to choose a favorite medium because I haven't really mastered any of them yet, but if I were to pick two, they would be watercolor and oil painting.

GD: It seems like a lot of your artwork has a personal touch to it. Could you talk us through the process of making your art and the personal experiences and emotions behind it?

HG: My artwork usually starts with a photograph that I or a family member has taken. The photo is usually one that I find myself looking at repeatedly, one that I have an emotional connection to. I'm a very quiet person, so a lot of what I understand about people I have learned from observation. Sometimes, in my photos, I find a sort of magical moment, where the image

actually captures the person and not just their likeness. My goal in creating art, especially portraits, is to convey a usually unseen part of a person in visual form. Not just part of their personality, but some deeper truth of their character. I think the painting of Michael with his cat Tucker is the one piece of my work that comes closest to achieving this.

GD: In your artist biography, we noticed that you study English at SUNY Geneseo. Do any of your paintings have a written counterpart?

HG: My writing and my artwork tend to focus on similar themes, such as identity and relationships; but I've only done a few works that include both written and visual components. The first was a painting I did for a contest in high school, in which I focused on the transition between childhood and adulthood. I painted poems in ink into the dark blue background of the painting, so they were subtle and hard to read. The other piece is actually this painting of Michael and Tucker. I took creative writing the year before I started the painting, and wrote a poem about the original photograph. I was somewhat happy with the poem, but I felt that the image was necessary to understand the full meaning of the poem.

GD: You paint a lot of animals. Could you tell us the backstory of that? Is there a story about *Danny's Lamb,* which you submitted?

HG: I've loved animals since I was very little, and I've been constantly surrounded by animals. I very often feel that I connect better with animals than people, so being at college without any pets is kind of like living without oxygen for me. Sometimes I actually talk to my dog Bear on the phone, and he gets all excited and starts running around the house. Every summer we visit the farm where my mom grew up in upstate/Milford, New York, (I'm from Maryland). The painting of Danny was taken outside my Grampa's dairy barn on that farm, and the farm now belongs to Danny. When I was little, we used to help Danny herd or feed the cows, and we spent a lot of time with the other animals, such as horses, ducks, goats, and sheep. My whole family is kind of animal-crazy. Christmas parties for us usually have as many pets as people. I have three aunts and uncles who are vets, an aunt who's a dog trainer, uncles who are farmers, and many animal-raising cousins. I like to think that I take after my Gramma a bit, who unconditionally loved all animals, including her pet deer and opposum she fed every day.

Danny actually told me that he can't stand sheep and he wishes I could turn it into a calf, but I think he was probably fond of them at one time. The picture was taken by my Grampa, Fred Powers, who loved photography and was very talented.

GD: We've heard that you have work hanging in galleries. How has that experience been?

HG: The painting of Michael and Tucker is currently at the SUNY Student Show in Albany, but it should be on its way back soon. It's been really nice to get to show my work, and it encourages me to keep creating more artwork.

GD: What projects are you currently working on?

HG: Currently, I'm focusing all my attention on my Thesis Exhibition, which will feature several watercolor paintings. I'm designing the paintings to be pages in a children's book, which I hope to publish in the next year or so. The paintings are winter scenes of a girl and her dog, and the book is meant to be a Christmas story. I'm really enjoying working on it, but the amount of time it requires has been rather overwhelming on top of all my other classwork.

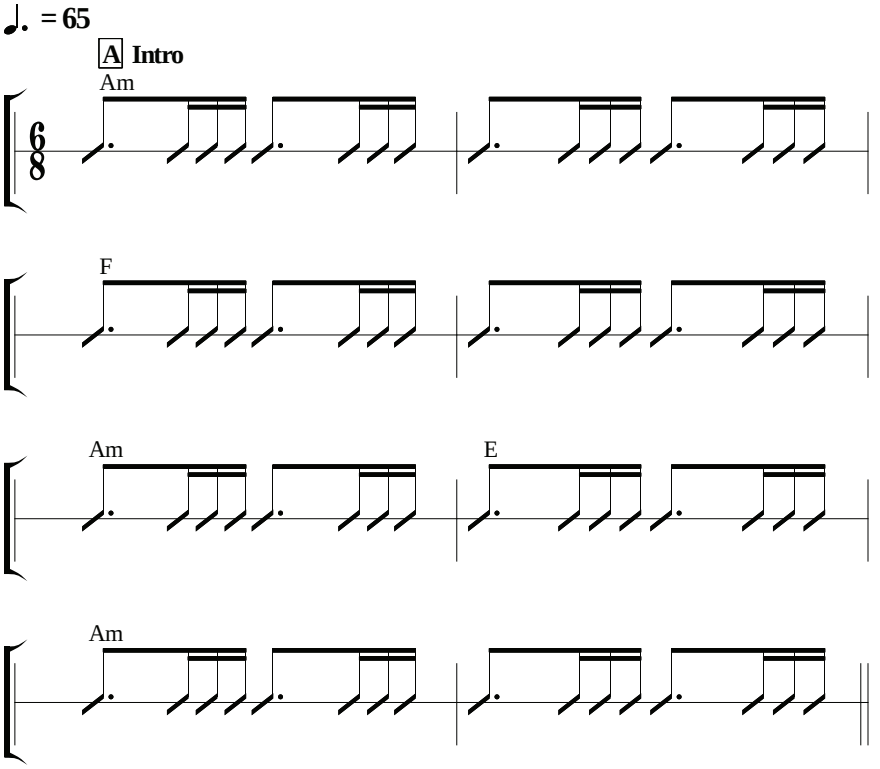
GD: Do plan to continue making art after Geneseo? What does your artistic future hold?

HG: I definitely plan to keep making art, probably for the rest of my life. Next year I'll be applying to MFA programs to study studio art, and I hope to write and illustrate children's books, which will undoubtedly be filled with animals.

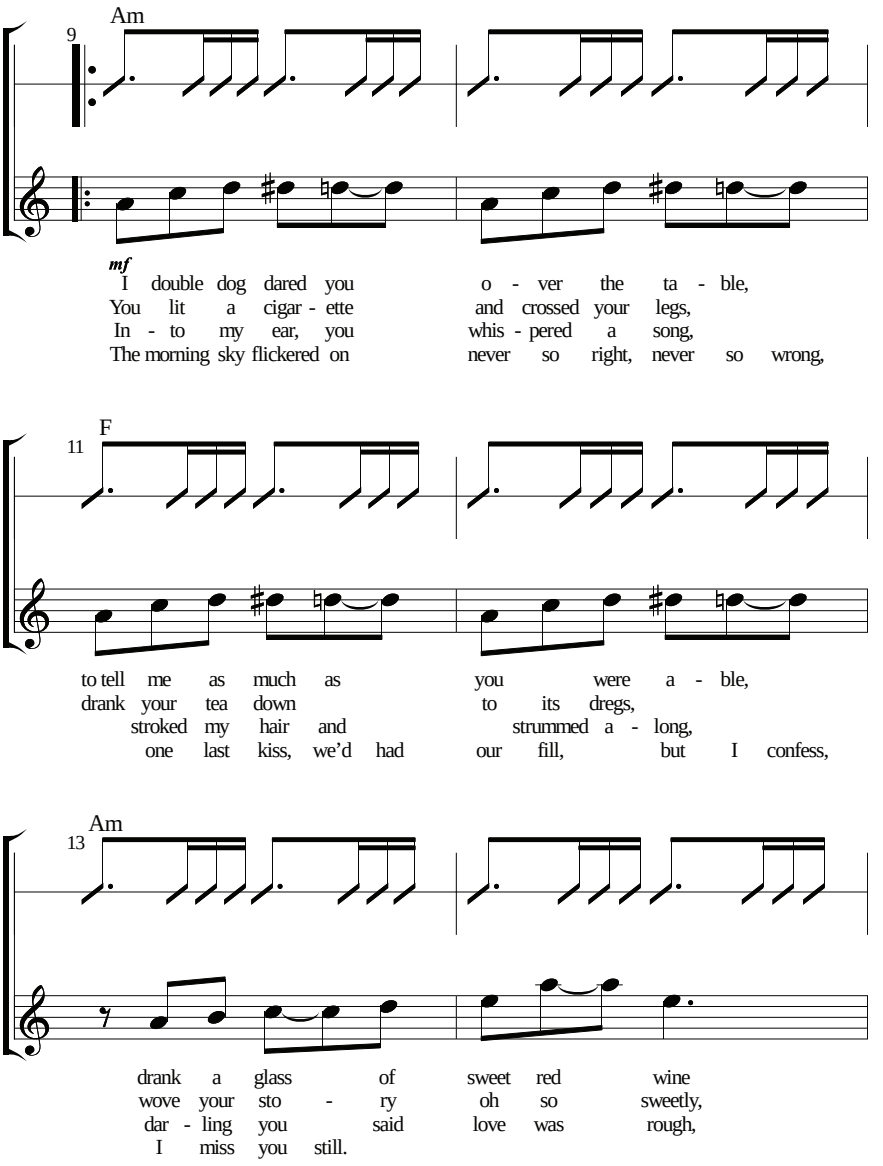
Danny's Lamb, Hannah Glaser

I Whispered Never

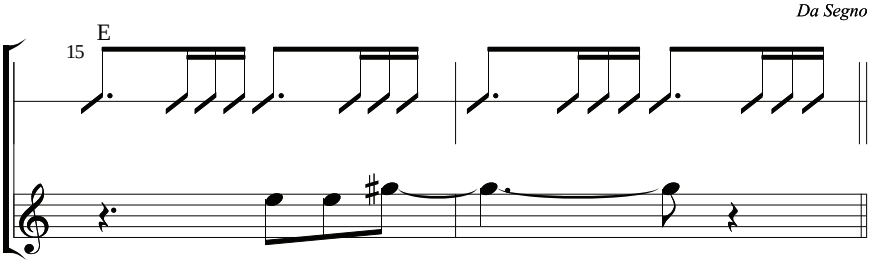
For this issue of *Gandy Dancer*, we received the lyrics of Amy Bishop as a poetry submission. Bishop joined with Kirsten Maxwell, a singer/songwriter to set her lyrics to music. We decided to include the music in our print edition, as well as a recording of the song for our online journal.



B Verse


Am
9
mf
I double dog dared you o - ver the ta - ble,
You lit a cigar - ette and crossed your legs,
In - to my ear, you whis - pered a song,
The morning sky flickered on never so right, never so wrong,
F
11
to tell me as much as you were a - ble,
drank your tea down to its dregs,
stroked my hair and strummed a - long,
one last kiss, we'd had our fill, but I confess,
Am
13
drank a glass of sweet red wine
wove your sto - ry oh so sweetly,
dar - ling you said love was rough,
I miss you still.

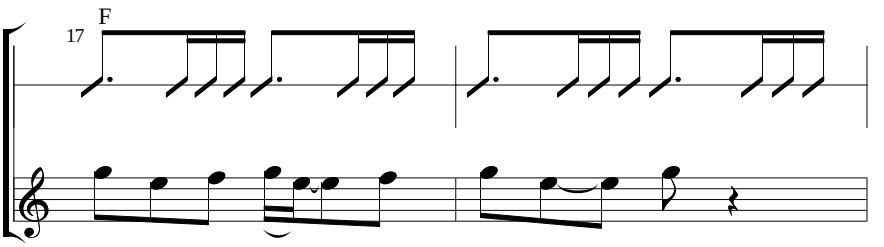
Da Segno



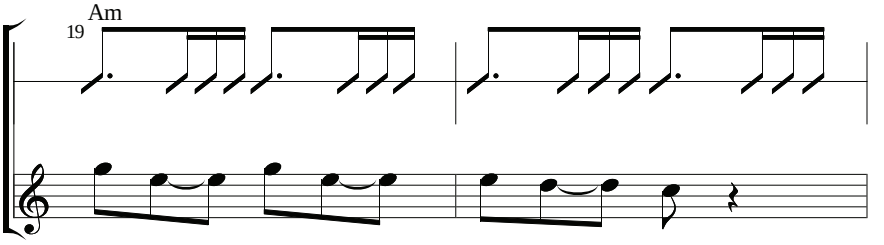
and took my time.
never was I caught so easy.
told me I was more than enough.

C Chorus

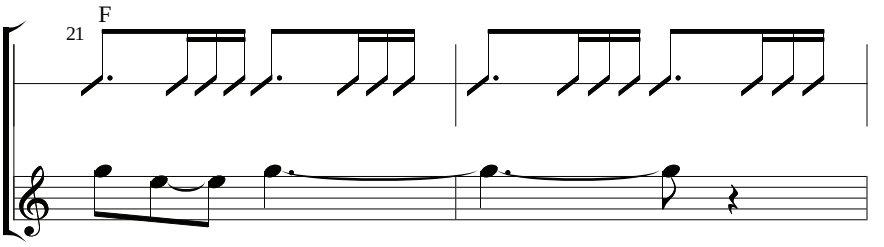
1-2.



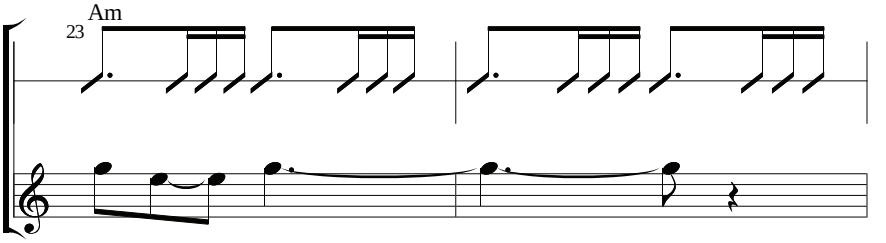
I whis - pered 'ne-ver' a - gainst your lips,

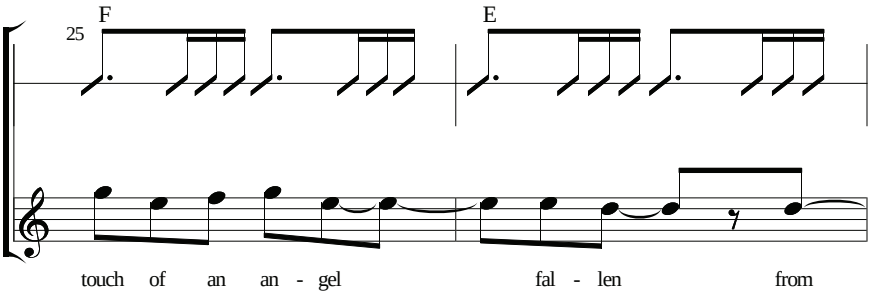


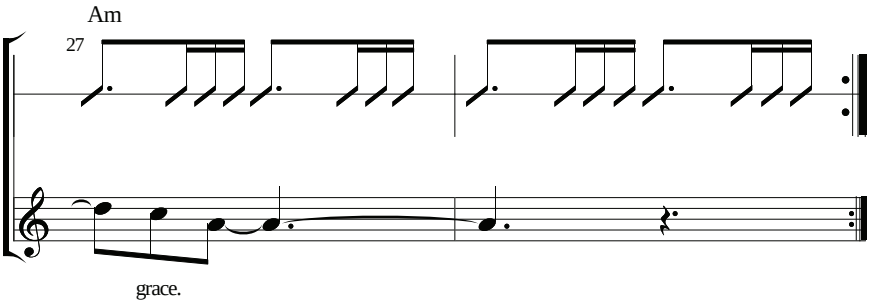
broke my pro - mise with a kiss,



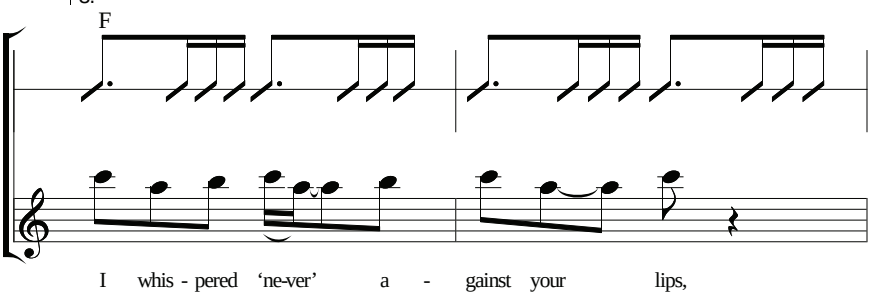
touch of truth,

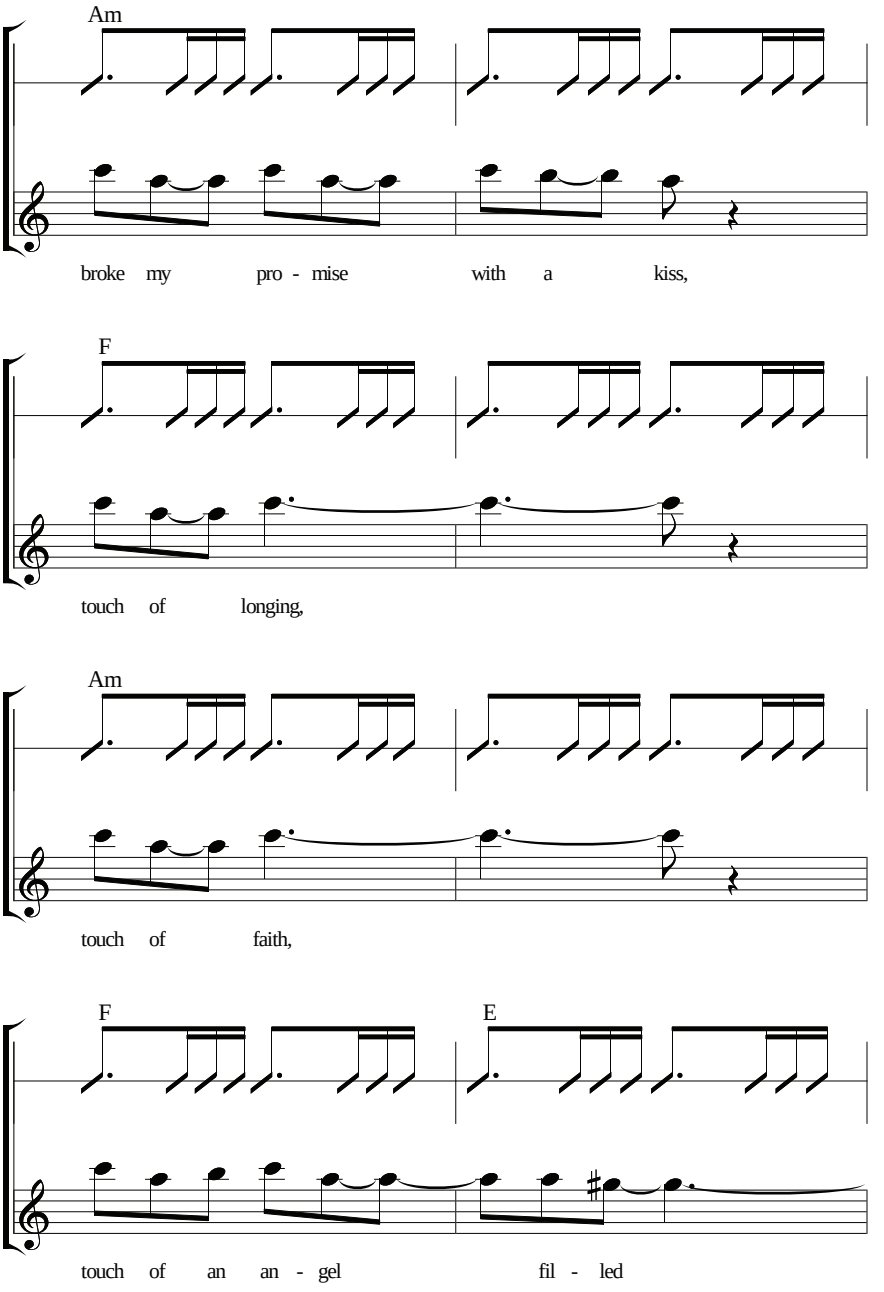


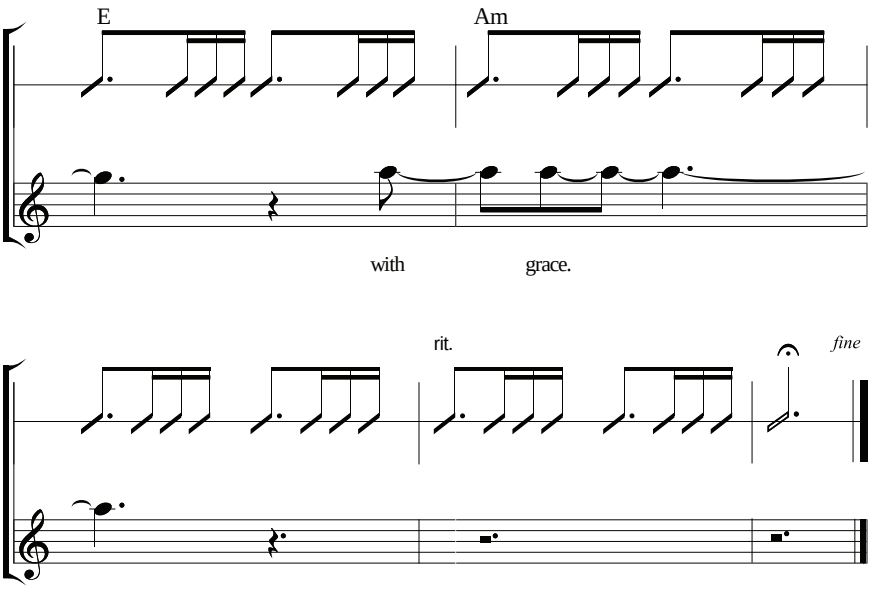




D Final Chorus




Am
broke my pro - mise with a kiss,
F
touch of longing,
Am
touch of faith,
F
E
touch of an an - gel fil - led


E
Am
with
grace.
rit.
fine

SARAH N. LAWSON

Portraits of Struggle: A Review of Amina Gautier's *At-Risk*

As a middle-class, white female from a rural area in Western New York, reading has always been a way for me to learn about other people and their lives. Amina Gautier's *At-Risk*, an engaging collection of short stories about the lives of young African Americans, introduced me to characters unlike any I have met before—in life or in literature.

At-Risk was published in 2011 by the University of Georgia Press and is the winner of the 2011 Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction. In *At-Risk*, Gautier explores narratives that are often ignored and characters who are dismissed by society. The collection includes ten short stories, beginning with "The Ease of Living," the story of a boy from Brooklyn named Jason. He is sent by his mother to live with his elderly grandfather in the South after his two friends are killed during a gunfight on the streets. Jason resents his exile, but his grandfather's home provides him an unlikely sanctuary in which to cope with the deaths of his friends and consider what that means for him.

This short story is immediately followed by "Afternoon Tea," which is narrated in first-person by Dorothy, a first-generation American and daughter of a formerly wealthy Jamaican woman. Dorothy goes to a Saturday program hosted by members of a professional women's sorority, but she is acutely aware that these women are trying to divorce her and the other girls from their mothers and their upbringing. This reality is exquisitely exposed in the

line, "The Zeta Alpha Deltas had not been subtle in the least way about their desire to wean us from the women they didn't want us to become." Though their identities and backgrounds are different, Dorothy and Jason are both examples of the desire to be loyal to one's environment despite the harm that environment can bring. The choice to open the collection with these two stories as reveals the many potential risks and obstacles in place for these young people.

While the characters in Gautier's collection might be linked by the term "at-risk," the reader comes to understand the inaccuracy of such a term. The main characters are of different ages, from elementary school age to adolescence. All of them are acutely aware of the pressures of a world that expects them to fail. This is highlighted in the story "Pan is Dead," in which a gifted boy, Peter, is faced with the return of his father, who has a history of drug abuse and is a portrait of what Peter could become if he doesn't use his intelligence to escape. The story is narrated by Peter's younger sister, and she draws attention to the conflict of race and success with the lines, "'Boy, you can't be president.' This much I knew. Everyone knew that the president was always white and never from Brooklyn." This is especially interesting commentary from a collection published after the inauguration of President Barack Obama, but it reminds the reader that the image of a black man in the highest office in the nation had previously been unimaginable to young black people.

One of the collection's most striking features is the envelope technique it employs to complete the book. The closing piece of the collection, "Yearn," returns to characters from the first story, "The Ease of Living." The story is not about Jason, however. It is the story of his friend Stephen, one of the two who was shot and killed. This image of a boy before his tragic and untimely death is a heartrending reminder that the term "at-risk youth" is applied to real people in our world. Though Dorothy, Peter, and Jason are all fictional characters, there are young people just like them with real desires and passions which often end up stymied by situations out of their control and choices that they never planned to make.

Gautier's work is poignant, compassionate, and breathtaking in its humanity. The characters scream and whisper and declare, delivering their stories in a way that resonates in one's bones. I won't soon forget the characters I've met here: whether feisty or bewildered, determined or forsaken, they have much to say about the perils of adolescence, especially as it intersects with poverty and racism.

MARY LINDEN AND KEARA HAGERTY

Amina Gautier: An Interview

Born and raised in Brooklyn, Amina Gautier currently teaches at DePaul University in Chicago. Her short stories have appeared in numerous literary journals such as *The Antioch Review, Iowa Review, Kenyon Review,* and *North American Review*. Winner of the Flannery O'Connor Award, her first collection, *At-Risk,* explores struggles faced by young African Americans. Her second collection, *Now We Will Be Happy,* was recently awarded the Prairie Schooner Book Prize and will be released on September 1, 2014.

It was a pleasure to hear Gautier bring her work *At-Risk* to life during her visit to SUNY Geneseo and to work with her on this interview.

GANDY DANCER: Can you talk about how you selected the title *At-Risk* for your collection? We were struck by the contrast between the title, which suggests statistics and sociological reports, and the stories, which examine the particular lives of individuals. Also, your characters often allude to feelings of invisibility—they refer to themselves as "statistics" and "indistinguishable black kids." How does the concept of invisibility intertwine with the idea of danger or being at-risk?

AMINA GAUTIER: *At-Risk* is comprised of ten stories which center on the options available to underprivileged "at-risk" African American youth in Brooklyn, New York. The stories in the collection are set in the late 1980s and early 1990s during the war on drugs, the tail end of Reaganomics, increased budget cuts in public education, and the rise of gifted or enrichment programs to aid underprivileged public school kids. Though the point of view varies from

first to third and from male to female, all ten stories feature child protagonists and are told from the points of view of the kids or adolescents in the story. In compiling the collection and entitling it *At-Risk*, I sought to give names and faces to children who have been marginalized and to put narrative pressure on the term at-risk itself, believing that when we affix labels like at-risk, low-income, disadvantaged or underprivileged to the same kids we claim we wish to help, we enact a dehumanizing process of erasure upon them. Furthermore, in choosing to tell the stories from the vantage points of children, I sought to depict children in a realistic manner devoid of the sentimentalized renderings they so often receive, to pierce the veil of nostalgia that encourages readers to remember childhood as a period of innocence and leisure and remind us how dangerous a time childhood can be.

GD: Other characters in *At-Risk* seem very aware--and often irritated-- by the fact that they fall under the gaze of those with more privilege. Dorothy, the protagonist in "Afternoon Tea," especially resents the women who view her as someone to rescue. What do you hope readers will understand from characters like Dorothy, characters that are skeptical of the role models and charity imposed upon them?

AG: When readers encounter characters like Dorothy and Naima and many others in the collection, I hope that they will see them as individuals rather than types and that this way of seeing will color their real world experiences as well, so that they think first before they condescend or presume to know what others desire. Well-wishers and do-gooders abound in this world (for which I am thankful); yet, truly compassionate people can become enamored of their own volunteerism, such that it takes on a life of its own and overrides, erases, silences, or fails to take into account the needs of the people. At such a point, altruism disappears and vanity rears its head.

GD: Many of your protagonists seem to be girls on the brink of adulthood, just going through puberty. What are the specific challenges or pleasures associated with writing from the point of view of someone younger than you?

AG: I don't focus greatly on the gender of the protagonists in the collection; both males and females get plenty of narrative time with me. Part of the point of the collection is to depict adolescents—the point of view characters are all between the ages of ten and sixteen, which is a time period that happens to cover puberty. As Henry James demonstrated in *What Maisie Knew*, writing from the child's --or adolescent's-- point of view can enrich fiction by adding an additional later of conflict, vulnerability, and depth above and beyond the conflict of the story's own dramatic action. Point of view becomes an extra conflict area. 'Adult problems' such as gun violence ("The Ease of Living"), drug addiction ("Some Other Kind of Happiness" and "Pan

is Dead"), assimilation, racial profiling, and drug use ("Dance for Me"), homophobia ("Boogiemen"), pedophilia/statutory rape ("Girl of Wisdom"), unplanned pregnancy and single motherhood ("Afternoon Tea" and "Held"), drug dealing ("Yearn"), and public education budget cuts ("Push") are more revealing when seen through the lens of a younger protagonist living in a culture riddled by such problems while lacking the maturity to make sense of, or the power to effect, change.

GD: Some of the most interesting relationships in the collection are those between mothers and daughters or mothers and sons. Can you talk about your interest in these relationships—and other intergenerational ones, such as the one between Jason and his grandfather in "The Ease of Living"?

AG: I think it's pretty safe to generalize and say that (unless you're a child celebrity with an income) until you reach adulthood and your circle widens to include co-workers and other types of people, as a child/kid/teen, the people in your life with fall into three main groups of (1) people to whom you are related, (2) people in your neighborhood or on your block, and (3) people you know from school. Unless I wished to write a collection about adolescent orphans, it would have been virtually impossible to write a collection about adolescents without including their relationships with members of their families. Families come in units other than nuclear ones, so the stories mirror and reflect reality by depicting a variety of different family structures that reflect those we encounter every day.

GD: "Girl of Wisdom" depicts the development of a sexual relationship between Melanie, a young girl, and a much older man. Despite her youth, it's hard to view Melanie as a victim and Milton as a villain. What were the particular challenges of writing these characters? How did you perceive Milton, and how did you want him to be perceived?

AG: The understanding of the story rests upon point of view. I wouldn't say that point of view is a challenge for me as the writer, but it may well be a challenge for some readers. "Girl of Wisdom" uses dramatic irony, so that the reader is privy to information about Melanie that Milton is not. The very first word of the story tells us Melanie's age, but this is information given in narrative, not dialogue. Therefore, the reader knows that Melanie is underage, but since Melanie deliberately withholds information about her age from Milton, he is unaware that she is underage.

GD: The stories in *At-Risk* are loosely linked by setting and theme. Can you talk about the order of the stories and how you organized the collection?

AG: "The Ease of Living" and "Yearn" are the only two stories in the collection in which characters recur. Thus, the decision to begin with one and end with the other constitutes a deliberate choice that allows the stories to

function as the frame for the collection to which the other eight stories

cohere. The ten stories are all set in the Brooklyn neighborhoods of Bed-Stuy, Brownsville, and East New York during a six year period comprising the late 1980s and early 1990s, and roughly half of the stories are about kids who escape the vagaries of their neighborhood's dangers and the other half who don't. Each of the stories in the collection has a mirror image, a counter-part, a "flipside," if you will, which should be apparent upon reading. In regards to the ordering, the chronological order of "The Ease of Living" and "Yearn" was intentionally reversed. Thus, the reader begins the collection being told what Kiki and Stephen's fate will be in "The Ease of Living," but is allowed to see them in the last story, "Yearn."

GD: We got really invested in your characters, such as Kim and her sisters in "Held," and Jason and his grandfather in "The Ease of Living." What are you working on now? Any chance we might encounter these characters again in a novel?

AG: Time will tell.

EMILY WEBB

Growing Up Lucy

— for Genaro

I.

I distinctly remember the moment when I became a calamity. It occurred mere minutes after learning I had become an older sister at four years old—a reckless age when scabbed knees are still considered cute.

While some of the frantic events that day linger as fragments in my memory, I still vividly recall my father trudging toward me as I lounged in my pink and cream plastered bedroom, filling my daily quota of coloring. I noticed how his bristly eyebrows crinkled together in a frustrated panic while he struggled to lure me away from my coloring book.

"Em, you need to come with me to the hospital right now," my father pleaded between heaves of breath. "We have to go meet your baby sister."

As he wildly whirled his hands in the doorway to hurry me downstairs, I couldn't seem to understand what was possibly more important than finishing my Crayola opus. Sure, I knew that we had to make room for this tiny newborn in our already tiny family. I just didn't see what all the fuss was about—my new sister was going to be another rambunctious kid just like me.

In waiting for her arrival, I had planned a gamut of adventures that would have trained this girl for her new role as my partner-in-crime. We were going to jiggle to the best tunes blaring from my Playskool cassette player, chitchat over cups of fathomed tea in my mossy playhouse, even rummage through my costume chest to flaunt the glitziest jewels and chicest outfits. Little did I realize that such overly eager impulses could get me into some tight troubles.

Caught up in the fantasy of being an older sister, I strolled over to the door of my closet and peered through its hinges to gawk at my father, who was frantically rifling through clothes to pack a suitcase for me.

"Hi, Daddy!" I shrieked through the crack, though he was too frazzled to respond. "I can see you! Look, Dad! I'm in the doo—"

Before I could even breathe out another chuckle, my father finished packing and abruptly slammed the closet door, inadvertently clinching my lips between its hinges. I still remember the searing twinge of hurt that pulsated beneath my lip tissue as I yelped for him through tears and muffled speech.

Though I knew that my father did not mean to inflict pain on my motor mouth with what felt like a closet chokehold, I realized years later that the episode was entirely self-inflicted. It was the birth of a hot mess. I bore a fat lip a week later to prove it.

II.

My mother never spent much time with her father as a child, though she cherished the moments when they'd plop in front of the tube together and watch their nightly program. In her small brick colonial in Queens, my mother would not have much of a say when it came to choosing the family programming on their single Magnavox television set. She usually had to tolerate her other five relatives wielding the dial, including my grandfather. He would often force her to sit through repeats of *I Love Lucy*, the celebrated six-year sitcom starring Lucille Ball, the outlandish funnywoman who cracked the televised veneer of a poised housewife with uproarious hijinks.

Though the show had been playing on air over and over again for almost twenty years, my mother would still strain her paunched baby cheeks from giggling at Lucy's wild antics. Alongside her father, she would watch in hysterics as Lucy gulped down too many spoonfuls of Vitameatavegamin—an alcohol-based serum that was "rich in megetables and vinerals"—or when she played Harpo Marx's reflection. She delighted in listening to her father chortle whenever Lucy would screw up another one of Ricky's gigs at the club or bawl like a child after getting caught in her shenanigans. I can imagine my grandfather letting out his signature cackle—reminiscent of the Count from Sesame Street, though missing its Transylvanian nuances—as my mother looks over to catch his revelry and follow suit.

III.

Somehow, stories of my dumb luck or casual misfortune have become prime dinner conversation. That time I lost grip of the leash on Aunt Tracy's dog after being startled by another dog's bellowing bark, for example. Or the time I desperately needed to pee while stranded on a tarmac for seven hours before my first international flight, alone. Or even the time I accidentally blasted Blondie's "Call Me" across the quiet section of my college's library when my headphones popped out of my computer. These recurring tales of my awk-

ward pain have caused my family to christen me with nicknames. The most popular one, as of late, has been "calamity"—in the loveliest of ways, my folks assure me, though I still dole out an eyeroll every now and then.

If you ask my mother, she will insist that I'm just as endearingly clumsy as Lucille. I would expect as much from the woman who loafs around our house in ratty, pink pajamas, printed with that iconic scene of Lucy and Ethel gorging themselves with chocolates off a speeding conveyor belt. Those pajamas have floated through almost every distinct moment of my childhood for as long as I can remember, whether my mother was scolding my mindless antics or guffawing over my latest mortifying episode. Those pajamas have watched me bloom into a calamity while trying to grasp adulthood. I just wonder how long it will take before I bloom out of it.

IV.

A grand horn medley swells with the babaloo shimmy of maracas as Lucy's opening credits swipe across the screen and introduce that iconic episode, "Job Switching." When the screen fades into a shot of the Ricardos' modest living room, Ricky walks on set by slamming the front door and calling for his crazed redhead in a huff. Lucy then tramples onscreen and chirps out a loud "is that you, sweetie pie?" ready to sling her arms around her husband until she catches his fuming glare.

Before she can retreat backstage, Ricky grumbles Lucy's name with his burly Cuban accent and reels his finger inward to summon her as if she were an impudent child. Lucy's lips curl into a guilty cringe, a response I recognize.

This time, Lucy's crime is overdrawing her bank account. Ricky reads aloud a note that she leaves on one of her checks: "Dear teller, be a lamb and don't put this through 'til next month."

As the audience chortles off-screen, Lucy winces under Ricky's hard stare and starts to wring her hands together, as if trying to scrub the proverbial red off.

"I don't know what's the matter with you," Ricky whines. "Every month, every *single* month, your bank account is overdrawn. Now what is the reason?"

The shrill pitch in Ricky's outraged voice sounds similar to my mother's when she would chastise my senseless behavior as a kid. That time I ran into oncoming traffic, the afternoon I left our basement door open and caused my baby sister to topple down the stairwell—you know, "kid stuff."

While my mother has disciplined me for reckless antics over the years, I would never have served her as cheeky of a retort as Lucy's when she tells Ricky, "You don't give me enough money!"

The audience then falls into a bout of rousing laughter while Ricky and Lucy begin to bicker about who works harder in supporting the family. Sick of arguing about their responsibilities, Ricky finally challenges his wife to experience his life in the working world and apply for a job. With her head held exceedingly high, Lucy appears confident when she accepts this test of her competency, though we all know how she fares after working as a candy maker at Kramer's Kandy Kitchen.

V.

While he would yuck it up watching Lucy raise all sorts of hell on screen, my grandfather could have been a comedian in his own right. My mother remembers the way he would spill out cheeky one-liners almost as if they were scripted. "Do as I say, don't say as I do," he'd say whenever his offspring caught him disobeying his own rules, or he might say, "I zigged when I should have zagged," if he took the wrong route during a car ride. My grandfather hardly seemed to take himself seriously, even as the head of the household.

Though I still find it hard to believe that this former sailor, carpenter and World War II veteran could deliver such hilarious lines as if it were his job. I suppose there must be a kooky gene floating somewhere in our family line. While I've listened to my mother tell stories about his shenanigans over the years, I can't seem to conjure enough of my own memories about my grandfather's double life as a jokester.

When I look back on my whirlwind childhood, I can only piece together his vibrant presence in old photographs. I am often posing with my grandfather on some patriotic holiday—whether it be Memorial Day or the Fourth of July—his sanded palms cradling me close while we share a dimpled grin. I slightly remember the way my grandfather would watch over our family like a vessel, anchoring himself in an armchair at any gathering so that he could play with his grandkids and still watch the Mets game. He would often kick back and watch me ricochet around the room, cackling in awe of my boundless energy.

The only memento of my grandfather that still rings clear is his old, hearty laugh. It fueled my childish abandon when I scaled countertops for unreachable treats or played hardcore rounds of leapfrog. It made me feel daring and invincible, even when the calamity unfolded in welts and scrapes. I felt like I could do no wrong around my grandfather, no matter how impulsive or foolish I acted.

VI.

The camera cross fades into a bleak workroom at the candy factory, its walls seemingly starved of rich colors despite the black and white transmis-

sion. Enter Lucy and her faithful accomplice, Ethel (dressed in smocks and deflated chef hats) filing in behind their supervisor. As they walk into the workroom, Lucy and Ethel catch another employee sitting at a workbench and whisking her hand around in a frothy pool of chocolate.

When their supervisor comes to an abrupt halt stage right, the disastrous duo reacts on cue as they topple over each other with a jerk. With a taut frown flaunting her authority, their supervisor doles out instructions that raise the tight vessels of her bony neck.

"Ricardo, I'm going to put you to work chocolate dipping," she beckons over to Lucy with a tone of inflated command. "You say you've had experience?"

Distracted by the mesmerizing efficiency of the other worker, Lucy waits a beat until she snaps out of her ditzy trance.

"Oh, yes ma'am. I'm a dipper from way back," the redhead assures her boss with a sprightly tone. "They used to call me the Big Dipper."

Lucy turns to Ethel and rewards her punch line with a proud chortle until the audience joins in. The camera then focuses on the supervisor, her lips pursing into a firm crease and her eyes bugging out in scorn. Catching this displeased reaction, Lucy soon cuts her guffaw short and instead lets out what sounds like the bleat of a queasy doe.

"There is no room in this plant for levity, however weak," the supervisor remarks. Lucy responds with a faint "yes ma'am," quickly collapsing the dimples carved in her radiant cheeks.

When the supervisor decides to escort Ethel offstage and place her in a different department, Lucy hops onto a stool next to the employee hard at work and settles herself at the table, complete with a tub of melted chocolate, fresh candy and a wooden cutting board. Before she gets her hands dirty, Lucy peers over at the other worker to observe her mechanical motions. Her curious smirk signals the workings of a rascal—I can tell because I wore that same simper just before the door hinge cut my mischief short.

Once she believes she can handle the candy dipping process, Lucy blithely scoops a glob of melted chocolate out of its tub and spatters it onto her cutting board. She feverishly swishes her fingers around in the bubbling liquid, looking back at her coworker every now and then to check if she's doing it right. As she continues to play in this muddy puddle, Lucy begins to prod the chocolate with a deliriously chipper grin, almost as if she were punching piano keys in a grand concerto. Ignoring wads of candy that drop around her workspace, Lucy flings its remains into a pile on the table and spatters the chocolate dripping from her fingers into that mess. The calamity builds to a crescendo and howls of mirth rise from the audience.

Before she proceeds to muck around in this slop, Lucy suddenly flickers her wide, dopey eyes across the room when she hears a fly buzzing overhead.

She follows its path until it finally lands on her coworker's face. Acting on a sheer impulse to kill the critter, Lucy whacks her sticky hand against her coworker's cheek, prompting the woman to strike back with another chocolate smack.

The audience starts to hoot once Lucy turns to the camera, her face slathered in globs of chocolate. She then gasps with disgruntled breath as the screen fades out.

VII.

One moment that crawls into my mind when I consider my grandfather's humor is the time he broke out in uproarious laughter after raving at my aunt in public over family dinner. As I gorged myself with plates of gnocchi and eggplant Parmesan alongside my relatives at an Italian restaurant, I could hear a ruckus coming from the other end of the table where my aunt sat across from my grandfather. As the noise grew louder, I looked over to find my aunt wrangling with a wine bottle that was clutched in my grandfather's wrinkled, wobbling grip. I assumed that he was trying to pour what might have been his third glass, but my aunt wanted to stop him since she knew that he could keep pouring.

"Stop it, okay?" she grunted in an audible whisper while hunched over her food, struggling to free the bottle from his fingers. "You've had enough already."

"What's the matter?" my grandfather whined. His grimace expressed all of his waning strength at seventy-five years old.

As he started to raise his voice—partly due to frustration and partly due to his poor hearing—I noticed how patrons sitting at other tables peered over their shoulders and gawked at this hollering old man. They were enthralled by his tantrum, as if he were a zany child.

"Will you stop?" my aunt sternly uttered under her breath, glaring at my grandfather until he released that coveted bottle. "We're in public—people are staring."

"So what?" he shouted in what sounded like a fit of enraged amusement. "I yam what I yam!"

Though it felt inappropriate at the time, I couldn't help but giggle at my grandfather's cartoonish outburst. It resounded against the restaurant walls with an odd note of both triumph and resignation. While I scanned the reactions from my family around our table, I caught my mother hiding a weak smirk as she focused her expression in her plate of angel hair.

VIII.

By the time she aged well into her twenties, my mother had grown too large for that modest brick colonial and soon mounted a quest for adulthood. She became the first in her family to earn a college degree (which she afforded with her own wallet), she worked through countless odd jobs until she secured her title as a Supreme Court clerk, and she even managed to raise two daughters while wrangling my calamity. In watching her face every kind of hardship over the years, I've come to admire my mother for this reason—she is a warrior.

While she has forged a foundation for her growing family, my mother still cherishes the time she spent with her father over the years, carrying his beloved cackle in her mind. When asked about her fondest memories of my grandfather, my mother immediately recalls his antics on the night of her wedding. She caught him grooving and gliding to disco music on the dancefloor, whisking almost every female guest off her feet.

"He was a dancing fool!" she chimes with an incredulous chuckle. "I had never seen him act that crazy before."

She kids that he was probably excited to get rid of his daughter. Though her weary hazel eyes, vacant as they whirl into a fit of nostalgia, suggest more.

Before she toddled out of the venue in her puffed lace dress that night, my mother remembers how her father ambled towards her, amidst hundreds of clamoring guests to bid her farewell. She noticed the way his bristly eyebrows knitted together as his eyes welled with tears.

"You know how I feel," she simply mutters, emulating his shaky tone. "I'm your father and I will always be there for you."

I can hear my mother echo his words with a snivel, which helps me realize that she rarely heard this kind of sentiment from her father. I believe my mother when she insists that she had always felt close to her father growing up, despite how seldom he expressed such warmth. I suppose her warrior skin must have grown with time, throbbing to thrive on her father's pride and affection.

When she steadies her voice to budge out another answer, my mother concedes that she must now harbor memories, like this one, since he can no longer express those feelings.

"It's like I've been mourning Grandpa for the past three years," she murmurs, shirking the hurt in her words with downcast eyes. "The way I see it, he's already gone."

IX.

If I were to have asked my grandfather about that public dinner outburst years later, he most likely could not have told me where we were, what we

ate or even who we were. He would have just stared at me vacantly with tired eyes. Though I would have probably repeated myself a few times and clearly enunciated in a raised voice so he could listen with his hearing aid, I know that he would have just resorted to shrugging his shoulders and staring back into space, listless and irritated.

In the past three years, as dementia clawed through his brain, I've watched my grandfather decline into an idle, sedated husk of a man. When I first heard the news about his diagnosis from my mother, I struggled to process her bleak report. Sure, I had heard tragic tales about elderly relatives in other families grappling with a decaying memory as a result of this syndrome—though I hadn't really believed that my family would be dealt such a faltering, emaciated hand. While the term "dementia" may directly translate to the Latin word for "madness," I refuse to believe that my grandfather was driven insane by its symptoms. Though I admit, he didn't seem to possess his own self as he reached its seventh and most crippling stage.

As the result of his cognitive decline in his last few years, my grandfather had to endure the touch of another human scrubbing his back in the bathtub and wrangling his body into an adult diaper, since he could no longer perform his daily routine. He often lashed out at his wife or his aide when they struggled to haul his inert, gaunt frame from his bed into a wheelchair everyday. If he tried to open his mouth and communicate, he could only groan in muted babble or sometimes bray out with incoherent exclamations. In those last few months, I also learned that my grandfather had become prone to a phenomenon known as "sundowning," in which dementia patients sleep during daylight hours but later become restless and confused at night. According to most psychological studies, these combined factors of weight loss, fatigue, and agitation usually manifest as a depressive disorder in most dementia patients.

I didn't really need a psychologist telling me what I clearly saw: he didn't even cackle anymore. While his brittle bones continued to age well into his eighties, I noticed how his spirit diminished as if he was retreating to the beginning rather than braving the end. I couldn't really tell what was worse.

X.

Cut to the final scene of Lucy's mayhem in the candy factory—the pinnacle of her sugared nightmare. The camera fades into the same dismal workroom set, though this time it features a long conveyor belt stretching from one side of the stage to the other. Lucy and Ethel are herded into this room like before, but the duo now fixes their tense gaze on the contraption.

The camera focuses on Lucy as she ricochets her twitchy eyes up and down the wide expanse of the belt, clearly dreading its automated gears and

levers. With a knitted brow, Lucy fears that this moment may be her last chance to prove her competency in the working world. She doesn't seem to have much faith.

The supervisor breaks Lucy's anxious stupor as she begins to give more instructions. "Now, the candy will pass by on this conveyor belt and continue into the next room, where the girls will pack it," she orders in a much more stringent tone than before. "Your job is to take each piece of candy and wrap it in one of these papers and put it back on the belt. You understand?"

Lucy and Ethel answer with a weary reply, "Yes sir—uh, yes ma'am!" before the audience rumbles with a few chuckles. The viewers don't seem to have much hope for the calamity twins either.

"Alright, girls. This is your last chance." The supervisor seethes with a twinge of exhaustion. "If one piece of candy gets past you and into the packaging room unwrapped—you're *fired*."

She bellows into the next room for the operator to start the conveyor belt. Lucy and Ethel suddenly jerk upwards in fright and pluck wrappers from the countertop. When chocolates slowly start to tread across the belt, Lucy and Ethel lurch closer with their hands hovering above the incoming stock. They snatch these candies from the belt, crackle their wrappers around each piece in a tizzy, thud them back onto the belt and watch for the next one.

Once they settle into a productive pace, Lucy and Ethel find themselves wrapping at a greater frequency. The belt picks up speed and bare chocolates quickly scurry past. Raucous laughter pounds against the screen as the audience indulges in what sounds like a fit of schadenfreude. The camera zeros in on Lucy's grimace as she watches her gainful employment slide away from her grasp, one sweet at a time.

"I think we're fighting a losing battle!" Lucy hollers over to Ethel above vindictive hysterics. She looks to her right side to find Ethel already shoving those pesky candies in her mouth so they don't pass into the next room.

As the laughter reverberates through the chaos, Lucy proceeds to hastily wrench her hands around each candy, twisting its wrapper with tense shoulders. But then, the conveyor belt stops. The frazzled women look at each other in pure terror and start to grab any sugary remains from the belt, collecting them in their oversized caps and even larger mouths.

When the supervisor returns onstage to find not a single candy left, she surveys the duo with pleased astonishment while they sit upright, stuffed with their secret of failure.

"Well, fine. You're doing splendidly," the supervisor smugly remarks. She then shrieks to the operator offstage, "Speeeeeeed it up a little!"

Lucy and Ethel bug out their tired eyes in shock and resume their work. The scene fades out.

XI.

In spite of my yearning to help care for my grandfather in his last months, I could only send recycled words of solace to my mother over the phone while six hours away at college. When I was available at home, I made sure to visit my grandparents so that we could catch up. Essentially, I tried to distract them from his sickness with my sprightly energy.

One night last January, I offered to drive over to their cramped apartment, which is five minutes away in a neighboring town. My mother often assumed the role of caregiver when his aide wasn't on duty, so I wanted to spare her for one night. Besides, I thought I could handle it—I had just turned twenty-one after all.

Once I briskly knocked on their apartment door, I waited for a minute or two until I heard my grandmother jingling its chain lock and then opening the door to greet me.

"Oh, hi, Pussycat," she said in a rather subdued tone. "Come on in."

As I stepped through the doorway, I immediately noticed my grandfather, sitting hunched against a reclined bed loaned by the local hospital. His gaze was glazed over onto the television set.

"How's he doing?"

"Meh, he's not getting any worse but not getting any better either." My grandmother shrugged her gaunt shoulders with exhausted indifference. As much as I imagined that she wanted to assist her husband in every possible way, I knew that her slight, shrunken frame couldn't handle the physical strain.

I headed over to the foot of his bed and tried to focus his attention on the genial wave of my hand. My grandmother then scurried closer to his bedside and slapped him repeatedly on the shoulder until his eyes found her face.

"Do you know who is here to visit you?" she hollered into his ear. It was one of the many brain puzzles we quizzed him with so we could gauge his condition. "Do you know who this is?"

When he heeded her questions with a meek "huh," my grandmother repeated herself, but much louder this time. I remember when they used to bicker like Fred and Ethel. Now, it just seemed like she was screaming at him. I watched my grandfather crane his neck to stare in my direction and then slowly turn back to her with a response.

"Uh, Cheryl," he gurgled out as his lip started to quiver from too much work. Cheryl is my mother's name.

While I had tried to prepare myself for this day, I couldn't stop the shock that shuddered through my veins once I felt this reality of his syndrome. My grandfather had become the dementia patient.

As I tried to shake off those broken nerves, I noticed my grandfather swiftly tack his fingers onto his knobby calves and start scratching into his skin with his fingernails. His legs were lacerated with streaks of dried blood.

"When did this start?" I asked my grandmother as I struggled to steady my faltering voice, not looking away from his damage.

"Oh, that? He's been doing that for a while now," she replied. "I'm not really sure why."

My mother told me months later that my grandfather had contracted scabies, or parasites inside the skin that are usually festering under unwashed linens. She assumed that his previous two-month stint in a nearby rehabilitation facility might have caused the infection.

Watching my grandfather cringe as he tried to scrape the pain out of his skin, I began to question. I might have convinced myself that I could nurture him since I had reached an adult age, but I will always be Lucy. No matter how hard I would try to deliver the tender care and comfort he desperately needed, I knew that I might topple onto his frail body after catching my foot on the bed or I'd inflame his abraded skin while trying to warmly touch his knee. This calamity can't be trusted to watch over someone so delicate. It would be a child taking care of another child—I would easily make his condition worse.

XII.

Working toward her starring role on *I Love Lucy*, Lucille Ball fought tooth and nail for twenty years to rise out of amateur films so that she could become a slapstick queen. She might have endured plenty of hardships on the way—the deaths of her father and uncle, the frequent absence of an unfaithful husband—but she made sure that she fumbled into televised greatness.

With each new episode in the series, Ball strove to perfect every pratfall or wacky face. Once the cameras started rolling, Lucille would bawl like a glorified lady child until audiences broke into hysterics from her shenanigans. When it seemed like Lucy would never overcome her calamity, Ball was right behind her to control the chaos.

After watching countless episodes of *Lucy* over the years, I realized that such mayhem could foster a hilarious blessing if steered in the right way. I could still comfort my grandfather with a boundless spirit as long as I focused that energy on treating his condition. If Lucy could tackle the responsibility of amusing others, then I sure as hell could for the sake of my family. That's the truth to growing up—accepting that life needs more laughter.

XIII.

When my grandfather finally stopped scratching his red-slathered legs, I tiptoed closer to his left bedside and picked up a tube of prescribed ointment and a washcloth from the night table. Once I started to cleanse his wounds with hot water and massaged them with cool gel, I looked over to catch the tense wrinkles ease in my grandfather's face while he slowly closed his eyes to slumber.

I found my grandmother watching the film *Hope Springs* on their small, gleaming HD television set. In this particular scene, Meryl Streep and Tommy Lee Jones sit in a movie theatre as an elderly couple, bickering about one potential way to spice up their date.

"What's going on?" my grandmother asked in a whisper of innocence.

In this moment, I heard canned laughter echoing inside my head. It would be too awkward, so instead I laughed it off with a loud chortle until she giggled in return.

About the Authors

Amy Bishop is a junior English (Creative Writing) major at SUNY Geneseo originally from Hamburg, Germany. A connoisseur of language, her passion lies with poetry as she is a romantic at heart. She'd like to have tea and muffins with Sylvia Plath, as she admires the intensity of her writing.

Sarah Christ is currently a junior at SUNY Geneseo pursuing a double-major in Communication and English (Creative Writing). Originally, she is from the small town of Palmyra-Macedon. Her guilty pleasure is watching the Buffalo Bills play on Sundays. She was published in *Gandy Dancer* 2.1, and she would love to sit down with her favorite childhood author, Gordon Korman.

Sarah Corcoran is a junior at SUNY Geneseo studying International Relations and Spanish. For the most part, she enjoys the insanely large amount of snow in her hometown of Syracuse, New York and freezing her toes off skiing. If she could, she'd have tea with George R.R. Martin to find out how he will end his series.

James Fitz Gerald is a second year graduate student in the Binghamton University English Department. He is currently pursuing his MA and intends to pursue a PhD thereafter.

Hannah Glaser is a junior at SUNY Geneseo double-majoring in English Literature and Studio Art. Hannah has a passion for animals, and much of her artwork focuses on the emotional connections between humans and their animal companions. This spring, she is working on her art studio thesis exhibition, which will feature a series of watercolor illustrations for a children's book she is writing.

Madeline Herrick is a senior at SUNY Geneseo, studying both English (Creative Writing) and Mathematics. She's from Ballston Spa, New York and likes to travel as much as possible. She prefers coffee over tea, and she hopes that Mark Danielewski does as well.

Meghan Kearns is a junior English Literature and International Relations double-major at SUNY Geneseo. She grew up in Orchard Park, New York, but her enthusiasm for travel has taught her that home can be found anywhere. She carries a strong conviction that everybody has a story worth writing. This is her first publication.

Joshua Keller is a Ph.D student in English at SUNY Albany. He was born in Seoul, South Korea but grew up in Red Lion, Pennsylvania. He loves to travel and explore the local folklore of the places that he visits. If he could, he would sit down to tea with William Faulkner and offer to share a flask of whiskey under the table.

Anna Kushnir is a junior at SUNY

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Samantha Lambert is a sophomore at SUNY Geneseo majoring in Communication and minoring in Sociology. She comes from Brooklyn, New York and enjoys running social media platforms (especially Tumblr and Buzzfeed) for Geneseo and on-campus organizations. Sami would love to have tea with Roald Dahl, her favorite childhood author.

Stephon Lawrence is a senior English (Creative Writing) major and Art History minor at SUNY Geneseo. She was born and bred in Brooklyn, New York, where her heart steadfastly remains. When she isn't writing or camped out in Geneseo's art studio, Stephon enjoys spending time with friends and watching 90's post-apocalyptic anime. She was published in *Gandy Dancer* 1.2 and would like to have tea (spiked with whiskey) with Ernest Hemmingway.

Danielle Levin is a junior at Binghamton University studying Graphic Design and Management with a concentration in Marketing. She lives in Suffern, New York and enjoys solving Sudoku puzzles in her free time.

Bibi Lewis is a senior at SUNY Geneseo, originally from New York City. When she isn't writing, she can be found knitting or rambling about feminism. She was published in *Gandy Dancer* 1.2. She would gladly share a lemon bar with Gertrude Stein or Michael Chabon.

Kirsten Maxwell is a senior English (Creative Writing) major at SUNY Geneseo. She hails from Huntington, New York and hopes to one day be a world famous guitar-playing-henna-wearing singer/songwriter. Her work has previously appeared in *Gandy Dancer* 2.1. She would love to have tea with Rebecca Lindenberg, whose honest and passionate work has inspired Kirsten in her exploration of poetry.

Stephanie Nawrocki is a senior at SUNY Geneseo studying English Literature with a minor in Political Science. Born and raised in the snowbelt of Western New York, she enjoys any sort of winter activity, from tobogganing to pelting innocent friends with tightly-packed snowballs. Stephanie has written for *Thought Catalog*, an online journal that publishes a variety of different genres.

Megan Nolan is a senior at SUNY Geneseo and nearly finished with both of her majors: English (Creative Writing) and Communication. She is from Syracuse, New York and probably spends too much time playing video games. She would like to have tea with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle to find out which Sherlock Holmes spin-offs he enjoys and which ones make him cringe.

Joseph O'Connor is a junior at SUNY Geneseo majoring in English with a concentration in Adolescent Education and minoring in Gender & Women's Studies. He is the Vice President of Geneseo's Pride Alliance, as well as the President of Geneseo's LGBT and Advocacy club on campus. He hails from Lynbrook, New York and enjoys playing Seeker on Geneseo's Quidditch team. He has been published in Geneseo's *OPUS* and

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Julianne Rocco is a junior at Binghamton University studying Biology and Studio Art (Painting). She grew up in New City, New York and, when not studying or training her pet fish to do tricks, she enjoys baking cookies and doing yoga. This is her first publication, but she has won local competitions for her artwork. She would enjoy having tea with Dr. Seuss to ponder life through rhyme, as long as there were some scones on the side.

Brandon Rumaker is a senior at SUNY Geneseo studying Psychology. He is from Ossining, New York and enjoys films. He would like to have tea with David Lynch, though he would probably leave more confused than he came.

Jim Ryan is a senior English (Creative Writing) major at SUNY Geneseo. He lives in Avon, New York and has previously published a poem and story in *Gandy Dancer*. He would love to one day drink tea with Neil Gaiman while discussing gods and good art.

Sarah Simon is a freshman at SUNY Geneseo majoring in Communication with a Journalism and Media track. She is originally from Manhattan, New York and feels blessed to have grown up there. She has been published in Geneseo's *MiNT* literary magazine and would like to have tea in cold blood with Truman Capote.

Andrea Springer is a senior English major at SUNY Geneseo. She will be attending the University of Rochester in the fall to pursue a Master's degree in Adolescent English Education with a specialization in literacy. She recommended a book to Matthea Harvey once and still writes about the moment in her diary.

Suraj Uttamchandani is a senior Mathematics major at SUNY Geneseo, originally from Commack, New York. When he's not trying to force a link between the banal and the abstract, he plays with impossible equations and other maddeningly infinite mathematical objects. If he could, he would gladly have a cup of tea or coffee with Jhumpa Lahiri, who has inspired much of his writing.

Emily Webb graduated from SUNY Geneseo in 2013 with a Bachelor's degree in English (Creative Writing) and French. She hails from Oceanside, New York and now works as a roving reporter for the *Long Island Herald*. She has published poems in *Opus* and was named Honorable Mention for the Mary A. Thomas Award in Poetry. She would choose to sip tea with Sylvia Plath so that she could learn how to truly love like a mad girl.

Jason Zimmermann is a freshman at SUNY Fredonia studying Video Production, and he plans to take on Visual Arts and New Media as a minor. Film and photography are passions of his, and he loves finding ways to make them more fun and interesting, which is what intially got him into long-exposure photography. He hopes to one day make a career out of his passions, but even if he can't, he will never stop doing what he loves.