



# **Gandy Dancer**

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

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

Our Postscript 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](mailto: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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**CREATIVE NONFICTION:** We accept submissions up to 25 pages. CNF must be double-spaced.

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**VISUAL ART:** We accept submissions of art—especially photos, drawings, and paintings—in the file formats jpeg, tiff, and png. Submitted images should have a minimum resolution of 300 dpi and be at least 5 inches wide. Please include work titles in your submissions.

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*Special thanks to:* Allison Brown, Kate Daloz,  
Michele Feeley, the Parry family



# Dear Readers—

Welcome to the tenth issue of *Gandy Dancer*. If you are reading this, we've completed our second (and last) semester as managing editors, and we're on our way out into the post-graduation world. Right now, we might be up to our eyelids in champagne, or waxing poetic over the golden years of our college days, or screaming into a hole in the ground while Simon & Garfunkel's "The Only Living Boy in New York" plays and the camera pulls away.

We'll try not to get too sappy. That being said, graduating means reflecting about what we are leaving behind, and what lies ahead. Rising to the surface of these thoughts are the simple, slim volumes of *Gandy Dancer* we've helped bring into the world. Each issue of *Gandy* is a record of time and memory: days or years of experiences and thoughts turned into stories, essays, poetry, paintings, sculptures, and photos. Months of reading, editing, combing through hundreds of carefully-crafted works of art, selecting what we think is the best creative work from across the State University of New York system.

Working with *Gandy Dancer* for two semesters, we've come to appreciate the privilege of the unwavering support of SUNY Geneseo's English Department—especially our patient and resourceful secretary Michele Feeley, and the Parry family, whose generous patronage allows us to honor the most accomplished essay published in *Gandy Dancer* during the 2016-2017 academic year. Ultimately, *Gandy Dancer* is the work of a family of students, faculty, and staff, who are beginning or following through on lifelong commitments to the arts and the written word.

That family, of course, extends to you, our contributors and our readers. In our last letter to you, we underscored the fact that a literary journal, especially *Gandy*, is a gathering place. Our goal is to act as a community for writers and readers across the state—a place to share our thoughts, our concerns, our ambitions, our fears, our lives as writers and people. Throughout the year, we've noticed that this idea of a journal as a gathering place, while powerful, is also passive, and doesn't do justice to the art and writing in this issue. How can it, when to make art you must not be passive, must not simply gather, but experience, take from reality, and create something of it? How can it, when our moment in history is so shrouded with confusion, isolation, austerity, and war? *Gandy Dancer* is a printed gathering place, yes, but we would like to take it further; we propose this journal as a place of concentrated witness.

Over our two years in *Gandy Dancer*, we've seen the concerns of the work, and the priorities of the staff selecting it, shift deeper into explorations of the ever-growing tensions and conflicts of ordinary life. In this issue, we come

face to face with the difficult truth—the sorrow—of life in America. In Nathan Lipps’ poem “Ablutions in the Dark,” we experience the slow and lonely pain of age, coupled with the cycle of Spring, the cruelty of April. Sarah Steil’s “Steadying” is a second person story that draws you into the developing relationship between a damaged mother and her daughter. Jasmine Cui’s “Apologia,” an essay on the cruelty of chance, unflinchingly portrays a family’s struggle with disability and alcoholism. Peggy Wen’s exquisite, contemplative paintings and sketches bring us into quotidian, abandoned domestic spaces, and into the gaze of resolute, yet isolated women. While this issue succeeds in confronting dark truths, there are lighter shades to explore, such as Chloe Forsell’s “Fifteen Ways of Looking at a Privy,” which is as much a meditation on presence as it is a history: a momentary glance from an outhouse in the woods into our ability to imagine the future. In addition to the compelling work included in this issue of *Gandy Dancer*, we are happy to announce that the Parry award for nonfiction this year goes to Maya Bergamasco for “Absolute Pitch,” published in 5.1. In this careful portrait, the author reflects on the relationship with her mother and its legacy in the author’s life.

This volume’s published works highlight the value of the persistence of the arts. In this place of witness, these student artists create a place to work together to understand ourselves and our current reality. With great pleasure and gratitude, we present to you these thoughtful, accomplished pieces. We hope they speak to you, and compel you to witness, record, reflect, and continue to share with us.

Cheers,  
Evan Goldstein & Oliver Diaz  
April 2017

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# Fall

The week my dad moved out, our basement flooded. All of our American Girl Dolls and birth certificates floated around like pathetic canoes navigating the filthy, stale rainwater that had swallowed up our childhood. Holly and I, playing rescue, hastily put on Mommy's squeaky yellow rain boots and waded through the musky stench that turned our playroom into a gas chamber, attempting to liberate our favorite toys. Upstairs, stifled by the dense basement door, I heard Mommy talking on the phone with the insurance company, yelling between sobs. That night, pajama-clad Miranda curled up on the tattered armchair, little wrinkled thumb in her mouth, and watched reruns of *The Berenstain Bears* while Holly and I spread all of her waterlogged stuffed animals in front of the fan like a makeshift morgue. Mommy ran frantically between rooms, packing away toiletries, baby shoes, and tuna sandwiches in an Aldi tote bag.

The following afternoon, Mommy drove our clunky van for four hours, no gas station stops, and settled on Niagara Falls as our destination, the closest we could get to fleeing the country without the hassle of explaining that the basement ate our paperwork. I sat on the passenger side and kicked my unlaced Keds back and forth in the space behind the empty seat in front of me.

"Mommy, who is going to take us trick-or-treating this year?" I whined as I caught sight of a cheesy Halloween store beneath the bustling overpass. My dad wore the same dingy soccer ball mask and black windbreaker every Halloween for the eight years I'd been alive, walking the three of us up and down our suburban avenue until we'd press the swollen pumpkin baskets against our chests to keep our sweet treasure from spilling out onto the asphalt. He would retrieve my candy from the blue house on the corner as I waited at the end of the driveway, cowering in fear of the neighborhood Pomeranian.

Holly rolled her eyes at my whining. She had always kept me on edge: one minute she would be blowing bubbles in her chocolate milk with me, the next she would be slamming her bedroom door in my face. I attributed this to her being two years older than I; that's what big sisters do.

"We'll figure that out, Gracie. Why don't we play Mad Libs to pass the time?" Mommy cocked her frizzy head just enough to flash a weary smile, reaching back with her free hand to toss Holly the Mad Libs book that held archives of our previous road trips. Miranda shifted in the car seat behind me. Blonde wisps of dewy hair coiled around her rosy cheeks as her mouth formed an angelic *O*. I had almost forgotten she was there; she seemed to sleep through everything.

"Alright, adjective," murmured Holly, who had never been able to speak above a whisper. She would always mumble her order in my ear at restaurants so I could relay, "Chicken tenders, please," to the waiter. Sometimes Mommy would pay her a quarter to say hello to people when they greeted her in public. Holly adjusted her glasses as she held the indigo Crayola marker ready. Her sleeves were a little too long, tucked between her fingers. Her chestnut bangs hid her forehead from view.

"Foggy," I responded halfheartedly, noticing how the world outside of our stuffy vehicle was a subdued grayscale map. I wondered if things would ever regain their color, or if rain had washed and worn the sky and our basement into permanent dullness. Even our once-beautiful dollies had mildew spreading like frost on their porcelain skin. I felt guilty for ruining them. Mommy, Holly, and I threw words at each other until twilight welcomed us to Niagara Falls, but all I could think about was how my dad wasn't there to yell, "toe-nail!" for every noun.

Holly and I rolled our matching turquoise suitcases across wet parking lot gravel as Mommy's arms, covered by a shapeless sweater, juggled a sleepy Miranda and an overstuffed purse. After some thoroughly disappointing exploration, we decided that the motel was nothing extraordinary. It smelled like cheap breakfast sandwiches and cigarettes, nothing like the ritzy resorts we stayed at during my dad's big court cases, which had complimentary cookies and heated swimming pools. This place boasted leaky ceilings and baroque patterned wallpaper, peeling at the corners of the room, which oddly resembled throngs of dancing turtles.

"Do you see turtles, too? Or is it just me?" Holly whisper-giggled in my ear as Mommy bartered with the concierge.

Soon after sunrise, we walked to the cloud-covered Falls. Three pairs of warm, sticky hands met the steel railing at the overlook in captivated unison. Miranda, straining to be in our atmosphere, stood on tiptoe on the bottom beam

of the fence that kept us from plummeting into the frothy rapids below. We were enthroned in mist, three constants among the unyielding rush.

"I heard there was a guy who went down the waterfall in a barrel and survived," I bellowed over the mild roar of the cascades, gripping my dad's tattered Callaway Golf hat to my chest. He would wear that hat every day in the yard, fervently practicing his shot as I sat on the stone steps and watched every swing, running barefoot to retrieve golf balls from the neighbor's manicured lawn. Holly's glasses were fogged, shielding me from her jet-black stare, but I felt her scorn just as strong.

"You believe everything you hear," she snapped sharply, fiddling with the machine that offered a magnified postcard view.

It's because I hear everything, I thought. My older sister's words stung me more than the rogue beads of water that splashed into my eyes. Not that I'd wanted it to, but my keenness for excessive observation had become my enemy. Holly didn't seem to hear the things that I heard. She didn't eavesdrop on Mommy's phone call with Aunt Susan through the locked bathroom door while her voice cracked through the running faucet: "I never want to see his fucking face again." Holly didn't ask her friend on the school bus the next morning what that meant. She didn't sit on the fifth stair, concealed by the living room wall, listening to them hush-hissing at each other at midnight. Holly didn't read that text from someone named Missy on my dad's second cell phone while playing Tetris during his conference.

"wish I could see u."

I didn't plan on being the only one awake when Mommy snuggled into my twin bed and draped her arms around me, kissing my forehead and sighing, "It's not your fault, baby muffin." I didn't mean to be the only one to realize that we were all she had left. So when my dad, sneaky and silently as he could, packed his prized baseballs and framed law degrees and soccer ball mask away in cardboard boxes, I was the one who grabbed his beloved baseball cap in solemn preparation.

Whoosh. I closed my eyes to calm my foggy thoughts, listening to the buckets of water beating the rocks, to the sound of endless falling and crashing, to the untamed wind. I wasn't entirely sure how long we were going to be there, avoiding the rotting basement and the reality of a life without my dad, but there was something soothing about the sound of escape. I opened my eyes to see Miranda waddling over to Mommy, who was perched on a rusty park bench with a pencil in hand. Mommy sometimes seemed as if she was in a trance, staring off into space with an uninteruptible blank expression. Today, she looked tranquil, the usual dark circles under her eyes a little less severe. Miranda laughed and clapped her little hands with amusement, as a squirrel scurried across the bench. Mommy smiled wide and scribbled in her journal.

“How much do you think the barrel guy got fined?” Holly asked playfully, leaning over the steel railing next to me.

I laughed, thinking about how much I would get fined for dropping my dad’s hat into the abyss.

“Probably enough to fix our basement,” I responded, reaching down to tie my Keds. Holly’s quiet velvet laugh echoed in my head as Miranda’s giggling resonated in the background, mingling with the rushing water, and in that moment I appreciated my ability to hear.

# at once I am monolithic and incorporeal

Mother was *wúyǐ*, they say  
I inherited her: nose, ears, lips.

Taut skin, jaundice-colored. Men  
mistake affliction for ingots; they say

they are sick  
with yellow fever.

Tongue is divination stick,  
licking salt runes into

my chest. Confused  
mouth calls 悲<sup>1</sup> love,

calls 草<sup>2</sup> sex. Oceanic,  
my chest is full of gunpowder.

---

<sup>1</sup> melancholy

<sup>2</sup> grass

I am swollen sea cleaving  
self into ions.

Lysis, the body spliced  
into multiples to feed

five thousand. All Asian girls  
are made of the same: jade,

parasols, rice, stoicism. *I want  
my own Lucy Liu to split*

*open like flypaper.* Call  
my silence willingness

not protest. Call me  
没有名称<sup>3</sup> not beautiful.

---

<sup>3</sup> nameless

# Russian Roulette Except Every Chamber Is Full

Plastic shower curtain is morgue sheet  
hiding the shame of slow death—methylene blue,

oxygen-starved. Look, here  
is sacrum, coxal. Me at age twelve

when my mother overdosed, as if to prophesy  
the men, slack-jawed. Women, skinless,

fingers tearing at the neck, at what cannot be  
seen. Cloud of locusts, black, tar-thick,

pulsing under epiglottis. Wasps needling  
through the ribs, hissing like livewires

in water. Man drowns  
himself in tin of paint thinner, ignoring

its sides screaming: “NOT MEANT FOR HUMAN  
CONSUMPTION.” Man becomes diaspora.

He becomes tongueless, infantile,  
always asking what comes next:

locust; livewire; Narcan; nothing.

# Child Protection

*Across state lines.* The words glared at Ramona, and sprung up to pounce and handcuff her. She was too quick, though: she crumpled up the social services packet that had been hiding amongst her T-shirts, and chucked it. Those words had nothing to do with her. She wasn't *taking* Joey; she was taking care of him. Like a mother should. She took a breath and folded another shirt into the duffel bag. Then she stilled, the hairs on her arm awake to the wispy exhale of the packet unfurling against the walls of the wastebasket. Maybe she should take the papers. Better than leaving them here for anyone to discover after she was gone. She tiptoed over and pinched the packet out of the trash. The words leapt out at her again—*across state lines*—and she flipped the pages away from her. She flattened the packet and crammed it deep in the belly of the bag, underneath her clothing and the couple things of Joey's that were here, and not at the Bensons'. She planted her hands on top of the clothes and pressed down hard, creating more breathing room for her belongings and less for that accusation on the page.

A tinny version of an Erykah Badu song erupted from somewhere. Ramona scrambled for her purse, grabbed her phone and checked the tiny screen. Aisha.

"Hey, girl," Ramona said. She sat down on the mattress. Stripped, it felt waxy.

"Hey. I only have a few minutes, but I just wanted to check you know how to get to the house, once you get off the bus. You have the directions, right?"

"Yeah. Walk east to North Charles, then take the 3 to 28th street, right?"

"Right. 340 East 28th. The one with the blue porch and the plastic flamingos. You saw the pictures. You can't miss it."

"That porch does seem pretty unmissable," Ramona said. The porch was really what had convinced her this new chapter was possible and necessary.

Sure, the fact that it was Aisha, and a house of sober, responsible adults in the other rooms helped, as did the cheap rent and raised minimum wage in Maryland—practically double Philly's. The cozy look of those overstuffed armchairs, the improbable robin's egg blue of the posts, and the silliness of that flamingo family cemented the deal. Did Joey have anything in his life right now that was purely silly? Purely sweet? Deborah Benson, his foster mother, had never once laughed in front of Ramona, and her smiles were all Splenda. From what Joey said, the pack of kids running around the house sounded half feral. Ramona would give Joey goofiness again. Give him safety. Love.

"I'll get Anderson to set up the air mattress for Joey in your room," Aisha said.

"Thanks," Ramona said. "I really appreciate it. And I can't wait to meet him!"

"Yeah, it's been too long," Aisha said. "I'm just so glad you're coming, and that the custody hearing went well. You must be thrilled to pieces to have Joey back!"

Ramona glanced down. A crack in the linoleum had gradually zigzagged into a delicate web, over the course of these months. Ramona wasn't going to stick around for the whole floor to cave in.

She and Aisha always told it to each other straight, but she had to think of Joey. She pictured them sitting on that porch, cocooned in blankets and drinking hot cocoa with cayenne, while the sun sank somewhere beyond their concern. Her throat constricted.

"Yeah, you have no idea," she said. "I don't even know what to do with myself."

Soon, they'd be in Baltimore. They'd lie low for a little, and then it wouldn't matter anymore; it'd be just like she had won back custody, all official. It had been too long: thirteen months of visits only every other week, in neutral places. And now, this six-month delay on the reunification hearing! It made no sense. She had clawed out over a year of sobriety (well, with *one* lightning flash of a slip-up, but just one), she had a job at the Gap, and a secure public housing unit...she'd even taken that parenting course. What did they want, her left leg? A letter from the president? Ramona couldn't just throw her hands in the air and leave this up to the fates of bureaucracy. Joey needed her.

"You're awful quiet," Aisha said. "Are you feeling nervous?"

"Yeah, a little," Ramona said. "I've never even been to Baltimore. I'm excited, but there's a lot to figure out. Getting a job, getting Joey in school..."

"Oh, I'll help you out with all that. And everywhere will be hiring for the holidays; you should have no problem. I was going to save this for when you got here, but I actually know about an office job I might be able to get you an interview for."

“Oh, Aisha, that’d be amazing. You’re too good.”

“Well, we’ve gotta have each other’s backs. You kept me sane back in rehab.”

“I’d say you kept me sane, too, but I don’t think anybody could’ve back then.” Ramona said. Aisha laughed. “You’ve done it since, though. Better than a sponsor.”

“Oh, honey. Yeah, you were some hell on wheels. A nice hell, though! Look, I’ve gotta go, but keep me posted about the bus, okay? Bye!”

Ramona hung up, and resumed folding clothes into the bag. Would Joey remember Aisha? She’d last visited when he was only four, just a few months before they’d lost the apartment and moved into Tyler’s. Ramona had been sober that time for two weeks, and even speaking was like swimming through swamp mud. Leaving, Aisha had squeezed her and said, “I think this’ll be the time you make it stick!” But Ramona only lasted another month. It took losing Joey for her to stay sober. From the moment she woke up in the hospital and he was gone, she was rabid for him, volcanic; her pores plugged with seething magma. Once out of rehab (this time in-patient), she focused every cell into leaping through any hoop social services suggested.

But nothing was enough. She saw that now. Despite everything, Joey’s social worker *still* brought up the needle on Tyler’s floor from her first visit, a year and a half ago. The needle wasn’t even Ramona’s, or Tyler’s. It must have been one of Tyler’s roommate’s customers, leaving shit behind. God, she would never have even brought Joey there if she could’ve afforded the rent on their lease renewal. She had made it nice for him, though. The room Joey slept in might have been tiny, but it was a sanctuary. All clean light and fluffy stuffed animals and Christmas tree smell. Christmas tree smell because she’d bought eight of those dangling air fresheners meant for cars. The whole rest of the building reeked of all manner of fumes, but her boy’s room smelled like Christmas, like the only needles lying around were pine.

The Bensons would never do something like that for Joey, Ramona thought, tucking his favorite racecar in the bag. And they didn’t really know him, or the warning signs for magma rising. They weren’t teaching him how to stand up to bullies, or when it was right to help someone in a mess, or better to run away and get help. They were just plain weird. They spoke in tongues! Joey told her so during his most recent visit. It wasn’t like Ramona dragged him to confession every week, but that didn’t mean she wanted him getting mixed up with possession and speaking in tongues. A god that slithered into your soul, and swam around until your head rolled back and your body bucked, and poured out ropes of sound, ecstatic and gelatinous—that wasn’t a god she wanted. No more out of body. No more lightning.

She pulled the sides of the bag together until the teeth of the zipper clenched. A siren seared through the static of traffic outside. Her head snapped up.

Kidnapping, hissed the papers from the belly of the bag.

Rescue, she corrected. Necessary. She yanked the zipper closed.

Ramona stood outside by Joey's school playground now, the grainy strap of the duffel bag digging into her palm. She'd taken extra care to remain unobtrusive. She painted herself beige. She blurred her presence. A huge Goodwill sweater bagged over her blouse, and her brown hair tucked beneath an Orioles cap.

Joey wasn't outside yet. It was 3:27 p.m. He got out at 3:30 p.m. She glanced around and saw a security guard. He nodded at her. She nodded back. He nodded again. She nodded back. He nodded yet again. How many nods did he need? Who was going to keep this from going on forever? Did he have a tic? Would he be more likely to remember her if she ignored him or if she kept nodding into infinity? She wished she didn't have the duffel with her. She wished she had a car.

Maybe the view of the monkey bars could save her. Ramona did the thing where she became a painting. This time she became a painting of a woman gazing at a playground. She'd had a several-month stint as a security guard at an art museum a few years ago: Each week they rotated to a different room, a week in each different room, with just a few paintings to stare at. She thought she'd crawl out of her head. Instead she crawled into the paintings. Once she moved to the Modernist wing, though, it got to be too much. She was becoming splotches and nightmares. Zigzags, splatters, and twentieth-century shell shock. Even humming didn't help; the music escaped her control, and thinned into screeching violins. That was when she started bringing gin in a Poland Spring water bottle. One day she got weepy though, and her breath smelled, and that was the end of that. Vodka would have been safer, but a particularly sour night in high school had ruined the stuff for her.

Nowadays she kept to the Impressionists. Let her be blurry when she needed to be. Blurry, and prettily pastoral harmless. It worked: the security guard was looking the other way. Dude needs a hobby. Or meds. Then again, all he had to look at was the playground. If she weren't hiding, she'd have gone over and shot the breeze with him.

Joey burst from the gym doors in a clump of kids, one organism with many wriggling legs. Two kids were flashing Pokémon cards. Joey and a boy were arguing, "uh-huh!" and "nuh-uh!" He sprung onto the jungle gym and scrambled up to crouch atop the plastic monkey bars.

"See?" he yelled down to his friend.

Ramona shook her head and knew she was doing right. She had to get him back now, away now, while he was still young and elastic. They were both like this, scrambling higher and quicker on dares—or not even on dares: Ramona and Joey were walking dares, dares and desperation and away, away, away. She had to divert his route before the ground got to know his name. All her potential energy for disaster was coiled, and ready to spring from his DNA. Only Ramona, reformed, could feed him the antidote.

They would get on the bus and become fresh, become possible. They would have to lay low for a couple weeks, use cash, work off the books—but she would get a job and get him in school. She would learn to cook with fresh vegetables instead of canned. She could teach Joey, make it fun: ingredients in a potion. He should learn too. They would play in the little yard, and eat on the blue porch. She could make life a humming, solid thing for him. She could do that now. After this getaway.

“Joey!”

Ramona whirled around.

Deborah Benson walked towards her. “Ramona?” Shit. How? *Why?* Joey took the bus home. Could she have guessed this?

“Mommy?” Joey called. Did he see her, or—Ramona’s organs knocked around inside—was he calling Deborah Mommy? She clamped her jaw shut. She tried to become a painting, casual, beige—no, not beige. Now was the time for straw hats, for smiles all around, blue umbrellas on the beach. She looked up and aimed some sunshine at Joey. She brought him into the painting too.

“Hey, buddy!” she said. He waved, and she winced. “Use both hands!” He made a face, brought his waving hand back to the bar, and kept climbing. She used to make fun of hyper-vigilant parents. But during the few days in the shelter, the months at Tyler’s, and all the time apart, a pulsing dread had hatched in her chest; a dread with tentacles that squeezed her lungs and reached outward to protect Joey.

Deborah was approaching from behind, so she probably had already seen the duffel. She turned and stepped in front of it, just in case. Shit, why was Deborah here?

“Joey, come down!” Deborah yelled and then asked Ramona, “What are you doing here?” Joey groaned but inched his feet down. It was always harder coming down.

“I needed to see Joey.”

The duffel practically shouted, *across state lines*. Ramona smiled, smiled, smiled.

“But you can’t, you don’t have a visit scheduled today.”

Oh, please, Deborah, tell me more about everything I can't do. Ramona prepared possible excuses for the duffel bag: picked it up for a friend, carrying groceries, just came from the Y, work uniform...

"I really need to talk to him. There's been a...I need to tell him some bad news."

"So sorry to hear that," Deborah said. "You know how this goes, though. You have your scheduled visits, and we don't want him confused. Stability, you know."

Joey finally had both feet back on the ground. He picked up his backpack and began running over to them. Ramona wanted to say, Stability? I'm his mother. She knew, though, that this most bedrock of boulders, this floor of her world, carried no weight here. Christ, the blinders on these people. Forward march, no looking around or back, no wiggle room for blurry reality. Ramona tried to imagine Deborah speaking in tongues, blurring holy nonsense, body spasmodic in spiritual ecstasy. She couldn't. Deborah was like one of the people at the County Assistance offices, either sneering or so wrapped up in red tape they'd lost their claims to red blood.

"It's an emergency." She tried saying please, but she couldn't do it.

Joey was there, and automatically she crouched and spread her arms, and he dove in, thank God: he was hers, no matter what Deborah said. She closed her eyes for a moment.

"Hi, Aunt Debbie," Joey said, his face still buried in her shoulder.

Damn it, she would say please if she had to. She stood up, clutching Joey's hand.

"Debbie, it's my mother," she murmured, softening her face until she was a mourner: one of those Greek paintings, or maybe a Jackie O portrait. "I've really got to tell Joey. I just need to take him out for ice cream or something so we can talk about this."

"What do you have to tell me?" Joey piped up. "What about ice cream?"

"Joey," Deborah warned.

"Hang on a sec, buddy," Ramona said.

"What's in the bag?" Deborah asked.

Ramona resisted snapping her fingers as the last pieces of this lie clicked into place. "Some clothes for the trip home. I just wanted to see Joey before I head there, in a couple hours. You know, have to settle some affairs..."

"Oh dear," Deborah said, but her face didn't move at all. Maybe she had Botox? Was that what she was spending the foster parent allowance on? Or was she just a robot?

Ramona tried to think in Deborah-speak, system-speak. "You know, I've got real respect for the stand-up job you're doing here, all the rules you keep track of, everything you're doing to take care of Joey. We all want the best for him. I know it's hard. I know you're just trying to do what's right. Just...two

hours, ice cream at Sonny's. I want to talk, give him time to *process*. Stability through these...bad circumstances." Ramona hoped that last part wasn't too much, throwing "stability" back at her.

"Are we getting ice cream?" Joey said. "Because I don't like pistachio anymore, did I tell you that? I want cotton candy flavor."

"Hang on, Joey," Ramona said, still watching Deborah, whose lips were pursed.

Ramona went for broke. "Please," she said. "Debbie..."

It paid off. Deborah blew air out from the side of her mouth. Definitely a smoker.

"I don't like this," Deborah said. "You should have called. But this once. Okay? I've got to get my son to the dentist. I'll pick Joey up at Sonny's when we're done."

"Thank you," Ramona said. "I appreciate it. I can drop him back off at the house if that's easier. Not a problem." Cleaning, cavities... How long did they have? The bus wasn't until 4:45 p.m., and they still had to take the city bus to the transit hub.

"I'll pick him up at Sonny's when we're done," Deborah repeated. She narrowed her eyes. "See you then." She walked toward the older kids. No parting words or reassurance to Joey. What did Deborah do when Joey got hurt playing, or upset trying to do math homework? Did she make up good dreams for him at bedtime? Did her face ever move? Was anyone caring for him this whole time, or just coldly doling out the basics?

Well, Deborah could melt in hell. The important thing was, Ramona was getting them gone. They'd bought time.

"Okay, buddy, hurry for ice cream time!"

"Why hurry?" Joey asked.

"Why hurry?" Ramona repeated. Tell him now? Better wait until they were truly safe. He talked too much, that was always his problem. Like her. "So we have plenty of time to eat all the cotton candy ice cream they have!"

"I can eat more than you."

"I don't think so," she said. "Can you eat fifty gallons of ice cream?"

"I can!"

She pulled him to the bus stop. Ten minutes until the next one. Why was everything so far apart? Who planned the layout of this city, and how shitfaced had they been? Should she take a cab to the station? No, that costs too much, and wouldn't make the Bolt Bus leave any faster, which was the real hurdle. They needed to be away, STAT.

Joey asked, "What do you need to tell me?"

"Don't worry about it. Uh, what toppings do you like? Grasshoppers? Worms?"

"No! Sprinkles and chocolate syrup, and gummy bears, and...and M&Ms..."

A few minutes later, the bus wheezed up to where they stood. They boarded, and Ramona managed to resist knocking the driver out of the seat and whisking them straight to Baltimore.

At the transit hub, Ramona raced to the man in the orange Bolt Bus vest, Joey in tow.

"Two standby tickets, please," she said, digging out her wallet.

"Nope, nope, nope," the man said, swinging his head back and forth.

"What?"

"What are we doing?" Joey asked. "I thought we—"

"Hang on, Joey, I just have to talk to this man for a minute." She turned back to him. "What do you mean, nope?" Saying it out loud felt ridiculous. Who even said *nope*?

"There's only one left," he said.

"He can sit on my lap, he's a little boy. We won't be any trouble."

"I am not little," Joey interrupted. "Where are we going?"

"Joey, *hang on*." When he was born, Ramona swore never to spank Joey the way her mother had spanked her. There were moments when her hand twitched, though.

"No kids on laps," the man said.

"Is that official policy? We've really got to make this bus. I mean—I'm sure you know best, but is there any way?" It occurred to her that this might have gone smoother if she were beiger and less wild-eyed, if she weren't wearing the giant sweater and Phillies cap, made a prettier painting or slinkier words. Maybe that ship had just sailed, though. The years of playing along for leering landlords and managers, and the couple months of pretending for Tyler had beaten the eyelash batting out of her. She was exhausted from all that survival. She wanted to be done. She wanted to be safe.

"It's official, all right," the man said. "One'a youse on, or both'a youse off."

She blinked. Groceries, clothes, came from the Y...answers for the wrong crisis. Gin and tonic, please. No. She wished there were someone to talk to, that she could sit on the hospital courtyard picnic table with Aisha and smoke, vent, hash this out. A cigarette, at least. She stabbed her palm with ragged fingernails. Christ! Focus. Could she send Joey on the bus, have Aisha meet him at the station, and get on the next one? No. She couldn't. What if someone took him? She wasn't letting him out of her sight again.

"Where are we going?" Joey whined.

"Okay. When's the next bus to Baltimore?" Ramona asked.

"7:30 p.m." He looked at her. "Scuse me, I've got to help the next person."

"Okay. Okay," she said, not moving.

“Mommy...”

“Okay,” she said. She pulled Joey away, walking backwards a few steps.

What could she do? The other bus lines to Baltimore were more expensive, and she didn’t know if they had earlier times. 7:30 p.m. They had to be gone before Deborah got back; they couldn’t just hide out here and wait. Why hadn’t she told her the name of an ice cream place across town? Why had she said one that was actually here? It made sense at the time. She should have bought the tickets in advance. Why hadn’t she done that? Right, she couldn’t; then it would be on her credit card, and if the social worker called the cops, they would know right away.

Did she know anyone with a car? Well, Tyler. The thought was like rotten cabbage. But maybe this was too big not to try it all; maybe she could play dead inside, waste into a pastel silhouette, just for today, and plead for one last thing. It might work. But no, he would take control of the plan; he wouldn’t want to take them to Baltimore. He would come up with a plan for them to stay in Philly, or hide away somewhere, together. No. She couldn’t risk it. She would go to the Greyhound window and hope.

“Mommy,” Joey yelled. He’d been calling her. Shit.

“Yeah, buddy, what? I’m sorry.”

“What are we doing? Why aren’t we at Sonny’s? You’re *ignoring* me, and Aunt Debbie is coming soon and we haven’t even gotten ice cream.”

She stroked his hair. “I’m sorry, I’m really sorry. We’ll get ice cream soon. I’m just trying to figure something out, okay? I need a few minutes to think.”

He ducked away. His voice rose in pitch. “Are we going somewhere? Why were you trying to get us seats on that bus?”

“Listen, Joey, I know you’re confused. I’ll explain everything soon. But you gotta give me just a few minutes. Just a few minutes of the quiet game so I can think. I’m figuring things out for us, for you, my special buddy, right? Just come with me.”

She started walking inside. Joey’s face was bubbling up to an eruption, his mouth a fault line. He held his hand out of reach, but he followed. Better to be inside, anyway. She scanned the area. No Deborah. Wait, was that cop looking at them? They needed to be away. No trace, no late buses, no run-ins before they were out of state.

The worst-case scenarios tumbled out of the duffel bag; sirens screamed in Ramona’s head. What if this didn’t work? If she were caught? Could she go to jail? Joey was her son, though. At the very least, he’d get taken back to Deborah, or someone else. Maybe someone worse. Some people in rehab had horror stories about the foster system. Some friends growing up, too—not good homes. And forget six months. If she got caught now, they’d never give her a reunification hearing. But were they ever going to as it was? If she couldn’t get him back by playing it straight, maybe there was nothing to lose.

But what if they got caught? Would they cancel her visits, even? It just made no sense; she was his mother. He was her son. He needed her.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket, and she jumped. How's it going? ETA? Aisha.

She stared at the screen, thumb frozen. What was she doing to Aisha? Ramona knew how cases went for poor kids, and was banking on the cops—if they even got involved—losing interest after a few weeks. But what if it didn't work that way? Aisha would be so disappointed in her—and could maybe get in trouble, too. Aisha had stood by her these past five years, even though Ramona kept hitting ditches on the recovery path while Aisha walked on upright. Aisha worked so hard for her piece of solid ground.

So had Ramona.

She closed her eyes. What if she went to jail? This was a pretty bad purgatory, these twice-a-month visits, this answering to everyone and getting told to roll over and beg for slivers of hope. But forever apart, no hope left, jail... that would be sheer hell. That would be no life. People in rehab had stories about jail, too. And what if Joey got sent to someone worse? Deborah seemed soulless, and those kids ran wild, but so far, no one was hurting Joey. They were feeding him. He had a roof. Ramona hadn't let herself consider all of this so as to hurtle forward with this plan, but she couldn't stop now. What if he got sent to someone worse? What if Ramona's attempt to get him back stuck Joey with someone who screamed or hit or worse—the chest of a boy in group therapy flashed through her mind, as he lifted his shirt to show white, puckered burn scars, Oh Jesus...she couldn't do this.

She couldn't play with those kinds of cards. She needed him back, but she needed him safe more.

Ramona looked up from her phone at Joey. There was no Joey to look at. Her head swiveled to scour every corner of the corridor.

"Joey!" she yelled, not seeing him. The duffel slammed into her calf again and again as she ran. "JOEY!" Had he made a break for the ice cream? That must be it.

She burst into Sonny's Ice Cream Parlor, strands of hair sticking to her neck. It wasn't very busy. She ducked to be sure he wasn't under a table. He wasn't. Ramona stood paralyzed for a moment. She looked around a second time.

"You seen a little boy? Six years old? Brown hair?"

The cashier blinked at her, chewing gum. "What?"

"A boy!" Ramona yelled. "Have you seen a boy?" The cashier shrugged. "Dumbass," she hissed, and turned tail.

Would he go back outside? The bathroom? If he was lost somewhere, or hiding, or climbing... He loved toy trains. What if he got on a train and it

pulled away? Would he? He would probably go outside first. How far could he have gotten already while she was looking in Sonny's?

She was through the door, her pores welcoming a gust of cold air. She blinked. Her feet had kept running, her body kept carrying her through all these panicked machinations. "JOEY!"

He was there, standing so small by the curb where the bus employee had been. The strides to reach him felt slow, as though sloshing through soup or subconscious. Ramona's muscles seemed to melt. She sunk to the ground and yanked him into her arms. Her mouth was moving in strange shapes. A gush of something more than air but less than words was trembling its way out of her, but she didn't know what, and didn't care. Her stomach hurt and the muscles around her jaw jumped.

"Mommy? What are you saying? I'm sorry. Mommy?"

A low, animal howl came from her. Knots of syllables—from thank God and why would you and my baby—unsnarled and rushed out from her throat in ropes of garbled keening. Her chest bucked in dry sobs and her elbow buckled under the weight of the duffel. But she couldn't let go of Joey: he was hers, he was here. She had them locked in a strange dance, in a possession, in a fervid love-fear—dissolved to clanging atoms, skinned to its most primal translation.

"Mommy?" His voice was sliding back in time. Five-year-old Joey, visiting in the hospital after they'd pumped her stomach. She needed to get it together. She needed to be okay for him. Clutching his shoulder still, she pulled back and drew in a ragged breath.

"I'm so sorry, buddy," she said. "It's okay. I was just so scared."

"At first I was mad," he said. "But then I came out here to fix it by myself."

"To fix it by yourself?" Her body was still shaking. She knelt, and let go of the duffel bag.

"Yeah," he said. "I was gonna convince somebody on the bus to give us their seat. But then they were gone already."

"You were gonna—but you didn't even know what was going on. You didn't know where we were going." Ramona realized she was speaking in the past tense. They really weren't going. A gust of air unspooled from her lungs, and finally she was still.

"I don't care," Joey whispered.

She closed her eyes, and pulled him close again, her soul swimming in him.

"Listen," she said, after a few minutes. "Do you feel safe with Aunt Debbie? Are she and the other kids treating you okay?" She asked this every visit.

"Yeah," Joey said. "It's okay."

"Okay," Ramona said. "Well, we've got to get you back, then. Ice cream then home." She eased herself up.

"Not *home* home, though," Joey said. "Right?"

"No," Ramona said. "Not yet."

"I want to go with you," Joey said. He swiped at his eye with the back of his hand.

"I'm so sorry, buddy. I love you so much. Today was a bad thing. I'm so sorry. I almost broke the rules, and we've got to keep quiet about that. We've gotta follow the rules really good so that one day you can come home with me. Can we do that?"

Joey nodded. They began walking back inside, to Sonny's. A painting of a mother taking her son out to ice cream. But blotchy faces, a gutted mother. She wanted to pick him up and carry him, but he was too big and probably wouldn't let her besides. She settled for holding his hand, which he probably wouldn't let her do anymore either, soon.

"MOM!" He yelled. "What? What?" Had they blown it? Was Deborah back already? What?

"It's a Pikachu balloon! Up on the gate! Can you reach it?"

She knew before turning that no matter where this balloon was, she would find a way to get it. The ribbon was tangled in the gate against the wall of a side corridor, the end of the ribbon about twelve feet up. Ramona looked up. In the whole of the hall, there were seven or eight balloons slouched against the thirty-foot ceiling above. They walked over, and she set the duffel bag down. She breathed deep.

"Stay right here," she said. "I mean it."

Joey nodded. She hooked her foot through a space in the gate, and then balanced the other on a nail, grabbing at the first rail. She hauled herself up, legs dangling for a moment before kicking against the slippery bars with enough friction to push off, and onto the rail. She was crouched on the rail, now. She looked slowly behind her. Joey was still there, and no one was looking. She reached up for the next bar, and with the other hand seized the balloon's ribbon.

"Mommy," Joey said.

"Yes?" She asked without turning, scared to lose her balance. "Use both hands."

Ramona thought: No painting of this could exist. Slowly, she made her way down.



*Separate* (pigmented archival photograph), Marissa Specioso



*The Sound of Boca* (pigmented archival photograph), Marissa Specioso

# Sunday

I never liked Sunday mornings as a kid. My mother would wake me up around seven so we'd be ready for church, which started at nine. We were never on time. I'd always put up a fight. My mother would wake me with a gentle shake, and I'd begin to cry because I was still tired and in the midst of some silly dream. She'd cradle me in one arm and use the hand of the other to wash my face with a cool towel. All the while, I'd squirm and whine, begging her to stop. She soothed me by explaining that she needed to wash the crusty boogers out of the crevices of my eye. I'd calm down and let her clean me, afraid a booger would drop in my eye and blind me.

Being late was never much of an issue for us, because Papa Ordy was the preacher at Mount Zion Baptist Church. Sunday was his favorite day of the week. He loved standing at the pulpit and preaching to his family—his congregation. I felt a great amount of pride watching him, as he bellowed the words on the sacred pages as though they were his last. My dad wasn't around much when I was a child, so Papa, my grandfather, became his surrogate; he bought me clothing, toys, and books; babysat me while my mother was at work; taught me right from wrong, how to spit, ride a bike, and throw a punch. He did the same for my older siblings.

Papa was well aware of the ways of us demon seeds and how difficult it was for our mother to make sure we were all calmed and presentable before bringing us to church. At the time, there were five of us, out of a total of nine, living with my mom. All Sunday mornings were practically the same. My siblings could dress themselves, but I had to be forced into the tub, bathed, dried, and straightjacketed into a puffy dress before having my hair tightly braided. This was the most painful of these procedures, as the comb would always get caught in the kinks, and the barrettes clipped to the end of each braid attacked me whenever I turned my little head.

One Sunday morning, we were running even later than usual. Sometime between having my hair combed and being sat down for breakfast, the phone rang. I'm still not sure who it was, but our mother informed us she had to leave and would be back soon. Upon her return, we'd go to church, just as we did every Sunday morning. My siblings and I didn't mind. We took this time to get a little of our evilness out by roughhousing, cursing, and watching MTV before being shuttled off to the house of the Lord.

One hour turned to two, and my mother still hadn't returned. I was practically attached at the hip to my mother and whenever she left, I'd feel a bit anxious. With a shaky voice, I let my siblings know I was concerned about her detour, hoping to be reassured of her well being. Instead, I was met with silence, cut every now and then with the sound of someone sucking their teeth. I felt like I was living a nightmare. When I wasn't being visited by horror film monsters in dreamland, I was plagued by horrific visions of my mother being taken away from me. Sometimes, it was by car accident or mugging; other times, it was by dinosaur or giant tarantula. After my siblings grew tired of my whining, I was sent upstairs. Once there, I crept into the bathroom and began praying. I felt something terrible had happened.

"God, please don't let Mommy be dead," I whispered behind the closed bathroom door.

I was crying and didn't want my siblings to see me. They would be sure to mock me and tell me to stop being such a baby. I sat down on the edge of the bathtub and tried to imagine life without my mother. I couldn't fathom it. I just cried more and more. In every prayer I said before bed, I'd ask God to take me before my mother, dad, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles—any and all family members I could recall. I just didn't want anyone to die. I was awoken from my stupor of despair by the sound of the screen door slamming. Mommy! I thought. She's okay. But she wasn't.

"Y'all come down here," my mother called upstairs to my siblings and me.

I wiped my tears away and burst through the bathroom door, ready to run downstairs and into her arms. Instead, I stopped in my tracks at the top of the staircase. In the foyer below, I saw my mother with her head held down. My siblings had the same reaction. The three of them gathered beside me. My mother let out a small hiccup. The type you let out when you're overcome with sadness. Then she spoke.

"Papa died."

Silence.

Not Papa. Not the grandfather we'd grown up admiring as a father. God wouldn't kill him. Oh God, why? On Sunday, the day that he'd dedicated practically all his life to praising your glory? I was immobilized and momentarily deaf. Everything was still, as if someone hit pause.

"No, he's not!"

We're back in motion, and my oldest sister is hysterical, crying and screaming. My mother makes her way up the stairs and touches my sister on the shoulder.

"Yes, he is." She sobs, too.

I think this was the first time I ever saw my mother cry, and it was scary. This wasn't my mother. This was some defeated version. How dare she cry? She was supposed to be strong, for all of us. Why wasn't she comforting us? I wanted my old mother back. I wanted Papa back.

"This is all a bad dream, and I'm going to wake up soon!" my sister said, still crying.

God played a cruel joke on all of us that Sunday. We thought Papa was indestructible, our mother, unshakeable. It was all just an illusion. God took Papa's heart, the loveliest part of him, the loveliest part of the world, in our gullible eyes, and destroyed it. The punchline, delivered later and with great timing, was that Papa had the heart attack that would kill him while he was preaching. I wonder, what was the day's sermon? I know it included the lie my Papa told week after week:

"God is good, all the time."

To this day, members of the congregation who were present claim he died in the church. While this makes for a nice story, he held on for a little while longer before being pronounced dead at the hospital. After my sister's outburst and our tears, we put on our coats and boots in preparation to face the cold world beyond our four walls. We were going to meet our broken family at Papa's place of death. Once downstairs and alone, I walked beside the dining room table and fell to my knees. With outstretched arms, I looked toward the heavens and shouted one word: Why? I begged God to take me instead. When no answer was provided and I didn't drop dead, I realized that I was shouting at the ceiling.

We piled into my mother's two-door Pontiac Sunfire. After the roar of the car's ignition, a song began to play:

I wanna be your lake  
Or your bay  
And any problems that you have I wanna wash them away  
I wanna be your sky so blue and high  
And every time you think of me I wanna blow your mind...

I haven't heard that song since that day, over fifteen years ago, yet I still remember these lyrics. In that moment, Justin Timberlake, former leader of boy-band \*NSYNC turned solo superstar, sounded like a shaman. As strange as it may seem, I felt like somehow, Papa was communicating with us from

beyond through a teenybopper-beloved pop star of all people. Then, the chorus:

When all the love feels gone  
And you can't carry on  
Don't worry, girl  
I'm gonna take it from here.

This moment, as silly as it may seem, solidified my faith in the presence of some sort of afterlife. I believe a person who has left this Earth can communicate with loved ones they've left behind through everyday objects and, sometimes, nature. You're reminiscing about someone who you've lost and suddenly the lights flicker, as if to say, I'm still here, or you're feeling blue after a rough day and suddenly the song they used to always sing comes on the radio. These moments may seem purely coincidental, but I've experienced them too many times to think they are anything less than communications from beyond.

A week later, another Sunday, and it was time for Reverend "Papa" Oraid to be laid to rest. This time, we weren't late to Mount Zion; there was no one to excuse us. I sat in the front pew, not too far from the band and choir, dumbfounded. It still didn't seem real. At six, this was the first time I'd experienced a real loss. Not a goldfish, or an imaginary friend, but the man who I admired as a father figure. The man who always put others before himself and practiced what he preached. I sat there in deep thought: Who's gonna pull my loose teeth now? Who's gonna buy me a strawberry shake and hamburger from McDonald's? Who's gonna rescue me from getting my hair combed by grandma Ree?

I was selfish, like all children are, but even today when I begin to miss Papa, it's not because I'm bemoaning the life he could be living, but the guidance and support he could be giving me. I'm probably not alone in this way of thinking. We all remember our loved ones the way we want to remember them, which may not be who they really were. Our views of them are tainted by selfishness; we think, who was he or she to me, rather than, who was he or she. It also doesn't help matters that we are defectively programmed to create a mental highlight reel. The lows we do remember are annoying commercial breaks. No one remembers what it felt like to have their first tooth erupt, which is why incoming wisdom teeth hurt so badly. Maybe, if we'd held on to the feeling of that first pain, the latter pain would be almost non-existent.

Come to think of it, I didn't really know Papa. I knew of the things he did for his family, friends, and strangers, the gifts of money to satisfy debts. He loaned his car so others didn't have to walk, and provided shelter, food,

and comfort to those without. I can't tell you what town he was born in, or what mischief he got into as a young man, because I don't have a clue. I just knew him as a grandfather, a preacher, a diabetic, and a *good man*, which feels terrible. No one is that perfect. Sometimes, I wish I knew of something that would taint his perfection. The man lived for seventy years; he had to have shown some proof of life along the way.

After the songs were sung and the speeches given, the pallbearers carried my Papa to the burial site across the street, followed by the adults who attended the service. I had to stay behind in the nearly empty church with the rest of the children. I stared blankly at the lighted cross on the wall behind the pulpit. I couldn't speak or move, only stare. I felt like my spirit had been stolen from me. Meanwhile, the others around me continued living. Some wiped away the drying tears crisping their cheeks; others chatted, some even did cartwheels. One of my cousins said hello to me. Although she was standing beside me, it sounded as though she was speaking from somewhere outside. My sister nudged me, giving me a cue to speak. I turned my head and looked up at the girl awaiting a response. I really wanted to speak, but nothing came out. Instead, I slowly raised my right hand and mechanically waved.

Then, I stood up and ran. I had to vomit. I could feel my mouth heat up and water. It tasted as though salt had been poured in my mouth, giving way to a familiar burning sensation that crept up my throat. I ran out of the nave and down into the basement where there was a bathroom. My sister ran after me. I was baffled by my bravery, as usually I was afraid to go into the basement alone. Luckily, I made it to the restroom stall without making a mess. Vomiting made me think of the story of an exorcism my mother used to tell me. Apparently, a good little boy turned wicked and had to have a demon cast out of him before it could consume his soul. After the preacher and congregation prayed, shouted, and splashed holy water on him, the boy vomited, expelling the demon. All the windows in the church were opened so the demon couldn't enter the body of any other person in the room.

Papa always said the devil had a special vendetta against those who preached the word of God. Demons who possessed a preacher or one of their family members—especially a child—earned special favor of the Dark One. I thought that was the reason I was vomiting. I had to be wicked. I didn't know what shock was at that age. My youngest sister was in the stall with me, holding my braids back and rubbing my back to comfort me. Once the vomiting ceased, I stood up and looked at her. Through bleary eyes, I saw her concerned face, and wondered if she was possessed. There were no windows in the bathroom. My fears subsided when she asked how I was doing, smiled, and gave me a hug. I melted into her embrace. As we walked back to the nave, I began to wonder how my sister hadn't "caught" the demon. There

could only be one explanation—it was still in me—and Papa wasn't there to cast it out.

God truly is the greatest comedian. When the adults returned to the church from the graveyard, they informed us Papa couldn't be buried that day because the ground was frozen. The caretakers had no way to dig the grave. Poor Papa. Where would he go in the meantime? Maybe we'll take him home, I thought. He can sleep in my room. Luckily, that did not happen. If it had, I don't think I'd be able to relay this story. Waking up beside your dead grandfather is a surefire way to go mad, especially when you're six and afraid of the dark. Papa did look like he was sleeping in his coffin. He'd finally been able to catch some rest.

Before we left the church to have dinner at a relative's house, I walked behind the pulpit where Papa stood on Sundays. I tried to remember how normal Sundays were. My grandfather used to pace back and forth while communicating what lay in his soul, hoping he could save others. His voice would reverberate off the thin wooden walls of the church, causing the entire room to quake. Each message he delivered was met with shouts of *Yes!* and other declarations of approval. I sat beside my mother, bored, kicking my feet back and forth, not understanding a word. Admittedly, his sermons were the part of the service I least enjoyed. I preferred when the choir sang and the band played. Then, I could jump to my feet and stomp and yell, just act a fool. I would shout at the top of my lungs, because I knew no one could hear me over the music.

I stood at the top of the few stairs before the pulpit, trying to see it all through his eyes. I thought that this is what killed him, the pressure and toil of Sunday, the day of rest. He was obliged not only to his family, but to a congregation of at least one hundred people, plus the non-members who would attend. They relied on him, a man, to deliver the message of the omnipresent and solidify His existence. They asked for his counsel during dark times and for prayers to improve their circumstances. When the prayers went unanswered, he had to provide an excuse. Believers say preachers and others who are said to be in the service of God are chosen. Well, Papa, I wish you would've never answered that call. Then again, you couldn't foresee the toll it would take, or maybe you did, and you were just too kind to care. Duty and kindness can be a deadly combination. If you knew it would kill you, would you do it all again?

I believe he would.

Reverend Oraid Blackshear was born February 29, 1932, so he was seventeen years old when he passed in January of 2003. (In reality, he was seventy, but he loved to joke about being much younger because he was a leap-year baby.) He was born in Georgia. While still in his teens, he married another teenager named Marie. Together, they had five children, three girls and two boys. He was the grandfather of I don't even know how many. He had to have sugar in his orange juice and take insulin shots on account of his diabetes. He owned a shotgun. Besides preaching, he'd been a truck driver and a factory worker. He helped to establish Mount Zion Baptist Church in Batavia, New York. He loved God, his family and friends, his congregation, and his community. A voice like no other, one that will never be heard live again. He loved Sundays. That's all I know.

PAM HAAS

# 18 Months Without a Head

The crowing reaches morning sunlight  
as an unhurried gurgle, alive still      & Lloyd Olsen

whimpers from nightmare to daybreak, dry heaves Mike's  
sunrise anthem. Perched among the hens, the rooster

need not have frightened the neighbors outside  
closed curtains. No one wanted to see the rooster without a

warning. Even Lloyd, especially Lloyd who missed  
dinner & lost grip that September

evening to axe a species into legend. His bird unhinges  
simple realities—sky is blue, can't live with

head cut off. Scuffing wings announce an en-  
lightened body flipping off quaking onlookers. Mike defies

mutilation, flashes Lloyd an unweighted neck hole

# Spider on My Headboard

Your house is not this place, Spider,

the headboard view from those many eyes  
could peep my sleepdrooling face  
sneak giggles while spinning meals.

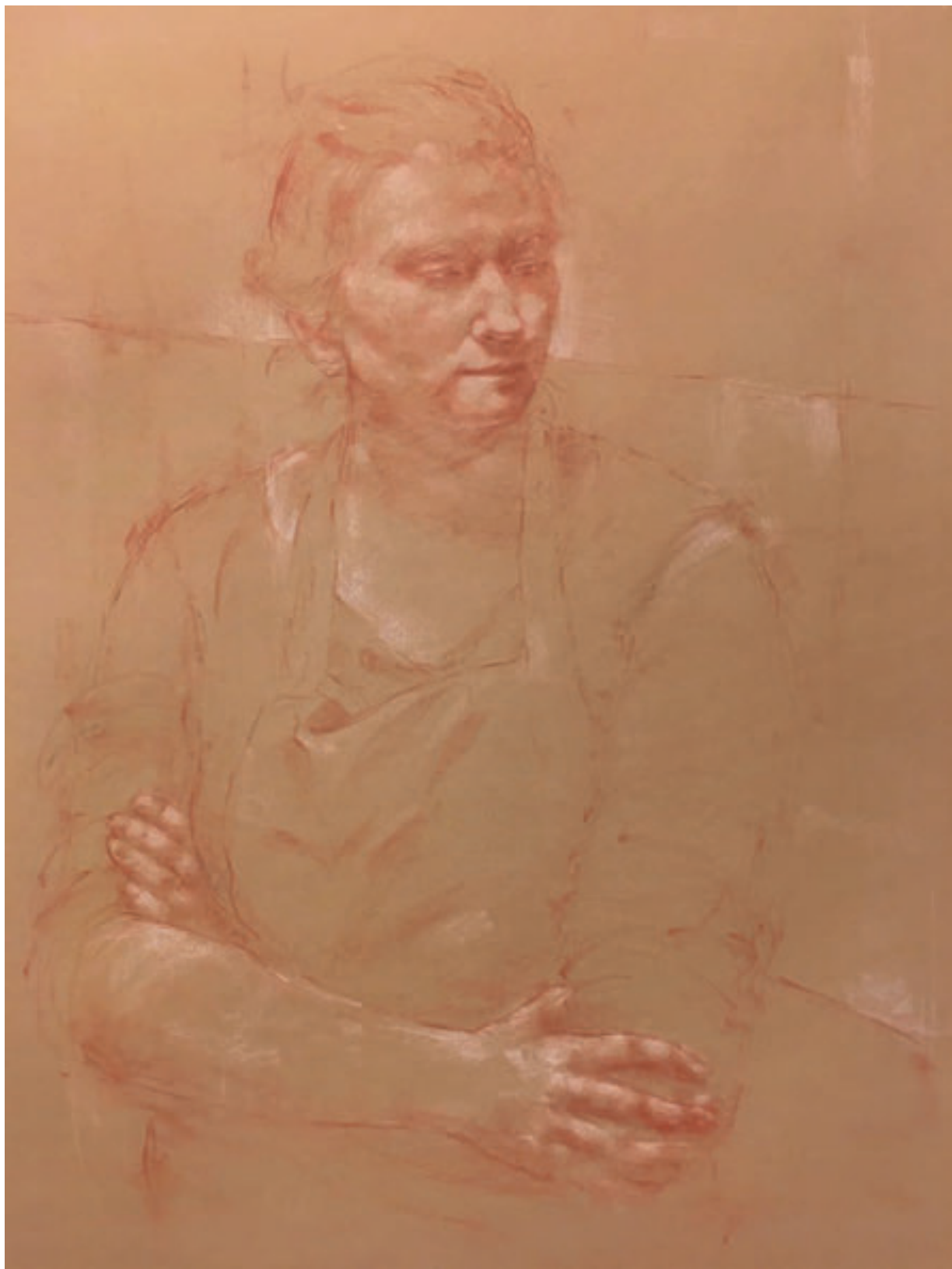
The webs you put in corners have no home  
where I rest in the dark. Seeing you  
my lips stretch along blunted teeth, reach  
for seconds to steady breaths—

Do you see yourself in shiny  
doorknobs warped belly-big, needle legs knocking?

I hovered a shoe next to my bed: printed  
stains        where I laid my head to rest.

# 911

1. I was ten. I had to run away  
to clear the screams from the receiver  
while my sister bled into a towel,  
and our dog, now a strange animal,  
charged at the door with murderous intent.
2. It was never dialed,  
but the cordless phone found a new cradle  
in the thick marsh of the pond out back.  
Marble-eyed sunfish observed as  
I was sent with snorkeling gear to search till dusk  
but found only nests of dirt.
3. A drunk motorcyclist looked up at me from  
his back as blood clotted like wax on his swollen head.  
My own voice sounded unfamiliar  
spelling out the road name under pooling lamplight.



*Fits Right In* (chalk pastel on paper), Peggy Wen



*Leftovers* (chalk pastel on paper), Peggy Wen

# Steadying

Your mother at twenty-one, a baby constantly at her hip, discovers a love she has not found with anyone before. Years before you are born, she raises your older sister, Annie, above her head, wants to tuck the baby's laughter into her hands, hold it in her palms. Your mother stays at home in a house too large with her first husband, a man you will never meet. She doesn't yet know that he sleeps with his secretary on the weekends, or that in less than a year she will be pregnant again and filing for divorce.

You watch her before you are born, before everything breaks apart: your mother emerald-eyed, laughing. Your mother, waking in the middle of the night to a crying child, hand cupping the baby's head like she might float away. Your mother, happy.

And now you picture her in a little over a year, two small children at her hips, meeting your father outside a gas station. You picture him, a mechanic, with eyes too large and too close together, bending toward your mother, leering at your sisters.

Your mother at twenty-three, with two babies and no husband, smiles at the softness of this man's voice, blushes when he calls her beautiful.

You watch this broken woman and think, Run.

Five months after your mother meets your father, and three months before she is pregnant with you, she moves into his small city apartment with your sisters. She leads your older sister by the hand, feels herself sinking when she admires the tiny living room, the dirty bathroom with a broken faucet.

But, oh, your mother in an upswing! She doesn't yet have a name for what causes her these weeks of happiness and what leaves her in fetal position in her bedroom for weeks after.

Now, her mind pulses joy, shouts of possibility with this man she doesn't know. "Isn't this nice?" she asks your sisters. "You guys can play all day in Mommy's room."

Her pregnancy with you is a solar eclipse: she falls into sadness that causes her to lay on the living room couch all day—unmoving, empty—while your father works. One day before she has told him about you, your father comes home and stands over her. "So where's dinner?"

Your mother can't explain how her heart has slowed, how she wishes she could disappear into the fabric of the carpet and never resurface. She spends her days gazing at your sister, Megan, breathing in the scent of her, pressing her nose to the baby's silk skin and thinking: what's wrong with me?

She looks up at your father with her arm draped under her head, "Go make yourself something."

You try to picture your father, his clenched jaw, balled fists, and your memory erases the irises from his eyes. When he stares down at your mother now, you think he does so with pupils that swallow the whites of his eyes. "I work all day just for you to lay on my couch and eat my food and tell me to make something?"

Your mother smiles curtly, scoops Megan from the carpet, and walks into the kitchen. "Here," she says, tossing white bread onto a stained counter, grabbing peanut butter from the cabinet. "You can make a sandwich."

"I'm not making shit," your father says. "I buy the food and you make it. That's how this works."

With the baby pressed to her side with her right arm, your mother pushes the bread into your father's chest with her left. "You can make a sandwich."

This is the first time your father hits your mother. He pushes her backward, and she falls against the counter. The baby's cheek splits against the granite edge.

Wild-eyed, your mother tries to steady herself. Megan shrieks in her arms, but your mother stills, and her vision blurs, and for a moment she can't hear your father yelling, "Now, look what you did."

You wonder if this is the moment she knew she would leave, if this is when something broke within her. And yet, you see her face redden, words pooling in her mouth like bile, and know she will not leave your father for another ten years.

Why does she stay? Even then, you know the answer: you. Even as the anger blisters her skin, she feels the seed of you within her body, realizes that without him she will be a single mother to three small children with nowhere to go.

In a few weeks, the euphoria pulls her back in: while your father works, your mother buys things for his apartment, decorates, plays on a dirty carpet with your sisters. While your father works, your mother's high will convince her that this is the life she wants, needs: a life with her children, and your father who gives them to her. While your father works, your mother prepares for a life with you.

And then, in a few months, you are born, hands already curled into fists and ready to swing. Your mother will fall in love again, with the angry baby with the mess of hair, the child that lacks her beauty: you will be plain, dark haired, and dark eyed. But in her arms, you laugh with your mother, kick your pudgy feet, and she will think, this is why I stay.

One year before your mother leaves your father, she drinks for the first time. While your father works, your mother paces about her bedroom with shaking hands, stares at your siblings and wonders where she should go. She has a bruise from last night, from where he grabbed her across her waist. It runs along the base of her bottom rib. She runs her fingers around the purpled skin, presses just enough so that she can feel a tinge of pain, and lets go.

Your mother sits at the edge of the bed, hears the bickering of her children in the next room. When she thinks about leaving, her heart swells in her throat, prevents her from breathing. You sit next to her as you both listen to the nine-year-old version of you in the next room, to your siblings. You want to tell her she needs to leave your father, but you know she can't hear you.

She finds your sister, Annie, in the next room, now eleven years old, and tells her to watch the rest of you. She'll be right back, she says.

With your father's car, your mother drives half a mile to a local liquor store, parks around the corner. You want to lock the doors, you want to reach across her body and hold her in place. Though she can't feel you, you long to close her hands within your own, to stand in front of the store doors and block her entry. You want to tell her, go home.

When your mother exits the store with a small bottle of vodka in a brown paper bag, she looks around nervously and stuffs it into her bag. She gets in the car and waits for her breathing to slow. She drives home, her heart oozing through her ribs, her head ringing. Your mother wonders why she feels guilty for an act she hasn't committed yet. She tells herself that she just needs to take a second for herself, to relax, but still she can't shake a feeling of wrongdoing. You wonder if you could tell her about all the years to come, about all the things she will lose, if she wouldn't pour the bottle down the gutter and break the glass.

In the driveway, your mother stares at the bottle in her lap, breaks the seal and brings it to her nose. She sips from it, purses her lips and shakes her head,

and thinks, I deserve this. And then she feels her body slow, warm. She has forgotten what it's like to be calm. She finishes the bottle with her keys still in the ignition.

In the final year before your father leaves, your mother stuffs bottles of vodka under her bed, waits until he works, then finishes one and passes out on the couch. She hopes she will wake to a life without him, to a life where she no longer needs to decide what she wants.

One Monday evening, while you and your siblings wait in the back of the car, she meets a man outside of a liquor store. This man brushes your mother's arm with his own, whispers in her ear, pays for her bottle. "I've never seen anyone so beautiful around here before," he says, and your mother feels the swelling, the longing, her need to be needed.

In the final year before your father leaves, your mother leaves you and your siblings at home, stays at this man's apartment, and returns home before your father knows she's gone.

At ten years old, this is the start of an anger that you will harbor for years, the spark of a fire you will feed until it consumes you whole. Ten-year-old you bristles at your mother's absence. For years you will think, what better way to leave one man than to jump into the arms of another?

But the you watching her now wonders if your mother meets this new man and sees escape, if she knows she can't be alone with three small children and no money. You wonder if this is the only way she knows how to leave. You wonder if she thinks this man will be different.

You wonder when your mother asks this man to live with her a week after your father leaves if she sees him as survival. You wonder when he hits her for the first time, if she looks at her children and her empty bank account and closes her mouth. You wonder if all of those years you hated your mother for not leaving him, if she hated you just as much for making her stay.

When you are thirteen, your mother sits in a therapist's office, palms pressed together. She wants to tell someone how she can sleep for an entire day and still feel tired, how some days she wants to melt into the walls or disappear behind the shower curtain. How she will spend weeks in fetal position on the living room floor, a bottle in her hand, and then fill suddenly with happiness, with gratitude for her life.

You sit next to your mother and listen to the way she hurts, want her to know you're next to her even though you know you're not.

The therapist, an older woman with graying hair, listens to your mother speak, nods her head. When your mother quiets, this woman asks your mother if she's ever heard of bipolar disorder.

Stomach acid rises in your mother's throat, and you watch her body stiffen. "No," she says. "I'm not sick. I'm just tired."

You don't know if she hears these words and feels like she's falling or like she's finally being caught.

After forty-five minutes, your mother makes another appointment that she will miss. The words *manic depression* and *illness* break against her skull, and your mother will drive home and drink until she can't remember them anymore.

When you are sixteen, your mother crawls into your room, kneels before your bed, clasps her hands in prayer. "You know what I used to call you as a baby? A bull. You were so tough. You would fall over again and again and never cry," she whispers.

Next to your bedside, your mother is so tiny, so sunken. You imagine her as a ghost: skin drooping around crumbling bones, body caving in. Her entire body, concave, skeletal, except her stomach, which alcohol has stretched outward, convex and stubborn.

"One time I left you outside in the car while I took in the groceries, and it was so, so hot out. And I came back out for you, and you were as red as a tomato, but you still had that serious little pout on."

Some part of you knows that your mother's shaking hands ache for your own, but you smell the vodka on her breath, and anger turns you to stone. "I think you should go to bed."

You wouldn't know that she was crying if it weren't for one small, shaky breath, and her grief ignites you.

"I swear to God I will never drink again," she says, and you train your eyes on the fault lines of the ceiling. Some part of you still longs for a fight, wishes to corner her and yell, to pull the bottles from every spot she has tried to hide them. But now you only pity this wispy old woman with the beer belly, and you turn away from her.

"I think you should go to bed."

Your mother lingers at your bedside, and you know she waits for you to turn toward her, to close her tired hands within your own. You know that when she leaves your room she will finish whatever bottle she started. You know she hopes that you will stop her.

You wait with your back toward her, listening for the soft shuffling of her bare feet on the carpeting, the hush of her leaving you.

At sixteen, you wake to your mother's red hair, her figure bending toward you, "Wake up, we gotta go."

On a summer morning before birds have awoken, you press your face into a pillow. "What time is it?"

"Seven. Up, up, up! You can't sleep all day."

Beside you, your dog looks up to you groggily, rests his head back down. You knead his ear in your palm, blink sleep from your eyes, "Okay, okay. I'm up."

You slide your feet into torn flip-flops, stay in pajama shorts. The dog lies against your pillow as if to mock you, and you stick your tongue at him and mumble, "You can lay there now but I'm taking that spot back."

In the car with your mother, you press your temple to the warmth of the window, to the sun filtering through the glass, while she drives to local garage sales. You gaze at old furniture, at boxes of oxidized jewelry, at torn paperbacks, and yards full of broken baby toys. Your mother buys a lamp with a torn shade, a silver ring with a missing stone, a cedar cuckoo clock. She picks through these treasures and whispers to you, "Isn't this nice? Isn't this pretty?" like it's a secret only the two of you can share.

On her good days, in her good weeks, you can pretend your mother has always been sober, that her happiness isn't a temporary one. She will drive around and buy things she doesn't need. On these days, she will charge up her credit cards at malls and boutiques, purchasing clothes she'll forget she owns, jewelry she will lose. But you ignore your unease, her giddiness, because she has chosen to spend her good day with you, because you will relive these hours again and again when she is drunk and crawling into your room.

This is how it begins: at eighteen, you spend one of your last nights at home before you leave for college. You lock your door, and though you hear your mother on the other side, you turn toward the wall.

In the middle of the night, you realize that when you leave, your mother will be alone for the very first time. This is the guilt that pushes you to your feet, that leads you to your mother's bedroom.

When you open her door, you smell it: the bite of liquor, the sting of vodka. You hear her shuffling inside the bathroom, and when you press your ear to the door you hear the soft ache of her crying. You debate walking in or walking away. You know that your mother is drunk on the other side of the door. You want to hate her and push her away, but you also know you can't, you won't.

When you open your mother's bathroom door, you find her hands pressed together between her thighs, blood drying against her forearm. "What happened?"

"I hurt myself," she says, and you pull on her arms until you see lines clawed into the pale insides of her wrists.

"What did you do? Why would you do this?" you yell at her, your heart at the back of your tongue. Your mother starts crying, apologizing, and you see her suddenly as a scared child, a woman who will lose her life over losing you.

You grab a towel, wet it in the sink and dab at her wrists, wipe away the blood. "Hey, look. You see this? It's not that deep, okay? You're okay." Your mother sobs deeply, uncontrollably. Your synapses fire in your brain, and every muscle tells you move, now, but you still with fear. "Hey, look at me. How much did you drink?"

The room spins around you. Your mother doesn't answer, and you want to shake her until she does, then go back into your room and keep the door locked until the sun rises. Your vision blurs, but you place your arm on your mother's shoulder, and you hear yourself say, "Come on, we have to go," even though you don't know where there is to go.

You wrap a towel around your mother's wrists and lead her outside to the car door. You help her into the passenger seat, reach across her body, and buckle her in. You repeat, "You're okay, you're okay," and you drive her to the hospital.

Your mother spends eight days in a psychiatric hospital, and when you pick her up she shows you a prescription for lithium.

She starts to cry on the way home. "Do you hate me?" she asks.

You pull the car over on the side of the road, and stare ahead, grip the steering wheel. "I don't hate you."

"You're leaving me," she says, her freckled hands shaking.

"Where do you think I'm going?"

"You want to forget I exist."

You focus on her green eyes, feel your heart swell. "I love you. I just don't understand you sometimes."

"I'm gonna get better," she says, hand resting on your thigh. "I'm not gonna drink anymore. But you can't leave me."

You see the fear in your mother's eyes, and realize that she thinks when you go to school you will never come back. And though some part of you wants to escape, there's another part of you that sees this small, scared woman and wants to cry with her. You enclose her hands in your own. "I'm not leaving. I'm going to school, but you know I'm not leaving you." And though you don't know if your mother really will get better, if she will stop drinking, you feel her fear and know that she wants to. You hug her, steady her body against your own as she cries.

"You can't leave me," you say. "You can't scare me like that. You can't hurt yourself like that."

When your mother quiets, you sit in silence with your head against the seat. “How the fuck did we get here?” you say.

And when your mother begins to tell you her story, you hold onto her arm and listen.



*Internal* (ceramic, cone 6 clay body), Jane Galletti

NICOLE PERO

# Everyday Hauntings

I see an open-mouthed man in her pupil. He is pressed to the glass.  
He looks lost and confused, and every time her eyes close for a blinking  
second I hope he won't be there, but those yellowed teeth and frenzied  
laugh lines stick like window clings. I start seeing him in others' eyes, too,  
my mother, sister, paper boy as I hand him an envelope for the daily trek  
up my hill. The man makes tired yawns sometimes, his hair haphazard  
and sleeping robe open to age-spotted chest. I find the man in my cereal spoon,  
flipped upside down but still looking haggard. It is when he paints the mirror glass  
that I shatter it with a wayward golf club and stop going to work.

# Brigantine Beach Blues

I feel in me a shuddering hole  
formed of broken seashells and boardwalk splinters,  
gone too soon for my comfort, I want  
to spend days upon days huddled in the '90s set,  
*Golden Girls* style. Mirrored walls,  
glass and white wicker furniture  
plus a cruddy pull-out couch.  
This timeshare is what's keeping me whole,  
sunburned and laughing at my father  
who left the keys in his other swim trunks.  
He calls the locksmith, one hundred dollars for  
a credit card and a quick jiggle of the knob.  
It sounds like the word for mourning  
something you haven't lost yet.

JOE SIGURDSON

# Recognition While Fishing on the Lake at the Cabin

I caught the hangover early on  
and started killing beers and  
felt better.

I went fishing while my friends  
slept in the cabin.

Alone, floating on a kayak,  
I rocked one back and glared  
into the top of the world.  
This will kill you someday.  
Paddle on; cast the line.

# Apologia

I am eleven and fiddling with an off-brand Swiss Army Knife when the silvery van shimmers uphill like a minnow. Its compact body, slick, a bullet spitting through the horizon, leaves oil-breath and hissing tar in its wake.

My mother is always composed, always poised, except now she is not. I watch her calculating outcomes in the rearview mirror—but the van is in the wrong lane, its driver beer-breathed or suicidal. These are variables that cannot be predicted. She does not know if the car will decelerate, if he will change trajectory, if she can save us.

I hold my breath in anticipation. This is not voluntary; it is necessary. She is trying to shift into the other lane but doesn't quite make it. I am safe, but she has not evaded impact. I know that nothing will ever be the same again, because I have always been good at math and this is basic—the law of equivalence. An eye for an eye. A tongue for a tongue. Mother loses her legs and her voice so that I may walk and speak.

It is four years later and the aftermath still lives on my upper thigh—a lateral line pulsed into the skin like an interjection, emblematic. A reminder of how trauma can cleave a person in two: a before and an after. Suffering has an expiration date stretching far beyond the advent of that initial event. The diagonal still slashing across the right leg, trauma still darkening sun-starved skin.

At night I dream of vans like silver bullets. In the dream I am on the roadside, bearing witness to the moment of contact multiplied by the amount of time it takes to jolt awake, sweat-soaked, hands shivering from the adrenaline high. There is nothing as violent as the sound of metal shredding metal—the face of our car becoming tin confetti. With each collision I watch as mother is propelled out the driver's window, trajectory always the same. Her doll-like

body arcing towards the asphalt, poppy-colored skirt rippling like silk kite. I try to catch her; maybe this time it will be different. But as fast as I run, I never reach her in time. She always lands back first, spine snapping like communion bread.

Coping is a reaction to injury. When the skin is lacerated, blood begins to coagulate—clotting so that a person does not bleed to death. The body is constantly adapting to physical stress, always looking—for ways to survive.

My mother's coping mechanism is knitting. She sits in her wheelchair, silent, learning how to knit and purl. Perfecting the lace stitch until she forgets what time it is and falls asleep, needles in hand, fingers still trembling in anticipation.

Father copes by coming home at ungodly hours, breath rank, smelling of alcohol and desperation. His lower lip curling into a cruel sneer as he points at me in wordless accusation. He does not need to speak for me to know that I have stolen his everything. He blames me for what I did not do, for what I could not have done.

I am sixteen when I swear out loud for the first time. Later, I will learn the full potential of obscenity; it is like water, taking the form of its situation. But right now it is in the form of the word "fuck." Its catalyst is an accidental burn in the form of iron skillet kissing elbow, like a rabbi blessing a child's forehead. Crescent moon is birthed, angry and angular.

Father, sticky-eyed, asleep but not quite, screams awake when he realizes what has been said. He grabs the thing closest—a toy gun—and slams it into my back so hard that the body welts in two places: a before and an after. A friend once told me that all children are mistakes. My father is correcting his.

When finished, he thumps upstairs, leaving me alone to deal with the aftermath of what has happened. Broken-bodied mother wheels herself over to where broken-bodied daughter lies. Daughter can only look upwards, sobbing the words, "I am sorry, I am sorry, I am so so sorry." Mother can only look down in horror, mouth shaping words that never harden into sounds, like phantom limbs. What she is trying to say is this: "Don't be."



*Rocky, Oh Rocky!* (silver gelatin print), Arnold Barretto

# Otro

Papi once told me,  
si quieres ser un  
hombre verdadero  
necesitas caminar  
como un hombre  
verdadero With your  
intact cock in hand like  
a sword getting ready to  
conquer cualquier pedazo  
de nalga that you  
desire—

Papi, my favorite color es el  
rosado. Eres maricón?  
And I want to wear a falda.  
Eres Chica?

Right hand on my  
cock  
a failed patriarch  
of your patriarchy Perdóname  
chica but I just want  
to come to the conclusion of the  
understanding of my testicles.

# America,

*After Ginsberg*

my back itches y necesito que me la rasques, America,

I like the dotted half note and the taste of agave & caña de azúcar, America,

tu mamá is so fat that when she stands on the world scale, it says “globally corrupt,” America,

my people come in different shades and they all smell like chicharrón, America,

I enjoy your queso but it’s not what you think it is, America,

you are not America, my grandma named “Australia” ain’t America,

mi mamá is America.



Featured Artist

# The Dream-Maker Man

"I once had a dream of Paris, looking down on the city from the top of the Eiffel Tower."

It thing  
house

He  
Mo  
saw  
S  
JEAN  
po  
next  
been  
morn

"Jean  
get to  
one an  
Much  
dress  
as a  
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ROMEO, DON JUAN  
AND ... AND ...



NORTH AMERICAN DYE CORP.  
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...sufficiently strong. In serving hot tea, the mint leaves may be placed in the teapot along with the tea leaves, too. But a pretty touch is lent to the service if sprays of mint dusted with powdered sugar are placed beside the other tea accessories and passed with the individual cups. Candied mint leaves are an innovation as tea-sweeteners, and candy rose-

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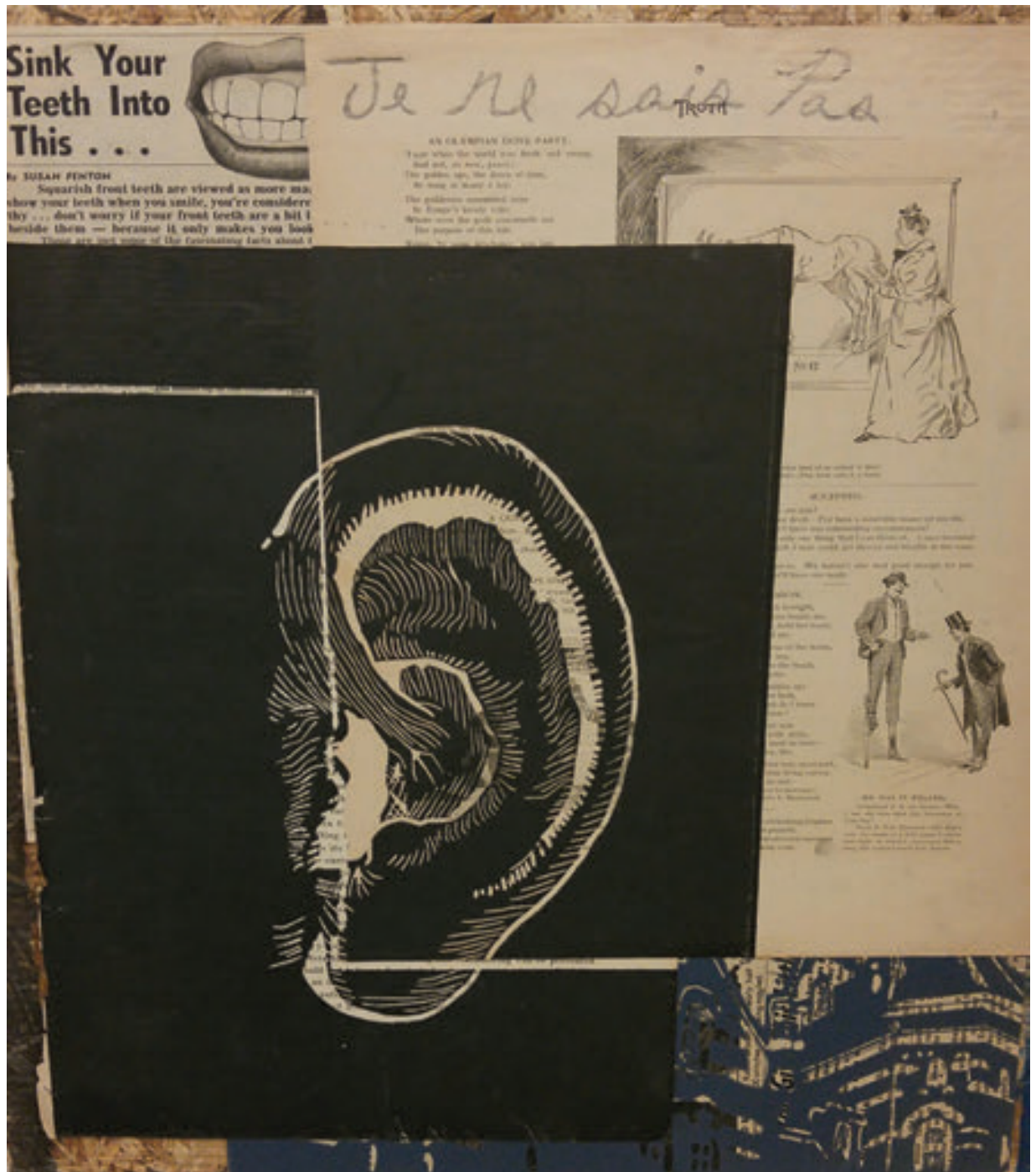
The Dream Maker Man (collage), Ashley Lester



*Body of Christ* (collage), Ashley Lester



*Internal Method* (linoleum relief cut and collage), Ashley Lester



Je ne sais pas (linoleum relief cut and collage), Ashley Lester

# Red Oak

There was something living beneath the timbre of his mother's voice. Simon wondered if she knew. She always seemed mystic to him, like the mind readers you see in movies.

"Eat your breakfast," his mother Jess said, sighing. Her strong jaw was slightly clenched, a usual feature of her face. Simon was not good at reading faces, and he fidgeted in his chair under the gaze of her amber eyes. She sat down across from him. "Did you skip your extra class yesterday?"

He said nothing, and instead moved the food around on his plate in short, timid motions.

"You know you have to go, Simon," Jess said, quiet but stern. "You can't fail math this year, it's a very important class. The teachers are there to help you."

"I wanted more leaves." He spoke quietly.

Jess didn't get mad. She almost never did. Instead, she stood up and patted the top of his head, slightly pushing down his dense ringlets of hair.

Yesterday Simon had enjoyed his afternoon in the woods, as he always did. He liked the clear air and crunching leaves. He liked the soft dirt under his feet. Sometimes, if he was daring, he'd dip a hand in the frigid river, letting the clear water slip through his palms. The cold would chill his hand until it was numb, and he'd remove it, sitting back down on the shallow bank. The river was fairly wide, but not large or filled with rapids. The banks were shallow, but the river was fast and made gurgling noises like an upset stomach or an engine trying its hardest to start. He spent hours collecting leaves to press in old heavy books—outdated encyclopedias and unused dictionaries on dusty bookshelves in his home were filled with remnants from the autumns before. It helped him forget about school, even though the dense woods were right down the street from the building.

His father entered the kitchen with a smile on his face. He was a short man with a crown of wiry salt-and-pepper hair.

"Come on, get to the bus stop! Omar, you too," he called down the hallway of their small ranch home.

His older brother emerged from his room, yawning. Simon saw his father put an arm around Omar, whispering something to him about Simon and to look out for him, okay? Together, the two brothers left on the faded school bus.

The school hallways were narrow and old with musty scents, tiny lockers, and several students wearing hand-me-downs of camouflage and otherwise. Dirt caked into the worn tile floors as students tracked it in with their sneakers—another mark of a rural public school. The students brushed by Simon, shouldering their way through the crowd and each other. In his classes, the sounds of the teachers speaking and the hum of the fluorescent lights buzzed in his ears, causing the lessons to pass over him as he fidgeted in his seat with distraction and unease. As the day ended, he drew near his locker. A scruffy, pale boy approached him.

"Hey, kid," the boy said. He was taller than Simon, like most people in the school.

Simon didn't make eye contact, and instead focused on opening his locker.

"I said hey. Are you stupid or something?" The boy laughed, and a group of boys behind him chuckled along. "Is that why you go to the special class after school?"

Simon opened his locker with trembling hands. He wanted the boy to go away. He wondered where Omar was, as they usually met up before going to the bus.

"Good job, dumbass, you opened your locker." The boy reached for the rusted seafoam locker door. "See if you can get it open again." He slammed the door shut, metal slamming down on Simon's hand.

He yelped in pain. The bully looked at his victim and opened his mouth as if to speak, but before he could say anything further, the bell signaling the end of the day rang. Simon scrambled for his things and ran for the door. He sprinted past the waiting buses, their white exhaust bitter in the cold air.

He thought he heard someone call "Simon" from behind him as he ran, but he didn't stop. As he got to the woods, a park with a dirt path through it, he ran away from the trail and through the skeleton-bare trees. His feet pounded over both stone and soft ground as they carried him further toward his destination, a small clearing he often visited in the forest. As Simon grew nearer, he slowed down, his heart hammering in his chest. The ground in the forest here was more soft soil than rocks. Simon sat down to catch his breath.

His eyes stung with tears. The cold air wrapped itself around his ankles, grabbing his legs through his thin socks. He heard footsteps approaching him rapidly from behind, but was too upset to pay them any attention.

"Simon," a voice huffed. Simon looked up and saw his older brother standing above him, his dark skin shining with sweat despite the cold weather. Omar's feet were planted firmly on the ground and his brow was furrowed. Simon didn't reply, but instead buried his head in his knees, pulled up tight against him.

Omar sat down next to him and put a lanky arm around his younger brother's shoulder. After a pause, he suggested, "Come on, let's go find those leaves. What color are we looking for today?"

"Red. Dark red," Simon answered, sniffing and rubbing his hand, which was still sore.

The two slowly stood up. Together, Simon and Omar searched for leaves fitting the description. Simon was very picky about which leaves he allowed in his books, but Omar was patient. He never hurried Simon, and instead of shouting at him to hurry up, he sat down with him and looked for leaves to meet his brother's standards. Simon sat down on the cold forest floor, sifting through individual leaves with the scrutiny of a diamond inspector. Breath rose from his mouth in a pale gray that reminded him of ghosts.

"Simon, how about these?" Omar asked him from behind.

Simon turned and was greeted with a head full of leaves that his brother threw at him. The older boy laughed and began to run, his younger brother chasing him. Simon was not well-coordinated and he watched Omar run circles around him, faint autumn sunlight creating light patches on his walnut skin. Finally, he slowed down and allowed Simon to catch him. The two laughed and fell over onto the dirt, some of it clinging to their jackets.

"You caught me, you caught me," Omar laughed. "You win."

It was then Simon saw it. By the bank of the river was a tall red oak tree, some of its leaves still attached. They were deep crimson, and Simon was transfixed. Omar caught on, following his gaze and slowing his laugh.

"That's it," Simon said quietly, walking over to it. The leaves were too high for him to reach, however, and they emptied into the clear river below, ruining the chance of finding one on the ground. "I can't get one."

Simon's face contorted into furrowed brows and a frown, and Omar strode over to the tree. "It's not that tall. I can climb it."

Simon looked at him hopefully, but said nothing. His brown eyes were wide as he nodded.

Omar's lanky frame was stronger than it looked, and he clambered onto the tree with ease. He reached toward the red leaves, setting his face and sticking out his tongue slightly in concentration. Simon stood at the base of the tree, wringing his hands in anticipation. It was something he always did

when excited or nervous. He huddled a bit further inside his coat, eager to see the leaves up close and imagining what they would look like once pressed and dried. The river carried in cold air and swept by Simon in a slight whisper.

Then, over the bubbling and spitting of the fast-moving water came a cracking sound. Omar's hand retreated and Simon couldn't see his face, but he knew by the way Omar clung to the branch that he was scared. Simon's feet shifted nervously in place and he felt a roiling in his stomach as his face grew hot with fear. His brother seemed so far and high up that he didn't know what to do.

"Omar," he said quietly, wringing his hands with anxiety now instead of excitement. He heard his brother produce something like an answer but before he could finish, there was another snap. The branch gave way into the water below, carrying his brother with it.

Simon's heart skipped several beats and a wave of panic crashed over him. He jumped to the edge of the water, and stood on the slanted shallow bank, watching to see if Omar had emerged from below, but he saw only but his distorted reflection. The river moved wildly on as if nothing had happened.

"Omar!" He cried, his voice cracking. His shoes were wet and cold as he stood on the cusp of the river. Water bounced from the fast river in droplets on his porous sneakers, and moisture from the ground below him steeped through the rubber soles. Downstream, he thought he heard a "Simon"; he thought he heard crying.

He exited the water and sprinted downstream, but the water was too fast and he was too slow. The boy tripped over a rock and fell, cutting through his jeans and creating a gash in his knee. He tried to get up to run again, but his leg gave way and he fell to the forest floor. Bits of dried leaves and dirt stuck themselves to his knee, and he gripped it tighter, feeling the heat of the injury, soon matched by the heat of his tears. The water was too loud, and he shifted his hands to his ears, standing up. Simon began to sprint back the way he and his brother had come, back toward the school and the street and home. It felt as if someone had shoved a stone into his lungs, and he gasped with panic and effort.

He remembered screaming the whole way back. He remembered his father dropping a porcelain plate and running outside. Later, his mother on the phone, voice wavering but strong. He remembered lights and lights and lights.

It had been two weeks and twelve neighbor-given casseroles since her oldest son drowned in the Paulinskill River. She never thought it could happen, especially somewhere she let her kids play almost every day after school. A dog found Omar an hour after *it* happened, and the animal's owner tried CPR

three times, to no avail. Local newspapers called it a tragedy that an intelligent boy of thirteen years would die. They spoke as if it never happened to anyone. She thought this would make her feel guilty, but she felt nothing—like someone had vacuumed out everything inside of her and she was just a ribcage with skin. The funeral had been a dream—none of it felt tangible, none of it real. Jess absentmindedly cracked her knuckles at her desk. Years as a database manager had left her with carpal tunnel syndrome, which got worse since her son passed. Some days she could barely open her hands flat, leaving them slightly clawed instead. Numbers flew in front of her, but she barely registered them as she typed line after line of data.

“Aren’t you done for the day, Jess?” her boss, an older woman, asked tentatively. “We’re all done. You should get some rest.”

“No,” Jess answered, distantly. “I’d rather finish up here first. I’ll see you Friday.”

She ended her work an hour after the others and went home. Her husband’s minivan was in the driveway, and she felt some of her loneliness lift. Inside, she was greeted by the clinging scent of pasta primavera, her husband’s signature dish. Jess smiled and silently gave him a peck on the cheek. His eyes were tired, but he grinned back.

“He’s in his room,” Ken said with a sigh. “Still not eating much.”

Jess sighed heavily. “Jesus, he’s only ten. Can you imagine? Ten years old. And having to see...” She trailed off, looking down at the tile of their kitchen.

“No,” Ken said, scooping pasta onto a plate. Steam fogged up his glasses, and he took them off, clearing them of the water droplets. “I really can’t. You need to talk to him, Jess. He still won’t listen to me. It sounds silly, but I wish Omar could talk to him about this. He was always the one to get through to him.”

Jess didn’t respond; instead she nodded thinly and exited the kitchen, walking down the hall.

Her two sons—her *only* son—lived down the hall in a room across from where his brother’s once was. She hadn’t cleaned out Omar’s things yet, even though a well-intentioned neighbor told Jess it’s best to get it cleaned up early. His old door was always open a crack. She hadn’t gone in except for when she needed a picture for the funeral. He had the best copy of his school portrait in his room. Jess was afraid to open the door fully, in case it let out a ghost. She knew it was ridiculous, but the room always seemed colder than the others. It hurt.

She shook her head slightly to break her stare away from the old door. Jess’s neck was stiff, her eyes strained from the constant glare of her computer screen. Slowly, she knocked on her youngest son’s door. She heard a shuffling of feet before Simon answered. His eyes were puffy, and he looked at the floor. He was always looking at the floor, even before all this happened.

“Simon, honey, you have to eat,” Jess nearly whispered. She was greeted with the usual silence. “Are you feeling okay?” She knew that was a dumb question, but with Simon she rarely received an answer anyway.

His skin, normally a rich umber like the leaves he used to collect, seemed bloodless—his eyes glazed over as if hypnotized. Jess thought it was like having another ghost in the house. She held onto him but never received a hug back. She tried not to blame him for what happened, to convince herself that it was just a twist of fate, but every time she looked in her son’s eyes, she saw something that was missing, something stolen from her.

Dinner was still, as it had been for the last few weeks. They sat closer together now but it made the gap at the table feel larger. The spaghetti was warm and it sat in Jess’s stomach like a rock. Bedtime was so quiet she could hardly put herself to bed. Her ears buzzed in the silence like a swarm of hornets, and she tossed and turned until morning.

The next day, she went into the small kitchen with its cold tiles and found it empty. Jess walked down to the other end of the haunted hallway and knocked on her son’s door. There was no answer.

“Simon,” she yawned, rubbing the back of her neck with an aching hand. “It’s time to get up for school. I’ll make you breakfast.” She received the usual stillness in return. “I’m coming in.”

Her eyes adjusted to the darkness of the room and found nothing. Simon wasn’t in his bed. Jess’s heart leapt into her throat so quickly, she thought she would choke. Her palms sweat as she rushed to each room in the house, looking for her son. She still found nothing. She hated this house now—it seemed to laugh at her as she searched. Ken was doing IT work for the local high school, and had been called in early to set up the new operating system, and wouldn’t be back for several hours. Jess set her jaw and threw on a thick beige coat over her bony shoulders and thin pajamas. Snatching a hat off her cluttered kitchen counter, she bounded out the front door, like a child late for school.

Her old Saturn station wagon groaned to life and she gripped the frigid wheel, backing out of her driveway. The radio played soft static but she didn’t bother to turn it off. Her stop wasn’t far.

The woods had always intimidated Jess this time of year because its grayness that seemed to swallow up every bit of color. Ever since they moved to this rural town seven years ago, her children had loved the woods, but she never understood why. She should have listened to her gut feeling about the forest. She shut off her car and jogged into the woods, being careful to scan the trees around her for the sight of her boy’s red winter coat. A few minutes in, she couldn’t see her car anymore, and she was beginning to worry that

she'd lost her way. But then, Jess heard the river. It made her heart beat faster than it already was from her jogging. A small figure in a red coat huddled in a clearing to her right. Immediately, she felt a huge weight lift from her shoulders. Jess approached her son quietly. He didn't look up.

"Have a bad dream?" she asked. She saw the mess of tiny curls on his head bob up and down in the manner of a young child. She took the hat from on top of her head and bent down to put it on her son's, sitting by him in the process.

The river ran like an unanswered phone, each splash of water slowing her heart a little more. Jess's hands froze in the cold, and she rubbed them together to try and make warmth. The sight of the river had made her numb. It moved with a clear intensity that she knew she could never match again.

"That's the tree?" she asked, pointing to the skeletal figure of the trunk. None of the leaves were left. Jess had never actually been to the site of where her son had died, afraid there wouldn't be anything to mark his passing.

Simon nodded, not looking up. He just seemed to know where she was pointing. Jess wanted him to make eye contact with her. She wanted an "I'm sorry," even though it wasn't his fault. She almost wanted to strike him. Instead, she put her left arm around him, bringing him closer to her in the frigid air. Jess thought the tears on her face would freeze, but they didn't. Then, Simon reached his cold hand up to her face and wiped a tear away. Jess didn't smile, but her chest swelled with a brew of both compassion and sadness, and the tears poured out faster. She clasped his hand and held it in her own. The two huddled together, bare trees around them closing in. Below them, leaves rotted into the ground.



*Mia in Rainscape* (35mm color photograph), Isabel Owen



*San Miguel* (35mm color photograph), Isabel Owen

# Fifteen Ways of Looking at a Privy

I. Sitting my bare skin down on the damp-morning timber is about as magical as it gets. This one is nothing more than a wooden seat over a hole in the ground in the middle of deep deciduous trees, far enough away from where our tent is set up. It's our fourth morning on the Appalachian Trail, Cal and I, and the May foliage gleams, rays beaming through the trees and illuminating me, alone, pants pushed down my legs. I am queen of the Connecticut woods, quiet and human on her throne.

II. Queen, but not God. That title belongs to Tsi-Ku, the Chinese goddess of the outhouse, "the Purple Lady," a delicate figure with long, dark hair who would reveal the future to the women who came to visit her when they needed to relieve themselves.

III. As a child, I'd always known them as *outhouses*, paint-chipped stink boxes next to the soggy shower room at the state park where Mom first taught me to love the woods. They were often crowded, and even though finding myself alone in the trees scared me, there was no thought more frightening than having to make small talk on the toilet. I avoided them, preferred squatting behind a bush and wiping up with leaves, but only if I knew Mom was within earshot. Had I known about Tsi-Ku, the goddess waiting in silk robes to tell me who I'd be when I grew up, I might've braved the crowd, saved time sneaking away to find a secret spot in the woods.

IV. My intestines have somehow regulated themselves. I wake every morning and leave Cal to start packing up the tent, saunter off to solitude. Privies are clearly marked on the AT guide, one at nearly every campsite. The symbol: a small crescent moon.

V. Luna, the ancient crescent-shaped figure, was originally carved into doors of “ladies’ rooms” during the Colonial period. A symbol for womanhood, the moon designated a privy specifically for women. As the country began to push itself farther westward, deep into the Sierra Nevada, men’s privies were eventually abandoned. The women’s space stayed better maintained, and so Luna prevailed as the symbol for the privy.

VI. I’m feeling slightly guilty at having this moment for myself as the moon fades fast in the light of the morning sun, dawn having cracked at least an hour ago. A betrayal of Luna, she’s been left to only see what happens after the sun sets: night soil, a euphemism for what lies in the pit below the privy. Still, I’m revelling, and I imagine a comfort in her liminal presence: here with me, but not really, dimming in the lavender sky.

VII. Other names include *bog*, *dunny*, *backhouse*, *kybo*. I prefer *privy* for its preservation of *private*. I prefer that Cal doesn’t know what my legs look like squatted over a hole, the dewed light revealing the forest of tiny hairs sprouting from my upper thighs. Yet, I’m glad to hear him rustling leaves just fifty yards away.

VIII. In summer 2007, the privy on Mount Whitney was removed from its peak at nearly 15,000 feet above sea level, the highest peak in the contiguous US. Disposal was too dangerous; park rangers in hazmat suits balanced on steep-walled canyons, helicopters navigating rocky winds to carry out 250-pound barrels of waste. Panoramic views of the Sierra Nevada sacrificed in its confiscation, Tsi-Ku left alone in the pale light of the moon, a low wind billowing through her silky purple gown.

IX. In summer 2016, I close my eyes, breathe the air, and imagine myself on a mountain peak, the Sierra Nevada; the wind blows through my dark oily hair, and I am as close to becoming a goddess as I’ll ever be. My eyes open, and I remember that I am goosebumped and serene and seated bare-bottomed, somewhere in New England. Buried in black birch, hawthorn, and aspen. I can hear Cal packing up our tent, prepping our gear for another ten-mile day of sore shoulders, and quiet conversation as our boots lick at leaves and stones still wet from the night’s rain. I’ve never been out West, but Cal and I intend

to go next year. I can't imagine the intimacy of days isolated on a trail with anyone else. Moreso, I can't imagine them *without* anyone else.

X. From Middle English *prive*: private (adj.), close friend, private place (noun). Tsi-Ku knows something about myself that I don't know, something I'm not yet privy to. I've taken the Meyers-Briggs personality test too many times; I'm INFP, trying to find comfort in four letters that might reconcile the part of me that finds comfort in Cal's unseen presence, and the part that's glad to be alone out here. The part of me that stands at the peak of Mount Whitney, rooted as the violet skipilot cushioning the rock, lone-flying and transient as the gray-crowned rosy finch circling the peak, and the part of me that knows she wouldn't ever go alone.

XI. There's a sentimentality to the privy, to the way the pants freeze in position at the knees. Billy Edd Wheeler captured it in his low acoustic tune, a muted voice resonating lamentations for his own "precious building," also threatened by removal for uglying the town. Bobby Evan howls a folky melody about the "good old outhouse's" single window, sun pouring through like it does through the greening branches this morning in mid-May.

XII. Louder rustling, heavy boots advancing quickly, I hardly notice as Cal approaches me in the open air. My knees unfreeze, cheeks peel from the dewy wood, elastic waistband snaps just under my bellybutton before he's within eyesight. I look up and Luna's nearly disappeared. After taking a tiny moment to mourn the end of my time here, I gather myself and trot away quickly, passing Cal as he makes his way to the precious throne I've just relinquished.

XIII. Tsi-Ku shakes her head at my leaving. In my haste to get up, I've forgotten to ask about my future, but the moment is gone. I'm beginning to think these questions will never be answered, neither by Myers-Briggs tests nor a Chinese goddess.

XIV. There is no solitude in privacy.

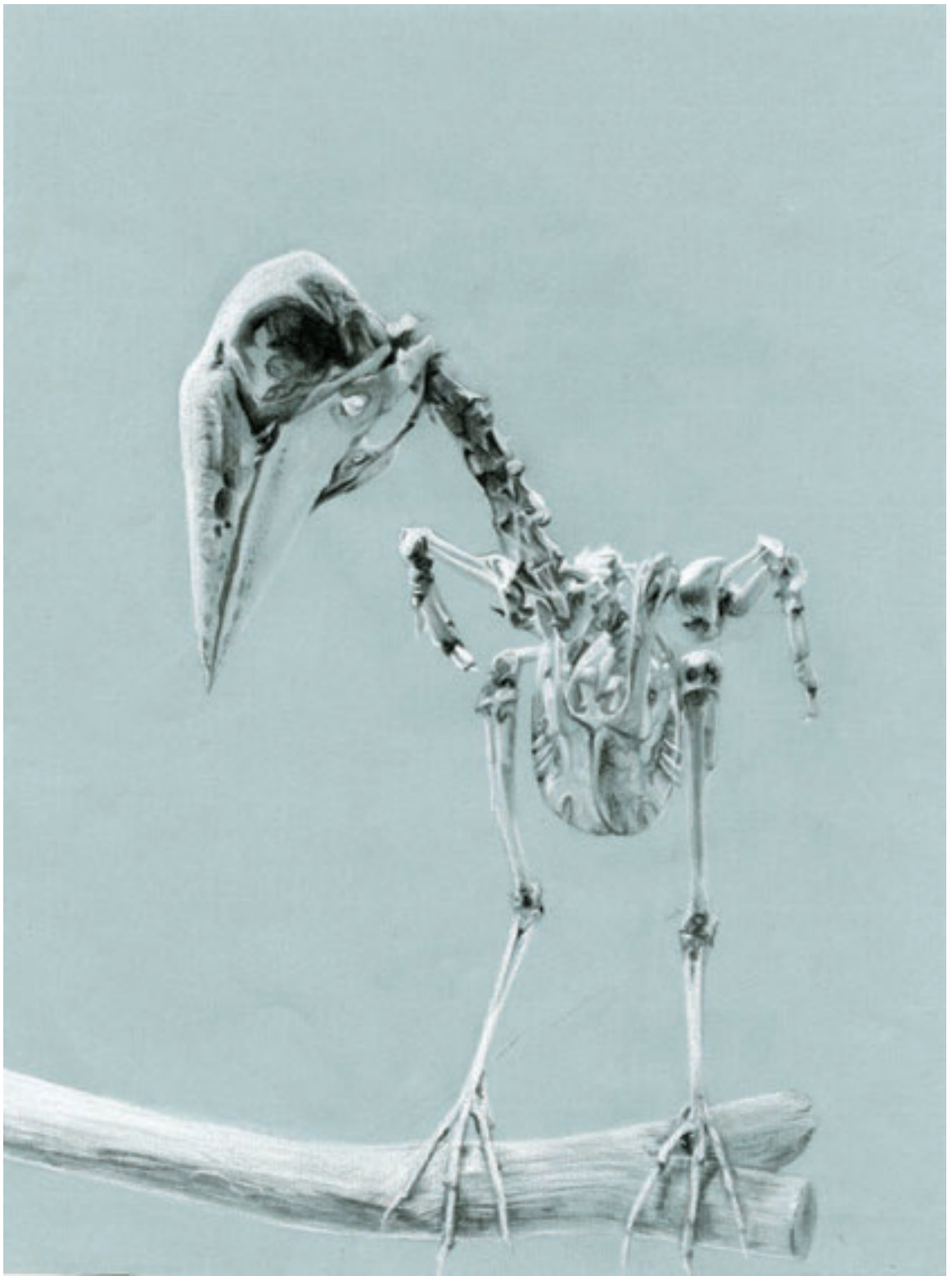
XV. Somehow, I prefer it this way.

# Ablutions in the Dark

She is lowering herself into the tub,  
awkwardly with age. Sudden novas  
of pain indicating when to pause.  
Looking through the window, finally  
in water, warm, inviting forgetfulness  
she sees her distant husband  
bent over, spinning a stone,  
sharpening the spade & the harrow  
grinding that metal to hot flakes.  
Bright shower of fractured steel  
dancing around his boots.  
Like the idea of root.  
In the cool dark morning  
in April.  
Not for the field or some better capture  
of plants unwanted.  
But looking defeat in the eye  
and saying yes. But like this.  
Deeper and slower each day.  
Grinding away the effort.  
The exquisite tool of living.  
Of saying no.  
Outside the shed he stops and turns to the still house.  
Probably April.  
Widening bulbs of hydrangeas tossing in the wind  
louder than their abating love.  
More fluid than cooling bathwater.

# Visiting Detroit

Reading Philip Levine  
on a sun-drenched beach  
a Wednesday day on Lake Michigan.  
This morning a friend had messaged me  
offering up her afternoon  
shift at the bar we both work.  
Reading, reading. Trying ever so hard  
to ignore the words entirely.



*Bye Bye Birdie* (charcoal pencil), Chelsea Sereno



*Always Watching* (colored pencil), Chelsea Sereno

## A Note

It was night on the streets of what I imagined  
to be Italy; but only because the streets were stone  
and a restaurant to the left spilled a red and yellow  
glow on the round tables and umbrellas outside. I stepped out  
of the painting by an artist whose name I neglected  
to look for once the purple ceiling fan caught my attention.

I never noticed it before.

Past the coffee shop, I looked through windows that  
displayed a carved bear, a wolf, an owl, a dog—  
nevermind. The dog was an actual dog.

I saw a wedding and gargoyles,

three women in black,

another wedding,

a squirrel that sat with its arms stretched out

like it was using a typewriter.

He reminded me of Ulysses, whose super power

was the ability to write poetry. I forgot the title

of that book. I didn't think

that squirrels could write, and street signs had name tags:

"Hello, my name is Peter Pan."

But I saw that even doors will leave

you a note that says, "Close me tight (I get stuck)

—Front Door."



*Frankenstein's Staples* (digital photography), Sean Maphia

LIZZIE PELLEGRINO

64° 58' N, 21° 27' W @  
14:00 & 20 y.o.

aska covered hills with hekla  
bucket to the east  
i prayed basaltic ash  
clouds would cover the ever  
summer sun. martian analog  
i pace on moss that groans

shifts under hiking boots. i did  
not want to leave the river,  
meandering jarðhiti. swimsuit in  
thirteen °c and hair wet with  
sulfur-altered steam

i pushed my xenolith fingers into silt & hoped  
the ground could collect me into igneous  
rock and store me in the mud under  
katabatic breeze and jökull.

# change

my father smells like rusting  
coins, twisted copper boundaries, collected  
nickles, pennies, dimes,  
prismatic faces coalescing in sidecar compartments  
commiserating with their greening alloys.

he strikes "in God we trust" into my molten palms  
so hard, i still feel  
engraved long after the coin  
drops, small angles scattering  
over heatless chrome.

    i scrub my hands. corrode the crystal lattice  
    cultured in the microcracks of my flesh.

he seizes our swelling jars of cents, empties  
every vessel into the lake, oscillating  
eternal wishes or maybe craving  
brittle fracture, to cleave himself from his scent  
as i know it.

why mint? why stamp metal daughters fated  
to be totaled, fingered, intermingled along a planar array  
below sea level?

the lake is metallic. brined.  
a marinade of stacked copper faults.  
steeped silvery reminders  
of my father's hands.



*Distant Pressure* (chalk pastel on paper), Peggy Wen



*Locked In* (chalk pastel on paper), Peggy Wen

# Centre Island Bay

It is early, the sun brushing the tip of the horizon, the town still slumbering in their hazy homes. Down the beach, there is an AA meeting, the group's beach chairs firmly planted in the sand. The wind carries the sound of their hands clapping together to me. I gaze at them through the sunlight as I sit in my own beach chair, feeling the heat blanket my skin.

I often wonder about the stories they tell. Every Saturday morning, I find them at the far end of the beach, gripping their Styrofoam cups of coffee, and I think that one day I will walk over there. One day, I will sit in their circle and listen to their tales and memories. But not this time.

This time I am staring at them from a distance, hoping that if I listen hard enough, I will catch bits of their conversation on the breeze. I am perched just outside of the lifeguard room, a garage for the maintenance crew, with a golf cart to the left and a grimy picnic bench to the right.

The land wraps around the bay so that the tide pulls the water westward, following the contour of the shore before letting out into the Long Island Sound in the north. It is small and forgotten, a rocky little beach that faces the vast fields and looming mansions of the gated community across the water. It is often empty, save for the elderly couples and young families who sometimes remember the calmness of the bay. The water is never very deep, the depth only about eight feet during high tide. I shift in my beach chair and look back over at the meeting. Maybe they are forgotten too.

I look out over the water, the voices of the clamblers resonating from their boats. The water is still, almost solid, as though it is only a picture of the bay. I listen to the clamblers for just a moment longer, hearing the bellowing voice of the captain. Then I am in the garage, standing in front of a whirring fan.

There is the scent of sweat and sunblock. A familiar smell. Gabe is lying on a cot in the corner of the room, the metal legs bending under his weight.

He is snoring slightly, his body shuddering as he breathes and moans. "Have a little too much fun last night?" Ryder asks from the table, where he and Zach are playing cards. Gabe just moans again and rolls over on the cot. "Drunk bastard," Ryder says under his breath, and he and Zach chuckle. Then they are silent, focusing on their game as they throw cards onto other cards. There is the occasional cursing under their breath when one of them gains the advantage, but other than that, it is just the whirring of the fan and the sound of the cards hitting the table.

This is my world. Or part of it. But sometimes, most of the time, it feels like my whole world. This little beach, this tiled room, it closes in on you, engulfs you. And the people and places outside of this beach seem so far away, so unreal and dreamlike. As though it was all part of a different life, a different world.

I am on the stand when everybody else gets to the beach. First there is Monica, headphones in, lip-gloss perfect. She breezes into the room, drawing discreet stares from the guys. Then there is Leo, zipping up on his moped. He leans it against the side of the garage and slings his backpack over one shoulder, sauntering into the room. Addison arrives last, her car screeching to a halt, slamming the door shut with her foot as she grips her coffees in her hands.

The picnic bench trembles under Addison's body as she squeezes herself between Monica and Zach. There is the awkward exchange of:

"What's up?"

"Nothing, you?"

"Good actually, last night I went out and—"

"Oh, that's cool."

From the stand, I can hear the conversation stall, then die. There is the collective exhale of exasperation, the uncomfortable shifting in seats and the slow, but certain, exiting of the room. Without hesitation, they solemnly shuffle towards the stand, steadily gripping the painted wooden planks and pulling themselves up the tower. Leo slumps onto the bench next to me and Monica and Ryder stand on the platform slightly below us, all looking up at me with tired eyes.

As though born of slush and grime, Addison reeks of ignorant comments and tasteless jokes. Her skin secretes an odor, which could only be described as self-entitlement. Her hair is dark and greasy, her beady eyes unwavering in their stare; her nose rests on her face like a beak, always pointing at whomever she is judging. Sometimes I watch her shift in her seat or slightly adjust her shorts so the fat of her thighs spreads in the most flattering way. I study the way her lips twitch when she is preparing to interrupt someone or how she tugs at her limp hair when somebody teases her. I know that beneath the

grotesque smell of knock-off perfume and clinical beauty creams, there is a sad understanding that this is her life. At the good old age of twenty-four, Addison has settled into the mundane lifestyle of tiny accomplishments and average goals. It doesn't matter that she lives at home or that her parents fund her life, or that she believes that the world should hand her its most beautiful attainments. For Addison, life will forever be a summer job that pays well but dies when the weather changes.

Ryder's whistling reaches the room before he does. Swinging the lanyard of his keys, he whistles the tune to some nameless country song and aimlessly strolls into the garage. He places his hands on my bare shoulders, slowly rubbing my tanned skin as he leans in close and breathes in my ear. "Sup?"

I shrug him off me, and he steps aside, smiling as he takes the seat next to me on the bench. "Ryder, don't touch me. It's too hot to be touching people." I dramatically wave my hands to fan my face, then return to reading my book. Ryder reaches over and pulls the book from my hands, closing it and putting it aside.

"It's never too hot if I touch you in the right places." He winks at me and smirks.

I stare at him with pursed lips, unimpressed by his joke. "Ha ha," I say, reaching out to grab my book. "Funny. Now go away." Without giving me the book, Ryder stands and steps back.

"No," he says, walking around the table. "Let's play cards." He places my book out of reach and pulls out a deck of cards, already shuffling them before I can answer. I roll my eyes and nod, knowing that he won't leave me alone until I agree to play. Ryder focuses on the shuffling; I see his brows furrow and his forehead crease as his fingers maneuver the cards. Without pause, Ryder deals me my hand and wordlessly begins playing.

Outside of this beach, Ryder and I were strangers. Are strangers. Passing each other in the crowded halls of our high school, I am just a nameless face, simply a body he bumps into without apologizing. Here, we play cards and tell stupid stories about our friends, but once we wash the sand off our skin and change out of our lifeguard uniforms, it is as though the other one does not exist. When he slings his arm around his girlfriend and gets drunk at bonfires, when he sets off fireworks with his friends and runs from the cops, I am not real. I look at him now, studying the birthmarks on his arms, the way his blonde hair falls over his eyes, how his pouting lips are chapped from dehydration. I look at him now so I can remember him when I leave.

The boy that exists on Facebook and Instagram, who tweets nasty things to people he doesn't like, who sends snapchats of guns and cigars; he is not the same boy that sits across from me now, smiling at the cards he's dealt himself.

When Ryder leaves the beach, he leaves part of himself with it. As do I. As do all of us.

With careful footsteps, I walk out into the water, Zach gliding past me on the surfboard with Monica struggling to balance at the front. The glittering water cools my skin as I walk farther out, Ryder and Leo besides me. Perched on the stand is Addison, staring down at us as we retreat to the bay, stranding her on the empty beach.

When the water tickles my waist, I submerge myself completely, feeling the molecules of the water part for my body as I swim below the surface. I come up for air, letting the sweet summer fill my lungs, and swim towards the surfboard. Tommy, our boss, doesn't mind when we go swimming, he likes to think we're practicing for our lifeguard drills. The current of the water pulls us out of the swimming area until we are drifting in the middle of the bay, the occasional wave methodically rocking us as we rest our heads on the board and our legs dangle beneath us.

Under the water, Leo's leg brushes against mine. He looks at me through his sunglasses, the hint of a smile curling the corners of his lips. I hold his stare for a second before I am thrust underwater. I feel thick fingers grip my shoulders as they propel me downward, the water filling my mouth before I get the chance to hold my breath. The hands push me down until I reach the bottom, brown muck squishing between my toes. The pressure from above subsides as I am released. I crouch under the water, grabbing a handful of mud before my legs push against the ground and I glide back up to the surface.

I come up gasping for air, the salt water burning my lungs. The sounds of the surface world come back to me as I catch my breath: the rippling water lapping against the surfboard, the ringing bell of a buoy somewhere across the water, Zach's laughter as he throws back his head and opens his mouth, the sound shaking his limbs before escaping his body.

"What's the matter, Lila?" Zach says between his laughter. "Can't handle a little fun?"

It's a game we like to play, called Deep Sea Diver. You push somebody down, down until they reach the bottom. And if one person cannot push someone all the way down, a second person joins in so that you have two people pushing you instead of one. It's fun when you know to hold your breath, not so much when you almost drown.

Still coughing, I reach over to Zach and smash my palm onto the top of his head, the muck from below spreading over his hair and oozing down onto his face. Zach's laughter immediately halts, a faint echo softly bounces off the water then quickly floats away. Zach's face contorts with disgust—eyes

squeezed shut, lips puckered and nostrils flared—as he wipes the mud away with the back of his hand.

“Pretty funny, huh?” I spit at him once my lungs are void of water. Zach glares at me then ducks under the water, running his fingers through his tangled curls to wash the mud out of his pale blonde hair.

From the mouth of the garage, Gabe sticks his fingers between his lips and whistles, the high-pitched sound filling the bay. We all turn to look as Gabe sticks his hand in the air, gesturing for our return. “Squirt! Ryder! Let’s go!” He calls from the shore. Like eager pets, Zach and Ryder race towards the beach.

The boys emerge from the water, wet hair stuck to their cheeks and dripping bathing suits clinging to their thighs. They rush into the garage to grab their towels and sandals then hurry off to the parking lot, where Gabe has already lit a joint, the wispy smoke of marijuana escaping out a cracked window. I watch as Ryder throws himself into the front passenger seat, sucking on the joint like it is candy. Zach climbs into the back of the car and Gabe is driving away before the door is even closed.

At 5'11", Gabe is 240 pounds of beer and sausage links. He was a high school football player who didn’t know what kind of fish he was until he went to college, where the only way he could make himself feel bigger was by filling his chest with smoke. Zach and Ryder idolize Gabe’s blatant unwillingness to look any further into the future than his plans for that weekend, but laugh at the mediocrity of his life as if their same actions will have different results. The three of them take their lunch break together, disappearing for an hour, then slowly returning with glassy eyes and big stomachs. The rest of us exchange glances, but no one ever mentions the scent that lurks on their clothes.

“Monica,” Leo, the three of us still floating on the surfboard, says, “switch sits with me. Please.”

“And sit with Addison for half an hour? Yeah, I don’t think so,” she says without hesitation.

“Oh, come on, you know how long she stays up there. I’d rather just sit in silence for two hours than deal with her for even fifteen minutes.” Leo pauses, waiting for Monica to comply. She doesn’t. “Don’t make me pull the ‘boss’ card.”

Monica and I both laugh at this. “Please, Leo, you get an extra two dollars an hour. You don’t have any real power.” I say.

“Hey, I make the sitting schedule, so technically I have the power to make you sit with Addison all day long,” he replies.

“Well, maybe if you had taken the early shift instead of the late shift and had actually *made* the sitting schedule today, that would be true. But that’s just not the case here, is it?” Monica says decisively. Leo huffs and pushes off the board, swimming towards the beach.

There is a pause as we watch him splash his way to shore. Then Monica turns to me, saying, "He looks at you a lot."

"Excuse me?"

"Haven't you noticed? He's always looking at you."

"Oh. No, I guess I haven't." I have.

"I don't think it's like a creepy kind of staring. He's just...into you." Monica waits for me to say something. I just shrug, my blushing cheeks easily mistaken for too much sun and too little sunblock. "Would you, you know, get with him?" Monica asks, leaning into my answer.

I glance back towards the beach, where Leo is now slouched on the life-guard stand next to Addison. And he is looking at me, I swear, he is looking at me. "So you would?!" Monica concludes, noting the slight curl of my lips as I hold his gaze from across the water.

"No. No," I say. "I mean, probably not. I haven't really thought about it," I lie.

"Sure, okay," Monica says, thinking for a moment. "You can do better, anyway."

"Yeah, totally," I say, quietly, still thinking about Leo's leg brushing mine under the water.

Monica quietly eats her spring salad as she thumbs her way through a fashion magazine. I look over my book at her as she pauses to run her finger over the image of something she likes. Next to the magazine is her phone, which constantly buzzes with text messages. Addison sits across from Monica, her curious eyes falling on the open pages of the magazine.

Gasping dramatically, Addison snatches the magazine from Monica's hands and brings it up to her face, staring at the model on the paper. "Oh my god," she says excitedly, dragging out her words. "I love Victoria Beckham. She's honestly just the best," Addison squeals as she crinkles the magazine in her grip before giving it back to Monica. "I just love her."

"Addison," Monica says as she smooths the magazine, "that's not even Victoria Beckham."

"Sure it is," Addison says.

"No... Look," Monica holds out the magazine to show us the model, a tall brunette that most certainly is not Victoria Beckham.

"Oh, would you look at that. My bad." Addison shrugs her shoulders. Monica rolls her eyes and goes back to flipping through the magazine.

"Monica, have you heard anything new about Zach and Vinny?" I ask from my beach chair.

"Oh yeah, did they ever have, like, a confrontation?" Addison adds.

Monica looks over at Addison slowly then turns to me before she speaks. "Well, I only know what Ryder told me. You know about the whole cheating thing, right?"

"Yeah," I reply, "Vinny hooked up with Priscilla."

"Vinny is Zach's friend. And Zach is dating Priscilla. And Vinny works at the beach on the other side of the street," Addison says as though we don't already know this.

"Yes, thank you, Addison, for clarifying," Monica says. "So apparently Vinny finally met up with Zach yesterday, which is why Zach was late for work. And Zach beat the shit out of Vinny, like, no mercy, and he had to go to the hospital."

"Is anything going to happen to Zach? Isn't Vinny's dad, like, a lawyer or something?"

"Yeah, I think he has his own law firm. I think Vinny's pressing charges. I mean, if you ask me, I think it's stupid, like, you did a shitty thing, so deal with it. Don't go running to your mommy and daddy."

"Well, I don't know about that," Addison interjects. "Cheating with someone isn't illegal. Jumping someone is."

I nod my head slowly, enjoying every little word that comes out of Monica's mouth. I crave these stories, the insane "no way" kind of stories that you can't believe actually happened. Monica tells me what she knows, a quick run down of the cheating, the fight, the aftermath, dragged out by Addison's persistent side comments.

I crawl out of my beach chair and walk out of the garage, squinting my eyes as I scan the beach. To the left of the lifeguard stand is a young family, their sand toys scattered and half buried, Styrofoam boogie boards left just at the water's edge. The mother and father corral their three children, all still in swim diapers, and plant them on sandy towels, wiping their hands before giving them sandwiches.

The sand crunches and shifts under my feet as I walk to the tower. Leo is stretched out on the wide seat of the stand, his limbs sprawled out and eagerly absorbing the sun. He sits up straighter and makes room for me on the bench. We sit in silence for a moment, taking in the shrieking laughter of the kids as they gobble up their lunch.

"So, when you gonna ask Addison out?" I ask, poking him in his side. He squirms away from my touch and swats at my hand.

"Ew, don't say things like that."

"What? Afraid she's too good for you?" I tease, smiling as his face grows red.

He scoffs, sitting up even straighter. "Please, she's not good for anything." As if on cue, Addison's shrill voice rings throughout the garage, ping-pong off the cement walls and finding its way to the stand, where goosebumps prick

my skin. We turn to look at the garage, then glance at each other, shuddering simultaneously.

"Thank God she won't be here next year," I say to him, relishing the idea of an Addison-free summer.

"Doesn't make a difference to me, I won't be here anyway," Leo says.

"Good thing too, you're becoming too old to be a lifeguard. You're so frail," I say jokingly.

"Please, this is only your second year here. Once you've been here for five or six years like me and Gabe, you'll get it. This job becomes tiresome."

"What could be so tiresome about hanging out at a beach all day?"

"Trust me, you'll see. It's all fun and games right now, but once you're done with college, like me... It's time to move on." I smile sadly and look over at the small family, the kids now strapped into their life vests and floating in the water.

Leo sighs deeply, the salty air filling his chest before he slowly exhales, his body seemingly collapsing in on itself. Before he breathes in, I count his exposed ribs, thinly covered by tan skin. Leo's the type of guy who could eat fast food every day for the rest of his life and not put on a single pound. The drawstring to his bathing suit desperately clings to his hips as he ties it tightly, but I pretend not to notice the excess fabric scrunched around his waist. Instead, I notice the gentle curl of his lips. Instead, I notice his sunburnt cheeks and his calloused hands, and I smell his fading cologne mixed with sunblock. Instead of his bony torso and his lanky limbs, I notice that he is looking at me, through his sunglasses, and he is looking at my lips, just like I am looking at his.

"What are you looking at?" he asks, playfully. I hold his stare for just a moment longer, trying to see past the dark shades of his glasses.

"Nothing," I say, smiling as I turn away. Leo is finite. He is not like Ryder or Monica, who lead opposite, glamorous lives. There is no secret persona, no mask, no mystery or enigma or charade. He is what he seems to be. I take comfort in knowing that my Leo is *the* Leo, that when he leaves this beach, he takes all of himself. He doesn't leave pieces behind with the sunblock and whistles, he doesn't lose himself when he loses the uniform to the washing machine. The Leo that clasps his hands at church, the Leo that bumps into me at the grocery store, he will have the same eyes that look at me now, he will have the same silvery voice that now fills my ears. He is real. And he is next to me. And all of him is next to me, every atom, every face, every voice, it is all right here, right on this tower.

I catch myself staring at him again, smiling at the beauty that is his simplicity. "You got something to say?" he says jokingly, but I just smile and shake my head slowly, knowing that the things I want to say are not meant to be heard on the stand.

We sit in silence together, feeling the sun beat down on our skin as we watch the small family eventually pack up their things and leave. Inside the garage, Gabe's low voice calls out the time: 4:00 p.m.

"Time to go?" Leo asks without looking at me.

"Yeah..." I reply.

"Well, see you tomorrow."

I get up slowly. Carefully climbing down the ladder, I look up at him just one more time. The sunlight frames his face. He waves his hand at me and I wave back, then wordlessly turn and walk to the garage.

The five-minute car ride home is peaceful. Transformative. I buckle my seat-belt, roll down the windows, and play the radio. The running wind courses throughout my car and washes the beach from my skin, pulling away the scent of sunblock and salt water. By the time I pull into my driveway, it is as though the bathing suit that hugs my body is the only thing that has followed me home from the beach.

Walking up to the front door, some faces become blurry as others come into focus. Names that I didn't remember at lunch time fill my head when I sit down for dinner. Jokes and stories that made me laugh as I lounged in the sun no longer make sense to me once I fall into my bed at night.

My mother hugs me when I walk in the door, her shirt stained with the tomato sauce that is now simmering on the stove. She holds my face in her hands, stroking my dark skin and asking me if I put sunblock on throughout the day. I nod but don't really remember.

"How was your day?" she asks, but when I start to answer, my mind draws a blank.

The pieces of stories that I have don't taste right in my mouth so, instead, I say, "Nothing."

"Nothing? You're telling me that you spent the entire day at the beach and yet you don't have a single story to tell?"

I shrug. "What do you want me to say? Nobody ever goes to the beach; there's not much to do when there isn't anyone to guard."

She sighs. "Well, what about those kids you work with? What are they up to?"

I think back to the card game with Ryder, to Zach playing Deep Sea Diver, and to sitting on the stand with Leo. But when I look at my mother and open my mouth to speak, I know she wouldn't understand. The reputations we have earned in this small town don't match up with the people I spend my day with. The names she associates with certain adjectives are also the names that find ways to keep us all entertained during the long days at the empty beach. Neither she nor my friends can comprehend the complexity of

the beach, the complexity of each individual lifeguard who sits on that tower and watches over the water.

So when my mother asks about my day, there is nothing to say, no tale to tell. Those stories belong to a different me, from a different world, made up of a rocky beach and a tiled garage.

# View from Atop Mount Herzl

The State built Yad Vashem in a winding way:

emerge  
from the museum,  
see the glowing, the white hills of Jerusalem,  
and a sun a confirmation.

In 1945 my great-grandfather traveled from Brooklyn to Poland. Dr. Stern

with a suitcase of surgical supplies and a letter from Celia in his breast-pocket. Maybe

he saw in the bumps of emaciated rib-bone the white hills of Jerusalem? Nonlinear conclusions.

Moreso, he must have felt a lacking:

Filling in, *the tub in the bathroom of my mother's first home*    *overflowing*  
*soapy suds on a purple-tiled floor & and young laughter*

I think about how his serotonin wavered,  
more like airport highways than white hills.  
I know he kept a garden

in his Queens home  
but cried        into mirror glass in old age.

I don't speak Hebrew but the *shema*  
reminds me of my own  
      ribcage—smooth flat fatty skin,  
the topography of the tri-state.

Moreso I occasionally lay on bathroom tile cold & wonder *purple*

# holiday

“Good to see you.” the blurring lights  
of northern boulevard slinking in sleep  
paralysis; the hills the valleys of a fringe  
town whispering salt-mined promises  
meanwhile: across millennia of trees and  
interstate highway, the long island  
mansions & green park and clean street fill  
me clean empty-full like the nassau county  
eyewitness news 7 and the hum of the  
long island express-way the backnoise for  
ponzi schem-atic villages their vibrating  
anxiety and i love them, the way i love  
friends who were never friends in a three-  
story estate, should-have-gone there-  
should-have-tried-harder; please, prove:  
that i want the city because my friends say  
i want it, “Complacent,” i say about the  
upstate campus, sipping overpriced bubble  
tea, in 48 hours i’ll be in a yellow valley,  
still wondering what complacent means—  
(wherever i am i always want to go home)

# A Review of Kate Daloz's *We Are as Gods: Back to the Land in the 1970s on the Quest for a New America*

Kate Daloz's *We Are as Gods: Back to the Land in the 1970s on the Quest for a New America* is a compelling and insightful account of the 1970s back-to-the-land movement. Daloz traces the birth of the commune in America, drawing on the stories of her parents, Larry and Judy, who played a key role in the growth of the movement. This well-researched chronicle is told through the lens of Myrtle Hill, a commune that sprung up on a muddy farm in the woods of Vermont. At a time when the prosperity of the post-war era hollowed, and the orthodoxy of official American culture drove even the wealthy to despair, Daloz proves that the back-to-the-land movement was more than a manifestation of disaffected anti-capitalist idealism. It was a sustained and

successful movement to remake lives outside of a system that felt intractable, yet doomed to fail.

Daloz's style reads at times like a documentary history, at times like an extended lyric essay. The blend is pleasing, particularly during vignettes of day-to-day commune life, or stories of the many vibrant characters that populate the book—like Loraine the silent anchor of Myrtle Hill, who impresses a Tibetan Buddhist monk, or Chico the nudist architect. Though *We Are As Gods* examines a historical movement, it avoids overly theoretical digging, aiming instead for individual narratives and detailed character development.

Daloz outlines the rise and fall of communal living experiments, social activism, and the attempts of the disaffected to live off the land in acts of “voluntary primitivism.” While these back-to-the-land efforts boasted an environmentally friendly lifestyle and a rural education that had previously evaded city folk and suburbanites, Daloz addresses the potentially life-threatening situations that arise in the face of self-sufficiency. The quality of shelter becomes dependent on learned skills, which leads to bitter winter drafts or timber homes going up in flames.

The first major question that arises strikes at the core of the movement, drives the book forward, and remains highly relevant today in the face of communalist movements: “How do you maintain a leaderless system and a do-your-own-thing freedom while also making sure that the group has what it needs to survive?” Daloz provides potential answers to this question throughout her book by hopping from one commune, like Myrtle Hill, to another, like Entropy Acres. As her characters grow restless and move across the country to explore other communes and gather resources, Daloz describes successes and failures within the movements. In one example, a hippie commune operates without a leader, which solves the problem by not addressing it. Everyone smokes pot, does drugs, and fights against monogamy. On the other hand, there is the regimented Reality Construction Company, that has no tolerance for spiritual frivolity and laziness. As Daloz explores these experiments, she reveals the contradictory elements of the back-to-the-land movement. One failure, for instance, is the homogeneity of its members in terms of race and class. Daloz recounts Nina Simone's comment, “Lou, there aren't any black people here,” on her visit to Lou Gottlieb's Digger Farm commune.

Daloz's work is instructive and indubitably useful for a hopeful modern back-to-the-lander. At the same time, the book paints an engaging narrative that raises questions about the possibility of truly revolutionary egalitarian living within a capitalist society, and brings readers along for an insightful look into the back-to-the-land movement's rise and decline.

The release of *We Are As Gods* is timely, even prescient. It explores a cultural milieu some of us are still struggling to preserve against the setbacks of the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s. In a moving section, Daloz chronicles the

People's Park protests of 1969 Berkeley, and unflinchingly portrays the brutal repression students faced under Governor Ronald Reagan. The anti-war movement during the Vietnam era was the largest protest movement to date, until the election of Donald Trump. As students afraid—like many are—of what the future holds under an authoritarian government, *We Are As Gods* provides a dynamic example of the trials, tribulations, and complex responses of students and young people searching for a response to a failing system.

# An Interview with Kate Daloz

Kate Daloz was raised in the woods of Vermont, in the geodesic dome her parents built during the back-to-the-land movement in the 1970s. She holds an MFA from Columbia University, where she taught creative writing, and was a founding member of Neuwrite: Columbia Scientists and Writers. Her work has been featured in *American Scholar*, *New Republic*, and *Rolling Stone*, among other publications. *We Are As Gods: Back to the Land in the 1970s on the Quest for a New America*, is her first book.

***Gandy Dancer: We Are As Gods*, seeking to chronicle a movement of hundreds of thousands of young people across the US out of cities, is a truly massive undertaking. We were wondering how you did it. Approximately how many interviews did you do? How did you record them and what methods proved most efficient for pulling these stories out of your sources and into cohesive narratives? How did you maintain all these threads while writing?**

Kate Daloz: In addition to formal interviews, I talked to a lot of people informally, so I'm not one hundred percent sure of exact numbers, but it was scores of people and probably hundreds of hours. As many interviews as possible were in person, but I did a lot over the phone and by Skype. Whenever possible I recorded conversations using the voice recorder on my iPhone. I also took notes during the interviews, in case the recording failed. In person, I usually take notes by hand, but when it's not in person and I don't need to be making eye contact, I type because I'm faster that way. After each interview, I take extra notes on whatever I wanted to remember about the conversation itself (the setting, the mood, and any insights or areas for follow-up). Then I

type up loose transcriptions, making it very clear where I used paraphrase and which were the subject's exact words. I also include timestamps in the transcription so I'm always able to easily go back and double-check the original sound file. I give each interview a simple title of the subject's name and the interview date.

Using the writing program Scrivener, which allows you to break a project into small, flexible parts, I make files for each area I know I want to write about ("communal child-rearing," "Summer '71"). After I finish each interview, I go through it and cut-and-paste its contents into the appropriate files, labeling each chunk with the interview title. This way, when I'm ready to start writing, say, about the summer of '71, everything everyone told me about it is in one place, labeled with the source, so I can remember whose version was whose.

**GD: You give vivid depictions of these communes' landscapes. Although primary source material and interviews must have been useful for getting to know the settings in which you worked, it seems like you visited these commune sites (and, of course, grew up next to one). How much traveling did you do to write this book?**

KD: I take every opportunity I can to go back to Vermont! Growing up in the area was absolutely vital for allowing me to write with authority about the landscape and seasons—what the air smells like in January as opposed to June. I only actually visited the site of the commune a few times, but on one of those visits, I brought a blank map and had former residents walk around with me and help identify where gardens and structures had been forty years earlier. Back in Brooklyn, I also used Google Maps and MapMyRun.com to get the specifics about routes and distances really accurate.

**GD: In a few sections of the book, you qualify this back-to-the-land movement in terms of its racial and class makeup: the people who lived in these communes were almost exclusively white and middle class. How did you reconcile the seeming exclusivity of this movement?**

KD: That's a really great question and one I've continued thinking a lot about since finishing the book. Like many Americans during the Obama era, I found myself having more and more intense conversations with friends and family about race and class. I had long since noticed the extremely narrow demographic that made up the population I was writing about, but when I read "How Privilege Became Provocation," in the *New York Times*, by my friend Parul Sehgal, something clicked. I suddenly understood the back-to-the-land phenomenon in a new way: as an expression of privilege. Though I tried not to use that word very much in the book itself, it informed the way I described my characters' backgrounds and choices, as well as their confidence, assumptions, support networks, and blind spots. It let me approach some of the re-

current questions about simplicity movements (Who are these idealists? Why don't more of these radical experiments last?) and emerge with new answers.

**GD: In many ways, the communes are not perfect, particularly in their gender-specific divisions of labor. Are these difficulties products of inherent human flaws or a product of the fact that the communards still lived within American culture?**

KD: Another great question! What I like to point out is that partnership, co-operation, and collaboration always involve conflict and negotiation. There's a persistent fantasy that stepping outside of traditional structures—monogamy, say, or the nuclear family—will somehow also mean stepping away from disagreement and interpersonal tension. But domestic issues—questions about cooking, cleaning, childcare, financial security, how money should be saved and spent—have to be addressed, no matter how your family is structured. While it came as a surprise to many '70s-era communards that it was harder to be “married” to twenty people than to just one, they learned a tremendous amount about group conflict resolution and how to structure healthy communities—lessons that are still in widespread use today.

**GD: Have you explored any contemporary communes or cooperative living environments? If so, what is your opinion on these back-to-the-land-inspired movements and communal living experiments?**

KD: I haven't spent as much time in today's collective houses, live-work spaces, or independent farms as I'd like to, but there's no question that another back-to-the-land-ish movement is taking place today. If I could sum up the contrast between today's idealists and those of the '70s, I'd say that people undertaking these experiments today are *far* less naïve and ill-prepared than the '70s back-to-the-landers. This is partly because they have the experience and practices of the '70s generation to draw on—but they also have the Internet, with its almost limitless ability to connect people, resources, and ideas.

And it's worth noting: The intellectual origins of today's Internet culture, with its emphasis on sharing, stretches straight back through the *Whole Earth Catalog*, to the early hippie communes of the American Southwest.

**GD: Throughout the book, we see many communes struggling with the question of whether they can transform society. Do you think any came close to inspiring a restructuring of American society? What do you believe is the largest success of this movement?**

KD: America went through so many huge changes after the 1960s that it's hard to give credit to any one element, especially one as short-lived as the commune movement. But as I've already indicated above, its participants' extreme inventiveness and rejection of the mainstream gave rise to many structures and practices we take for granted today, from recycling programs

to homebirth advice to food co-ops. The two biggest, I'd say, are organic food and the connected, information-sharing culture of the Internet.

**GD: Do you see any similarities or differences between young people's responses to American society in the '70s and young people's responses to the same social structures today?**

KD: I had already begun working on this book when the Occupy and Black Lives Matter movements started, making the parallels between today's activism and that of the '60s and '70s much more obvious.

As much as I admire and am grateful for the real changes they brought about, I do bristle a little bit at the "Baby Boomer Exceptionalism" narrative that often accompanies comparisons between their activism and that of other generations. While there's no question that Boomers' idealism and frustrations with social ills spurred them to action, it's also vital to point out that they were born into a period of tremendous economic confidence and inherited a job market in which a college degree pretty much guaranteed a comfortable livelihood. That background of privilege—not just on a personal, but on a generational level—was essential in letting such a large number of people feel secure enough to risk such widespread rejection of the status quo.

**GD: What are you working on now?**

KD: Right now, I'm working on another personal-history-as-American-history book—this one is about my grandmother's sudden death in 1944, during WWII, and the decades of secrecy and shame that surrounded her story.

# About the Authors

ARNOLD BARRETTO is a senior international student at SUNY Plattsburgh. Originally from India but raised in Dubai, he learned how to adapt to different environments easily. He loves photography, theatre, and chocolate.

EMMA CORWIN is a junior English major at SUNY Geneseo. When she isn't writing or tackling her ever-growing pile of homework, she can be found indulging in foreign cultures, which usually means watching anime.

JASMINE CUI is 17 years old and is majoring in political science, economics, and violin performance at SUNY Geneseo. She aspires to be like her parents, first-generation Americans who fought an extraordinary battle for their place in this country. She has received national recognition from the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards. Her work can be found at *The Shallow Ends*, *Glass: a Journal of Poetry*, and at [www.jasminecui.com](http://www.jasminecui.com).

CAROLINE DELUCA lives in Brooklyn, NY and is pursuing her MFA at Stony Brook Southampton while working as a freelance editor. She has taught creative writing workshops at Stony Brook University, the New York Memory Center, UVA Young Writers Workshop, United Community Corporation, and Gaudenzia Substance Abuse Recovery Home, among other places. Her

writing appears, or will soon appear, in publications including *Shelia-Na-Gig*, *Snapdragon Journal*, *sirsee*, *Thesongis*, *Rat's Ass Review*, *Local Nomad*, *Seven Deadly Sins*, *Accelerate Education*, *Greek Fire*, and on her website, [carolinedelunca.com](http://carolinedelunca.com).

CHLOE FORSELL lives in Western New York where she is finishing her last semester at SUNY Geneseo, pursuing degrees in French and English (creative writing).

JANE GALLETTI is currently a senior at SUNY Plattsburgh with a double concentration in painting and ceramics and an art history minor. She is the president of the Plattsburgh Association of Visual Arts and is active in her community as a local artist. She also works full time as a travel agent, which aids in seeing artwork abroad.

GRACE GILBERT is a sophomore English (creative writing), and childhood and special education double major at SUNY Geneseo. She drops things a lot, and probably eats too much cheese for her own good.

MACAULAY GLYNN is a graduate student in English at Binghamton University. She was editor-in-chief of the Keystone College literary magazine *The Plume* for

two years and is a three-time recipient of the Edward Cameron IV American Academy of Poets prize.

PAM HAAS is a senior English major and philosophy minor at SUNY Geneseo. Her hobbies include exploring, procrastinating, performing slam poetry, and not thinking about graduating. She also loves to sleep in and fight the patriarchy, but usually not on the same day.

ASHLEY LESTER is a sculptor, print-maker, and collage artist from the Adirondack Mountains in upstate New York. Her work invites the viewer to experience the internal conflicts of her childhood and the tension and difficulties of creating relationships with newly discovered family members.

NATHAN LIPPS is a graduate student at Binghamton University. He studies poetry and German philosophy.

ZARIRA LOVE is a junior creative writing major at Purchase College.

SEAN MAPHIA is a broadcasting/mass communication major and creative writing minor. He is from Herkimer, NY. He plays his guitar and sings on occasion. Family is everything to him.

JAMISON MURCOTT is a sophomore at Purchase College and is working towards a BA in creative writing. She has never published a work of fiction before. Native to Long Island, NY, she spends her summers working at the beach and then spends all that money on egg sandwiches and iced coffee.

ISABEL OWEN is a sophomore English (creative writing) and history double major with a minor in Latin American studies at SUNY Geneseo. She likes to post poems in unexpected places and pretend that she didn't do it, even though everyone knows that she did.

LIZZIE PELLEGRINO is a junior English (creative writing) and geological sciences double major, who cares far too much about walking through every puddle in her path. Her backpack, at any given time, likely contains at least two notebooks, three rocks, and a few bags of chamomile tea.

DIEGO BARCCEL PEÑA was born in the Dominican Republic but has lived in the Bronx, NY since he was three. He is a senior English (creative writing) major at SUNY Geneseo. His work has been previously published in *Gandy Dancer* and *Dark River Review*.

NICOLE PERO is a senior at SUNY Geneseo who loves sleeping in, painting her nails, and making questionable financial decisions. She wants to make it to the ripe old age of eighty so she can crochet on her front porch, and screech at anyone within a few yards.

JULIANA SCHICHO is a senior English (creative writing) major at SUNY Geneseo. Her poetry has been featured in *Runestone Journal* as well as Geneseo's *MiNT Magazine*. She often writes about crime scenes or the ocean—sometimes both. This is her first fiction publication.

CHELSEA SERENO has a love for graphic design which has grown, thanks to the limitless possibilities provided by new digital production tools. As someone

who has grown up with a passion for drawing, being able to combine this with her graphic design work is very rewarding. She can push her original concepts in ways she had never dreamed of.

JOE SIGURDSON studies creative writing at SUNY Oswego. He has been published in *The Great Lake Review* and *The Oswegonian*.

MARISSA SPECIOSO is a travel photographer with a passion for nature and food. She travels all over the globe, and is always in search of beautiful landscapes and traditional foods. She

takes photographs to capture feelings of emotion and to engage the viewer in the photo in a non-traditional way.

SARAH STEIL is a junior English (creative writing) and pre-vet major at SUNY Geneseo. She loves spending time with her five crazy siblings and four crazy dogs.

PEGGY WEN is a senior at SUNY Plattsburgh. She is interested in figures and objects placed in space. Feeling misplaced herself, she seeks to find solutions of placement and interpretation in her paintings.