



# Gandy Dancer

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

Issue 8.1 | Fall 2019

**gandy dancer** /ˈɡɑn dēˌdɑns ər/ *noun*

1. a laborer in a railroad section gang who lays and maintains track. Origin: early 20th century; of unknown origin.









We've titled our journal *Gandy Dancer* after the slang term for the railroad workers who laid and maintained the railroad tracks before the advent of machines to do this work. Most theories suggest that this term arose from the dance-like movements of the workers, as they pounded and lifted to keep tracks aligned. This was grueling work, which required the gandy dancers to endure heat and cold, rain and snow. Like the gandy dancers, writers and artists arrange and rearrange, adjust and polish to create something that allows others passage. We invite submissions that forge connections between people and places and, like the railroad, bring news of the world.

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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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**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 and mediums in your submissions.

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# Dearest Readers,

Welcome to the long-awaited Issue 8.1 of *Gandy Dancer*! After the publication of our *Best of Gandy Dancer* edition, the fourteenth issue feels like the beginning of a new chapter for the magazine (chapter joke intended). Likewise, as we are both new to our roles as Managing Editors of *Gandy Dancer*, it feels like a new chapter for us.

With the return to our usual publication schedule, we also return to our *Gandy Dancer* duty—that is, to forge connections between writers and readers across the SUNY system. It seems, in that same vein, the theme of connection (and the lack thereof) has become the central one for this issue. Though never outright intentional, it's always exciting and rewarding to find what commonalities the year brings out of our writers' and artists' work. It does not seem out of place that, in this moment, the idea of attempted connection and consequent alienation is something our contributors have focused on. This alienation is reflected in different ways: alienation from others, alienation from place, alienation from society, and, ultimately, alienation from self.

On that note, we feel compelled to give a nod to the common thread in the majority of our poetry this issue: sex. Yes, we know it's there and, no, it's not subtle. In works like Kiel M. Gregory's "Emotionally Compartmentalized Lovemaking is Called Fucking," the poet explores the nature of intimacy, or imagined intimacy, inherent to the act of sex. It seems to us that this emphasizes the alienation one feels from other people emotionally; as in, two people can be touching and not connecting. Gregory, in that way, remarks on how real a supposed connection can feel in the moment; he concludes his poem with a lover claiming she won't disappear, but then his speaker is suddenly overwhelmed with the feeling that "...her words seemed out of place; / a foreshadowing [he] denied."

While this issue's poetry discusses the desire to connect to other people, the prose seems to express the desire to connect to the surrounding world. DongWon Oh's "Troubles of Ants" describes the experience of being a draftee in the South Korean army, and how the removal of young Korean men from society for their military service erases their individual identities for that time, forcing them to eventually reintegrate into a world that has moved on without them. Similarly, the nonfiction piece "Dirty Spoons" by Renee Grasso describes a feeling of removal; in her case, though, it's sparked by her return home after the first semester of college. Grasso knows intellectually that "of course, things had changed without [her]," but she struggles to have the new version of herself in the new version of her home.

These explorations of intimacy, alienation, and attempted connection aren't ones you should be subject to embark on alone; in fact, we've enlisted somewhat of a tour guide for you, or at least a shadow you might chase from one cover to the other. The man featured in Nicholas Simenon's "Alienation" collection invites you either into or out of the triangle of light on the front cover and, in that way, either into or out of the fourteenth issue. If you choose to follow him throughout, you will end up somewhere quite different than where you started.

Note that none of this is to say connection is impossible. The striving for intimacy is, in itself, a noble pursuit, and we believe many of our pieces ultimately ring with hope. In our opening poem "The Gland," poet Marissa N. Quiñonez describes a very literal internal exploration. After hearing the "loud hum" coming from inside a man, "they twisted its head, / sliced open the skull, / & gaped into the gland under the moonlight." We believe that the exploration Quiñonez writes about is one way to counter feelings of alienation. With that being said, we hope you'll hear our loud hum and take the time to act accordingly and discover what lies within.

Cheers!

Nicole Callahan & Natalie Hayes  
November 2019



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# The Gland

After his suicide, they heard  
a loud hum coming from inside.  
They twisted its head,

sliced open the skull,  
& gaped into the gland under the moonlight.  
It was like the cosmos

creating the very birth, & a hairy man  
dressed as a human befell  
on its two legs for the first time.

# Emotionally Compartmentalized Lovemaking Is Called Fucking

When she said *Deeper*,  
I thought how far I'd already gone;  
fearing her departures even before she'd left,  
wanting for our moments and instances  
of effortless chemistry to never  
stop boiling over.

When she said *Harder*,  
I thought how difficult it already was;  
sharing that most intimate, connected moment,  
creating a space within me for her.

When she said *You feel so good inside me*,  
I thought how my chance for that had passed;  
having someone so ready to love me for who I am,  
finding someone so willing to accept what I was,



how remarkable that our encounter should come to be  
and how long I'd wanted that emotional connection.

When she said *I won't disappear on you*,  
I thought how her words seemed out of place;  
a foreshadowing I denied.

# Troubles of Ants

Lee watches an ant climb his combat boot. It pauses at the toe, looks up, and says to itself *not today*. It turns back, climbs off the boot, and wanders back to its hill. Lee watches the ant for a while and then turns his head skyward. Birds are flying by, so far away they look more like origami than flesh and feathers. He remembers that his sister's favorite birds are the ones native to this region. She started high school recently and checks with in with him less and less. The world is passing him by, it seems. These birds are too far away to be sure they're the ones she likes. The July sun casts shadows across his face. He hears rifles fire in the distance. Lee reaches for the radio as it crackles.

"Command, this is Charlie Six, inquiring about which unit just got hit. Over." Lee takes his finger off the radio, ears alert in case his unit is next.

"Charlie Six, this is Command. Stay off the radios."

"Understood. Charlie Six will stand by."

"Did I fucking stutter? Stay off the radio."

Lee turns to his superior, Tae, who shrugs. Lee doesn't understand yet, but he will. At worst, they will get chewed out for not keeping watch; at best, there might be a slight nod from an officer. When there isn't much in between punishment and incentive, the more experienced draftees find there isn't much to strive for.

"Sergeant Tae?"

"Yeah, Lee?"

"Do you think these would work if it came down to it?"

Tae, only half visible and standing guard by the mounted gun, turns to Lee slightly. "I doubt it will matter, Corporal Lee. Keep your eyes fixed ahead, and we go back to our fluffy cots tomorrow."

Private Lim, the youngest, just a few months into his service, snickers at *fluffy*.

"Do you have a problem, Lim?"

"No, Sergeant."

Tae lights a cigarette.

Lee cringes as the smoke drifts towards him. He grabs a latch on the side of the tank, climbs on, and slides into the pilot seat. He drums a steady rhythm onto the worn wheel.

"It's too hot for this shit, Sergeant." Lim says, tilting his helmet back to scratch his forehead.

"Fix your helmet, kid."

Lee casts his eyes over to the right, where the rest of the war machines are lined up in formation. The officers never explain the reasons for these tactics; it's do this, do that. Wake up at this hour, park the tank here, clean your rifle this way. Yes, it's different from what you were taught at boot camp. Keep watch over an armory that hasn't been opened in half a century.

Lee glances around. Every breeze could reveal an enemy—but that isn't quite true. Their rifles are loaded with blanks and if hit, the sensors on their combat vests will ring, signaling injury. It feels childish, like a game, paintball minus the paint. It is, after all, just another training exercise.

The radio crackles. Tae scrambles to the radio, trying to make sense of the static nonsense.

"This is Charlie Six. Say again, Command? We lost you."

"Guerrilla en route to your position. Watch out."

Suddenly alert, the three soldiers wield their rifles against the encroaching enemy. The discombobulated voice has conveyed nothing helpful. All they can do is scan the foliage for lurking enemies.

Then the shots come, a steady *putputput* of rifles. A cylinder falls on the hood of the tank, just out of Lee's reach and starts to sputter smoke. Lee, Tae and Lim all killed, *technically*. It's over in a second.

The guerilla rises out of the dirt and mountainside like a time-lapse video of flora come to life, dressed in fatigues and silhouetted in plants. He approaches the tank, shaking his head. He slings his rifle so that it hangs diagonal on his back.

"Sergeant Tae, I expected more from your unit."

Tae snaps to attention, his right arm already forming a crisp forty-five-degree angle. He fumbles with his rifle, nearly tripping over a jutting rock to greet the captain. The short, stocky Captain Cho steps forward, inspecting the empty shell of the smoking cylinder on the hood of the tank. Lee squints rapidly to blink away his tears from the smoke, aware that the training exercise is still on, and in this scenario, his unit has been killed. He can't wipe his eyes until the captain calls off the exercise. Lee is, after all, dead—and supposed to act like it.



*It's all so damn silly.* Lee is going nearly blind from all the war paint dripping into his eyes, every drop sharp and stinging. That, coupled with the tear gas sneaking its way into his lungs, hurts like hell.

"What do you have to say for yourself, Sergeant? Were you not on guard?"

Tae steps forward, bumbling his words.

"We were, Sir!"

The captain sucks his teeth, scanning the tank for faults. Finding none, he turns and walks away. The radio crackles and the training exercise is over. Tents are pitched, tanks are parked, and fires are lit. The afternoon sun folds into itself and fades out.

The barracks are not an architectural marvel. If it wasn't for the rifles and men in fatigues, they might pass for a jail, and a drab one at that. The sun is high in the sky and lights up a windless day. The clouds hang as still as each hour feels to Lee's mind. Some draftees sit around by the assembly area, others run laps on the field or crowd the singular pull up bar. Lee is high above the men, at the top of the foot of the mountain, with the never-ending expanse of mountain all around him, the monotony of the gray barracks to his back. To him, the men resemble ants on this Sunday morning, keeping themselves busy, never questioning, always efficient.

Snow starts to fall, soft like ash at first, but it quickly turns to blanketing waves. Lee knows the drill, and so do the men. Softly cursing their luck, they pick up brooms and start to sweep. Just in case war breaks out on this Sunday morning, all the roads need to be clear of snow.

The damn snow always falls on the weekend, Lee thinks. He knows there is no divine providence ruining the draftees' weekend. But it is more comforting to find fault in weather, than to acknowledge the fact that they lack control, even over their weekends.

War doesn't break out this Sunday, as it hasn't for five decades.

Lee snaps awake, the alarm hitting his mind like a hammer of a pistol slamming into place. This isn't a natural transition; there's no soft alarm that gets progressively louder as he hits snooze over and over. It's a new sound he hasn't heard before. Is it a fault in the system? A speaker malfunctioning? It's early August; the next set of training exercises aren't scheduled for another week. They are men of routine, ants in an anthill, following the rising and setting of the sun, the gradual browning of leaves. All this occurs to Lee as he sheds his gray tracksuit and slides into his fatigues, the pieces coming together and blending into each other like a camouflage kaleidoscope. Lim zips off to retrieve their rifles from the armory.

As Lee zips up his combat vest and pats himself down for extra cartridges, he realizes this is a real situation.

"Move faster! We're moving out!" Tae shouts.

With an efficiency that is ingrained past his muscle and deep into his bones, Lee neatly fills his pack. Two blankets, two uniforms, a flashlight, an extra pair of combat boots, toiletries. He snaps around. Lim has placed his rifle by his feet, ever the quick private. Lee runs to his post, scrambles up and down the tank, roping down the shovels, pickaxe, mortar rounds, checking the oil levels, and securing the extra fuel.

In a matter of minutes the mounted gun is set, and they are ready to move out. The engine roars life into the night, and the sirens blare. Tae steps aside for a forbidden smoke, and Lee inhales. He wishes he were brave enough to smoke too.

The radio crackles, almost quiet against the engine: "All companies of the 369th Field Artillery Battalion, this is Command. This is not a drill. I repeat we are at DEFCON two. Check in when you are ready to move out."

One by one, all dozen units send in affirmative answers. All these men complain daily about being dragged here. They miss their girlfriends and their families; they want to be in school, but when it comes down to it, they are good at the jobs their country has assigned them. Tae is an excellent unit leader; Lim an efficient first gunner, and Lee pilots his machine as if it is an extension of his limbs.

War machines mar the tranquility of the Korean mountainside. Lee notes somewhere in his mind that DEFCON two meant there is only one threat level left—DEFCON one—or nuclear war.

The radio crackles with Captain Cho's voice, hard-edged, as usual: "All units be advised, at oh-two-hundred, seismographs picked up a 6.5 earthquake off the east coast of North Korea, near a known underground testing facility. I repeat, this is not a drill. Be ready to move out. Stand by until further notice."

Tae shrugs and lights another cigarette. If Tae is caught smoking in this situation, he will be court-martialed for breaking protocol and potentially revealing his position to the enemy. He'd get up to fourteen days in jail, which is fourteen more days in the army. A ridiculous punishment for an equally ridiculous crime, considering everybody knows that North Korean troops are nowhere near. Tae speaks and Lee snaps to attention; he is still second in command, after all.

"The North Koreans couldn't test the missile during the day? Honestly rude, if you ask me."

Lee and Lim chuckle. They are all thinking the same thing.

The next few hours are a blur of struggling to stay awake and alert. Lee imagines the rest of the Korean army, groggily scanning the northern sky-

line for a threat. Lee's body has calmed down from the adrenaline rush, and his sweat freezes under his fatigues in the early autumn morning. As dawn approaches, Lee looks at the men around him, all of them serving a country that demands two years of their lives, no questions asked, with no exceptions.

Lee looks at Lim. His chin is still soft; the army hasn't hardened him yet. Even Sergeant Tae is only tough because he needs to be. He's still a boy with only a tiny patch of peach fuzz that he attempts to tease into a beard, only to shave off once an officer reprimands him for not following regulations. Just a year older or younger than Lee, these boys are made into the same shape. They are no longer individuals.

"Hey, Sarge?" Lim asks.

Tae is leaning on his rifle and turns to Lim. He doesn't say anything.

"Do you think we're really going to war, Sergeant Tae?"

"I know as much you do, kid."

"This is Command. All units turn off your engines and maintain radio silence."

The night drags on. Without the underlying growl of the engines, the mountainside is eerily silent. The bush rustles. Lee spins around, aiming down his rifle to see a deer trot out of the edge of the trees. The deer continues toward Lee, aiming for a patch of grass by the tank tread. Tae sleeps inside the tank, his snores reverberating off the steel walls. Lee wonders if he is the only one aware of all this, the only soldier who sees their service more as war games than war and is frustrated by the enforced patriotism of the Korean army. Lee thinks about all the times his fellow draftees have complained about being dragged away from everything and everyone they care about.

When Sergeant Tae discharges in a few weeks, Lee will be in charge of the unit, the first line of armored defense in case of the Korean War: The Sequel. Lee reaches out for the deer, wishing with the tips of his fingers that it would approach him. He knows that North Korea has the capabilities to evaporate this deer, him, and anything south of the 38th Parallel into radioactive ash. But his sergeant is sleeping and so is the rest of Korea. The deer cares only about this patch of grass.

The radio crackles; the deer bounds off.

"Threat level down."

Lee stares at the radio. His unit is asleep, and he still has a year left of his draft sentence.

"We are back down to DEFCON four. Let's pack up and go home. Command out."

In the humidity of a Seoul summer, Tae, Lim, and Lee sit at a street side bar, slinging back *soju*. At first all their sentences begin, "Do you remember," but



eventually they move on to the future. On the bar's T.V. screen, silenced by the ruckus of the street, Trump and Kim Jong Un shake hands. With the shake of their meaty palms, the two presidents have signaled the end of a war. It has been nine months since Tae has discharged, two months for Lee, and Lim is in his last stretch. Tae has gone back to university; Lee will do the same soon.

# To gully

Settlers dispute by a muddy creek  
over land rights and property but

patience erodes, and a gully knife  
stays with the body it sliced.

A gully guts a man;

## **gully**

*gul·ly* | \ˈgʊ-lē\

*(noun)*

1 : a large knife

2 : a trench which was originally worn in the earth by running water  
and through which water often runs after it rains

3 : a small valley or gulch

*(verb)*

*gullied ; gullying*

*transitive verb*

: to make gullies in

*intransitive verb*

: to undergo erosion : form gullies

A gully guts the earth.

A boy in Converse slides down slopes of dried leaves,  
leaving trails of bare mud exposed.

Before they happen upon an oversized knife—  
life stolen by the gully.

Time is both body and landscape, forever changing  
forms, but experience sticks in our minds.



THE DINER



THE DOCK



THE DRIVE IN



THE CEMETERY



THE JALOPY IN THE WOODS



THE OLD TIRE SWING

*Left as Is* (digital), Victoria Reneau





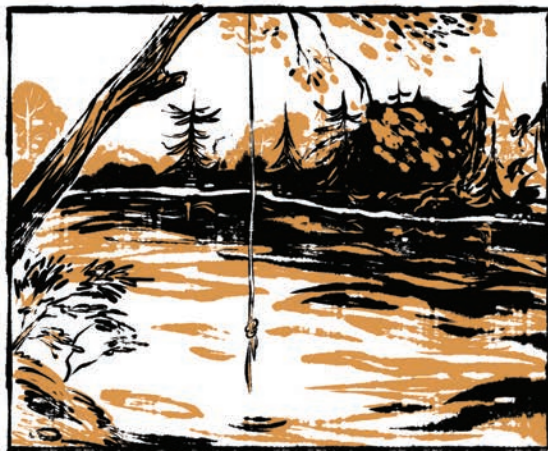
MAKEOUT POINT



THE GAS STATION



THE ONCE BEATEN TRAIL



THE ROPE SWING



THE FORGOTTEN FAIR



THE CAVED IN BARN

# Into the West

Alberta is a blank sketchpad  
to the eyes trained for neon lights and mishaps  
labeled modern art, unable to see past  
their tawny smog and blue lights—this is a private gallery.

A winter's sunrise stroked pastel lavender  
by the blackbird's feather drifting above a cerulean lake  
dusted with glitter. Strands of shredded cotton balls  
curl upwards from the silent surface.

The ridge of mountains sprayed  
deep forest green. The graffitist's thumb slipped on  
the nozzle as he turned to call back to his friend. Changing cans,  
spritizes of sunshine fall gently on scarlet leaves.

The roads etched in charcoal,  
long and straight. Halfway through, the child's hand  
grew weary of gripping the two yellow crayons  
and he wandered home for a snack.

A herd of cows blotted cream and chocolate in oil pastels,  
trembling in gnarled fingers on a nursing home porch.

Just a smear as they graze high in the hills.  
The crimson orb dips into black soil, tugged by the flick



of a rainbow tail under the ice, stars poking through  
the thickening cloth of night until the moon  
is our only spotlight.



*Alienation* (photography), Nicholas Simenon

# anatomy of a drunk record

everlasting rounds,  
mountains that create  
breathable noise.  
we listen when we're  
drunk, when our  
minds are no longer  
ours to control.  
repeated scratching  
makes me dance,  
divine unconsciousness,  
we pull out another record  
when all that's left  
of the last is  
grain.  
I groan when the  
noise stops,  
never stop,  
never stop.  
I sink into corduroy  
cushion.  
sit by me  
so I know the  
world isn't truly  
spinning.

# Dirty Spoons

My mom tapped on the door and cautiously stuck her head inside my room. The sound was so familiar, so delicate I couldn't tell if I was dreaming. As she softly crept toward me, I became aware of her yoga pants and V-neck T-shirt and realized I was awake. I wasn't in my dorm at school, startled by my roommate's alarm. I was at home.

Mom perched on the side of my bed and touched my back. "How are the sheets?" It was a cool September in Queens, and the Grasso household had already made the leap from regular summer sheets to winter flannel sheets; they were unbelievably comfy.

"Good." My mouth parted slightly.

"Good." My mom smiled. "It's already noon. I was letting you catch up on sleep, but you have to come hang out with your family at some point. You only get four days with us before you go back to school, you know."

I nodded. "I'll come down. Is there coffee?"

"I made a pot, but there's not much left. Come down and get some before Dad and Charlotte drink it all."

I shook my head into my pillow. "Okay."

Mom leaned down to pick up a shirt from the floor. She took in my room as she folded it and drifted towards my suitcase.

"Don't worry about that, Mom, I'll do it. I just didn't get a chance to unpack last night."

"Oh no, it's fine. Hey, did you see that? I hung up Charlotte's painting. I put it over that poster you had, but I didn't think you'd mind."

I looked at the wall across from my bed to see a Jackson Pollock-style painting that my sister made when she was in high school. I smiled politely.

"Nice."

Mom finally slipped out after one more strict warning to get out of bed. I blankly fixated on the messy streaks of yellow and purple paint and began getting dizzy. I didn't dislike the painting, and I didn't even mind it covering my three-year-old Nicki Minaj poster. I just didn't like that my mom was messing with my room when I was gone. What's the point? My room had been exactly the same since I was nine years old, and I didn't mind it. Of course, I'd changed some things: I took down some Jonas Brothers posters, replaced some pictures of old friends with new friends, and vacuumed occasionally. For the most part, I didn't mind if it didn't grow with me. *God knows I changed too much in the past month for my room to keep up, anyway.*

I sat up in bed and thought about the millions of mornings that had come before, some almost exactly alike. Rushing to school mornings, rushing to church mornings, Sunday pancake mornings, Christmas mornings, but no morning had been quite like this one: my first morning home from college.

"Renee! You better not still be sleeping. Spend time with your *mother!*"

"And your sister!" Charlotte yelled from her room next door.

I rolled my eyes and jumped out of bed.

Perhaps the best way to explain my family is to describe the little spoon shortage phenomenon. Here's how it would happen: each family member got up in the morning, made a cup of coffee, and grabbed a little spoon to stir their milk and sugar. Finally, they went to set the dirty spoon beside the sink, only to find, to their grave disappointment, that the previous family member had left their coffee spoon in the same spot. By the time I woke up, there would be three lightly used spoons laying in a row, each with a small pool of coffee resting on its neck. My dad would usually patrol the travesty, tensely reminding me, "Kid, you don't have to use a new spoon."

In a house that loves coffee and hates waste, the little spoon shortage was no small issue. Our morning and afternoon coffee rituals could wipe out our little spoon supply merely twenty-four hours after running the dishwasher. As soon as my mom began noticing this trend, she nipped it in the bud. "Save the Little Spoons" became a new mantra for her, not unlike the way that PETA urges us to save the whales. Mom advocated for those spoons as fiercely as she did for any other abused kitchen supplies in her home. As we lounged on the couch in the TV room, Charlotte and I would hear her lamenting from the dining room: "One...two...three...four plastic cups on the table! Rinse them or throw them out. If you were just drinking water, then it's fine to just rinse them. It's not as gross as Charlotte thinks." I'd also hear: "Renee, how many times do I have to tell you? Spatulas, this drawer under the sink. It's like you haven't lived here for 18 years."

Now Mom announces: “Everyone, when you make a cup of coffee, use *my* spoon. I’m going to leave it by the sink, and I’m always the first one up in the morning, so it’ll always be there. Eight spoons a day for coffee is just... ridiculous.” She said these things again and again, until the kitchen felt like a minefield, with your next potential misstep lurking in every corner.

The only sin worse than forgetting to use Mom’s coffee spoon in the morning was failing to notice that she made a pot of coffee for the family and making your own cup in the Keurig. This heinous, unforgivable crime was exactly what I did on my first morning home from college. In my groggy state, I nodded to Mom, who cheerily said “She’s risen!” without looking up from *The New York Times* on her iPad. I made a beeline for the Keurig. It wasn’t until she heard the distinctive whirring of the coffee grounds that her head snapped up. “Renee, I told you there’s a pot of coffee.”

“Oh, too late. I’m sorry.” I couldn’t conjure up my usual level of sympathy for committing one of her kitchen offenses. It was the first time in two months that I was sharing a space with someone over the age of eighteen.

She forgave me instantly. “It’s fine. More for me.” She was letting me off easy even though I was up to at least strike three by now—sleeping late, leaving clothes on the floor, and ignoring the pot of coffee. I realized with a pang that she missed me. At the very least, I should’ve gotten a passive-aggressive glare by now. But all she said was, “Hey, since you’re not gonna take the rest, can you pour me another cup?”

She’d only drink coffee out of her favorite mug: tall, ceramic and covered with pink dots. Of course, she’d already put it in the sink right after her first cup. I inspected the mug for any dirty dish residue, ran some warm water over it, and pivoted to grab a dish towel. Suddenly, I paused, overcome with guilt. Mom kept everything in immaculate form. Clothes folded, dishes stacked away, and every spoon used to its full potential. At school, running water could suffice for doing dishes, but at home it felt like I had spit in my mother’s breakfast. I grabbed the dish soap and a sponge. Right as my coffee finished filtering out of the Keurig, my sister came bounding down the stairs.

“Look who’s finally awake. Why’d you make a cup of coffee when there’s a pot? You always do that.” Charlotte wasted no time in making a few cutting but amiable remarks. She skipped across the kitchen with open arms, and I cringed in anticipation. “I’m so glad you’re home! Oh my god, relax, Renee. Do you hate me or something?”

“I just don’t like being squeezed in the morning,” I said, trying to keep my voice light. Still, Charlotte’s joking accusation felt more accurate than my weak protest. What was different? Why was I happy to see her, but couldn’t hug her? Maybe this had something to do with that sinking feeling I had for the entire bus ride home, or maybe my family should just know better than to ask so much of me before my cup of coffee.



"Renee, just because you're this cool college student now doesn't mean that you can..." Mom trailed off. "I don't know where I was going with that." She shrugged coyly and sipped her coffee.

Charlotte snorted and picked up where Mom left off. "Back when I was a college student, I... oh, never mind." She mimicked a pompous grad reflecting on her glory days. In reality, she graduated only three months ago, and I suspected that she didn't miss it at all. Charlotte didn't like doing her own laundry or eating alone, which I considered simple pleasures. She'd gotten tired of going out by her second semester. "I don't want to bore you with my stories. Tell us some of yours!"

I laughed as I unwrapped a Thomas English muffin. I was never a huge fan of English muffins, but two months without a toaster in my room had made me crave their simple, familiar crunch. "I call you guys every day. I don't have any stories to tell you."

"Sure," Charlotte intoned. Mom's face had turned cautious. Why was Charlotte pursuing this? She knew that when it came to drinking, smoking, and other foul behaviors, our parents' policy was "don't ask, don't tell." I realized that I was so preoccupied with my new college persona that I may have overlooked how other family dynamics had changed, too. Since moving back home for law school, Charlotte had transformed into an adult who would be making a steady income soon, no longer my trendy twenty-something sister. She stopped answering my texts once it hit midnight, because she was already asleep. Every morning, even on the weekends, she was up at the crack of dawn studying. When I told her drunk and high antics that I thought she'd find funny, her laugh sounded more nervous than amused.

I looked at Charlotte sitting at the counter now, her dark hair falling in her face as she read *The New York Times* on her iPad, just like Mom. I wondered if she'd still want to watch stupid Lifetime movies and go on "spy missions" with me when she became a big-shot lawyer. Charlotte had always toed the line between being my friend and my second mother, but one important difference between Mom and Charlotte was that Charlotte watched my Snapchat stories. She'd never snitch on me, however, she could do a mean guilt trip if she was in the right mood.

*But what am I even guilty of?* I wondered. I thought about how my mom lectured me continuously the summer before I moved out. "Don't drink hard liquor, Renee. If I get a call that you're getting your stomach pumped and you're four hours away from me, I swear." My mother clearly didn't know the simple mechanics of a college pregame, of course we drank hard liquor. It's cheaper than beer and doesn't make you bloated. Besides, it makes all the guys look a lot cuter. I knew from my aunt's stories that my mom drank plenty when she was my age, so what's the deal with the guilt trip?

I felt frustrated that she didn't trust me, but I also reminded myself to stand in her shoes, watching me walk away to college. Was there really any way for her to know if I'd make all the right decisions? Parenting is like taking a lifelong test that you can't study for and you never really get your grade on. My sympathy for her and my itch for independence took up two halves of my brain, like the two different people I was at my two different homes.

I brainstormed some PG-13 stories I could tell to satisfy my audience. "Hmm. Well, this is kind of funny. My TA for Business Ethics handed back my paper with literally no criticism. He just wrote 'Idk what to tell you to improve, I honestly wish I could write like this.' And, like, this is the person who's supposed to help me with these papers!"

They both laughed. Charlotte shook her head, "Genius problems! Prep's English teachers prepared you well." I missed being able to brag. If I told my friends that story, they'd just call me a smart ass.

Mom was never impressed—meaning, she was never surprised by either of our accomplishments. She was only incredulous, "How much older is he? What qualifies him to grade your papers, when you're obviously a better writer?"

Whenever I told Mom a story, she always went a little too far and I'd end up defending my antagonist. "He's a year older and took the class last year. He's really helpful with other parts of the class, he just doesn't have much constructive criticism."

I'd almost forgot about my English muffin. I ran to the toaster oven and twisted the knob until it dinged.

"Did it burn?" Mom asked.

"Nope, I got it." I looked in and grinned at the golden-brown complexion.

"Does the little baby need help getting it out?" Charlotte mocked.

I used to be too nervous to reach into the toaster because I burned my hand when I was younger. I was so excited to reach in to get my Pop-Tart that my hand clattered against the toaster oven's red-hot roof. I was fine but began asking Mom or Dad to do it for me whenever they were around. Charlotte eventually teased me enough that I gathered up the courage to retrieve my own English muffins and bagels. In fact, Charlotte's teasing helped me shed a lot of my childish tendencies. Still, it was annoying.

The bathroom door swung open and my dad—was he in there the whole time?—looked genuinely surprised to see me, as if he hadn't picked me up from the bus station last night, "Oh, hey kid."

*Don't say anything about the coffee pot*, I willed.

He pointed to the fruit bowl behind me, "There's one banana left, I can share it with you if you want." Even worse. Mom and Charlotte snickered.

“Stop being such a fruit pusher!” I said on script. “I know where the bananas are, you don’t need to make a public service announcement about them.”

Dad hung his head and hid a smirk while Charlotte dove into the specific issues with banana sharing, “You can never really split it evenly because it’s such a weird shape. Only one person can use the peel, so the other person’s hands get all sticky. And...”

“Yeah James, and why are you always trying to share a banana? It’s not an ideal food for sharing!” Mom’s joking, incredulous tone toward my dad sounded indistinguishable from her angry voice. Sometimes, when I would hear it from my room upstairs, I’d have to press my ear to the door to see if she and Dad were actually fighting or not.

“Alright, alright, enough!” Dad pretended to look insulted and turned accusingly to me. “Renee, I thought you’d finally be on my side when you came home.”

Never one to miss her cue, Mom jumped in, “Why would you think that?” She rolled her eyes towards me. “When we make fun of him while you’re at school, he talks to your graduation picture and says he wishes you were here.”

I laughed at the image of my Dad begging my picture for help and followed his eyes to the frame hanging behind Mom. It’s one of my best pictures, with true, honest eyes and long, flat-ironed hair from before I chopped it all off last summer. My prom and graduation pictures looked great too, but behind those smiles I wasn’t too happy. High school was just uncomfortable. I was always shifting between friend groups, always running to band practice, and always wondering what was wrong with me. I smiled, thinking of my friends at college. We chilled in each other’s rooms, sometimes stressing about homework and guys, but mostly laughing and talking. It felt stable without feeling too high-stakes. It was disorienting that my family preserved the old version of me on this wall, while I grew and lived my new life 200 miles away.

“Yeah, kid, we miss you when you’re gone.” I snapped out of my reminiscing and watched my dad as he walked with the slightest limp across the kitchen. Out of all of my family members, I talked to Dad the least while I was at school. Whenever I did call Dad, his end of the phone call was almost always something like this: “Watch the Yankees lately? No? Oh, okay. You have class today? How are your professors? Awesome. Yes, Nanny and Grandpa are fine. Okay, kid, I’ve gotta go. Talk to you soon.” He never really inquired what I did with my time other than whether I watched Yankees. Maybe he didn’t want to know.

I glanced at my phone. iMessage from Julia: “*So bored at home bro.*” I thought about what to type back for a moment, then settle on, “*yeah it’s weird. Miss you <3.*”

“Wow, only home a few hours and she’s already telling her friends how lame her family is,” Mom said. I looked up at her with a start, and her face fell when she realized she may have been right.

“No, I’m happy to be home. I needed a break.” But home didn’t feel like I had expected it to, and I couldn’t pinpoint why. My first month at college had felt like nothing but firsts, and I didn’t mind it. Now that I was home, I wanted to be wrapped up in some comfort and familiarity.

Of course, things had changed without me. I expected that. I didn’t expect that I would feel physically dizzy balancing how I’ve changed with how my home has changed. I sat at the counter, drinking my coffee, and just kept noticing different ways that the house had shifted in my absence; like how our wooden paper towel roll had been replaced with a stainless steel one. Or that we just always kept a tablecloth on the table now, even when it wasn’t a holiday. I didn’t even miss home when I was gone, but it strangely hurt to be excluded from these changes.

*I had to come home to feel homesick*, I thought. I felt like Charlotte’s Jackson Pollock painting: two distinctly different colors, smeared together on one canvas. I’d told Mom I was happy to take a break, but was that true? Being home was bringing up so many complicated feelings that I didn’t know which life I needed a break from anymore, or which one was honestly mine.

Home was a break from my roommate, whose presence was often a looming, isolated silence. Home was a break from stress, since being on a campus sometimes felt like license to be productive or social 24/7. But, mostly, home felt like a startling break from the new me. Home was a break from hungover breakfasts, when we congregated at the College-in-the-Woods dining hall at about 10 a.m., and would usually still be laughing and recapping the previous night when lunch was served at 12 p.m.

There wasn’t much reason to loiter after breakfast in the Grasso house. Dad gravitated to the living room to watch CNN and Charlotte asked me if I wanted to go to CVS with her to pick up her prescription. Mom began listing things we had to pack before I returned to school on Sunday.

I rose from the counter and walked to the sink. I washed my spoon.

A few months later, I’m home for winter break. I’ve changed my mind about my major ten times, I’ve laid naked below a Pink Floyd poster of six naked women; I’ve had bad trips, great quesadillas, and final exams.

Mom and I are driving to the mall to do some last-minute Christmas shopping. She turns to me and smiles, “Glad you’re home, honey.”

“Me too.” I try to think of a way to phrase the question burning at the back of my throat. I hold back for a moment, and then I just say it, “Do you think I’ve changed?”

Without a moment of hesitation, Mom says, “No.”

“Really?” My insulted tone catches me off guard.

“Yes. Do you think you did?” She’s still watching the road, but I feel her eyes on me.

“I don’t know. I guess not.”



*Untitled 2* (ceramics, mixed media), Hannah McCasland





*Untitled 1* (ceramics, mixed media), Hannah McCasland

# Papa's Dandelions

Radiant bushy blossoms open, lifting to greet the morning amber glow and warm sweeping blush.

Little golden flowers whisper in a windy hush.

The Dente di Leone, the Lion's Tooth,  
needs only the slightest breeze to parachute.

Notorious for its blithe nature,  
and ambitious behavior.

Nuisance, weed, garden fiend.

But let me set another scene.

Many years ago a war broke out and the whole world felt its quake.

Rome had not a scrap of food,  
not even a crumb to waste.

But the dandelions grew in the county fields, and they grew abundant and true.  
These tiny flowers were plucked in bundles and gathered everywhere they blew.

Resilient, glorious, sun symbol.

Papa still gathers the dandelions.

He handpicks them for a meal.

He tells us about the times they share and speaks of their appeal.

And in the evening, as the sun declines and the sky grows gradient blue,  
all the flowers salute themselves, and sleep comes sweeping through.



*A lo Mejor* (watercolor), Cindy Castillo

# Mud

That day I had my back turned trying to get an ottoman through the front door, so I didn't see the flower-patterned sofa slip and knock Mark, my dad, to the ground. Probably everyone's grandma had that same couch: hard cushions, oversized arms, and a petal-and-leaf print that looked more like pot-pourri than spring foliage. It had pinned Mark right on top of a stinging nettle which was, until that moment, two feet tall and about the only green thing on the lawn.

The sound of snapping was what pulled my attention to the front yard. Mark had gone down hard not twenty paces from his blue-and-rust pickup. Air hissed through his partial dentures as the red of blood-filled capillaries bloomed in his unshaven cheeks, trying hard not to yell or scream obscenities, which wasn't like him at all. Every time he visited home, he hoped that Molly would be visiting her folks across the street in that sun-bleached green house and he hated the thought of being unimpressive around her. He had said she was a lawyer on the East Coast or something sophisticated like that. I figured she was something laughable like an actor because he's always falling short of his dreams and face-planting instead. Or landing on a stinging nettle.

Mark only had enough leverage to keep the weight of the sofa off his leg. His brother, my Uncle Steven, grunted under the weight of his end of the couch while sweat dripped down his face like melting ice. They used to run a moving company out of Pine Bluff, about fifty miles south of Little Rock, back when they wore sleeveless shirts to show off tanned and bulging muscles. This was back when they had tans. And muscles. And a truck worthy of a moving job.

Steven turned to me, glaring against the sunlight, and jerked his head toward the couch, "Seriously?!"



Years later, the three of us did a lot of talking, passing around a shot glass that said, '*IF FOUND, PLEASE REFILL*,' and a bottle of something that Jack Daniel's red-headed stepson made. Through the evening, a yellow sun became red as it sank lower in the sky, the bottle became lighter as the whiskey level dropped, and expressions became solemn. We all talked a lot that night. And again, another night. We've talked about the day with the sofa more times than I can recall. Putting it all together. They revealed to me that their volunteering was about more than clearing their dead mother's house and saving money by not hiring movers. It was mostly because it had been so damn long since they had moved somebody.

Scrawny, lanky, twenty-seven, and built-for-the-AV-club me left the otoman in the doorway and ran over to help. My eyes avoided theirs as I looked for a place to put my hands, but I wasn't nearly fast enough.

Steven, having absolutely no patience, yelled again, "Just get under it, boy!"

The tiny nettles were digging into Mark's leg. Every time he tried to gain more leverage his calf pressed harder into the green leaves. Flecks of spit glistened in the air, propelled by the sharper hiss of his breathing. Everybody in my family always wore the wrong clothes for an occasion. While I had come to help after work and still wore my uniform, which included jeans, Mark wore cargo shorts even though he knew better. He had put them on that morning knowing how ridiculous his mother thought that many pockets looked. As a kid he used to collect things in his pockets: shoestrings, crayon stubs, an occasional dangly earring. When he got older, he collected souvenirs from every move, a small stolen token of remembrance. The first day that we drank and talked he told me that he wore his shorts that day because he hoped to collect something at Grandma's house.

Luckily for Mark, the only broken leg was on the couch. Unluckily for me, the decorative front skirt made it impossible for me to see where my hands were grabbing and as I lifted, my right-hand forefinger caught on a broken nail. Steven and Mark used the momentum from my mediocre lift to flip the couch over onto its back. Without realizing it, Steven had dropped his end over a burrow in which a Western Diamondback Rattlesnake, number two on America's list of most deadly snakes, had taken refuge from the midday sun. Steven ran over to the pickup's tailgate and retrieved a small remainder of duct tape, the same stuff that held his muffler and door handle in place. He pulled a length of tape free, knelt down by Mark and laid it along the back of his left calf. Steven pinched a corner of the heavy tape, squeezed so that it stuck to his thumb for better grip.

Mark looked at him, glared at the flat plant, and said, "Do it."

It wasn't the first time they had performed some sort of back-alley triage; there had been several cuts, gashes, sprains, and even a concussion. Mark

had once made a splint for Steven's forearm out of the broken chair that had caused the injury and the jagged splint pushed four splinters into his flesh.

When Steven yanked what turned out to be Gorilla tape, it removed as much skin as nettles. Mark punched at the earth, as dry and hard as he ever was. Tiny beads of toxin had been seeping through the needles into his calf, the swelling had begun to form large lumps. He squeezed his eyes closed, hit the ground a second time, and pushed the spent air from his lungs.

Mark held out his hand for help getting up. Steven dropped the tape on the couch and grabbed onto one of Mark's hands. They turned to me as though two heads of the same creature, glaring because I wasn't keeping up. I held up my hand, bloodied from the couch. One of them shook his head, the other looked at the ground, and up went Mark without my help.

"Get me a cup of water or something," Mark said to either of us. Steven went to his truck a second time and retrieved a bottle of water. Mark crouched down and poured water onto the dirt. "Right. Of course. Friggin' hot as hell out here." He clawed at the ground with fingernails to loosen dirt which he put into the bottle to make mud. Mark squeezed out a handful, dropped the bottle, and spread the wet earth around his calf as thick as he could.

The pair of them strode past me looking straight ahead toward the front door. I'm not as strong as they were at my age and it disappointed both of them. I wanted to think that they were just being hard on me. Mark had tried to toughen me up like his dad had done to him. When I was nine, I fell off my bike and a red line of blood dripped from my knee to my white sock. I asked for a band-aid, and that's when Mark told me that Mom was leaving. I knew those things weren't related; they fought all the time. But it meant that she wasn't there to comfort me and my bleeding knee. It meant she wouldn't be there the next time I fell. It meant that I hadn't done enough good things to keep her around. It meant that I would never ride my stupid Schwinn again.

The front door slammed shut and I heard Steven yell something about useless waste. The ottoman lay to the side of the door, leaning up against the house. I wrapped the bottom of my shirt around my finger, my blood creating a Rorschach blot on the dark blue fabric. I had to stop the bleeding—keep it all in.

The sun and heat outside Grandma's house were too oppressive to willingly stand around. The small breeze I heard rattling in the leaves of the tree across the street didn't provide any reprieve. At least that's where I thought the rattling came from.

Inside the house portraits hung crooked on Grandma's yellow papered walls and down the cramped hall. When I was six or seven, I counted all of them. I never cared much about who was in the frames, because most of them



were complete strangers to me. Probably second cousins once removed, great step-uncles, and so on. Grandma's collection, Mark said once.

The living room smelled of musty furniture, and dust motes glinted in sunbeams. The worn cushion of a love seat made almost a U shape. A rocker missing three spindles eyed me suspiciously, threatening to break if I stood too near. After fifteen years of being away, that room held no more memory for me than a sepia photo, browning at the edges from overexposure, chemical bonds breaking down, and everything wilting.

The piano bench waited patiently as though longing for company. Small lines of light bled in through the blinds and laid across the smooth surface of the bench's wood and on the piano's top and front boards, mimicking the white and black of the keys beneath the felt cloth. "Keys need to breathe," Grandma had said. "Never close the fallboard, that's the keyboard cover."

I felt myself moving slowly, as though wading through water toward the bench. A board creaked beneath my left foot. It squeaked when my weight shifted back to my right. The small wheels curved and smooth legs were nestled into the carpet's beige, green, and red of a flower motif—burrowed, as my toes might have done when the carpet was new.

I heard Mark grunt from the bathroom. They had used hydrogen peroxide which bubbled on his leg where Steven's tape trick had left raw flesh. I know now that Mark blamed me for it being so bad. I know that at that moment he held as much contempt for my many failures as he did for the nettles.

The bench groaned lightly under my weight. With age, everything creaks and groans and all we can hope for is that nothing cracks or breaks. Things that break generally become two broken things, neither of which is of any use. Like the leg that broke off of the potpourri couch which covered an angry snake in the front yard. Like Steven's arm for the seven months after a doctor finally pulled the slivers out of the infected forearm. Like my parents, and Mark and me, and the display board I kicked down when I stapled my finger because all I wanted to do was fix something and it was the only reason I had taken a job at Home Depot in the first place. Things break—I had grown to understand this well. That is simply their nature; that's just what happens. As I let my weight settle, the bench did not break.

That corner of the room smelled faintly of perfume and mints diffused into the wood. I'll never be convinced that grandmothers don't all smell of mints and floral perfume. We would sit at the piano bench when I was only up to her elbow. She would show me the inside of the piano, and we would watch the action of the hammers as I leaned on a dozen keys at once; a ruckus of disharmonic tones spilled from the soundboard every time. She would poke my ribs as though they were the keys and take tremendous joy in, as she said, "The sweet notes of laughter resounding from your soundboard."

I knew the keys were clean and shiny beneath the felt. Grandma always wiped them down on Sundays. My right hand still holding the reddened hem of my shirt, I took the corner of the keyboard cover between the fingers of my left hand and held it, peeling back the cloth so that I could touch the keys, hear their sound, and play something other than the disharmonic tones I used to create.

“Don’t get too attached to that thing!” Steven spat, scaring the hell out of me. I spun around toward the hall, gasping. If I had one of Grandma’s mints in my mouth, I would have choked on it. Mark stared at me. Steven stared past me. “That damn piano isn’t going anywhere. I’m not moving it. Probably weighs a goddamn ton and is worth a hundred dollars at best.”

Mark opened his jaw wide like an anxious mutt; a silent yawn, or maybe a stretch to ease tension brought on by clenching. He took a deep breath and put a placid smile on his face. He stared right at me, the way he did when I was a kid, when I had done something wrong. My finger had slipped from the hem of my shirt and threatened to bleed again. The felt cloth in my left hand hung to the floor.

That look he always gave me forced guilt or shame whether or not I had really done anything wrong. I always thought there was something mean about it when I was a child, or if not mean, maybe evil. Age changes everything, and I saw something honest instead. His eyes didn’t provoke guilt or shame, but truth. The discomfort of being stared at made my eyes do what they always did in these moments—avoid his gaze. Instead, I looked past him to the wall and a few of Grandma’s pictures.

A young girl whose eyes were the same color as Mark’s stared back at me. Her eyes were kinder and framed in red-rimmed glasses. She wore a knitted sweater of unfortunate pastels; her hair was curled and defying gravity. It came out of me before I knew the question was forming, “Who is she?”

Mark knew without looking which photograph was behind him, and he could read my expression. His face turned stone for just a second and flashed back to the smile. “Your Aunt. Joan.”

On weekends when I stayed with Grandma and counted those photos, I somehow never really looked at the faces. On holidays, when the whole family gathered, Aunt Joan wasn’t in attendance. On projects with a family tree, she was never mentioned.

Steven cut in before I could pursue, “Went missing on the night of her senior prom. Her and her boyfriend.” He shrugged. “Long time ago. We’ve got a couch to move, you and me. Get a box and move.” I glanced back down at my finger, the clot still intact, and nodded my head. He wasn’t going to give me anything more about Joan. Not yet.

I turned back around on the seat. Several of the piano keys had sunk in like bad teeth. Others were missing pieces of white or black, exposing wooden

rectangles where I had imagined real ivory. The piano wasn't something I could ever hope to fix. It was junk. And hiding under that cloth, it was a lie. Just like everything else in the house.

I replaced the cloth and stood up. I chose a large box by the hall to prove I was capable of helping. They waited for me to go first; probably worried that I would stay back for fear of hurting another finger, but they also needed me to open the door because they were already holding boxes. I set my box on the banister and pulled the door open, catching the corner of the box. It spun and tumbled to the floor, dumping Grandma's trinkets along with a small container of remains of a past family pet. The tin fell onto the hard tiling and dented a corner badly, spilling its gray-and-black powdery remnants along with two small chunks of white.

"Christ! That was Miser!" Mark yelled.

Steven leaned his head toward his brother, "It died 'Miser;' it was born 'Mister.' Dad changed its name when it was ten and officially became grumpier than his own damn self." Steven's eyes dropped to the dark powder on the floor, "Course the cat was orange back then."

"Clean it. I need a cigarette."

They walked out, and for the first time I was glad there wasn't a breeze.

Grandma's bathroom was as dark and dusty as the rest of the house. The tub was covered with flecks of damp dirt. And invisible nettles. It was the room in which her body was found. I imagined her lying there in an old night gown, white or maybe pink, one hand up near her face, the other on her stomach. I couldn't decide if her eyes would have been open or shut. For some reason I dwelled on that. They said she had a heart attack.

I found blue, green, and yellow cleansers under the sink before the unexpected sound of a garage door opening across the street pulled my attention to the window. A black car slowly backed out, making several corrections to stay straight. Mark stared across the street. Steven leaned against the exposed bottom of the couch, smoking. I wished he would get snagged on one of the nails. He flicked the butt too close to Mark, who glared at him, and then returned his gaze to the house. The garage door groaned its way shut, and the black car drove away. Staring vacantly at the yard, Steven lit another cigarette. Mark tapped his foot on the ground, waiting for Steven to pass him one.

I didn't want to move boxes. I didn't want to spend my day trying to prove something to them. I didn't want to clean up their damn pet. I wanted things that weren't. I had a strange desire to take that piano apart because it wasn't worth restoring. I left the cleansers in the bathroom because, seriously, to hell with that, and I stepped back into the hallway.

When somebody says not to go in a room, the first thing I want to do is get a good look. A door nobody ever talks about, like a photo of a young girl, can become part of the wall. Until now I never needed to go to that room.

Nothing else was down there, as far as I knew, but apparently there were coiled things waiting to strike and clots waiting to break free.

The hinges squeaked and moaned. Colors, brilliant even with the shades drawn, covered the walls. Simple Minds, Tears for Fears, Prince, Queen, The Bangles; they all looked across the room at one another, striking poses, vying for attention in the quiet. A dresser, a bed, a stool. Everything else was too dark to see. I flicked on the light for a better look.

A record player sat on the desk just inside the door. I hadn't seen one in years and couldn't help but wonder how many years it had been since anybody had seen this one. My ears ached for compensation for the death of the piano. I flipped the switch on. The needle, already set in the grooves, began to feel its way across the vinyl, reading the small divots and bumps. Queen's song, "The Show Must Go On", began to play.

A turquoise Care Bear sat on the comforter of pink triangles, blue circles, and purple squiggles. A stuffed E.T. had fallen off one side of her bed. Hers, because I knew whose room this was. It felt like I gained and lost an aunt in a day. I could still, perhaps, learn about her. On a dresser rested arm sleeves, a couple of bows, a can of hair spray, a clock that had died sometime in the past at 11:58. Everything was doubled in the mirror. The dull complexion and appearance of my own reflected face was emphasized, being surrounded by the images of the rock star immortals posing in posters all over the room.

I felt the complete absence of time. The room was stuck between two frames of film and Joan might walk through the door if somebody could only fix the projector. I crossed to the window and debated opening the blinds. Maybe the sun's light would somehow get the picture started again. Maybe it would reveal too much. After all, a room preserved for thirty years must have its secrets.

I couldn't help but wonder how many times Grandma stood in the room. I imagined she would hug that bear a long while, probably smell the lingering perfume within it until one day she had breathed it all in. Or maybe, I thought, she avoided the room and never came down the hall past the bathroom after she made that bed one final time.

The music stopped suddenly, followed by quiet. Mark and Steven stood just inside the doorway trying at first to stare me down but getting distracted by the history around them. Their feet were as rooted as if they had also been in that exact place for thirty years.

Mark's hand moved away from the record player, his arms crossed, hands turning into fists and nestling themselves under the opposite arms. "And just what the hell," he asked, "are you doing in this room?" His eyes narrowed and his head tilted. I felt like he could hear my quickening pulse and wanted to hear it better. "Getting pretty curious today."

"Yeah, like a cat," Steven chimed. "Like Miser." The bottom of his left shoe left a faint gray mark on the carpet as he shifted his weight back and forth. "Coincidentally, where our curiosity started. Remember that? 'Course, stupid us, just left him there. Mom thought he'd been hit by a car." He flashed a smile, or what he called a smile.

"You killed your own cat?" I asked, more shocked than disgusted. His lingering grin was his only response.

"Well, shit," Steven shouted, slapping his hands together. "If he thinks a cat dying is bad, we better not say anything about the casualties involved in our side job. The kid might freak out." The lilt in his voice revealed he thought he was funny.

Mark's slow sigh was one of gathering patience. "Let's mind our context, huh? The last thing we need is a panicked call to the cops." Mark took another step into the room, nodding his head. He pulled a stool from beneath the desk and sat down. His elbows went to his knees. "Sit," he said.

I lowered myself onto the floor in front of him. The fresh smell of cigarettes came at me from everywhere. Steven sat on the bed behind me, the turquoise bear tumbling to the floor from his movements. Instinctively, I picked it up. I wished that the music was still playing, that the clock was still ticking. Everything hung in the room.

"Would it make it easier," Mark started slowly, "if I told you that it's—it's for good reasons?"

He had managed sincerity in his voice. Good reasons? For casualties?

"Just tell him. I'm gonna just tell him," Steven said. "See, jackass there, what's his name, Eric, right? Eric got to being a little frisky with Joan. Joan, she comes to us and asks if we can help her teach him a lesson. As in, stay the fuck away from Joan."

Mark ran his tongue between his teeth and lips. "We offered to take care of it ourselves, you know. Rough him up is all, we told her. Nonviolent, she says. Ok. I told her, you get a chair and some rope, tie him up, scare him, see how he likes somebody getting too personal."

I shifted uncomfortably, excitedly. They both regretted and relished the story.

"Obviously we followed. What kind of big brothers would we be to miss out on seeing Joan scare the shit out of that bastard? So, night of prom, sure as hell he tries to lead her away from the bonfire at a friend's house." Steven was visibly proud of her, even at this moment. "She lets him, guides him toward a clearing. Not far from the drop off."

A lone cloud must have passed in front of the sun because what little light came in the window dimmed, casting a moment of cool.

"She lured him easily enough. He was all about that chair and rope, thought it was his dream come true. She tied him up without a problem; he

didn't struggle one bit, until she pulled out a hammer." Mark's eyes left this world and entered his own dreamscape. "The fear in his eyes was heavy, palpable. But uh, prom night drinks, you know. He fought back pretty hard and slipped the ropes. Joan didn't tie it too tight, because she wasn't too serious."

"Yeah well," Steven cut in, "Was her boyfriend who broke my arm with that chair when we seen what he done to her. Fast as fuckin' lightning. We couldn't stop him. You know who was there to help me? Made a splint out of the chair?"

"Family takes care of family," Mark said.

"Too bad nobody was 'round to help him. You know how it is...these teens, they drink, they wander too close to the drop-off. They hit every single goddamned rock on the way down. It's terrible." Steven shook his head.

Mark breathed in sharply. "I still have his class ring. Something to remember him by. I don't know, I just couldn't help myself. They never found Joan, though, for obvious reasons. I told Ma that she had talked about running away. That we didn't think she was serious. Even suggested that Eric threw himself over when he found out she was gone. I think Ma always hoped Joan would come back. And I don't think she ever really forgave me for keeping such a thing as my sister planning to run away a secret. I'd rather be hated than for her to have known the truth."

"Most people would. Hence—our *other* employment."

Mark rocked forward on the stool, lifting one of its legs off the floor, leaving him to balance on its other two as he held his breath for a moment before slowly exhaling. His eyes finally met mine. Like he was considering me rather than accusing me. "It's a family thing, you see. Family takes care of family. We protect each other at all costs." He was choosing his words carefully. "You, uh. You family?"

Behind me, Steven sniffed to remind me that he was there. Coiled, he waited for my answer.

"But. You were movers," I said.

"We certainly moved a lot of people." He sniffed again. Rubbed his nose. "You gotta just learn to go with the flow, kid. Like me. I don't give a damn. I just do what feels right."

A car door slammed shut. Mark rose from his seat and walked across the floor. He cracked the blinds open with two fingers. Peered out. His face dropped, eyes widened, and he whispered beneath his breath. He spun around and made for the front door. Steven, wary of unannounced visitors slamming car doors, called after him asking what it was, and ran out of the room.

My hands trembled. There could be danger. I thought it must be out of fear that I rose from the floor, stepped out into the hallway, and closed my aunt's bedroom door behind me. Quickly, quietly, I made my way back to the living room, to the entrance, and peered out through the window in the door.



A red SUV sat in the driveway across the street, the back hatch still open. A woman was in Grandma's yard talking to Mark; her bare arms waved in conversation, and long legs extended from a knee length skirt. It was Molly, visiting home on a long weekend. I could just barely hear their conversation. Business was good, she was so sorry to hear about what happened, and hoped everybody was alright. She stepped forward and hugged Mark like an old friend. I saw her make the move to let go of the embrace before him. She gave Steven a brief one-armed hug.

Mark nodded his head back to me and I heard him say that I was inside, cleaning something up. Then he gestured to the couch, and I lost his words again. He looked so happy to see her. Genuinely happy.

I pushed open the door and heard Molly clearly, "Well, now, I can help you. Got two arms as good as anybody else's, haven't I?" Her voice was both sweet and heavy, like a dripping honeycomb.

Mark raised his hands, ready to say that wasn't necessary. Her eyes moved to his calf, pink and swollen, and she insisted. She put down her purse. Steven took the side with the stinging nettles. They wedged their fingers under the edge of the couch and counted together. "One, two, three. Lift." A step toward the truck. The leaves rattled in the tree across the street, I thought. Another step toward the truck. Then, her face fell. We all heard the rattle. She dropped her end and jumped back, and I instinctively jumped too. The snake lunged after her in a long defensive strike. The edge of the couch hit the ground and caught the snake's tail, silencing the rattle, holding back the bite. The hard movement of Molly's drop pulled a nail across Steven's hand, which sliced clear across his palm. His end dropped to the ground, freeing the snake which leapt again.

A snake of that size can open its mouth wide enough to wrap around the muzzle of a small mammal. Drops of venom are known to leak out even before contact with its prey. This snake's bite landed high on Molly's inner thigh. As the hollow-tipped fangs sank into her flesh, it squeezed a gland in its head and injected its venom. One fang hit the femoral artery. The spurt of blood spat back at the snake and caused it to release and slither away. Molly crumpled on the ground, life seeping out and death seeping in.

Molly's high shriek tore at her vocal cords. Her face contorted like a reddening gargoye. Blood pulsed out of her, harder and faster as panic and adrenaline flooded every inch of her shaking body. Mark was already at her side. He dropped to the ground and put his mouth to the wound to suck the venom out. Her agony rattled the window in front of me, echoed down the vacant street, and shattered a chunk of Mark's heart.

I clenched my hand too hard. My heart raced inside my chest. While Mark sprinted across the yard for the rest of the bottle he had applied to his leg, blood seeped through the clot on my finger. As Mark dashed back to the

convulsing and foaming-at-the-mouth woman, my own blood beaded at the tip of my finger and dripped onto the remains of Miser.

The contents oozed from the bottle onto Molly's leg, while Mark's finger pressed into the arterial gap to stop the flow of blood. Drawn out like a sailor to a call of the siren, I approached. It was rare for a reaction to the venom to be so intense. It could have been that the other fang hit a vein sending tainted blood straight to her heart. Mark didn't seem aware of anybody but the two of them as Molly continued to shake and foam. Mark touched her leg where the reds and browns had not.

I realized how much I liked that shade of red. How well it mixed with the browns of earth. How good the tightness in my stomach felt—panicked, anxious, adrenaline-fueled. I approached Steven, turned, and leaned slightly in. "Is it always this—this exciting?"

Steven turned his head toward me. The right corner of his lips curled upward, and his eyes gleamed. We both looked back to the slouched man. Mark shouted for somebody to call 9-1-1. I reached for my pocket and started to pull out my phone.

Steven held his hand out and shook his head. "The last thing we need is a panicked call to the cops."

Mark took her left trembling hand in his, held it comfortingly, and whispered to her, *sshhhhhh*. He held her hand, looked at her hair which now covered in dirt and saliva. Slowly, as though at war with himself, he grasped the diamond ring on her finger. I could see the fight happening behind his eyes as they shifted from her face to her leg and to her finger. I could feel the energy. As I pushed my phone back into its pocket, Mark slowly and gently slid the ring off of her finger. That was the drive. Looking into the whites of her rolling eyes he whispered one more time. *Sshhhhhh*. He slid the ring into one of the small pockets of his cargo pants. There was the compulsion.

I knew who I was then. Who I am. I am my dad—strong and hard like the earth. And I am my uncle—calm and flowing like the water. "Yes. I'm family," I said. "I think we need to move her."



*A Four* (digital drawing), Shantam Goyal





*A One* (digital drawing), Shantam Goyal



I CAN'T BELIEVE HOW I'VE  
GROWN, THE YEARS I'VE  
SEEN. LOOK AT THE LINES  
OF MY FACE! NEXT THING  
YOU KNOW, I'LL BE GREY.

*A Three* (digital drawing), Shantam Goyal

# Faux

I knew one lover:  
He loved me once.

We spit kissed in the dark,  
playing Russian Roulette like our tongues were revolvers aimed at no  
mouth.  
If I said my body needed to feed off yours to writhe on it naturally,  
you would consider our friction toxic to the environment.

We were a consequence,  
embarrassed to be in the same room as the skeletons that rammed into false  
skin.  
If you ever tell me our side effects were intentional,  
you'll probably want to test me on you again to make sure.

Lover loved walls down.  
I loved a wall.

We fucked as a secret,  
under a blacklight lathered in each other's shame like it hurt him to lie to  
me.  
If no one wanted to see a boy make contact with another boy,  
why did you make it out to be a suitable possibility?

We were dead upon arrival,  
improperly executed as the marriage of two bodies soaked in neither's sweat.



Somewhere his frown is a mirror aimed at an epiphany,  
but fake happy made us both look desperate to shove ourselves at each other  
again.

Lover's body turned away.  
I loved his deficiency.



*Alienation* (photography), Nicholas Simenon

# Spilled Coffee

I spilled my coffee and burned a hole through the earth.  
The monsters that live in Earth's core emerged and thanked me  
for my help, each one shaking my hand before wandering off.  
Every day passed with more and more news stories:  
"Three-Headed Dragon—The Newest NFL Player!"  
No one ever asked me how the monsters escaped. They only  
said, "Can you believe it?" One eight-foot lizard moved in  
upstairs and threw parties every night.  
It was only then that I wondered if I had made a mistake.

# Deerslayer

The doe is coiled up in the snow and still breathing. Fallen here in the hollow of an elm uprooted is the deer, with a fine steam rising from her flank, tawny and slick with wetness.

The boy is twelve years old today, and he carries on through the woods to where the doe has fallen behind his father and his older brother, a soft whine resonating deep in his temples. He has the stock of the shotgun in the crook of his arm and he cradles it tight to his chest. The gun is not made to be carried this way. The sling nips at his ankles, the weight sends him off kilter. He goes slowly and he measures each step. Lifting one boot out of a drift, pausing, plunging it ahead. Passing a bare right hand across his face to wipe the fluid from his eyes.

The boy's brother has stopped at the base of the elm. There is the deer, lying crescent-shaped in a cove of tangled roots, ears twitching, dark dorsal fur pulled tight on the ridges of her spine, the swept grooves of her ribcage. The brother is seventeen and knows with a man's surety of the absolutes of nature and life's passage into death. He waves to the father, who has slowed to let the boy catch up, and sinks to his haunches, clicks his tongue, regards the doe where it lies. Boy if you ain't unlucky, he says.

The father watches the boy's back as he passes and eyes the narrowed shoulders under the overlarge coat. He is nearing fifty and with the clarity of age he recognizes the beauty immanent in life's natural cycles. As such he sees in his sons the amelioration of his own self, like the widening rings of an elm tree, and understands the doe to exist under no different principle and for no different purpose. When he reaches the doe he whistles low under his breath and motions for the boy to come close. See the way she breathes shallow and quick like that, he says. Looks like a lung shot but not quite both. The boy stares mutely, still clutching the shotgun. He has circled around to the doe's

head to watch the weak flaring of her nostrils but finds himself looking into the eyes of the animal. Black eyes from rim to pupil, reflecting back his own face undistorted. He breathes in the sharp winter air and with it the rank, wild smell of her fur, cloying and sticky. How long's it take to die? he says.

Turn her over and we'll take a look, says the father. Take a look here, he says. This is the most important part.

The boy thinks to sit but will not set down the shotgun to do it. He looks again into the doe's eyes as if to find some difference from before, but the brother steps in front and seizes her by the forelegs. The doe writhes listlessly, head lolling, neck dragging in the snow like a thing already dead.

Easy. Easy, the father says. Hold her still now, watch she don't kick you. Now flip her on over.

Oh ain't that a sucker, the brother says. Boy if that ain't an ugly one.

Well don't let go of her. Where's your knife at.

Uh. Here.

Hey, look close now. Do it this way she won't feel any pain.

The doe seizes once and sags into the snow, neck gouting. The blood stomped into the snow from its killing is bright and steaming hot. The boy's brother carefully wipes his knife off on the carcass then folds it away. The father sits on the elm stump next to the doe's head and lifts it by an ear to examine it. The boy watches the doe's eyes as the head lists gently.

See that, the old man says. Don't it put things into perspective?



*A Terrible Time* (stoneware), Brianna Olsen





*Sentimental* (ceramic with shoe polish), Holly Yandow

# Escapism

Ten, maybe eleven, pigeons sit inside a crater in the Arizona flatland. Their wings gently stretch the empty pocket walls, splitting seeds, the hock-jointed boys club. A rabbit passes by and they screech before realizing it's just a man singing a song about one.

An orange ranch home south of the cavity claims to be an Andy Warhol museum. The television loops a videotape of people trying on wigs. A greasy tarantula holds my hand like a child and asks for a drink of water.

The shrine underneath the sink holds a candle inside a bucket. Hot lightning hits the roof and it all goes dark. Her rumble waves the room like a wild white flag. The owner wasn't home. I slept in his bed.

With no warning, the tenth pigeon explodes into a pile of feathers and twigs. The remaining nine or ten pigeons take turns gnawing at his bones. The savory beak. He is little more than a withered European mouth in the dirt. How does that protest music go again?

The dusty Southwest rips through my window like a suicidal blue jay. My plucky hands tremble, oily with bile. The window slams dark in shame. I stretch myself flat against the spoiled carpet. It'll be days before anyone notices.

# PASSING

From up your gullet crawls puberty's  
late bloom. A goose eats the letters in  
your name like jelly beans. He hides inside  
a pulped chamber, sleeps in the pits  
and fissures. Hissing with all those  
ugly teeth. Molars ripen next to  
the carrots, julienned.

I sit on the subway neighboring possums.  
They read newspapers and drink wet coffee.  
One wears a jade necklace and pats his plump  
middle. It's embarrassing, really, finding him  
wearing all that costume jewelry. Slimy-toed,  
greasy-palmed, pale sprout. I carry a dagger in my red  
backpack. I do not know the difference between us  
at times. A coyote steps onto the train; a bright purple  
fear pours across the platform. His abdomen  
produces a hand and waves. I swallow it whole  
like a real man.

# Motion Sickness

We spiral across the turnpike, a blur of hands and gasoline. I can't hold onto the steering wheel, onto all of these abstract ideas so early in this poem. Mother Mary taps my shoulder and asks if I would consider using the word "motor oil" instead. We're throwing up and it's like

we're kids again. Our roadmap folds into a fan and shoots into the puckered eye of a toll booth worker. He squawks, collapsing like a Great Stork. At home, his kids flop around in the mud. Birds in oil. They garble like salmon-hungry hounds. A falling such and such. Mother Mary asks if I got lazy here. Even if

I could talk about myself without using my name—Instead: You take off your shirt and say something mean. Farmed flesh. Rivers of legs. It's so hard to look at you when you are so hungry. A jewel falls into my mouth. I taste nothing. You hold me in your mouth. You say I taste nothing.

Between bodies there are pages of poems dedicated to my queer shame. In a perfect world, you take the wheel. In a perfect world, I don't flinch when we hit water.





*Jazz Scene* (acrylic on canvas), Traci Johnson



*Nothing in Moderation* (photography), Logan Hicks





Will you link with me just for this eternity?  
I'm begging you to let your neutrons bind with mine.  
We can do this foxtrot forever, buried inside  
each other's furious  
nimbostratical electron clouds.

# Metropolis

Metro; Mother. Polis; City. From the Greek. Cities have mass. Concrete a thousand feet skyward weighs down on onlookers and inhabitants, stalwart against updrafts and the disbelief in tourists' crooked necks. The heights of human civilization. Metropolis—a culmination of geography we carry on hunched shoulders.

By all accounts, New York City is crowded. Bridges crowd, buildings crowd, people crowd. I crowd around a stage with strangers. My mother sits to my left, holding my hand with the soft palm of hers. Her hand is warm compared to the cool wood armrest under my five-year-old hand. My eyes bound between a golden yellow dress and a rose in a glass case. Song mixes with the faint perfume my mother always mists for rare occasions. The scent is inseparable from the concentric teardrops of her rose gold necklace she adorns above her maroon blouse. The lighting from the stage draws amber streaks out of the light brown curls that frame her round face. Her smile is slight, content. I smile, too. The Beast dances with Belle, lamenting their plights, and I feel the weight of the city for the first time: below the architecture, below the culture, below the skyline, I catch glimpses of our home thirty miles north. My earliest memory of the city.

"Where'd you get all these stamps, Mom?" This world is quieter, less exaggerated.

"I've just collected them over the years." A few hundred stamps spread across our dining room table, the ones you press into ink to replicate a little design. I love the dragonfly one. The smooth hourglass of the wooden handle contours into my palm. We're under the warm light of the dining room table chandelier. There are other markers, crayons, and paints scattered around like

a technicolor hurricane. I eye the markers with the little shapes instead of tips; a flourish of tiny green dog paws is my signature; its good enough for a seven-year-old. We're making cards for something, someone. Newspapers underlay the messier activities. I clutch the dragonfly stamp.

"You've got to push down really hard, so it gets enough ink," Mom says, opening the ink pad's plastic case for me. I do as I'm told. I put as much effort as I can into the stamp. Drops of ink form on either side.

"Like this?" I ask between strained grimaces.

"Maybe a little too hard." Mom puts her hand on mine and lifts it up off the pad a little. Her hands are soft and clean. My hands are a mess of green marker, blue paint, and a ladybug my mother stamped on earlier. She puts her focus back into her paintbrush, the kind with a little sponge at the end. I want to be like my mother, engaged in the creation of something. I put my hand over a scrap of forest green construction paper and stamp the dragonfly, testing it out a few times. I put one on my card.

There's innocence here in the suburbs. Expanses of nuclear families holed up in their hollows. There's no expectation of appearances in a shadow—no real history or culture to behold. But it feels less developed, as if the achievements of mankind suddenly stop where the Hudson meets the Harlem River. All one can do is live. But there are hints, hints brought back by suit-and-tied commuters and family day trips, allowing culture to leach out from population centers—where mothers take sons to see musicals and to dream a bit bigger than their bedroom walls.

For every center, for every polis, there is a periphery eternally in the wings. It's called Suburbia. To be sub, below, the urban, the city. From the Latin. Like subterranean subway cars. New York City exerts a pressure of wonder in tow behind the smog. We always ride the train into and back out of the city. Metro North goes right through Croton–Harmon station, a two-minute car ride from our home up on the steep eastern slope of the Hudson Valley. I always think the train station looks like a spider with broken legs, zig-zagged and straddling above the railways. Rail lines spread like a spider's web across the tri-state area, the metropolitan area, radiating out from the center.

They're habitual: the train rides. My mother doesn't like to ride backwards for the hour on the train. She gets nauseous, but New York City is there, so we go. I watch the Hudson River fly by between cattails, graffitied tunnels, and rocky shores. The Tappan Zee, the old rusted, steel one since demolished (the new one is futuristic and grand, straightedge), flies over head. It's the same path I've travelled since I was five, the same sticky plastic upholstery of Metro North seats. *Mother North*, that's funny, just like my mother who nods off next to me as we rumble toward Grand Central once again.

"I love you, Sweetie," whispers the wall.

"Oh my gosh! I can hear you!" I say back to the beige tiles. My mother is twenty or so feet away, facing a corner, back turned to me. I'm doing the same, back turned to her. In the dining concourse of Grand Central Terminal, there's an intersection between the foot ramp up to Forty-Second Street and the entrance to the Oyster Bar. The domed ceiling carries words from corner to opposite corner, privacy from the line of other tourists waiting their turn. The secret of the architecture is a miracle to a ten-year-old.

"They have a table inside. Let's go eat," my mother says to the wall, referring to our large group of neighbors taking an excursion into the city.

"But I don't like seafood."

"I know. They'll have something else," she reassures me. I leave my corner and we walk in together. It's dimly lit, and the air is heavy, stagnant. I look at the tank full of rubber-banded lobsters and pinch my nose.

"It smells like fish in here."

"You'll get used to it," my mother says, not giving in to my whines as she drags me along by my wrist. I'd rather be outside whispering anonymous messages into the wall, pretending to be a ghost. We sit down at a long table for our party of twelve. My mother directs me to sit next to my sister, despite my protests. She meets my father and the other adults at the far end of the table.

Soon platters of oysters arrive in ice baths on freezing aluminum plates. My scrunched-up nose signals my mother to come over. I smell her perfume again as she reaches down between us to grab an oyster. She teaches me and my sister how to eat them. Pick up a nice juicy one, holding the ugly, bumpy underside with one hand. Use the little fork to detach the meat from the slick, pearly interior. Squeeze some lemon juice on it and drip on some cocktail sauce. Slurp in, chew a little, swallow.

"Go ahead, try it."

I watch my mother demonstrate the final step. I watch the other adults indulge. I want to be like them, in the city doing fancy, sophisticated things. I need to live up to the genius and aesthetic of the city planted above my head. I am in its roots; I have to act like it. I tilt my head back and try to swallow as fast as I can. I taste acid combined with the salty water of the lower Hudson. It has the consistency of snot and is about to slide down my throat. I think of pearls and Aphrodite, as I've been told oysters are an aphrodisiac, though I thought that was just related to the goddess. I think of the famous constellated ceiling a hundred feet above my head, then through the ceiling, through its admirers gazing upward, and I wonder where Venus is on the celestial map. I think of Manhattan like a grimy pearl, rising out of the polluted harbor seafoam along with the skyline, and I want to rise too. I forget to chew, but

I manage to keep the oyster down. We find our way back home to our place on the bumpy shell. I get used to my suburban shell. I get used to the smell.

Comfort is slow and all-consuming. At fifteen, I'm growing. My legs grow longer, my arteries stretch, and I ache. "Stand up straight" becomes my mother's most common refrain. My height becomes a constant shifting with the command of her words. Perspectives shift in puberty, along with posture. At some point, I begin to value space over potential discomfort. And New York City is crowded. The novelty of the LED screens of Times Square gives way to the smell of piss and exhaust. The crystal ball that drops every New Year's stops being crystal. The thought of people looking at me strangely for looking up at expanses of glass windows becomes more painful than missing out or the strain in my neck. The heights of civilization become a hassle to climb, the view stops mattering when my suburban bed is soft.

My mother pushes me. I try to oblige. I join Model UN, representing Jamaica—the country, not Queens—and spend an April weekend in New York. The hotel is large and in Midtown. We ride the train into Grand Central and I watch the floor tiles go by underfoot, conscious to not look up like all the tourists. I wear baggy jeans and a brown sweatshirt that I wear every day to school. I carry a blue duffle bag of dress shirts and an ill-fitting blazer as naturally as I can, trying to live up to the mystique of the city despite my resentment, my weak attempt to blend in. Architecture, no matter how grand, can only hide people for so long.

We get to the hotel where the convention is being held, and it's just tall, nothing more. Each meeting I attend has a silent Jamaica. I go to meetings in windowless rooms with other teenagers who are driven to engage. I'm adamant in keeping quiet for two days. I eat gyros from a Zagat-rated food stand with a wooden structure and plexiglass door to make it a restaurant, not confident enough to go beyond a hundred feet from the hotel. I'm embarrassed of the fancy suit I'm wearing. The velcro of the wallet I have never used before grates on my ears even more than the car horns. It's nighttime, but the city refuses to get dark. Streetlights, buildings, everything lights up, exposing, rendering all of me in full color. The buildings are not artistic expressions of modernity anymore; they are slabs of concrete and rebar, blocking out the moon and stars. The wind follows the streets as artificial channels, and it blows around my brown waves of hair.

I find it hard to breathe in a space so disassociated. People walk in their own directions, no eye contact, just existing in the same space. The buildings do not waver like me as they rise. The air itself is forced to be there, to enter my lungs. I'm partaking in it: the burden of the practical, running from ex-



pression. The anxiety tastes sour. I take my gyro and go back inside the hotel. I miss my home. I miss my mother.

"How was it, Honey?" my mother asks, embracing me at Croton–Harmon once we get back. I look in her hazel eyes.

"It was great," I lie. It is functional.

Walking in New York City is always touristic, a voyeuristic sensation from looking into a world that isn't mine. No matter how logical the gridlines or how enthusiastically I greet the apathy of the city, it seems foreign. The edges are so sharp, the spires ready to pierce the sky. Architecture caught between opulence of Beaux Arts and Art Deco and Modernist all at odds with one another; the first ingrained in the wealth of the past, the second caught up in the industrial aspirations of the Interwar, the third obsessed with form that follows function. A place where the MetLife Building seems to grow out from Grand Central like an opportunistic weed.

I'm used to houses with faux wood siding and rough gray shingles next to a smattering of trees. I'm used to the sugar maple in front of my home that drops leaves to rake, and the beige vinyl that's shown off to disorganized, calm roads I can navigate like nothing. I get lost on grids. My frame of mind is bound by the extraordinary ordinary, unsettled by places where sculptures grow like trees, the sky is held up by rooftops, and the basements aren't pitch black subways or oyster bars.

Six years later, I am doing laundry in my basement and I heft overstuffed hampers over the clutter. Boxes of Old Navy snow pants many sizes too small, a couple of tires next to the boiler, crates of my mother's crafting supplies (needles, multitudes of multi-color threads, cutesy stamps with associated ink, scrapbooks, pieces of wood), a knitted rainbow scarf I haven't worn since I was eight draped over a wooden rafter, the pantry where we keep cans of baked beans, more and more *things*.

The riffraff creates an aisle just wide enough to shuffle to the washer and dryer as my bare feet are sanded by concrete. I knock into a picture frame, and it falls forward. I didn't know there were any paintings down here. Setting the laundry basket down on the dingy blue rug in front of the washing machine, I turn around, eyebrows raised and jaw slack. I never noticed the frame and its contents before. I pick it up.

It is a painting. No, it's flatter and cleaner than anything that could be created by brush strokes. It is more of a framed poster, but matte without the high gloss. My eyes attach to the only spot of distinct color—a golden orange in a sea of blues and blacks—which runs up the plumage of a woman's head-dress. What appears to be feathers, mostly orange but with accents of purple, are so large they might've come from a mythical bird deity. The feathers curve

from well below her hip back up to her head as she leans back, well aware of her grace. Her skin is pure white, her eyes more smudged dots of shadow than any realized form, and there's a little rouge on her lips. Her face, however, pales in the presence of what she wears. Once I follow the headdress up to her face, I see her dress: a patterned black broken up by gray into irregular scales. It is like a robe enveloping her, only the nape of her neck and right shoulder are exposed—sultry. It takes me a second to see the panther's head. The dress is a hide, the head forming more or less a belt, and the fangs a buckle. My eyes follow the dress down to where paws were dragging behind her obscured frame. White, horizontal lines overlay a perfect blue gradient for the background—indigo on the bottom, powder blue at the top. It doesn't occur to me until later that the artist's perspective is behind the woman, as she swaggers up the gradient staircase at some kind of high fashion gala, walking away from me. A vision of the Art Deco.

It's a serigraph: a type of print that utilizes silk to transfer color. Which is appropriate considering the focus on fashion. Thoughts beyond staring are lost on me, though, all I can do is contemplate. In my nearly twenty years of living in this house, in the dried-out suburbs of New York, New York—of the mother city—at home is the farthest thing from what I feel in my basement now. I feel underdressed as I navel gaze at the visage, naked in my dark blue basketball shorts, white T-shirt, and uncombed hair. My slouch is heavy as I hold the woman up at arm's length.

It smells like damp wood in the basement. Though I've never seen her before, I feel like I have. There's an aesthetic of unabashed appreciation for the self, the human form, and the balance with function, something I devalued somewhere along my way. It is clear and near and muted. Distant but comforting. I take the woman, in her frame. I walk back over the exposed concrete, through the clutter, up the tarnished cream-colored steps.

"Mom, have you seen this?"

Art Deco is about access. Like the serigraph in my basement, mass-produced. Art Deco arose alongside industrialization, alongside the rise of capitalism. Magazine covers pushed out serigraphs en masse as a means to connect with people, even ones outside or tangential to the art world.

Fashion, in particular, is a vehicle to appeal to people who wanted artistry in a functional medium. Art Deco's aesthetic is clear, lines and curves, with obvious subject matter. It's caught between the practical and the aesthetic. A blend of form and function.

But excitement and economies grow stable after world wars. Form, creativity for its own sake, is lost. Art Deco morphs into the modernist movement. Architecture captures the essence best with its axiom: "form follows

function.” Buildings like the Twin Towers, hailed as “filing cabinets” unrelenting in their commitment to run-of-the-mill, straight-edge capitalism, no access through beauty. It became the norm for city centers and skyscrapers; no new Chrysler Buildings. But the Chrysler Building’s spire still flares out like a dress from a serigraph. The aesthetic, however ornamental, still exists.

I’m seeing a Broadway show, *Wicked*, with my sister six months or so after meeting the Art Deco woman. We pass the outer side of Thirty Rockefeller Center, the skyscraper across from St. Patrick’s Cathedral. It extends into the sky at right-angle steps forming stairways to the gods flanking a central block. As the sides of the building reach the top, they increase in frequency, mimicking a low-resolution logarithmic curve. From afar or a bird’s eye view, it appears to be carved, curving into a smooth, aerodynamic fin for the island of Manhattan, made up by skinny rectangular prisms—a mixed form between straight lines and sweeping curves. Some office space is sacrificed in the name of sculpture. 1939; Firm Art Deco.

At the base, staring down the Gothic Revival cathedral, stands Atlas—cast in bronze—along Fifth Avenue. I look up at the statue. He holds up the heavens, a stellar globe reduces to four rings wrapping around each other. I think of my mother’s necklace. Entire solar systems rests on the backs of the titan cursed to hold up the sky. Skyscrapers are condemned to the same fate, pushing against gravity, resisting the irresistible. Forward progress in the name of greatness.

What must it be like to struggle with the weight of the world? New York City holds up the excellence of a species in a sphere of intense proximity but is burdened by unfamiliarity. Suburbia—below the city—supports the polis by providing a foundation, as the base of Thirty Rockefeller tapers out behind the statue. Each identical house is a new world held up by families. An oyster presenting a pearl. A mother carrying her child.

Man builds up the geography, the context, and struggles against it. The artificial and the natural conflict in waterways and landscapes, each yearning to take over or reclaim the other. The sky is heavy, heavier than buildings and cities. Function crushes creativity; efficiency overtakes aesthetic. But in art, in Art Deco, the context of a modernizing world in its infancy mixes with realities of engineering. Art Deco, like New York, like Suburbia, like me, comes to be characterized by the tension of contexts. Tension defines art forms, places. Art Deco: a transition between prosperity and ambition for more. New York: a single point of geography turned crossroads of the world made of concrete and dreams. Suburbia: a tourist in the shadow of Atlas. Me: my mother’s son who was overwhelmed by even that. I straighten my back, turn, and run after my sister. Atlas strains against the weight of the globe behind me.



*Stayed in Sick* (acrylic and charcoal on paper), Erin Doescher



# I'm Awake

First I sat in the dark  
and wondered.  
I touched all the wrong parts  
and I just wondered.

Then I knelt  
torso tilting up  
oil on my hands  
thinking images, images.

Finally I lay  
hands closed and  
harnessed  
engulfed in cold sheets  
one eye on the door  
I found it

and it was truly a cascade  
it was indeed a rush  
I did feel it in my toes.

In all my years writing  
in all my years reading  
in all my years living  
this was the most poetic thing I'd done

and now  
instead of praying before I sleep  
I do this.



*Alienation* (photography), Nicholas Simenon



# A Review of Aisha Sharif's *To Keep from Undressing*

What is the connotation of the word “performance?” Our primary association with “performance” is the theatrical; our understanding of performance has become inextricably linked to the idea of something pretended, something acted out but not done. We think of performance as dishonest. To perform humility or joy is not understood to be the same as to be humble or joyous.

That may be why people dismiss the idea that identity is a type of performance. To say that identity is what you *do* and not simply what you *are* is often an uncomfortable proposition. Many people find comfort in labels—for good reason. Labels like “woman” or “man,” “gay” or “trans,” “Chinese” or “Jewish,” unite individuals with shared experiences and allow for societal comprehension of complex concepts. Aisha Sharif’s collection of poetry, *To Keep from Undressing*, resonates with a truth seldom expressed so thoroughly: that identity *is* a performance. A complicated, contradictory performance, clearly, but a sincere one, nonetheless. Throughout her collection, Sharif’s speakers wrestle with their lived experiences. They are Black, Muslim-American women; daughters, sisters, wives, mothers, and poets. The way these identities interact is at the very heart of Sharif’s work, it informs the structure of her poetry and her understanding that each identity is its own intricate performance.

*To Keep from Undressing* is divided into five sections. Each includes a part of the poem “If my Parents Hadn’t Converted: Questions and Answers,” which straddles the line between humorous and sincere hypothetical scenarios. The poem explores how the speaker’s entire life was shaped by one decision. Christian Aisha, or “Marian Elizabeth” would have had a prom dress “just short enough / to reveal / [her] knees.” When asked how many Muslims the Christian version of herself would “actually befriend,” she leaves no response at all. The poem serves as a pillar to the collection, always returning it to the key questions of who we are and how our experiences shape us. Sharif suggests that her Christian self is still her in a way, but that despite the fact that we all have various versions of ourselves contained within us, the Christian Aisha is missing certain key experiences that are an important part of her current identity.

The experimentation with structure in Sharif’s poems establishes her poetic identity. Sharif manipulates the formal aspects of poetry to build upon new ideas. Her poems’ experimental structures further emphasize the importance of performance. In the poem “A Mathematical Expression of Faith,” the relationship between the speaker’s family’s old Christian ways and the new Muslim ways they practice is presented as an equation to balance. Many poems have a call-and-response structure or a song-like quality to them. “After School on the City Bus, Memphis, TN,” for example, is performed as a school yard chant. At a live reading of the poem, Sharif’s voice echoed out the words of a juvenile bully, a taunt which she wishes she had responded to with a song of her own, by singing “Muslims know god.” Poetry’s very roots lie in performance, and these poems emphasize that relationship. Sharif has a firm understanding of her poems’ sonic qualities and the way they play with language and vernacular, for example in “Hijab Be,” where Sharif discusses the versatility and freedom of her fellow hajabis, how “Hijab be prayin’ still. / Hijab be raisin’ hell.” She combines and shapes her different identities and different schools of thought—scientific, schoolyard, Black, Muslim—to establish the identity of her work.

The collection’s philosophy on identity culminates in “The Fitting Room,” where Sharif’s speaker explains to a non-Muslim saleswoman why she wears the hijab. The speaker questions her own choice to cover, though she doesn’t reveal this to the saleswoman. Despite the way she questions her faith, she chooses to put her hijab back on, “pinning the performance in place.” This action is her way of performing faith through her doubt, which shows the complexity of her relationship to covering. Sharif’s hijab reifies her belief in a concrete way. In the simple act of putting on a headscarf, a mere performance, she creates her identity.

In contrast to the act of dressing, the creation of poetry serves as a symbolic undressing. Sharif’s work is the dissolution of identity markers to reach at

the undefined internal experience. The collection takes its name from a line found in "Iddah: Part II," which explores the time after the speaker's sister got divorced. The sister lies stagnant in yesterday's clothes, she does "anything to keep from undressing." When considering the way in which putting on a hijab cemented her external identity in "The Fitting Room," the act of dressing becomes synonymous with performing identity. In this way, her sister's fear of undressing signifies an unwillingness to lose her identity of "wife."

*To Keep from Undressing* balances the creation and deconstruction of identity. The collection constructs identities, as contradictory and complex as they may be, but it also deconstructs the actions we take to create our identities. It dresses and undresses the poet. *To Keep from Undressing* is itself a performance that created something real.

# An Interview with Aisha Sharif

Aisha Sharif is a Cave Canem fellow and Pushcart Prize recipient who has just debuted her first poetry collection, *To Keep from Undressing*. The collection explores the spaces Sharif has occupied, or has been unable to occupy, as a result of being an African American Muslim woman. She traverses her identities, and the ways in which those identities intersect, in life and on the page. Sharif resides in Shawnee, Kansas and teaches English at Metropolitan Community College in Kansas City, Missouri.

**GANDY DANCER:** At the onset of your collection *To Keep from Undressing*, it is made clear that it will be one about the intersection of personal identities—religious, racial, gender, and otherwise. I’m interested in the decision to have each of the poems in the book be explicitly about said identities; although they vary dramatically in their language, perspectives, forms, et cetera, there is a highly visible, traceable thread going through this collection. How, if at all, do you feel the presence of that thread might have affected your process? I’m curious about the ordering of the poems in that way, especially regarding the five sections into which they are divided.

**AISHA SHARIF:** I would love to say that I made a decision to have each of the poems in the book be explicitly about my various personal identities; however, the collection of the poems came about quite naturally and almost unintentionally. The poems in the book were written over a period of thirteen years before the book was picked up for publication. The poems were written at specific times of my life without me thinking about collecting them in a book. Some poems were written in graduate school for creative writing workshops; others were written within the first few years of my marriage

while struggling to find teaching jobs, and a few as a new mother dealing with the baby blues. So, the poems reflect these individual identities because they were written at a time where that identity was probably very prominent in my life. When it came to collecting them for publication, I collected them less to show each individual identity but more so to show the chronology and trajectory of my life.

The book is divided into five sections because initially I wanted the book to mirror the five pillars of Islam, five tenets that guide Muslims' beliefs and actions. However, that organizing strategy wasn't working in earlier drafts of the manuscript and was dropped, but the five sections stuck as clear breaks in the work.

**GD: Your work, as I've noted, is very much informed by your identities. In what ways do these identities affect your daily life, both professionally and otherwise?**

AS: As an African American Muslim woman, my identities are very much tied into how I go about my daily life. I wear hijab, so that is an act I perform daily and consciously. I literally put my hijab on every morning; I am conscious of being Black when I wrap the scarf up in a turban style that is so specific to the African American/African culture. As a college professor who teaches at a predominately white institution, I am also aware of my minority status the moment I walk into the classroom. This consciousness can be tiring at times; at other times, the majority of the times, it is enlightening and beautiful as it allows me to see the intersectionality in many ways of existing. I try to weave in this intersectionality into my poetry.

Over the years, though, I questioned whether I was too specific of a demographic to get published. That is, not only was I talking about Islam, but I was also talking about Black Islam, which is even narrower in focus. I questioned whether publishers would not be able to relate to my work. But I am glad I never stopped approaching my work professionally in light of intersectionality as it seems that audiences enjoy the overlapping, revealing just how relatable intersectional identity is for readers.

**GD: I touched on the broad, identity-based narrative that comes across in this book, but there are also a lot of tangential narrative arcs present. Take, for instance, the series of poems about hijabs. Looking at the fifth section alone, four out of the seven poems are, in varying capacities, about hijabs/ the experience of wearing a hijab. Were these poems written with one another in mind? In other words, were you intending on there being a collection of hijab poems in the book? Or was it perhaps more subconscious than that?**

AS: The poems were written very independently of each other. I wrote them during different times of my adulthood, each one reflecting a different issue

at that time that I was dealing with when it came to understanding the role of hijab in my life. When collecting the poems for the book, I knew that I wanted to include poems about hijab because that is such a significant aspect of my Muslim identity and including a range of poems on this topic would reflect the range of ways I have interacted with it. I believe that we never feel the same way about a belief or tenet every day of our lives and presenting the shifts, changes in opinion and wrestlings we have with faith is necessary and is part of the faith journey itself.

**GD: Your poems, when considered as a collective, maintain a simultaneous intimacy and distance between themselves and the works by which they are surrounded. By that I mean, they are all clearly connected thematically, though vary dramatically in their individual execution. In particular, you play with form quite a lot in your executions—"Conversion: A Mathematical Expression of Faith" and the five "If My Parents Hadn't Converted: Questions & Answers" poems come to mind. What do you feel your relationship with form is, and in what ways has that relationship manifested in the book?**

AS: I have always been attracted to formal aspects of poetry. When I initially entered undergraduate school, I thought I would be a Greek and Roman studies major. I had taken Latin for about six years in junior high and high school and loved reading classical myths and translating books of *The Aeneid*. There was something about studying prosody that was challenging and engaging at the same time. I believe that writing poetic forms has that same type of rigor and excitement. I enjoy finding ways to express myself in set structures—a pantoum, a sonnet, a villanelle, or even using a nontraditional form (like a math problem) to present an idea poetically.

In many ways, I see using form to express my ideas about my life as similar to how a person expresses themselves in a traditional religious path like Christianity or Islam. Poetic forms (like religion) provides me with a framework, something that gets me started, something that points me in a true direction, something that gives me a goal. It is up to me to insert my ideas, my feelings, and my voice into the poem (or faith path) to give it life. I may follow the form truly or break it here or there, but I always keep its integrity. And, in many ways, I think the book tries to express that. Poems like "Caesura," "A Dua Before Making Love," and "Covenant" wrestle with the application of faith; as the faith changes, so does the form in which that expression is presented. Yet, regardless of the change, I never let them—faith and form—go completely, as they are my rock.

**GD: I also found myself interested in the decision to bold certain lines and phrases within each of the poems. What was the intention behind the bolding, and what was the process of choosing which lines to or not to bold like?**



AS: The decision to bold was based on the need to highlight certain Arabic words and spoken speech. My editors and I felt it was important to present those words and phrases as different from the speaker's voice and native tongue.

**GD: Your poems often seem to occupy a hypothetical space—the “If My Parents Hadn’t Converted: Questions & Answers” series speaks to this, as does the poem “If My Daughter Does Not Wear Hijab.” Do you find the hypothetical is inherent to your poetic process? And, more generally, could you talk a bit about what your process is like?**

AS: Yes! Quite ironically, the hypothetical is very necessary. We live in a time that is so focused on what is presented in front of you. And, unfortunately, religion is seen as very uncreative and “straight-laced.” I have always been someone who thinks, “What if?” sometimes to a fault. In light of religion and conversion, I felt it was very important to think about how the choices of one's parents affect the child. Choice is at the heart of faith. It is something we choose to enact and believe. So, what if my parents' choice ultimately affected me, and my choice affects my child? I wanted to enter into the hypothetical as an act of faith. We would typically not think of it as such—as faith is usually seen as just accepting what is in front of you. But if we think of faith as more of an on-going inquiry, then we have to consider the hypothetical as something that guides our actions, to inform us before we act and to understand why we do what we do so we can prepare ourselves in the future.

As for my process of thinking about the hypothetical, in some ways, I approach it like writing fantasy. I truly imagine myself a new character, very much like in the “If My Parents Hadn’t Converted” poems. I fleshed out my character and gave setting, actions, voice, and internal conflict. I wanted to present a different self, almost an alternative self, to show how significant parental choices can be in crafting a life for their kids and, moreover, how conversion can dramatically affect the life one has led.

**GD: Your poems have, despite the ways in which they tackle serious topics, a sense of humor to them. I’m thinking of “When You’re a Hijabi Going to the Club...” among others. It must be a balancing act, in some ways, to effectively maintain both a sense of seriousness and a sense of humor as you do. Do you ever find this balancing act difficult? And do you feel that this balance translates into other aspects of your life, perhaps socially or politically?**

AS: Having a sense of humor can save one's life. As necessary as discussing the intersectionality of my identities is, it can be mentally and emotionally intense. Writing poems that have a sense of humor is important not only to break up the serious mood of book's content, but also to show how laughter can be healing and allow you to get through rough times. But most importantly, having poems laced with humor is just fun! I love jokes and making

fun of myself; it eases me and gets rid of worry. So, to include poems that venture into the hypothetical or positions a hijabi in a club ordering a Sprite at a bar is fundamentally natural to me, being someone who loves the hypothetical and laughing, and also an intentional device to reflect the need for levity in the reading process.

**GD: Last but certainly not least, what are you working on now?**

AS: I am currently working on a collection of poems about Michael Jackson. I find him very intriguing. He inhabited this weird divide between public and private that I would like to explore. He is, on one hand, very talented and captivating and yet, on the other, extremely problematic and tortured. I am developing poems that tap into our intrigue with him and reveal his subconscious desires and our own; I even play around with envisioning his jinn!

# The Abyss

For the first time, Robbie would be collecting the firewood, laying it on the pit, lighting the kindling, and sleeping in his tent alone. For years he made the trip up to Acadia with Elijah and Foster: hitting the archery range, kayaking, mountain biking, and talking about climbing The Abyss. Elijah had always reserved Site Thirteen for the last week of August; this year he had reserved an extra weekend in September to get one more shot at the peak before the end of the season.

Elijah drowned on the first Monday of senior year. The funeral was held the following morning, three weeks before the boys planned to leave for Acadia.

Robbie came into the clearing where rain streaked down under the pale yellow glow of the outdoor floodlights and the light gray gravel of the parking lot was freckled with dark splotches. Twenty feet beyond the illuminated cabin deck of camp headquarters, known as The Meeting Place, stood a small wooden shack with the letters “QM” carved into the portico. He continued to the Quartermaster’s shed but found it padlocked with a sign directing visitors back to The Meeting Place for firewood and supplies. He looked to the edge of the clearing where the old Blue Dot Trail began. He hoped he would be able to follow the reflective blue dots without his Maglite, which he’d left in his tent.

Beneath the canopy of the pines, the rain slowed then ceased. The soft distant applause of water droplets falling through the low brush faded. Robbie’s eyes swept the ground, and he lifted his knees with each step, careful to avoid tripping over protruding roots as he scanned the trees for the blue dots. He reached at a familiar fork in the path and veered right.

He arrived at the old site, walking between the lean-tos and tent platforms toward the high reeds. Above him loomed the hallowed boulder, riddled with the same crevices he used to climb through with Elijah and Foster while still only dreaming of The Abyss. Some gaps were narrow enough to fit only a foot in, others were wide enough to walk through. Centered on the slope of the house-sized boulder was the painted target, a blue outer ring around a red inner ring and a yellow center, which marked the head of the archery trail at the rock's peak.

Robbie eyed the old beast. Before the face, five feet of vertical granite receded into the slope where the target was painted. He felt shaky and wondered if he could still make the jump, as he had last year. He crouched low and bolted, planting his left foot hard, pushing off the ground, and flinging his body into the air. His feet landed at the incline's base, and his hands slapped hard against the granite. He turned his back to the rock face and slid on his butt up to the center of the target that overlooked the old Site.

The plot looked smaller without the tents, the picnic tables, the rangers' trucks, and without the familiar voices. The crickets were loud, and the wind whistled through the reeds. Robbie could smell the salt carried in from Bar Harbor. It all felt louder, more concentrated than before. His pocket vibrated; it was Foster calling. He didn't answer.

Robbie wondered if Foster would ever lie on the rock again, if he would sit and watch the red efts emerge on rainy nights, smell the pines in the salt-tinged air, and listen for the eponymous call of the whip-poor-wills. He wondered if Foster would ever come back to Acadia, and if they would make a run at The Abyss together without Elijah. Robbie decided to make the climb in the morning; he would have to summit by himself.

The Abyss had a reputation for overwhelming novice climbers. It seemed that every time the boys were prepared to test out the trail, it was closed for an emergency rescue. From the base, they could see the hundred-foot drop-offs along the exposed foot-wide path, overlooking the coastal ridge. The boys had understood that The Abyss was not to be underestimated, and that they intended to one day conquer it together.

Robbie slid down the rock and returned to the clearing. He bypassed the Quartermaster's shed and entered The Meeting Place.

A woman in a red flannel shirt with a bronze Acadia pin stood behind the counter. Robbie inquired about the firewood. She asked for his site permit and he rummaged through his pocket, finding it stuck to the Eagle Scout insignia of his leather wallet. Foster and Elijah each had one just like it. Robbie

held the permit in the palm of his outstretched hand for the woman to see. "Expiration Time" was written on the beige slip in large bold print. It would be valid for two more days.

The woman nodded and went out the door behind the counter, returning with a bundle of chopped logs tied together with red nylon. Robbie thanked her and his stomach grumbled. He knew he should eat if he planned on finishing the climb in the morning, so he bought a hot dog and some fries, took a bite, and circled the room.

The cabin's walls were lined with framed newspaper clippings about the beauty of Acadia. "Acadia National Park Generates \$186 Million For Maine Economy," "Finding Serenity: Acadia National Park," and "Hidden Gems in The National Parks Service!" Thumb-tacked into the back wall, unframed and un-laminated, was a yellowed paper which read, "Acadia Hiker Dies in Abyss Fall."

Bar Harbor and its satellite neighborhoods were swept by the news of Sonya Larson's death four years ago. Robbie, Foster, and Elijah had heard that a young girl lost her life to The Abyss, but the article contained details the vague murmurs about the tragedy lacked. He pulled the tack out of the stiff parchment.

Sonya Larson had been a seasonal visitor, an experienced climber, and president of the University of Maine Climber's Club. She was completing a section of iron-rung climbing when she fell seventy feet onto a rock ledge protruding from the cliff face. Twenty minutes after she dialed 9-1-1, the park rangers arrived. Larson had sustained severe bone fractures and internal bleeding. They couldn't rescue her until an elaborate pulley system was set up to lift her to the top of the trail. After a two-hour operation, she was airlifted via helicopter to a hospital in Bangor, where she was declared dead.

Robbie heard from the rangers that the view from the summit was spectacular. He also heard that some of the campers referred to the area below as Larson's Landing.

Robbie took a second bite of the hot dog. It tasted dry and bitter. He tried a fry, but it was too salty, so he tossed them into the trash. He hadn't eaten since breakfast nearly twelve hours ago, and only had a cup of orange juice since then. He carried the log bundle out of the cabin and placed it on the deck. Pulling some twine from his back pocket, he lashed the bundle around his shoulders and across his chest to distribute its weight. The rope dug into his skin, but he was relieved to be back outside and away from the stale indoor air.

The sound of rain in the distance returned, and Robbie felt its gentle trickle as he stepped down from the deck. He took a deep breath and tilted his head toward the sky, rinsing his face and massaging his forehead.

His phone buzzed again. Rain soothed his skin and itchy scalp as he stood at the base of the steps.

"Hey, what's up?"

"Hey man, how's the site?"

"Fine, nothing special."

Foster spoke softly, "How you feeling?" There was a pause, and Foster continued. "Making it okay up there?"

"I brought my bike—handles the mud—and the site's good. Much closer to headquarters than Thirteen, latrine right near the lean-to, water pump, and plenty of hot dogs and chicken at The Meeting Place like always."

"Cool, cool." There was silence, like Foster was building the courage to ask a question. "You going up the trail?"

"Dunno, I'll see." The smell of wet garbage seeped across the gravel glade from the dumpsters opposite The Meeting Place. Robbie headed down the dark path between the high trees of the spruce-fir forest, back to Site Twenty-Four. His load felt heavy and his head hurt.

"Take a couple pictures okay? Especially if you make it to the top."

"Sure thing." Water began to drop from his nose onto his lips.

"Have you figured how long you're staying? The whole weekend, or what?"

"Dunno. I haven't really decided anything, but I'll let you know once I figure it out. Maybe tomorrow, cool?"

"Yeah, gotcha. Your mom's a little worried, so let me know whenever, as long as you're good up there."

"You can tell her I'll be fine. I've been up here before."

"Yeah, not alone though."

"It's not like you weren't invited."

"I know. I just didn't really feel up for it."

"Yeah."

"I still don't think you should be up there by yourself."

Robbie bit his lip. "I'm just sticking to the plan."

He arrived at the fence post for Site Twenty-Four and removed the bundle from his back. He placed the firewood at his feet and leaned against the outside of the open-air latrine beside him.

"Just don't go doing anything stupid."

"I can handle myself."

"You wouldn't be the first person to say that who got himself in deep shit."

"I know. But I had to come up; I can't be home right now."

"Yeah, I get it. Just be careful."

"I will. Later."

"Later, man."

He crumpled the site permit in his fist and flicked it off his palm. A breeze carried it to the edge of the trim grass, where it teetered on a fern and fell from



its wide feathery fronds, rolling away into the dark woods. He cut the nylon with his pocketknife and tossed one log into the fire pit for the next day, then he went into his tent and let the fatigue do its work.

When Robbie woke up, his lips were sticky, and his mouth tasted like sour milk. An aluminum canteen, hanging from the polyester ceiling, glowed pink-orange from the sunlight shining through. He took a sip of water, seeing his arm tinted the same pink-orange. His head still hurt and the skin over his brow felt tight across his skull. He got up, changed into hiking clothes, washed his face, and started out for The Abyss. The early morning dew made the air damp with the smell of wet pinecones.

Robbie hiked the twenty-degree incline that set the trail off over the worn and slippery rock face. He sprinted up the forty-foot slope and reached the flats, then he hiked the next half-mile of forest under the cover of the spruce trees. The narrow path was littered with fall leaves, acorns, and the occasional heady raccoon dropping. He made his way over the bouldering section, running up and down the rises and falls of the trail and hopping the gaps between rocks as he ascended the cliff. He looked up. The sun was directly overhead. The trail hugged the cliff and opened beyond the trees so that the cool shades of green yielded to a hot red. It felt like navigating the desert, as he followed the curving trail into the unprotected clearing, his legs shook, and his head throbbed. He finished off what was left of the half-full canteen from the morning. He still hadn't eaten since his two bites at The Meeting Place.

Robbie placed his right hand on the cliff wall for support. The tree line was just behind him now, and to his left was the open face looming over the trail's base. There was a sign in the middle of the path that read, "WARNING: OPEN CLIFF FACE. BEWARE, NO RAILING AHEAD." He remembered the sign from a picture in the article. This was where Sonya Larson had fallen. He removed his hand from the crusty rock face, his skin coated with a fresh layer of chalky, pale red dust. Curiosity drew him to the ledge. He took short steps—hands limp at his sides, shoulders sunken low—toward the edge of The Abyss Trail. The small sports bag on his back carrying his supplies pulled him downward and inward, toward the ground. He felt like it would pull him over the cliff, so he laid down and crawled to the end of the rock.

The town of Bar Harbor was set below him at the Atlantic's rim, three miles beyond the base of the trail. He stared down at the hundred-foot drop to the trail's start, and then at the spot where he used to gaze up in awe of the cliff with Elijah and Foster. He imagined the three of them, three twelve-year-olds with their brand-new pocketknives seeing the trail for the first time. Foster with his hands in his pockets, shuffling his feet and kicking up a cloud of dust. Himself, always a step closer to the cliff, staring with wild, blasphemous eyes at the towering slab of earth. And Elijah, nudging him forward,

punching his shoulder, and slapping him excitedly across the back to psych him up for the climb.

With his chin resting on the hot sunbaked stone, Robbie searched for the protrusion that Sonya Larson had landed on. He spotted it off to his right, about two-thirds of the way to the cliff base. It looked to be ten-to-fifteen feet long and extended only five feet out from the rock, but it was hard to tell without proper perspective. Robbie wondered if Sonya had thought this ledge would break her fall; he wondered if she'd thought that it would save her life.

Robbie slid back; feet shaking, hands trembling, head pounding, heart racing. He pushed off the ground to stand up. His mouth was parched. He rose halfway upright and felt a soft breeze pass over his ears, whirring tenderly, and nudging him forwards to the ledge. He thought about Elijah, how his last moments could have felt just this way: soft breeze, quiet air, even the water below. Stillness.

The green spruce trees behind him, the gray and green stained rocks, the brown pinecones, the raccoon feces, the red, clay-dusted patches of cliff face, and the distant, dark blue Atlantic water fading into the light blue horizon on this hot fall day; all turned black. Robbie collapsed, knees hitting the ground and torso flopping flush against the flat rock of the trail several yards short of the highest point, on which Sonya Larson last stood.

Two hundred students were bussed from the high school to the funeral. Black was everywhere, dark coats and pants, shining black shoes. Elijah's family stood beside the casket. Two brothers sung their favorite summer bonfire songs. They cried and choked, and Elijah's cousin turned her head to vomit into the plastic ficus behind Elijah's body.

Robbie woke up. He was lying flat on the ground and the first sight he glimpsed was the horizon beyond Larson's Landing. The sun was still directly overhead. He was alone; nothing had changed. Reaching behind his back, he removed his second canteen and three granola bars. He sat up as slowly as he could and drank even slower. Halfway through his canteen, he started on his granola bar. Chocolate bits and brown crumbs rolled down his shirt, spilling over his pants and tumbling to the ground.

When he gathered enough strength to walk fifty feet to the nearest water pump marked on the trail map, Robbie refilled his canteens and soaked his hand towel with the cold water. He returned to his previous spot to sit down, drank another canteen-full of water, and wrapped the cool, soaked towel around his head.

Robbie rested for another hour, eating and drinking, eyes fixed on the horizon. Wispy clouds swirled in the sky, tinting the firmament assorted shades of blue. The drop was far, but the small masses of land off the Bar Harbor coast were lush and green, and the air was dotted with gulls and fishing osprey skimming the water's surface. It was a sight teeming with life. In a week Robbie might forget about the new site, but he would remember the old days of hiking the Blue Dot Trail, the feel of the chalky boulders, the muffled sound of air brushing through the ferns, the smell of the North Atlantic, and how incredible the view was from the top of The Abyss.

He pulled his phone from his pack, pressed the call button, and waited to hear his friend's voice on the other side.

## About the Authors

MITCHELL ANGELO is creative writing major at SUNY Purchase College, and the managing editor of *Gutter Mag*. His work has previously appeared in *Gandy Dancer*, *Paintbucket.page*, and *The Westchester Review*. His microwave is haunted.

CINDY CASTILLO is a Junior at SUNY Geneseo. She is currently majoring in English with a concentration in literature. She hopes to one day become a high school teacher or counselor, but in the meantime you can find her drinking an iced coffee or a matcha tea latte while attempting to get all her school work done. She is the youngest of three. Her mom is her muse.

CLAIRE CORBEAUX is a senior English major and physics minor at SUNY Geneseo. In her spare time, she can be found eating fruit Mentos, aimlessly perusing the SUNY Geneseo website, and actively trying to change the aesthetic of her Instagram explore page.

ERIN DOESCHER is a senior studio art major at SUNY Plattsburgh. Her abstracted figurative work discusses the psychological nature of human relationships and their physical reaction to one another. She bases her work off of live model studies, photos she has taken of those in her life, or photos she

is in. Some photos derive directly from her emotional connection to another person.

DANIEL FLEISCHMAN is a senior at SUNY Geneseo. He studies creative writing and biology because he believes salamanders are worth writing about, too. At home in Ossining, New York, he can be found running into spiderwebs as he daydreams in nature preserves or admiring his pet cocker spaniel between budget horror movies.

LILI GOURLEY is a young writer, graduating Monroe Community College with an Associates in creative writing. She focuses on poetry and short fiction, often drawing inspiration and titles for her work from music and nature. She has been published in *ANGLES* and *Gandy Dancer* and intends to publish more of her poetry in the future.

SHANTAM GOYAL studies English at University at Buffalo for his doctoral studies. His research work is on Joyce studies and sound studies, and he was a practicing visual artist back in New Delhi, India. While he usually works in pastels and acrylics, he finds the simplicity and limitations of Windows Paint useful for impulses during limitations of time.

RENEE GRASSO is a sophomore at Binghamton University majoring in finance. In her free time, she likes to read novels, rewatch *Jane the Virgin*, and attempt to run on the treadmill for more than ten minutes. She is from Queens, New York.

JONATHAN GREEN is a graduate of the MFA program at Stony Brook Southampton. He is an editor at *The Baltimore Review*. Previously he was a research assistant in a Biomedical Engineering Lab at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine and a Wilderness Explorer Troop Leader at Walt Disney World. He doesn't know what mapping audio-spatial fields of marmosets and teaching children about environmental conservation has to do with writing, but he hopes it sounds interesting.

KIEL M. GREGORY is a poet, fiction writer, and essayist living in Sackets Harbor, NY. He attends SUNY Oswego where he studies Creative Writing and Philosophy. He co-facilitates a weekly poetry workshop at SUNY Jefferson. In addition to *Gandy Dancer*, his work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Paterson Literary Review*, *Lips*, *Great Lake Review*, *Black River Review*, and the North Country Writers Festival.

JAMIE HENSHAW is a returning student, currently studying English (creative writing) and adolescent education at SUNY Geneseo. His aspiration is to teach students, including his own children, how to apply their creativity to their written work, and to instill the belief that reading and writing are quintessential to success.

LOGAN HICKS is pursuing a BFA in photography and related media at the Fashion Institute of Technology.

TRACI JOHNSON was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York. She is a fine arts major at the Fashion Institute of Technology. She specializes in abstract paintings, wood sculpting, and print-making. She is motivated by a sense of energy surrounding her subjects and the desire to express euphoria and vibration within the color of her work. She has a deep connection with nature and strives to portray its calmness, fluidity, and liveliness in her work.

JAKE LEVYNS is a poet and theatre artist currently in his final year at SUNY Plattsburgh. He served as an editorial assistant on the upcoming sixteenth issue of *Saranac Review*. This is his first publication.

HANNAH MCCASLAND is a senior BFA student at SUNY Plattsburgh. She is concentrating in ceramics and sculpture. She is interested in residential architecture and architectural history. Her work is inspired by the residential architecture that surrounds her in upstate New York and the New England area.

AMY MIDDLETON, from Westchester, New York, is a third-year student at SUNY Purchase. She is double majoring in graphic design and creative writing, with a concentration in poetry. She is on the editorial board of *Italics Mine*, SUNY Purchase's literary magazine.

DONGWON OH is currently a senior at SUNY Geneseo. He was born in Korea and raised in India. He writes about his experiences as an international

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BRIANNA OLSEN is a sophomore at SUNY Plattsburgh. She has a love for just about any medium she can get her hands on, but lately she has been concentrating on drawing. In her free time, she enjoys gaming, gardening, and watching programs about art or nature.

MIRANDA PHILLIPS is a creative writing major at SUNY Oswego. When she isn't working on her novel series, Miranda spends her time discovering new scenic routes, watching hockey (#mapleleafsforever), and loving on her rescue horse during breaks in her home state of Maryland.

MARISSA N. QUIÑONEZ studies at Fulton-Montgomery Community College. She finds herself lost in her thoughts daily and appreciates all the human aspects of us. She enjoys expressing her thoughts to the rest of the world.

VICTORIA RENEAU is studying illustration and design at SUNY Plattsburgh. She would love to be an illustrator for children's literature or work in visual development someday, but would be happy doing any creative job.

COLIN SHARP-O'CONNOR is a senior at SUNY Purchase and grew up in upstate New York.

NICHOLAS SIMENON is a fine art photographer whose work reflects on the solitude and isolation we experience in big cities. He has exhibited

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NATALIA VETRI is currently a student at Suffolk County Community College, pursuing a degree in business marketing. Natalia's passionate about coffee and wearing corduroy bell bottoms.

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